The Journal of Student Affairs
Seventeenth Edition

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The 2020-2021 Journal of Student Affairs Editing Team

Mission

The Journal of Student Affairs is an annual peer-reviewed journal that explores contemporary issues and current trends in the field of higher education with a particular focus on topics of interest to student affairs professionals. As a student-run publication, we aim to highlight research and scholarship of graduate students that further develop best practices within higher education.

Values

The Journal of Student Affairs is committed to showcasing our values in every publication.

Diversity in Knowledge and Practice
It is critical for higher education and student affairs professionals to research and understand the needs of different student subpopulations to provide the best support to their students.

Learning and Development
Our publication helps readers advance their professional development and learn about evolving practices. Also, graduate students that participate in our editing cycles are able to learn a wealth of knowledge about how academic journals are run.

Equity
We aim to give a publishing opportunity to students who typically are not able to be published in academic journals due to educational requirements or lack of research experience.

Innovation
As we move into the twenty-first century and technology is more ingrained in the operations of higher education, professionals must be creative and innovative in their approaches to student support. The Journal of Student Affairs is an outlet for practitioners to share techniques, programs, and ideas that they have used to enhance the college student experience.

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The Editorial Board of the Journal of Student Affairs at New York University consists of graduate students in the Higher Education and Student Affairs program in the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development at New York University. The Board has been established to coordinate and carry out all editorial functions for the Journal and to ensure the continuity of future publications. The Editorial Board of the Journal of Student Affairs at New York University promotes the submission of articles that address issues of critical interest to the
NYU community and among the larger community of higher education and student affairs professionals. Articles that explore topical issues, suggest innovative programming, and embark upon original research are encouraged. The opinions and attitudes expressed within the Journal do not necessarily reflect those of the Editorial Board.

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We are deeply appreciative of all of the hard work that our editors have put into each and every editing cycle. Their work has been critical to making this publication the best version possible.

Lastly, we are so proud of and impressed by the hard work of our authors. Their vulnerability and dedication throughout this process are truly showcased in their manuscripts and we hope that they enjoy this publication as much as we do.
Preface

The past year has marked a time of great change within many facets of society, including politics, technology, education, and the economy. The COVID-19 pandemic, racial injustice, and a change in presidency has caused professionals across the disciplines to reflect on their standard practices and examine how they can be more effective in their work. Higher education is no exception; the radical evolution of the field impacts institutions on all levels, from students to senior leadership. The state of affairs in the United States and higher education throughout this academic year effectively shaped our vision for this final product, as we strived to capture the implications of current events in every manuscript that we published.

In particular, we wanted to publish manuscripts that speak to the experiences of underrepresented students, what institutions are and can do to support them, and how the current public health and racial injustice epidemics in the United States impact higher education and student affairs practices. Our hope is to contribute to the field of higher education research in a way that is timely to current contexts and can be built on in the coming years.

In reviewing these published manuscripts, three major themes emerged:

Theme One: Student Support

We recognize that college students come to campus with a plethora of life experiences, which can greatly affect their success in pursuing their degree. Therefore, we wanted this journal to acknowledge how critical it is for higher education professionals to be educated on the needs of a variety of student subpopulations to provide the appropriate support. Student populations showcased in this journal are generally underrepresented in research such as post-traditional students, students with disabilities, homeschooled students, and rural students. These manuscripts share the common goal of showcasing students’ experiences at different moments throughout their higher education journeys.

Theme Two: Student Development

Once students are given a solid foundation of support, the next step is developing them and their abilities. This development occurs both in and outside of the classroom and depends on well educated practitioners to foster holistic growth. This section of the journal covers a wide range of areas for student development, as well as a variety of student subpopulations, including Latinx men and first generation women students. These manuscripts examine how we engage underrepresented students in their personal and academic growth and give recommendations for best practices and future initiatives.

Theme Three: Institutional & Systemic Evaluation

Lastly, it is vital for higher education professionals to constantly assess and evaluate their practices and the impact they have on students’ development. While this topic can be extensive, the authors in this cluster do a fantastic job of articulating the importance of assessment work and examining advising models for students at both community colleges and four-year institutions. Having these manuscripts finish out our journal allows for a look into what
institutions can do to support students and their development within and through higher education.

On a personal note, we are so grateful to everyone who contributed to this journal and are so proud of how it turned out. We are particularly indebted to our E-Board members who went above and beyond this year to make this publication happen and to Dr. Dietrich for supporting our vision throughout the process. We hope you enjoy this journal and all the work that went into its production.

Jordan Bashline & Maggy Fread, Co-Editors in Chief
Breaking the Mold: Supporting Post-Traditional Students

Czarina Desiree Gutierrez
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Higher education was originally intended for a specific student type known today as the traditional student (McFadden, 2011). Traditional students, as defined by McFadden (2011), are those students within the 18-25 age demographic who pursue college immediately following high school. Currently, more individuals are returning to higher education to create better job opportunities for themselves, further their education, and/or achieve personal goals (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Kasworm, 2003; Rabourn et al., 2018; Tumuheki, Zeelen, & Openjuru, 2016). Within this study, this population is identified as post-traditional students, who tend to be older than the “traditional” college aged student.

As post-traditional student presence is increasing on college campuses, traditional support systems must shift to meet the needs associated with this growing population (Soares, 2013; Soares et al., 2016). Research has shown that post-traditional students have needs that are unique of their traditional student counterparts (Kasworm, 2003; Rabourn et al., 2018; Wyatt, 2011). Within this study, the term post-traditional student will be used when referring to nontraditional or adult students. The term nontraditional implies this population is an aberration from the “norm” that has been instilled in the higher education setting, rather than the persevering individual identity (Soares, 2013). Ogren (2003) added that, “colleges and universities traditionally have not served people like them” (p. 641). As such, traditional student services may not always fit the needs of post-traditional students. In response, some institutions have created academic programs specifically geared towards post-traditional adult students to close some of the gaps in services. Given this information, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What, if any, are the differences in the experiences of those who identify as post-traditional students enrolled in traditional undergrad programs versus those enrolled in programs designed to specifically serve post-traditional adult students?
2. What are the institutional responses that either help or hinder these students’ sense of belonging within their respective programs?

Literature Review

The National Center for Education Statistics (2009) reported that post-traditional students comprise approximately 38.2% of the postsecondary population, yet this group of students is often neglected on higher education campuses (Chen, 2017). An American Council for Education (ACE) survey found that over 40% of institutions indicated that they “did not identify older adult students for purposes of outreach, programs and services, or financial aid” (Lakin, Mullane, & Robinson, 2008, p. 12). The Lumina Foundation (2012) aims to increase the percentage of adults in America who hold a two or four-year college degree from 39% to 60% by the year 2025. However, they have noted that the nation will fall short of its intended goal if the focus is solely on traditional-aged students. McFadden (2011) stressed that it is one thing to
know that more adult students are accessing higher education, but it is another to understand how higher education professionals can better serve this population to promote retention. The data from this study shows the need for greater attention to the post-traditional student population, a diverse population that is breaking the traditional mold.

Defining the Post-Traditional Student Identity

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2009) defined nontraditional adult students as undergraduate students with at least one of the following seven identifiers: (1) delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, (2) part-time enrollment, (3) financially independent, (4) works full-time, (5) has dependents other than a spouse, (6) is a single parent, (7) lacks a standard high school diploma (Choy, 2002). Nontraditional students with at least two identifiers receive their bachelor’s degree at a rate of 16.9 percent, as opposed to traditional students at 53.9 percent (Rabourn et al., 2015).

According to the 2011-2012 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), post-traditional students have been a consistent and significant presence in higher education, equating to almost 60 percent of the undergraduate population. Soares et al. (2017) highlighted that during the 2011-2012 academic year 13.3 million out of the total of 23.1 million undergraduates enrolled in two- and four-year colleges and universities identify as post-traditional students. Although this population is increasing, their needs have gone unnoticed and unattended as most institutions are not equipped to handle them. Kasworm (2010) mentions that unlike traditional undergraduates, post-traditional students are rarely, if ever, just fulfilling an undergraduate student role at their institution, they hold many other roles in their lives that take precedents. Because this population is so unique, higher ed professionals need to understand the differences they have from their traditional counterparts as to better identify how services can adapt to fit the needs of post-traditional students.

Post-Traditional vs. Traditional Student Needs

Although both populations may attend the same colleges or universities, they differ in various aspects of the college experience. Not only do they differ based on the characteristics that categorize them into their two unique populations, but they also differ inside and outside the classroom (Kasworm, 2003; Rabourn et al., 2018; Wyatt, 2011). Post-traditional students are more likely than their traditional counterparts to ask questions in class, contribute to the classroom discussion, prepare drafts and revise their papers, and are less likely to come to class unprepared with unfinished assignments (Kasworm, 2003; Rabourn et al., 2018; Wyatt, 2011). In contrast to that, post-traditional students are less likely to be engaged in social or volunteer activities on their campuses. Another unique difference is how these two populations select the types of institutions they want to attend. Post-traditional students typically enroll in a college that is readily accessible because of the other priorities, obligations, and commitments they have in their lives (Kasworm, 2003). Post-traditional students also pursue flexible educational offerings such as online classes or part-time status because of their busy schedules and will typically commute to campus as opposed to live in the residence halls.

When compared to younger traditional students, post-traditional students have reported greater intrinsic motivation for learning. These motivations tend to be higher for post-traditional
students because they typically have been away from school and are choosing to return as opposed to traditional-aged students who enroll in post-secondary education right after high school. Intrinsic motivations for post-traditional students are personal growth, career growth, and interest in learning new material (Kasworm, 2003; Tumuheki et al., 2016). Extrinsic motivations can be both individual or non-individual and include societal perceptions, desire to fit in, be better, change their narrative, provide for their family, prove worth, and service loved ones (Kasworm, 2003; Tumuheki et al., 2016). However, this increased motivation did not always transfer to confidence in the classroom (Bye et al., 2007; Kasworm, 2003; Rabourn et al., 2018; Tumuheki et al., 2016). Overall, the main themes within motivations for post-traditional students include personal transitions and change, proactive life planning, or a mix of both motivators (Kasworm, 2003; Rabourn et al., 2018; Tumuheki et al., 2016). Because of higher levels of motivation, Carney-Compton (2003) mentioned that post-traditional students performed at higher academic levels than traditional students even though they had more extracurricular stressors (e.g. familial responsibilities).

Given this difference, we must direct our attention accordingly to see that the post-traditional student has a unique set of needs that cannot be met by sticking to traditional methods. Sticking to the traditional method will not cut it for a population that is growing in the higher education environment. To adapt to the changing demographics, crafting programs and services geared towards serving the post-traditional student population can help increase retention and persistence toward degree completion for this population. However, Kazis et al. (2007) emphasized that higher education institutions at the two- and four- year level continue to create- and adhere to- policies that privilege or favor traditional-aged students. Wyatt (2011) added that the integration and inclusion of post-traditional students will require putting students first and changing current institutional models to reflect one that considers the needs of all college students. This can be done in the form of creating specialized programs and services for post-traditional students.

How institutions go about lowering barriers for post-traditional student engagement falls into four rough categories: (1) Type A- adult-accommodating, (2) Type B- adult-oriented, (3) Type C- adult-ignoring, and (4) Type D- adult-added (Hagedorn, 2015). Adult-accommodation refers to the idea that the institution alters its mission and curriculum to serve the post-traditional student (Hagedorn, 2015). Adult-oriented is predominantly serving post-traditional students and their mission is focused on serving that population. Adult-ignoring has its focus firmly set on serving traditional students, which includes post-traditional students but with limited access or resources (Hagedorn, 2015). Adult-added is a step above adult ignored, but the focus is still not on adult students when creating policies and procedures, but rather adding them into the mix after the fact (Hagedorn, 2015). Understanding how a university serves post-traditional students can determine areas for growth and improvement to diversify the institution. Because of the limited time post-traditional students have for outside obligations, they will be drawn towards schools that can accommodate their unique needs. Aside from the adult-oriented institutions, all institutions should reflect on the barriers their post-traditional students might be facing that can be lowered. Institutional barriers can include a lack of classes at convenient times, prohibitive cost of classes and supplies, limited textbook access, lack of financial aid and scholarships, extra resources at inconvenient times, and lack of family-inclusive engagement opportunities (Hagedorn, 2015; Rabourn et al., 2018). Understanding and removing these barriers can help
Benefits of Post-Traditional Specific Programs

Because post-traditional students have their own unique needs in the higher education environment, it becomes evident that customized resources and services need to be in place to serve this student population. Hagedorn (2015) continued to expand on this institution type framework by creating the “Square Pegs analogy” (p. 312). This analogy highlights the idea that older students who are being integrated into an environment designed for traditional students can be similar to trying to fit a square peg into a round hole (Hagedorn, 2015). Because post-traditional students do not fit the traditional mold, it creates a “misalignment that produces four corners of friction: access, success, retention, and institutional receptivity” (Hagedorn, 2015, p. 312). Creating and implementing programs geared specifically for adult students can remove areas of friction and create services that are adult-oriented and adult-accommodating. Gast (2013) mentioned that there are many barriers post-traditional students face when trying to return to higher education, but it is important to understand that once post-traditional students are recruited, they need to be provided with specialized support services and have access to staff and faculty who recognize their unique needs and busy lifestyles. Edirisingha (2009) added that post-traditional students are more likely to drop out than their younger counterparts, and they tend to have the lowest completion figures.

It is important to understand that there are a wide range of options that have been piloted and assessed to determine what works when it comes to supporting post-traditional students. Gast (2013) highlighted that some avenues to consider include: online degree programs, hybrid degree programs, accelerated degree programs, mentor programs, and adult student support services offices. Adult student services offices on campus can be a way for post-traditional students to gain access to resources that support them in being successful in their academic goals. Cross (1981) mentioned that post-traditional students must address multiple considerations to be successful, balanced students; childcare, commuting, finances, class schedules that work around childcare and after-school activities, part-time or full-time employment, orientation to the campus, and introduction to available support services. Fairchild (2003) suggested that because of all the details post-traditional students need to consider, the professional staff must explore the campus and community, educate themselves of various resources, and coordinate referrals for post-traditional students. Leaving this information seeking to the students themselves can become overwhelming and an added stress with their limited time both on campus and juggling their various responsibilities. Support services offices for post-traditional students need to consider the unique needs this population of students have. Fairchild (2003) added that it is important for offices to be open at alternative hours, be located on a popular part of campus that is easy to access and continue to spread awareness campus-wide of the unique needs of this population. These adjustments can create a stronger impression on the post-traditional student experience and create a welcoming environment that allows individuals who identify with this population to feel confident in reaching out for assistance.
Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative case study design (Mertler, 2019). According to Mertler (2019), the purpose of the case study approach is to develop a highly detailed description and gain a thorough understanding of the individual entity that the researcher is studying. In the case of this research design, there were two individual cases analyzed: the first case was specifically looking at students’ experience in one adult degree program (ADP), and the second case focused on adult students’ experience in the traditional undergraduate program (TUG) at the same four-year private institution.

I obtained a list of potential participants through the Educational Effectiveness and Institutional Research (EEIR) office on campus. I chose to gather the participant information through EEIR as they are the main data collecting resource on the campus. Potential participants were invited to join via email that included a brief introduction to the study. All focus group sessions were audio recorded after receiving consent from participants. A total of ten questions were asked during the focus group that covered themes such as academic support, availability of resources, and inclusion/validation of their unique identity within their program. Within this study, I had a total of five participants (see Table 1). To protect the identity of the participants, I assigned an alias to each of them.

Positionality

At the time of the study, I was an employee of the institution where the research was conducted. I served as a counselor in TUG and a counseling intern in ADP. In my professional roles, I only worked with a specific alphabet caseload of students, and when obtaining data, I requested that EEIR remove students who fell within my assigned caseload to avoid bias and coercion towards those students. Having worked in both roles in different capacities I saw the nuanced differences between the TUG and ADP programs.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Sex</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Standing</th>
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Limitations

A limitation of this study was the limited number of participants. Only having two students representing the post-traditional student experience in TUG is only a small percentage of this student population. Another limitation that contributed to this was the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection began right before the social distancing orders and made participants hesitant to join. One session had to be conducted over the phone which also made it difficult in the data collection process.

Data Analysis

Based on the research questions and the analysis of the focus group data, two main themes emerged for this population: (1) the differences in experiences that post-traditional student felt in their respective programs and (2) the institutional responses (both positive and negative) toward including the post-traditional population. Within these two larger themes, there are subthemes that highlight the experiences of both groups in this research study.

Post-Traditional Student Experiences in TUG Program

In analyzing the data from the focus group sessions, both David and Vanessa shared insights on their perceived identity as post-traditional students in TUG. Within this theme, some main points that emerged were feelings of isolation and lack of inclusion (primarily because they did not see other students similar in age to themselves), differing responsibilities and motivation from their younger peers (mainly because they had outside obligations such as children and jobs to prioritize), and lastly, the conflict of their own identity due to the fact they were grouped with their younger counterparts.

Feelings of Isolation and Lack of Inclusion

Not seeing representation of post-traditional students in their classes was detrimental to their student experience. David mentioned that for him, the feelings of isolation in his class made it harder for him to ask for help. He talked about this fear of not feeling comfortable asking questions or asking for assistance because he felt this stigma that his age correlated with his knowledge and that he should know the answers. Vanessa added that when she felt she was the only “older” student in the classroom, it brought up not only feelings of isolation, but also feelings of doubt in her abilities to be successful in her classes.

The participants also mentioned how they feel there is a lack of inclusion on the campus and that the events and programs that are present are geared more towards younger students. David said: “…[W]ith our priorities and other responsibilities, you don’t particularly isolate yourself, but you see what is offered, and compared to everything else we have going on, … it’s not a good use of my time as an older student.” Similarly, as a parent, Vanessa said, “When I have to look at the events and see, oh, they’re doing a movie night, it would be nice … but is [my daughter] even allowed to come?” These experiences noted that although the school does provide programs and engagement opportunities, they may not always seem inclusive of the post-traditional student and their unique needs.
**Differing Motivations from Younger Peers**

Both Vanessa and David spoke directly about their shared experiences around having varied motivations around going to college that differed from their traditional-aged peers. David started by sharing, “I noticed that the priorities for some of the younger students are completely different. I don’t think they prioritize school as much. And then me, I just need to get it done because I’m getting older.” Vanessa added on that school is a priority for her, but mentioned:

...because I have a daughter and I’m also married, and I help out my mom a lot with foster children, it really is hard for me to decide if I want to study or make dinner for my family or go grocery shopping. It’s hard to find the time to balance school and home life, especially parenting.

Both participants have made sacrifices to return to school and earn their degree, and because of this, they shared that their motivations and priorities differ from their traditional classmates. Both David and Vanessa agreed that for them, they did not choose to go to college for the experience, but rather solely to get the degree.

**Conflict of Their Own Identity**

For Vanessa, returning to school was daunting and she felt as though she was the only one who identified as an “older” student compared to her peers. These feelings started even before her first day of classes. She felt excluded and different from everyone else when she was attending the new student orientation that was scheduled to last five days with activities ranging from as early as 7:30 am to as late as 10:00 pm, a “schedule not ideal for a parent”. For Vanessa, she mentioned, “I felt really out of place. I thought I was the only one.” Within the focus group session, Vanessa brought up an interesting concept: that she feels like her identity as a post-traditional student is not fully seen, but rather it is generalized with the personalities and identities of the traditional students.

When asked what is one thing they would like people to know about being a post-traditional student in a traditional setting, both Vanessa and David spoke to wanting to feel seen individually. David answered by saying, “Just knowing what makes us a little different than everyone else.” Vanessa added, “Just acknowledgement that I’m not what’s considered a traditional student. My parents aren’t paying for [school]. I’m not fresh out of high school. I’m not under 24 years old but there is more to me than just my age.”

**Post-Traditional Student Experiences in ADP Program**

For the students in the ADP program, Frank, Victoria, and Evan all shared interesting points regarding how their identity as post-traditional students is validated in their respective program. Some main points that emerged from the responses to the focus group session questions were positive feelings of inclusion and noticed differences from the traditional students they interacted with in TUG programs they used to be a part of.

**Feelings of Inclusion**

In sharing their feelings about returning to school as post-traditional students, all
participants shared similar mixed emotions of excitement and doubt and uncertainty. The negative feelings have since faded because of the connection they feel through the shared identities of their peers in the program. Victoria mentioned, “When I saw other people there my age, I felt more comfortable.” Frank added, “…these students are just like me. They hadn’t been in school for a long time… but they’re here like me.”

Seeing themselves represented as the majority of the program helped increase feelings of inclusion which in turn lead to an increased sense of belonging and confidence in their abilities as a student. Victoria said, “I think it seems like everyone is in the same boat, and we are all here for the same goal so that makes it easier.” Being in a program designed specifically for the post-traditional population helped increase positive feelings of inclusion and helped eliminate feelings of self-doubt.

**Noticed Differences from Traditional Students**

Although these are their current experiences in the ADP program, both Frank and Victoria previously had the opportunity to be in class settings with traditional aged students, Frank, through TUG, and Victoria, at her local community college. From this, they mentioned how that experience has given them an appreciation for the ADP program they are in now. When Frank started in TUG, he noticed learning differences between him and his younger peers. Frank stated, “while it came easy to younger students, I’ve been out of school for a while, so my thought processing was... different and that was challenging for me to cope with.” He continued by mentioning that he now appreciates being in the ADP program because it allows him time for himself and his other responsibilities. “Having the opportunity to take less classes, especially in the evening, gave me the opportunity to focus and have more time for myself, for work and for other things that I could be taking care of during the day.”

Victoria shared that during her experience in classes with traditional aged students, she felt not only a disconnect, but also a feeling that she had to censor herself as a student, saying, “if there were a lot of younger people... I felt like I had more licensed experience... it almost didn't seem appropriate for me to speak when they're new to schooling. These shared experiences highlight not only the benefit behind feeling included in their program, but also the way a student’s success can be hindered because of the feelings that emerge from a lowered sense of belonging and inclusion.

**Institutional Responses**

Both groups of students discussed the positives and negatives of their programs’ responses to their specific needs and their identities as post-traditional students. Because of this, this larger theme will be categorized into four subthemes: (1) positive institutional responses of TUG, (2) areas for growth in TUG, (3) positive institutional responses of ADP, and (4) areas for growth of ADP.

**Positive Responses of TUG Program**

When speaking to David and Vanessa about the ways in which they felt TUG excelled, they shared some positive examples in two areas: (1) the application/enrollment process and (2) the faculty response in regards to flexibility with their added responsibilities.

In respect to the application and enrollment experience, both David and Vanessa spoke
highly of how helpful and simple the process was. David mentioned, “The application process was easy. Then once I actually got on campus and did the transition and the welcome on board brief, the counselors were very helpful.” Vanessa shared how her academic counselor took the time to understand what other obligations she had to ensure they found a schedule that worked for her. “The counselor asked how many classes I was looking at taking, because I have a daughter. She said maybe starting with three to see the load and how much I can handle. I thought that was really helpful.”

Within regard to faculty support, Vanessa was able to speak positively on how “understanding and flexible” her professors have been with her other obligations. Vanessa said, “Most of my professors have been understanding when things happen… I think that that’s been a big help, having professors who acknowledge who's not a traditional student and being flexible.” Relatedly, David shared an example of a private conversation he had with faculty about his identity as a post-traditional student, saying:

I learned that when you talk to your professors and you tell them who you are and your background, they treat you differently… like an adult. Their expectations automatically get higher for you because obviously you're older and you're more mature, and they don't treat you like a child anymore.

I continued by asking David if it became exhausting having to do that each semester when he had a new faculty member, and he responded letting me know that for him it is fine, he does not mind it, but he does understand for others it might be challenging to do.

Areas for Growth of TUG Program

Within this point of the focus group sessions, the participants were asked to speak about some of the areas where they did not feel supported by their program. Four key themes emerged: (1) general negative experiences that hindered the students’ success and sense of belonging, (2) lack of programming and events geared toward the post-traditional population, (3) lack of representation in marketing materials, and (4) overall suggestions from the participants on what they felt would be beneficial to have on campus to support the post-traditional student population.

This example sheds light on how the system was confusing and difficult to navigate, but also how it made Vanessa feel disconnected from the campus population. Another area mentioned was the lack of programming and events that promote inclusion with the post-traditional population.

For David, he mentioned he was not too concerned with out of classroom events or programs as his main goal is to graduate as quickly as possible. For Vanessa, however, she spoke to the fact that of the programming she has seen on campus, not much seems to be geared to the post-traditional population or considerate of time offerings and family inclusion. While she understands traditional students, the population these events are intended for, do not typically have children, she feels it would be nice to have the opportunity to attend with her daughter. Vanessa mentioned, “it would be cool to see this event is for parent students… so if I want to do stuff, I can make sure that I'm doing it with [my daughter].” For Vanessa it appeared that the inclusion of post-traditional students and their needs is an afterthought when creating
programming and events. Vanessa mentioned that the only club/program she has participated in is the commuter club. “They send weekly emails about, I don’t know, just tips and stuff. That [club] hasn’t really done much for me.”

Another key point that was mentioned with the focus group session was the lack of representation they see of post-traditional students on campus. They both pointed out that with the population growing, it might be beneficial for the institution to market more to the post-traditional population by also including representation in marketing materials. Both David and Vanessa agreed that having more marketing and displayed representation of post-traditional students can not only help this population feel seen on campus, but it can also help prospective post-traditional students see that they can be successful at this institution because they are supported and acknowledged.

Both David and Vanessa shared suggestions for ways their program can better support them as post-traditional students based on their experiences. Based on the suggestions they provided, the underlying theme with each was that they both wanted a way to connect with others who shared similar experiences and to have a support system that understood their identity. David mentioned the benefits of having a support group for post-traditional students “where they can talk and find ways to help with the challenges of being an older student in a program made for younger students.” Vanessa continued by describing that within the classroom she sometimes feels the professors are not accommodating of the students individually but rather classify them all as traditional students. This suggests that training faculty on the needs of this student population may be helpful in better supporting them. Lack of support from faculty adds to feelings of lost identity within her program and can hinder her success within the classroom.

Positive Responses of ADP Program

Evan, Frank, and Victoria shared the areas that they felt the ADP program excelled. Based on their responses, the participants felt that the program excelled in four key areas: (1) the application and enrollment process, (2) the program offerings, (3) faculty support, and (4) the advising model.

All three participants spoke to not only how easy the application and enrollment process was, but they all touched on how supportive the team was in helping them apply and begin in their program. Victoria stated, “I applied late, but the admission counselor helped me with the process… I got the acceptance the following week, and they signed me up for classes. It was really simple.” Evan also spoke regarding the same admissions counselor and said, “She made it super easy for me to get in and she helped me get all the classes I needed. She helped me transition back into school and that was a big step for me.”

In addition, the participants all shared that the reason for enrolling and staying in the program is the specific offerings the institution provides that are geared to their needs as post-traditional students. Both Victoria and Evan discussed how being in a program that offers night classes, allows the flexibility to maintain a full-time job to continue supporting themselves and their families. Victoria said, “The reason I chose the program was because I liked the scheduling of it, I don’t have to struggle to find the time to fit classes into my work schedule.” Evan added, “The flexibility allows me to keep up with my other responsibilities, and I don’t know of many programs that focus on that.”
The participants also mentioned that the program ensures for small class sizes which has helped build a strong sense of community and strong faculty relationships. Frank shared:

As far as feeling included goes, yes, they do a lot of that, so much just so even the lady at the front desk in off-site center greets you with open arms, remembers you…not just see you as someone in the computer system, you are treated like real people. Because it’s a smaller community you feel you’re really seen.

Victoria added that of the professors she has had, they have all been very supportive and understanding of her needs outside the classroom. Victoria said, “Every professor has made it clear that you can reach out for support at any time, and have expressed that their syllabus is strict, but they would make exceptions if necessary because they understand we all have other obligations also.” All these shared experiences are examples of how the set-up of the program and the aspects they offer are intentional in making post-traditional students feel included and supported within their academic pursuit.

The participants all spoke highly of the advising office and the support they offer to all their students. Frank referred to the advising office as the “one stop shop” and added that the office helps, “setting up classes, initiating specifics like paperwork and just basic things you need as a student to even exist on this campus. They do everything there.” Aside from that Frank added, “they are knowledgeable in what we as post-traditional students specifically need, and if they don’t have the answer, they know who to ask to make sure we get the answer.” Evan added, “Everybody that I’ve met there in the advising staff are all caring and very helpful so that makes it amazing and then just the fact that they hold your hand through the process is appreciated.” Not only have they felt the positive presence of the advisors in their individual meetings and encounters, but they mentioned that this continues with the follow-up they do for their students. Victoria added, “We receive weekly email updates from the advising team and that helps keep us up to date on things. Everybody just seems so available and more than willing to help.” The experiences Frank, Victoria, and Evan shared really speak to the positive aspect that having a population-specific program has on the post-traditional student sense of belonging and support.

Areas for Growth of ADP Program

In addition to sharing the positive areas of the ADP program, Frank, Victoria, and Evan all spoke to the areas they feel could be improved upon to better support the post-traditional student needs. Based on the responses they shared, this section can be classified into two distinct areas: (1) feelings of separation from TUG and the main campus in general, and (2) suggestions for improvements.

Because he transferred from TUG over to ADP, Frank really spoke on the feelings of separation from the campus. Since his transition to ADP, he mentioned that is important for the program to “make students feel like they are a part of the campus and not just the program.” Frank continues by talking about how since his transition this has become a big takeaway for him. He said, “There’s a sense of separation from the campus. It’s just a class in a way and not an experience... There is exclusion… you’re not involved in the traditional school setting.”

After hearing about the areas for growth they see for the program, I invited the
participants to share any suggestions they had for ways the program can better support their needs as a post-traditional student. Frank suggested:

Maybe a welcome aboard package could be good… Basically, a starter pack that you can say, "Hey, here's a little schedule book and this is specifically what's going on with your program this quarter or into the next quarter."

Frank also suggested that the program can be advertised more since he did not know of the program until his TUG counselor mentioned it to him. Victoria added on by mentioning that taking classes at the off-site centers is difficult for a few reasons, the commute, and the lack of resources. Victoria said:

I think it would be nice to not have to take some classes at the off sites, but instead have everything available on the main campus. I understand the diversity of the program and using the off sites to help with the commute of some students, but the drive can get difficult for me at times.

For Evan, his only suggestion was regarding the tutoring hours and availability. Evan said, “I'd like to see more tutoring options. Just because I've always struggled with math and… I could always use that extra help and encouragement to understand it.”

In general, they have felt that the program has supported them in many ways and feel that there is not much more to suggest for changes. This speaks to how well the program has helped support the post-traditional students in their academic pursuits.

**Discussion**

Creating and implementing programs geared specifically for adult students can help minimize and remove areas of friction and create services that are both accommodating and post-traditional student focused. Based on the data collected from the focus group sessions, it became evident that there were more positive experiences from the students in the ADP program.

For the participants who were a part of ADP, they spoke highly of the fact that having a program catered specifically to their population made a big difference in their education. According to Rendón’s validation theory (1994), outside of in-class validation, students will turn to other validating agents, such as counselors, staff members, and advisors. Rendón and Munoz (2011) identified validation as a driving force that promotes students' strengths and beliefs in their learning abilities, which leads to a stronger sense of self-esteem and cultivates their drive to succeed. Not only did participants express positive classroom experiences, but they also spoke to the benefits of having staff members who are trained to support post-traditional students. The experiences participants in the ADP program shared, highlight the positive impact that comes from a program geared specifically toward the post-traditional student and the validation that comes from having a strong support system.

Although the post-traditional population is increasing, many traditional institutional programs have not adapted to meet their specific needs. The participants of this study spoke to their experiences being in programs considered adult-ignoring and geared toward traditional
students and the consequential negative impact it had on their collegiate experiences. Based on the narrative constructed by the participants, there is a decrease in confidence because of the lack of validation and representation in their respective program. This, in turn, causes students to feel isolated from the campus community and lack a sense of belonging. Increasing academic validation both in and out of the classroom will serve as a catalyst for change in helping post-traditional students trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in themselves as a student (Rendón, 1994). This increased sense of confidence may also positively impact persistence and success rates among this population of students.

Implications for Professional Practice

Within the professional practice there are small things programs can do to help eliminate some of the listed barriers. Kasworm (2003) added that it is important for offices to be open at alternative hours. Having alternative hours of operation allows access to services and support for post-traditional students who work full-time during normal hours of operation. One other suggestion is to create programming that is explicitly family friendly, so student parents can feel comfortable being involved and engaged outside of the classroom without the added barrier of having to ask/express a need for accommodation to in turn experience an increased sense of belonging. Another suggestion from participants included faculty and staff training on post-traditional students’ characteristics and needs. Cross (1981) mentioned that post-traditional students must address multiple considerations to be successful, balanced students; these include childcare, commuting, finances, class schedules, part-time or full-time employment, orientation to the campus, and introduction to available support services. These suggestions from the literature align with the lived experiences and recommendations provided by the participants of this study. Validation from faculty and staff will create a newfound sense of self-confidence which will promote a stronger sense of integration into college life for this population (Rendón, 1994; Rendón & Munoz 2011).

In hearing from participants, they all suggested that some form of mentorship or support group would be beneficial for their population. This is reinforced by Edirisingha (2009), which posits that mentorships for post-traditional students can improve social capital, bridge the gap between institutional culture and student culture, and provide students with insider tips for maneuvering the system.

Implications for Future Research

The lack of research on this student population in general may be the biggest barrier for post-traditional students (Hagedorn, 2015; Kasworm, 2005, Rabourn et al., 2018). More studies about positive interventions, programs, and services developed to support post-traditional students are necessary. It is important to continue researching the ways educators can support this population academically while also fostering their identity as post-traditional students. Future research should focus on a validation and strengths-based approach on the ways to create supportive interventions and the ways in which faculty and staff can adapt to meet the post-traditional students’ needs instead of placing the responsibility on the student to adapt to the program. It is also beneficial to have research on how to implement trainings for faculty and staff on the ways to include post-traditional students. My hope is that this study can be a
catalyst for change that will pilot studies with larger sample sizes to further address the need to support post-traditional students in higher education and break the traditional mold to be more inclusive of this growing population.

**Conclusion**

Post-traditional students are a growing population, and the traditional model is not enough to meet the needs of this population. Considering the national push to increase the number of students holding degrees, this topic is becoming more prevalent. However, when we take into account where funds and efforts are being allocated, it is evident that it creates a gap that leaves post-traditional students feeling under equipped and less supported. It is important to change and adapt to create a space where post-traditional students can feel included and validated which will allow for academic success. This population will continue to grow at a rapid rate, and enrolling this diverse population is not enough. There is no-one-size-fits-all for student success and support, so this same notion should be considered now that post-traditional students are increasing on college campuses. There is power behind breaking the mold that is the traditional method of operation and adapting programs and services to become equitable and inclusive in supporting post-traditional students.

**References**


Unconventional Education: The Homeschooled Student College Experience
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Introduction

Homeschooled students are unique in a college environment. Without adhering to a traditional school system, homeschooled students possess various learning opportunities outside of the classroom. However, because they lack the formal educational prerequisites held by traditional students, their achievements and experiences may differ. Stereotypes also exist for these students; they are often perceived as socially inept due to lack of prior socialization, for example. Institutions interested in including homeschooled students in campus diversity initiatives should develop a better understanding of their experiences. Once institutions understand the homeschooled student experience, then programming and resources can be offered to increase diversity initiatives. This article will also highlight the importance of parent and family services and how they can be incorporated in programming and resources.

Academic Achievement of Homeschooled Students

Academic achievement is important to institutions of higher education and homeschooled students. Snyder (2013) examined homeschooled, traditional public school, and Catholic school students’ academic achievement at a Catholic university. This study compared the mean major GPA and overall GPA of students attending the university on a 4.0 scale. The findings demonstrated that the mean major GPA of homeschooled students: (3.11) was the highest and the mean major GPA of public-schooled students (2.97) was the lowest (p. 301). The students enrolled in Catholic education possessed the lowest overall GPA (2.66) and homeschooled students (3.14) had the highest overall GPA. This study suggests that the academic ability of homeschooled students bears no difference compared to their traditionally schooled peers. In fact, homeschooled students consistently outperformed their counterparts in multiple GPA categories (p. 304).

That said, Snyder’s (2013) study is not entirely conclusive of academic ability as the only institution researched was a Catholic university, however, the study suggests that homeschooled students’ academic achievement and ability is comparable to their peers. This study calls for a closer look at the mean GPA of homeschooled students at other institutions for better comparison. However, this study shows how homeschooled students' academic achievement is the same if not better than their counterparts. This is important for higher education institutions to understand in order to recognize the homeschooled students’ college experience.

Another indicator of academic success in college is from grades in higher level math courses. Wilkens et al. (2015) researched college-level calculus grades: they examined the calculus grades of homeschooled and public-schooled students who had taken no prior pre-calculus class. They found that the homeschooled students earned much higher grades (87.2 out of 100) than public school students with their means ranging from 78.9–82.3 out of 100 (p.
These students had similar SAT math scores, yet all populations had not previously taken a pre-calculus class. In this study, homeschooled students’ academic ability in mathematics was comparable or better than their counterparts. This highlights the importance of recognizing homeschooled students’ academic achievement in a college environment for institutions interested in including them in diversity initiatives. Examples of diversity initiatives based on this study could include study groups, trivia nights, and other academic events dedicated to showcasing homeschooled students’ achievement in mathematics.

There are several limitations to the Wilkens et al. (2015) study, however. The students who completed this survey predominantly identified as White and male (p. 36). This is challenging when trying to identify and measure the abilities of an entire population of homeschooled students. Another challenge was homeschooled students’ lack of attendance at public institutions (where data is regularly collected), attributing to smaller data samples. The sample size of homeschooled students was predominantly smaller on the college campuses researched, therefore, adequate participation in this study was challenging (p.32).

Measuring the Homeschooled Student College Experience

Homeschooled students’ college experiences are important for institutions interested in including them in diversity initiatives. Bolle-Brummond and Wessel (2012) conducted a qualitative study focused on this experience. The students who were interviewed demonstrated strong involvement in academic and extracurricular activities. The homeschooled students were driven to achievement, attended classes regularly, completed all homework assignments, and took on leadership roles in the classroom and during extra-curricular activities (p. 244). The students were able to successfully integrate into college life and maintain friendships with their peers (p.239).

Institutions interested in creating inclusive programming and resources for homeschooled students can benefit from this study. Since the homeschooled students were highly involved in extracurricular activities, they may react positively to new programs and resources. Their tendency toward applying for leadership roles can help institutions create new clubs or organizations with increased leadership opportunities. Institutions could also invite guest speakers who have been homeschooled and allow the students to ask questions about their career development and how they present their past homeschooling experience to future employers. This will also allow traditional students the opportunity to learn more about homeschooled college students. This awareness is important for institutions interested in increasing diversity initiatives because homeschooled college students are a smaller population on campus and traditional students may not fully understand their experiences. If traditional students fully understand the homeschooled college student experience, then it could lead to a decrease in stereotyping on campus.

The limitations of the Bolle-Brummond and Wessel’s (2012) study was the student population; the students attended a doctoral-granting, public, Midwestern, and predominantly White institution (p. 247). The experiences in this study were also self-reported and not quantitatively measured. Nevertheless, this study did offer an in-depth look at the challenges and successes that certain homeschooled students face when attending this institution. Each integration experience was unique, but ultimately deemed positive by the students.

Self-esteem is another important way to measure the homeschooled college students’
experience. Drenovsky and Cohen (2012), sought to address the potential effects of negative stereotyping of homeschoolers’ adjustment to a college environment. Stereotypes such as ‘backward’ and ‘on the fringe of society’ were addressed in relation to the student’s overall self-perception (p. 19). Drenovsky and Cohen (2012) used a sample size of 185 students attending both public and private universities (p. 24).

The results of this survey were positive for homeschooled students. According to Drenovsky and Cohen (2012):

“This study finds that those students with a history of homeschooling did have significantly lower depression scores than those who had never been homeschooled” (p. 31).

This study concluded that there were no negative effects on the self-esteem of homeschooled students (p.30). Institutions interested in including homeschooled students in campus diversity initiatives can benefit from this study. The homeschooled students had positive levels of self-esteem; therefore, institutions could develop group programs with inclusive dialogue around homeschooling. Homeschooled students’ strong tendency toward extracurricular activities could result in higher rates of participation and attendance in this type of program. However, institutions will have to recognize that traditional college students may not be as willing to participate in events focused on homeschooled students and may need to develop incentives.

The limitations of the Drenovsky and Cohen (2012) study include sample size and length of time the students were homeschooled. 64% of the respondents had been homeschooled 10-12 years, 19% were never homeschooled, 8% were homeschooled 7-9 years, 7% were homeschooled 4-6 years and 3% were homeschooled 1-3 years (p. 26). This affects the quality of the data wherein 18% of the homeschooled students were not homeschooled more than 9 years. Sample size is another limitation wherein the survey was sent to 1,580 students yet had an 11.7% response rate (p. 23).

**Effective Campus Programs and Resources for Homeschooled Students**

Based on the literature provided, homeschooled students are academically prepared for college and their lived experiences are generally positive. But the question remains, what types of campus resources or programs would be most effective for institutions interested in including homeschooled students in diversity initiatives? Understanding the homeschooled college student experience requires institutions to learn directly from homeschooled students. It also requires institutions to understand the connection between homeschooled students and their parent(s) and/or family. Soufleris (2013), researched homeschooled students attending a residential university campus using a sociological framework and a qualitative comparative research design. The authors focus is on the student’s ability to garner social capital, network with peers, and nurture friendships. 25 homeschooled students and 25 conventionally schooled students were interviewed at the same institution (Soufleris, D.M., 2013, p. 5). In respect to developing friendships, Soufleris (2013) found that the experiences of homeschooled students were similar to their conventional peers and mostly positive (p. 138). The homeschooled students interviewed also acknowledged that college had provided them with increased self-
confidence. The friendships that these students developed aided in this process. When asked how the students have developed after their first year of college, Thomas, an interviewee says:

“Definitely more outgoing now. More organized. (Laughs). I guess I am not really afraid of anything. I was never used to be good with large groups where I didn’t know anybody. Now I am used to it” (p. 170).

Soufleris (2013), illuminates maturity and growth displayed from the homeschooled college students, demonstrating a positive progression in their college experience. Additionally, their experiences were ultimately more positive than their conventionally schooled peers (p. 171). Learning how homeschooled students are generating these positive experiences is beneficial for institutions to better understand this student population.

The Importance of Parent and Family Services

Another way in which institutions can better understand the experiences of homeschooled students is by recognizing the connection between the homeschooled student and their parents. Homeschooled students can benefit from increased campus resources designed to incorporate their family into their transition to life on a college campus. These types of programs can help homeschooled students and their parents understand how to navigate new challenges that may arise. Soufleris (2013) asked participants why their parents decided to homeschool pre-college and Donald, a participant says:

“My mom was not impressed with the education system and the public schools. One, she wanted to be able to discipline us. Not just in school but raise us and make us the way we are. She feels public schools have less and less power to do that. And also, the curriculum. She wanted a more personal curriculum” (p. 59).

The connection between the homeschooled college student and their family proves to be strong throughout the student’s college experience (Soufleris, 2013, p. 58). Therefore, universities committed to providing diverse resources on campus could benefit from increasing parent programs for homeschooled college students.

There are limitations to the Soufleris (2013) study including a limited pool of participants due to their small percentage on the college campus (less than 1%) (p. 188). Another limitation in this study is the institution type—a career-focused technical university. The homeschooled students attending this university does not fully represent the entire homeschooled college student population across the nation. The last limiting factor of this study was the racial identity of the homeschooled students. 24 of the 25 students interviewed were white; the one non-white student was of Asian descent.

Family services at higher education institutions are also important for homeschooled college students. Bridges et al. (2011) examine research on the needs of parents and families of college students and suggests how student affairs practitioners can provide improved resources. According to Bridges et al. (2011):

“although homeschooled students are rapidly gaining interest in pursuing higher
education, there is little being done to address the inclusion of these students (and their parents). Accordingly, parent and family services offices of the future will need to address the unique challenges faced by the parents of homeschooled students” (p. 95).

Bridges et al. (2011) further describe how institutions should consider the expectations that homeschooled students’ parents may have in terms of how the university meets the needs of their child (p. 96). Homeschooled students' parents have been teaching their children for several years—often due to feelings that the public school system is inadequate (Bridges et al., 2011, p. 96). Therefore, providing unique resources for these students and parents can help develop a positive relationship between the family and the university. Establishing a strong connection between the homeschooled student, their parent(s) and/or family and the higher education institution in which they attend can be beneficial in understanding the specific needs of this student population.

The literature reviewed by Bridges et al. (2011) suggest that developing university programs designed to 1) ease the transition to a college environment for the homeschooled student and 2) provide their parents with resources for understanding their students transition may benefit both the student and family. A suggestion for further improvement of these programs could be implementing homeschooled students parent orientation sessions. According to Bridges et al. (2011), parent orientations are consistently the most popular service offered at higher education institutions (p. 96). Therefore, designing a program to meet the specific needs of homeschooled students’ parents in relation to their child’s transition could be a successful solution to increasing campus resources.

Suggestions for Further Research

In reviewing the literature, it is apparent that positive trends exist in homeschooled students’ academic achievement and experiences at institutions of higher education. Several trends of homeschooled students in the literature appeared positive such as leadership ability, lower levels of depression, and higher levels of self-esteem. It is important that institutions interested in inclusion of this group provide adequate resources to maintain positive outcomes; resources described in this article, such as student groups, clubs, organizations, networking events and parent orientation sessions can foster a more inclusive environment for homeschooled students on college campuses. It can also help maintain the positive experiences that homeschooled students report having on campus and encourage them to share these experiences with one another.

Further research needs to be conducted for homeschooled students in all types of institutions in order to better represent their experiences. It is important to collect this data as the number of homeschooled students are increasing on college campuses (Bridges et al., 2011, p.85). But data collection on homeschooled students is often challenging due to low participation rates and small populations of homeschooled students on campus. However, by increasing homeschooled students’ opportunities to connect on campus through programming and resources, the student’s willingness to participate in research may increase.

The literature presented frames a portion of the homeschooled students’ college experience, but not the entirety. Based on this literature, I suggest we further explore how homeschooled students progress through their degree completion. More interviews need to be
conducted to understand the complexity of the homeschooled students’ transition beyond their academic and social achievements. This research would help determine homeschooled students’ experiences throughout their collegiate career—instead of just their first year; research on post-graduation experiences can also add to the understanding of the effects of their college experience. This research should be conducted across multiple institution types for adequate data sampling. The students in these studies also represented a small demographic of the homeschooled student population nationally.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, a thorough examination of the homeschooled student experience after their first year and post-graduation is vital to understanding how institutions can support them throughout the entirety of their collegiate career. It is important for institutions interested in including homeschooled students in diversity initiatives to understand their experiences because it will allow them to develop programming and resources for this student population that does not currently exist. It can also potentially decrease negative stereotyping on campus if institutions foster inclusive dialogue and promote awareness of homeschooled college students. It is also important to note that the families of homeschooled students can influence their successful transition to a college environment. Incorporating more campus programs designed to connect homeschooled students with their parent(s) and/or families can foster positive connections with the institution. I imagine this research could eventually bring homeschooled student experiences to the forefront of inclusivity discussions on college campuses interested in including this group.

**References**


Introduction

Although nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population lives in rural regions, limited research has been conducted on rural youth and their educational experiences (Koricich et al., 2018). Within the literature that exists on rural students, most researchers view this population through a monolithic deficit lens (Goldman, 2019; Stone, 2018) and emphasize how the college enrollment rate of rural students is lower than that of their counterparts from other locales (Koricich et al., 2018; United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2020). However, while it may be fair to say that rural students in general face certain challenges in obtaining a college education, the rural identity does not impact all rural students in the same way or to the same degree. In addition, despite the challenges rural students experience, data also shows that this group is attending postsecondary institutions in increasing rates (Byun et al., 2012; Nelson, 2016), a trend that reflects the strengths of the rural population in navigating higher education spaces. Thus, to challenge the common narrative around rural students, I will unpack the ideas of rural advantage and disadvantage as they relate to higher education while keeping in mind the complexity of rural students’ intersecting identities and backgrounds. I will approach this topic by analyzing the beneficial and detrimental impacts of three factors on rural students’ college access and choice: community, family attitudes and attributes, and high school characteristics.

Defining “Rural” and Positioning Rural Students

What qualifies as “rural”? According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), rural places are any areas with a population of less than 2,500. As of the 2010 census, the majority (64 percent) of the rural population in the country was concentrated east of the Mississippi River, with the greatest proportion of rural residents by state population living in Maine and Vermont and the smallest in California (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Data has shown that poverty is more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas, especially among people of color (Koricich et al., 2018). College students in rural areas are also more likely to be first-generation than their peers in other regions, as fewer than 20 percent of rural adults over the age of 25 have college degrees compared to the national average of about 50 percent of adults (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Of the total number of U.S. students enrolled in rural public elementary and secondary schools in 2013 (the most recent data available), 72.4 percent were white, 12.2 percent were Hispanic, and 9.3 percent were Black, compared to the national distributions of 50.3, 24.9, and 15.6 percent, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

While most of the literature on the rural student population highlights the impact of first-generation and low-income status on college pathways, the pre-college experiences of rural students who are Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) are often erased in the
literature, perhaps because white students make up an overwhelming majority of the rural K-12 population. However, recent research does show that BIPOC living in rural parts of the U.S. are 50 percent less likely to have a college degree than their white neighbors (USDA, 2017). While the educational attainment of racially and ethnically minoritized rural Americans is growing (USDA, 2017), there is still considerable geographic variation in high school and college completion rates within rural areas that disproportionately impacts BIPOC communities. For instance, over half of the rural counties in the United States with low educational attainment (defined as having high school completion rates of 80 percent or less among adults ages 25 to 64) have a Black or Hispanic population of at least 20 percent (USDA, 2020). This data points both to the limited college access and choices available to rural BIPOC students, as well as to the non-monolithic nature of rural communities.

**Findings on College Access and Choice**

**Impact of Community**

The first factor affecting college access and choice for rural students is their home community. To start, the location of rural communities can act as a barrier to access and choice, as reflected in the finding that “as the share of rural residents increases, the likelihood of a four-year college or university within a commuting zone decreases, while the likelihood of a community college marginally increases” (Ruiz & Perna, 2017, p. 99). While other data is limited on the numbers of private versus public institutions in rural areas and the prevalence of for-profit college enrollment among rural students, research has shown that community colleges are the most common source of higher education in rural areas (Boggs, 2019). In addition, 75 percent of the 41 million Americans living in “education deserts,” commonly defined as any place located more than 25 miles away from a postsecondary institution, can be found in rural communities (Boggs, 2019). Since proximity to higher education institutions correlates with likelihood of college attendance and selectivity of the institutions where students enroll (Ruiz & Perna, 2017), it is clear that the lack of colleges and universities in rural communities disadvantages rural students both in their college access and choice.

On the other hand, certain aspects of rural communities, such as their close-knit nature, can serve as a support to students’ college access (Means et al., 2016). Because it is typical for rural residents to know most of their fellow community members, rural students often have a vast extended-support network to whom they can turn for advice on how to apply for college and how to choose between different college options (Nelson, 2016). However, this support may not be distributed equitably to all rural students, as researchers have noted that community members are more likely to devote their resources to students with strong academic performance than low-achieving youth (Koricich et al., 2018; Nelson, 2016). Thus, the students who need the most support unfortunately may not be the ones who are receiving it, which points to the differences in how rural students experience aspects of the rural identity as they navigate the college application and selection process.

Poor economic conditions and limited career options within rural communities also affect the decisions rural students make about where to attend college. Many residents of rural areas are not qualified for “skilled” labor due to low educational attainment, meaning that companies in high-tech industries are less likely to settle in those regions and create new jobs (Koricich et al.,
As a result, rural areas experienced lower economic growth after the 2007-2009 Great Recession than urban and suburban areas (Koricich et al., 2018), and rural household income is currently 20 to 25 percent lower than urban household income on average (USDA, 2020). This trend of stagnant economic advancement has led to the perception among many rural students that career opportunities in their hometowns are limited either to industries like mining and agriculture that have been historically located in rural areas (Koricich et al., 2018), or to other low-skill options such as fast-food restaurants and retail stores (Means et al., 2016). Even further, supply chain limitations and market fluctuation incurred by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic have negatively affected the farming industry (Gavazzi, 2020; University of Arkansas, 2021), causing even more jobs to disappear within rural communities over the past year. Thus, the prospect of obtaining more opportunities (Goldman, 2019), a fulfilling career (Stone, 2018), and affluence (Byun et al., 2012) motivates rural students with the means to do so to leave home, sometimes for college, and not return.

This phenomenon of “rural brain drain” is not only an effect of struggling economies in rural communities, but it also causes financial resources to dwindle in these regions. As more and more highly skilled and well-paid residents depart their rural hometowns, the overall tax revenue of these communities continues to decline (Koricich et al., 2018). As a whole, this process constitutes a self-perpetuating cycle that keeps poor rural areas poor. Entrenched poverty in rural communities has clear implications for college access among low-income students, as families with fewer financial resources may not be able to afford the cost of higher education. This issue particularly affects youth of marginalized racial identities, as these communities “experience[s] notably higher rates of poverty compared to White residents” in all types of locales but especially in rural counties (Koricich et al., 2018, p. 299). Thus, not only do these trends highlight a need for increased financial aid for rural students, but they also underscore the importance of using an intersectional lens to understand how the combined impact of race and cyclical poverty affects college access for the rural population in different degrees.

Impact of Family

Throughout the literature, rural youth describe family as another influential factor in their college application and decision process, but the impact of family can vary greatly between students. For example, some students noted how their families motivated them to attend college so they could have greater opportunities for social mobility and a better life; in turn, students wanted to obtain postsecondary education “to give back to their family” (Goldman, 2019, p. 21) and serve as role models for younger siblings (Stone, 2018). The value of family is especially salient in certain cultures, such as in Native/Indigenous communities (Goldman, 2019). However, in some cases the strong value placed on family also limited college choice, as in Means et al.’s study (2016) where students expressed “concerns about who would take care of their families if they went a further distance for college” (p. 557). These anxieties led the students in question to consider only in-state colleges. College counselors have also described rural parents’ skepticism of postsecondary education as a challenge to students’ college access and choice, as parents express concerns that their children will leave for four years to go to school and never return (Gettinger, 2019). Furthermore, a report by the Pell Institute noted that rural parents in general have lower expectations of degree completion for their children than
urban and suburban parents; since parental expectations serve as a predictor of college enrollment, this trend has implications for college access and choice between two- and four-year institutions for rural youth (Ruiz & Perna, 2017).

The impact of family on rural students’ ability to navigate the college application process also differs based on whether students’ family members have previously attended college, a point that further emphasizes how the rural student population is not monolithic. For example, some first-generation rural students have noted that although their parents “were indirectly supportive [of their college plans] through encouragement, emotional support, and material provisions,” they were not able to help them fill out applications or financial aid forms due to lack of knowledge about procedures and terminology (Nelson, 2016, p. 262). In addition, a focus on affordability among parents of first-generation rural students may limit these students’ college choices, whereas parents of continuing-generation students may be more likely to encourage their children to apply to more selective private institutions due to their knowledge of financial aid potential at these schools (Nelson, 2016). This trend is reflected in the findings that high-achieving low-income students from rural areas apply to selective colleges in much smaller numbers than their urban peers (Hoxby & Avery, 2013), and that college-going rural youth are more likely than non-rural students to attend less selective four-year institutions (Ruiz & Perna, 2017).

While concerns about the cost of college are not solely specific to rural first-generation students, it is still important to note due to the number of first-generation students coming from rural locales. However, it is also worth mentioning that the possible barriers to access presented by first-generation status can be partially mitigated if students have older siblings and/or extended family who have attended college, since their knowledge of the college application process and financial aid options represents increased family cultural capital. If one applies Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Model (2006) to the first-generation rural student population (especially in looking at BIPOC students from this group), one could also argue that these students have strong navigational capital that allows them to enter and move through spaces not designed for them, such as higher education. Thus, students with access to this capital will have a greater chance of success in navigating the college application and admissions process.

Impact of Rural High School Characteristics

Just as family can serve as both a barrier and a support to rural students’ college access and choice, the environment and attributes of these students’ high schools can also help and hinder rural youth in their pathways to college. Two factors that can negatively impact access are small student populations and the remote locations of rural high schools, as college recruiters often would rather visit areas with greater concentrations of schools and greater numbers of students for higher recruitment payoffs (Gettinger, 2019). Research has also shown that recruiters are more likely to visit high schools in wealthy areas and that admissions staff at private colleges tend to favor students from private high schools (Gettinger, 2019). Thus, the lack of private schools in rural regions combined with increased poverty in these areas (compared to urban and suburban locales) also restricts college recruitment of rural students. These disadvantages contribute to the findings of multiple studies that rural students are more likely to enroll in public and nonselective colleges than their urban and suburban peers, a trend
known as undermatching (Byun et al., 2012; Koricich et al., 2018). Because recruiters often do not visit rural high schools, the burden ultimately falls on students to visit colleges themselves, which can mean traveling long distances due to the limited number of postsecondary institutions in rural areas. Research universities in particular rarely have rural campuses, and visiting these institutions is not always feasible due to the high cost of transportation. Thus, rural students' college choice is impacted by inadequate recruitment efforts. Furthermore, despite being academically qualified to attend four-year schools, many rural students undermatch by enrolling in two-year degrees, since the large concentration of community colleges in rural areas makes this option the most accessible choice for their postsecondary education (Koricich et al., 2018).

Although the small size of rural high schools can discourage college recruitment efforts, it can also benefit students' college access in that it tends to foster a “one big family” climate of encouragement and support for the high-school-to-college transition among students, teachers, and staff (Means et al., 2016, p. 558). Along the same lines, “access to school social capital” is more available to all students at small schools as compared to larger ones found in urban and suburban areas, as the ratio of staff members to students generally increases at small schools despite understaffing problems (Nelson, 2016, p. 270). Students at small rural schools also have more opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, especially athletics, compared to students in other schools where spots are more competitive. As a result, participation is greatly encouraged, as exemplified by this account from a rural student: “At the school I went to everybody is recruited to play soccer because we don’t really have enough players” (Nelson, 2016, p. 270). One could posit that this increased participation in school activities is a gateway to expanded college access, as it makes students' college applications more competitive in the admissions process.

In contrast, however, the limited financial resources available at rural high schools can act as a barrier to college access and choice by limiting students' academic opportunities. As of 2015, nearly 30 percent of rural high schools did not offer any Advanced Placement courses, compared to 5 and 8 percent of suburban and urban schools, respectively (Ratledge et al., 2020). Similarly, research has also shown that rural high school students are less likely to enroll in dual enrollment courses than their urban and suburban peers (Ratledge et al., 2020). One reason for this disparity is that certain remote locales cannot offer salaries high enough to recruit teachers for college preparatory courses (Lavalley, 2018; Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). This data is also supported by the finding that rural schools on average spend fewer dollars per student than urban and suburban schools (Ruiz & Perna, 2017). Overall, the lack of opportunities to engage in high-level coursework and gain college credit while in high school disadvantages students in rural high schools, as these students cannot bolster their college applications with competitive transcripts and are unable to increase their sense of preparedness for rigorous college classes (Goldman, 2019).

Similarly, insufficient tax revenue in rural areas, which stems from high poverty rates, also results in underfunded K-12 schools (Koricich et al., 2018). The lack of funding has created a routine understaffing problem at these schools, including in college counseling offices. College counselor shortages have a negative effect on all students in rural schools, but they can disproportionately impact Hispanic students, whose decisions about applying to college are generally more influenced by the expectations of school personnel (Byun et al., 2012). Similarly, Means et al.'s (2016) study of rural students in a predominantly Black high school found that the
limited access students had to college counseling services left them without clear direction about post-high school academic options and contributed to misinformation about college costs and financial aid. As a result, these students were “more likely to see the cost of college attendance as risky” and were less likely to enroll than their urban and suburban peers (Means et al., 2016, p. 564). These examples indicate the importance of taking rural students’ diverse backgrounds and identities into consideration when studying the college access and choice of this group.

In closing, it is worth noting that the negative impact of limited college counseling can be mitigated for some students by pipeline programs like Upward Bound, which provide students with information about college applications and financial aid. Other federal TRIO programs that offer financial and academic support can also help minoritized rural students succeed in college once they arrive on campus (Goldman, 2019). However, these programs are not formally open to undocumented students, many of whom live in rural communities due to the prevalence of seasonal farmwork and factory jobs available in these areas (Gonzales & Ruiz, 2014). This point further demonstrates the need to go beyond a monolithic view of rural students when considering factors that affect college access for this population.

Recommendations for Policy and Future Research

Based on the literature, one can propose several recommendations for policy changes to help improve rural students’ college access and expand their college choices. To start, more funding should be provided to rural K-12 schools so they can attract and hire guidance counselors in greater numbers. Since rural students are “disproportionately more likely to be first-generation and to come from lower-income families than their metro counterparts” (Byun et al., 2012, p. 479), they likely do not receive as much information about college from their parents and are more reliant on financial aid to attend college. Thus, it is essential to have staff who can support students in navigating the college search and application process by providing resources and spreading awareness of scholarship and grant opportunities.

In addition to counselors, rural schools could use increased funding to hire more teachers and therefore expand the academic offerings available to students. In particular, students would benefit from the opportunity to take Advanced Placement and dual enrollment courses to prepare them for the academic rigor of college coursework and allow them to obtain college credit before even leaving high school. If students transition into college feeling confident that their rural background will not prevent them from succeeding academically (and in some respects may even help them succeed), they may also feel a greater sense of belonging in the college environment, which in turn can increase their likelihood of degree completion.

Apart from expanding rural high schools’ financial resources, policymakers should also encourage higher education institutions to change their approach to rural recruitment to expand college access and choice among the rural population. Specifically, college admissions offices need to invest more time and funding into visiting rural high schools and community centers and bringing rural students to their campuses, rather than expecting students to find their own means to travel long distances to colleges. One possible measure to support rural high school students currently implemented by Texas A&M University is providing bus transportation for prospective students to attend open houses and other events on campus (Ruiz & Perna, 2017). This approach can be particularly effective in recruiting and increasing college access and
choice for undocumented rural students, who are legally prohibited from obtaining driver’s licenses in 40 U.S. states (Gonzales & Ruiz, 2014; Park, 2015). Virtual recruiting events have also become more popular during the coronavirus pandemic and can serve as a helpful tool for informing rural students of their college choices. However, it’s important to note that virtual recruitment options are not a be-all and end-all solution to expanding college access and choice for rural students due to the sizable percentage of rural Americans who lack high-speed internet access (Boggs, 2019; Headden, 2019).

Overall, lackluster recruitment efforts in rural communities represent a clear roadblock to college access and choice for all students in these areas—a roadblock that is magnified for low-income youth and their families who can neither afford the cost of transportation nor take time off from their jobs to make college visits. By making all rural students, but especially those of minoritized racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds, more of an institutional priority in the recruitment and admissions process, universities will begin to address the issue of inequitable college access among this population. Furthermore, they may also start to see rural students as a valuable asset for meeting their enrollment targets. Lastly, by showing rural students that other higher education options are available to them in addition to their local community colleges, undermatching will decrease and college choice will expand for this population.

In looking towards future research on this topic, scholars could benefit from bringing a more intersectional perspective by analyzing how race and ethnicity work with social class to impact college access and choice for rural students. For example, there is limited research on how the values of Native American/Indigenous youth combine with the history of forced assimilation in “Indian” boarding schools and the effects of intergenerational poverty in their communities to impact rates of Native college enrollment. Researchers could also look more closely at how racial identities intersect with rural culture to inform prospective students’ college decision-making processes. For instance, one small-scale qualitative study found that Black rural students do not want to attend predominantly white institutions (PWIs) because they do not see other students of their race at those colleges (Means et al., 2016). While this attitude may not be unique to rural students in particular, it’s not clear if Black rural students prioritize visibility and representation more than their Black peers from other locales, perhaps because of the value that rural individuals place on community. More targeted studies on the diversity of the rural population can better inform student affairs educators and practitioners’ approach to supporting the unique needs of these students and helping them succeed in their higher education journeys.

Lastly, given the rise of distance education in the age of the coronavirus pandemic, scholars could also conduct more research on how rural students’ perceptions of online courses affect their college choices, if at all. Looking to existing research on online education can inform areas of inquiry surrounding this topic. For example, in previous studies, online students have reported high satisfaction with the convenience of their classes (Platt et al., 2014). Given the prevalence of education deserts in rural communities, rural students in particular may be well-positioned to value the convenience of distance learning, as this delivery format can open up a new world of higher education possibilities for those unable to commute long distances. Rural students who are concerned about abandoning family responsibilities may also appreciate the ability to earn a degree without having to leave home, as long as they have reliable Internet access. However, research has also shown that rural students are more likely than their
(sub)urban peers to have limited technological experience and greater hesitancy in learning new applications (Hartley et al., 2015). Such factors could lead this population to perceive online education as inconvenient. Even if both perceptions are true, it is not clear which one has more of an influence over rural students’ college choice. More research on how this population uses their perceptions of online postsecondary education to make decisions about where to apply and enroll could help uncover the answer to this question.

**Conclusion**

Although perceptions of rurality have been confined to negative stereotypes of ignorance and inferiority (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017), rural youth are complex individuals with many of the same dreams and ambitions as their urban and suburban counterparts. Despite the challenges that rural students can face, such as minimal recruitment efforts from colleges, under-resourced schools and communities, lack of knowledge about the college application process, and limited college options within commuting distances, they also experience unique advantages in accessing postsecondary education due to their close-knit communities, strong family support, high levels of self-motivation, and meaningful teacher-student relationships. These benefits contribute to the findings that rural high schools on the whole have higher graduation rates than the national public-school average (Lavalley, 2018; Marcus & Krupnick, 2017), and that first-year rural students perform just as well or even better than their peers in college courses (Nelson, 2016).

Thus, it’s clear that rural students can and often do succeed in college. The challenge, however, lies in filling the rural opportunity gap—in other words, helping rural students navigate structural and institutional barriers (or, better yet, removing those barriers altogether) to get them to college in the first place, while preventing undermatching in the process. As researchers examine how this challenge has been further exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, it is especially important that they acknowledge the impact of rural students’ manifold identities rather than erasing this complexity and ignoring intersectionality in favor of one monolithic rural identity. With this acknowledgment, along with a recognition of the inherent strengths of rural students, higher education professionals and policymakers will become better equipped at dismantling the negative stereotypes that characterize deficit models of rurality, as well as expanding college access and choice for our nation’s millions of rural youth.

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Interpersonal violence (IPV) and sexual assault is a prominent issue on college and university campuses across the nation. The rates of violence have increased over the past few decades; recent studies show that 26% of undergraduate women and 7% of undergraduate men experience some form of nonconsensual sexual contact during their time in college (Cantor et al., 2019). These alarming rates have prompted a swift response from higher education institutions as well as the United States government in the form of mandatory training and legislation, such as Title IX and the Dear Colleague Letters. Research studies are also an important part of institutional response because this is how colleges and universities can better understand the nuances of IPV and sexual assault on their campuses and how to construct appropriate resources. As of now, IPV is defined as “physical, emotional, technological, verbal, or controlling abuse” (Findley et al., 2016, p. 2802) meant to demean and overpower an individual. Sexual assault is a branch of IPV and an umbrella term that includes any nonconsensual sexual contact, such as rape, fondling, and sexual coercion (RAINN, n.d.).

IPV and sexual assault affect different demographic groups in a variety of ways and despite the rapid growth of research on certain student subpopulations, there is still little known about how IPV and sexual assault affect students with disabilities. According to the 2019 Association of American Universities (AAU) Campus Climate Survey by Cantor et al. (2019), students with no disabilities experienced nonconsensual sexual contact at a rate of approximately 9.4% whereas students with disabilities were at an average rate of 17%. Considering the high rates of IPV and sexual assault that students with disabilities face, higher education institutions can play an active role in protecting these students. However, research in this area suggests that institutions may be failing to holistically support students with disabilities due to the misunderstanding of student experiences. By reviewing existing literature about students with disabilities and their experiences with IPV, this article intends to identify recommendations for best practices that can be used by institutions to provide better support to students with disabilities who experience IPV or sexual assault.

In general, students with disabilities account for approximately 11% of the undergraduate population (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013) and as college becomes more affordable and accessible, this number will continue to rise. Disabilities that students can come to college with include, but are not limited to, visual and hearing impairments, physical/mobility impairments, and learning disabilities, all of which can affect a student’s ability to navigate campus and the classroom. Developing advancements in technology allow for the creation of new tools that can enhance students’ ability to access information in the environment around them, which can encourage students with disabilities to get more involved on campus and within their communities (Findley et al., 2016).

The recent wave of research has uncovered vast insight into the effects of sexual assault and IPV on the general college student population. For example, women are at a higher risk of experiencing IPV and sexual assault on campus than men (Fisher et al., 2000),
regardless of the demographic group. Other risk factors include alcohol and drug abuse, living on campus, and being a freshman/sophomore, all of which can increase the likelihood that a student experiences IPV or sexual assault (Campe et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2000). Following acts of IPV and sexual assault, survivors can face negative psychological and physical consequences (Sabina & Ho, 2014; Scherer et. al., 2013), which suggests the critical role that higher education institutions play in intervening in the aftermath of these incidents. However, the aforementioned risk factors are compounded by the complex effects that a disability can have on a student’s social life, mental health, and academic performance, hence the importance of understanding the intersections of disabilities and IPV/sexual assault.

Within this literature review, the term students with disabilities will be used to refer to this student subpopulation as it is the term most commonly used in research in this area. However, there is much discourse around this term and its use of person-first language, and whether or not the term disabled students should be used instead. Similarly, the terms victim and survivor may be used interchangeably throughout this article to refer to a person who experienced an act of violence. Note that despite the language used in this article, a person who has a disability and/or a person who has experienced an act of violence should be asked about what term they prefer.

Risk Factors & Acts of Violence

As mentioned previously, existing research indicates that students with disabilities face a higher rate of IPV and sexual assault (Bonomi et al., 2018; Campe et al., 2019; Plummer & Findley, 2012; Powers et al., 2002). This may be because of the perceived or actual vulnerabilities that this group has; for example, a student with a mobility impairment may have physical difficulty getting away from their perpetrator or a student with a cognitive impairment may be unable to fully communicate their intentions in a social situation (Campe et al., 2019; Findley et al., 2016). Brown et al. (2017) reinforce this in their study where they found that students who have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder may be at a higher risk for sexual assault due to their sexual inexperience and inaccurate perceptions of social situations.

Even though students with disabilities is used as a blanket term, different types of disabilities result in various experiences which in turn, makes it challenging to capture a precise percentage of students with disabilities who experience IPV. According to the 2019 AAU Campus Climate Survey by Cantor et al. (2019), the rate of victimization among students with disabilities varied depending on the type of disability; the highest rate was seen in students with a chronic mental health condition such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety disorder at 26.3%. Additional rates for disabilities noted in this study are attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) at 15.2%, chronic medical conditions (e.g., diabetes) at 12.6%, and other disabilities like Autism Spectrum Disorder, mobility-related disability, and sensory-related disability (e.g., blindness) at 13.5%. This variability in rates suggests the importance of understanding how the type of disability a student has influences what they experience, which can better prepare institutions to respond to incidents of IPV.

A major risk factor seen in students with disabilities is social isolation and the subsequent low self-esteem they can face (Bonomi et al., 2018; Plummer & Findley, 2012). Abusers often exploit a person’s lack of confidence to coerce them into doing whatever the abuser wants, leading to a concept known as learned helplessness. Students with disabilities
tend to be more socially isolated, which may lead them to feel powerless in an abusive relationship due to their fear of being alone (Campe et al., 2019; Plummer & Findley, 2012). In turn, abusers exploit this fear and vulnerability to control the person with a disability.

Bonomi et al. (2018) build on this notion of exploitation in analyzing hookup connections and long-term relationships between students with disabilities and able-bodied students. In hookup connections, a student’s disability may be used to manipulate an emotional connection. An example of this is when an abuser encourages someone who is taking a certain type of medication to drink alcohol, knowing that it can cause a negative physiological interaction in the person. The abuser then masks this as “taking care of the person” when in reality, they are attempting to take advantage of the person’s incapacitated state (Bonomi et al., 2018). Long-term relationships involving a student with a disability may have more instances of physical and psychological abuse, which is where exploitation and disability-specific abuse becomes prevalent. The abuser may try to convince the person that their disability makes them undesirable in an attempt to further socially isolate them (Bonomi et al., 2018).

This is further echoed in Snyder (2015), which investigated the acts of IPV/sexual assault on female students with ADHD. This group of students was seen as inattentive and unable to perceive risk and thus, they were more likely to experience higher rates of sexual assault. Students with ADHD may have more difficulty making friends and therefore may act out and engage in risky behavior such as consuming alcohol/drugs in order to impress those around them. Because alcohol and drugs are frequently used as weapons in perpetrating sexual assault, the likelihood of female students with ADHD experiencing sexual assault increases. In this study, out of the 1,552 students surveyed, “of those females with ADHD, 16.5% reported experiencing any of the types of sexual victimization compared with 10.3% of females without ADHD” (Snyder, 2015, p. 1376), which was found to be statistically significant. Once more, this reinforces how abusers capitalize on the isolation this group of students feel in an attempt to exert power over them.

Similarly, Campe et al. (2019) investigated how disability types can affect the nature of abuse experienced. They found that students with psychiatric conditions were most affected by abuse in general, but students with learning disabilities, psychiatric conditions, and chronic medical illnesses were more at risk for attempted or completed non-relationship assault. Moreover, blind and/or deaf students were at a higher risk for relationship violence than they were for non-relationship assaults. Substance use (e.g., binge drinking, frequent alcohol consumption, and marijuana use) increased the odds of female students with a disability experiencing non-relationship assault, but these increased odds were not as high as that of female students without disabilities (Campe et al., 2019). This could be because, as mentioned previously, students with disabilities are often socially isolated, meaning they may not be involved in social situations with alcohol or drugs as often as their able-bodied counterparts (Campe et al., 2019; Plummer & Findley, 2012) and therefore, may not be able to accurately gauge their tolerance for substances.

**Barriers to Reporting**

It is natural to assume that a student who experiences an act of violence will report it to the proper authorities. In general, survivors of IPV and/or sexual assault are less likely to report (Patterson et al., 2009), but for students with disabilities, additional factors can influence their
reasons for not reporting. One major reason is that they may not know or define what they have experienced as abuse (Ludici et al., 2019; Plummer & Findley, 2012) or it may not be considered abuse under the law. For example, moving furniture to affect a blind student’s mobility may not prompt immediate action from a higher education institution or law enforcement, thus making the student less likely to report it. This lack of support can be very damaging to a student’s ability to heal from the trauma and may impact their motivation to pursue degree completion.

Another reason why students with disabilities may delay or negate reporting stems from the social perceptions about those with disabilities. For example, they are seen as “sexless” by society and therefore, a student with a disability may fear that they will not be believed if they come forward with a report of sexual assault (Lucidi et al., 2019; Plummer & Findley, 2012). Because these stereotypes have been entrenched in society for so long, it is less likely that the resources and support needed by this group of students will be available. Therefore, when students with disabilities do choose to report acts of violence, they can be met with insensitivity and a lack of support. Professionals working with survivors with disabilities are typically not trained to offer specialized resources and services, making these incidents more challenging to overcome (Powers et al., 2002; Sabina & Ho, 2014).

The National Council on Disability (2018) conducted an in-depth review of the reporting experiences of students with disabilities, as well as the perceptions of professionals that work with this group of students. Overall, the Council found that there were massive gaps in the services that institutions were providing to students with disabilities. In terms of physical access, the spaces that disability service offices are in may not be conducive to working with students who have mobility impairments. Some offices do not have automatic doors that open for those who need them, and others are located in buildings without working elevators. Even if a student can physically access the office, some of the meeting rooms are too small to accommodate larger assistive devices like wheelchairs, which can leave students feeling claustrophobic and uncomfortable. In some offices, there is a lack of aids immediately available for use when working with a student with a disability. The example posed by the report is if a deaf student walked into an office wanting to disclose an act of violence and no one working in the office knew American Sign Language (ASL), there would be no way for the student to communicate with the staff. One professional noted that by not having an ASL interpreter or assistive technology readily available, the staff had to pass a notebook back and forth with the student (National Council on Disability, 2018), which can be uncomfortable for the student.

This also highlights an issue that may arise when reporting after hours; if the campus public safety/police or residential life staff are not equipped to accommodate and respond to a report from a deaf student, this can leave the student feeling unsafe on campus. Many offices do not have a standard procedure for enacting the usage of assistive technology or other kinds of aid which can lead to confusion when said aids are needed (National Council on Disability, 2018). By not having a contact person for accommodation services, staff members in these offices must think of solutions in the moment, which may not be the most appropriate course of action for the situation. If a student cannot use on-campus resources, the institution typically does not have any connections to off-campus resources qualified to help the student (National Council on Disability, 2018). Thus, while dealing with emotional trauma, the student may have to find their own resources.
The last barrier that is commonplace for students with disabilities is that institutional websites typically do not have language around survivors with disabilities and resources that are specifically for students that require disability accommodations. Most of these websites are not provided in alternate formats that are accessible to screen reading tools or for those with low vision (National Council on Disability, 2018). Because this information is not readily available and accessible, students with disabilities who experience IPV may feel as though they have nowhere to turn and may choose not to make a report.

The Aftermath

IPV and sexual assault can have devastating consequences on a student’s life. However, students with disabilities are more likely to experience worse psychological effects like depression, anxiety, feelings of stress, and suicidal ideation (Bonomi et al., 2018; Plummer & Findley, 2012; Scherer et al., 2013). Although these are also effects that able-bodied students can feel after incidents of IPV, the aftermath for students with disabilities can be compounded by the aforementioned feelings of social isolation and the fear of being alone. Mental stress can exacerbate the student’s condition or disability by causing them to neglect their physical health (Plummer & Findley, 2012). For example, a student may feel so depressed that they do not seek medical attention for an injury that they suffered as a result of violence or their aggravated condition that may have flared up due to stress. Students with disabilities may withdraw from social settings in an attempt to protect themselves from further IPV, which may affect their relationships, academics, and physical health (Bonomi et al., 2018). The detrimental effects that IPV and sexual assault can have on students with disabilities highlight the importance of providing specialized resources to this group of students, as it can help them feel more supported and ameliorate the consequences of violence (Scherer et al., 2013).

Moving Forward

Despite the trauma that students with disabilities face as a result of IPV, there are many steps that higher education institutions can take to better support this student subpopulation. First, professionals need specific training to understand “the unique needs of students with disabilities, [the] different types of disabilities and how individuals may experience them, how students may define disability, [and] framing disability as an identity beyond a diagnosis” (National Council on Disability, 2018, p. 51). By doing so, professionals can be more intentional when engaging with students with disabilities who have experienced IPV and can provide the support they need. In the same vein, collaboration amongst offices on campus can improve the experiences of students seeking help and looking to report. Offices like Title IX, Student Conduct, Violence Prevention, and Disability Services are often siloed, which can create a disconnect in the coordination of services (Findley et al., 2016; National Council on Disability, 2018). By working together in these efforts, these offices would be better able to communicate with one another and streamline the accommodations that students may need.

This would also help in training different offices on supporting students with disabilities and educating them on IPV, sexual assault and available resources. Providing educational materials about the types of abuse including disability-specific abuse can give students and professionals a better understanding of what constitutes abuse, which may help students
recognize abusive experiences. Violence Prevention offices and Disability Services can work together to assist in safety planning should a student face an act of violence. These offices can help create language for marketing resources and services available specifically for this group of students and ensure that the marketing is accessible to everyone. An example of this marketing collaboration might be creating a page on a Violence Prevention office’s website specifically about the unique experiences of students with disabilities who endure an act of violence and specific resources and accommodations that are available for the student.

Institutions can work towards increasing awareness of students with disabilities within the general student population. Students with disabilities are more likely to disclose instances of IPV to informal sources like friends or roommates (Findley et al., 2016), so all students should be well-informed of the support that is available to survivors. Sexual assault educational programming should include language around students with disabilities as a way to break the stereotype that students with disabilities do not face IPV or sexual assault and should also be tailored directly to students with disabilities. Situations used in such training currently do not necessarily translate into the experiences of students with disabilities so having more applicable scenarios can resonate better with this student subpopulation (National Council on Disability, 2018). Additionally, training should be available in multiple formats to accommodate different learning styles and disabilities.

Disability should be a demographic included in research and surveys distributed by institutions so that institutional leadership and student affairs professionals can better inform their practices. Future research should further investigate how other aspects of a student’s identity can affect their experiences and if students with disabilities that also hold another minoritized identity face higher rates of violence than those who do not. This can help higher education institutions create and shape resources that better fit students’ needs.

Conclusion

Overall, institutions have a long way to go before they achieve a holistic understanding of students with disabilities and their experiences with IPV and sexual assault. While there is a lot of literature surrounding campus sexual assault, there is little conversation regarding this student group and the specific types of abuse that they can face. Existing literature uncovers the higher rate at which students with disabilities experience IPV and the lack of resources available to them. Moreover, these rates can vary depending on the type of disability the student has. This suggests the important role that higher education institutions play in the intervention and prevention of IPV and sexual assault. Both student affairs professionals and the general student population need better education surrounding the experiences of students with disabilities, so they are more informed and equipped to respond to students that need help. IPV and sexual assault are major issues on college and university campuses across the nation, but they affect vulnerable students, more specifically students with disabilities, to a higher degree and thus, institutions must make extra efforts to protect them.

References


Abstract

This research analyzes the alignment of today’s practices with current student needs in higher education. Veterans face unique challenges when transitioning back into civilian culture. When that transition combines with a shift to life on a college campus, these challenges are further exacerbated. Tinto’s Model of Student Integration allows the research to account for persistence and withdrawal factors among student veterans and the completion of their education. Based on published recommendations, a “report card” was created to evaluate each institution’s current programming, the information gathered from institutional websites, and administrator interviews. Administrators from six New England institutions who work directly with student veterans took part in either an interview or an online survey regarding the expertise of their institution and the needs of the students. Interviews were also conducted with eight current student veterans regarding their personal experiences within higher education. The result of the study is a set of recommendations backed by student views and published data, combining the expertise of administrators whose institutions have active student veteran programs.

Key Terms: Student Veteran - For the purposes of this paper, “student veteran” refers to a current or former member of active duty, retired military, National Guard, or Reserves regardless if they are using education benefits.

Introduction

Student veterans fall outside of the typical vision of a traditional-aged college student yet encompass a vast range of people, including those who enter college later in their life or take classes on an atypical schedule. The “National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)” reports that the vast majority of students in higher education—73 percent—fit under the non-traditional college student umbrella” (Get Educated, n.d.). As the population of traditional students gets proportionally smaller, most schools are looking at ways to capitalize on appealing to non-traditional students, including veterans.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act into law in 1944 (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018, p.2). This Act, commonly known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, and later as simply the G.I. Bill, is an education benefit that has been updated several times since its inception to meet the needs of service members as they return to civilian life (Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, 1944). The financial benefit of funds awarded included education along with unemployment compensation and home and business loans. The benefit was born out of the fear that millions of veterans would find themselves without a home or job opportunities once they completed their military service. The law was enacted to thwart this crisis among our veterans (Berman, 2015).
This bill soon transformed college campuses across America. Student veterans comprised up to fifty percent of the college population by 1947 (Berman, 2015). Fast-forward to 2017, and you can see the actual effect of this bill, as 28% of all veterans over the age of 25 have a post-secondary degree or credential (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018, p.2).

**Purpose**

The purpose of this research study is to examine the current programs that institutions offer to address veterans’ unique challenges. The necessity for this type of programming comes from the unique set of issues that veterans encounter, including mental health problems, failure to assimilate, and being caught between the two worlds of military structure and the freedom of civilian life (Kurzynski, 2014, p. 4). After identifying these challenges and barriers, I created a "report card" for this research based on current best practices published by Student Veterans of America (SVA) and the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (V.A.). The Report Card was a litmus test to evaluate the institutions’ current offerings to address known challenges and barriers. Interviews with student veterans helped to determine student needs. I will identify the institutions that have implemented programs that address these needs. Institutions that create programs to assist student veterans to degree completion will be determined to have the highest rate of success, knowing that one of the G.I. Bill's primary goals was to make veterans employable in the civilian world.

**Research Question**

What are the current practices that higher education institutions utilize to support the needs of student veterans?

**Literature Review**

**History of Veteran Enrollment in Higher Education**

After World War I, returning service members flooded the job market, and many had trouble making ends meet (History.com Editors, 2010). This pressure and uncertainty made assimilation into civilian life increasingly difficult. Many returning service members had to rely on government assistance, but that was often not adequate. In 1924, Congress passed the Bonus Act to help these veterans by promising them a bonus based on the number of days they served in the military. Although Congress may have had good intentions, it took almost twenty years for the payments from the Bonus Act to be awarded (History.com Editors, 2010).

In June 1944, President Roosevelt signed into law the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944. When created, the original G.I. Bill of Rights established hospitals, created low-interest mortgages, and awarded stipends covering tuition and expenses for college or trade school for all wartime service members. Between 1944 and 1949, nine million veterans took advantage of this benefit. By 1956, close to $4 billion had been invested in these individuals (History.com Editors, 2010). The U.S. government has already spent billions on these programs; this research will highlight areas that could improve the success of the investment.

In March 2014, the SVA released preliminary findings on student veteran success in
higher education. These findings from the Million Records Project showed promising results, with a 51.7% completion rate for student veterans (Kurzynski, 2014, p.3). The rate of completion for military students was calculated by the completion of their program or trade school training. This metric is not bound by a time constraint (Kurzynski, 2014, p.5). “Improvements in higher education can increase the success of not only student veterans, but also the American economy, because veteran unemployment rates decrease as their education level increases” (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011).

Veterans from both war and peacetime now enjoy many benefits from the G.I. Bill, including generous education benefits and, in certain situations, housing stipends. In 2019, the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics released a survey of the student veteran population in conjunction with the U.S. Census Bureau. Between 2000 and 2009, over 3,600,000 (14.9- 16.7%) veterans per year used educational benefits toward a bachelor’s degree, with at least an additional 2,000,000 (7.4- 9.1%) using the benefits for another type of advanced degree (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2019).

Although the G.I. Bill had benefits that were extended to all veterans regardless of race or gender, it has been easier for some to collect than others. For decades the administrators of benefits at both the state and local level were exclusively white males. In a time of rampant racial and gender discrimination, African American and female veterans did not have the same enrollment opportunities due to institutions giving preferential treatment too white males (History.com Editors, 2010).

Challenges for Veterans in Higher Education

Student veterans’ not only have to adjust to life outside of the military, but also to the culture of academia. The original goal of the G.I. Bill was to help facilitate this transition for veterans back into civilian life, but it also intended to stimulate the economy. By raising the education level of veterans, the country would see lower unemployment rates and ensure more skilled workers in the workplace. On top of the challenge of moving from a rigorous and regimented life in the military to one of freedom and choices in the civilian world, some decide to take on the additional task of becoming students.

Veterans are essentially moving between two worlds when their service ends; this can be even further complicated if they are in the Reserves or National Guard and are enrolled as a student while still serving. The military is extremely structured, and time is a crucial component to their success. Military units trust that other units will be on time, and during times of conflict, if someone is late lives could be at stake. Among service members there is a saying that “fifteen minutes early is considered late.” Additionally, there is an established chain of command with no shortage of people giving instructions on how the Commander wants the mission accomplished. Outside of the service, the world is less regimented: a veteran must figure out their own daily life, create and decide schedules that are self-regulated, and a boss telling them what to do feels more like an open-ended suggestion. Life can become something abstract that the veteran must learn to navigate.

In general, the American public does not recognize how challenging these changes can be for the veteran population, and veterans feel their confusion. In fact, 84% of veterans report that they believe the American public does not understand the difficulties service members face (Kurzynski, 2014). This results in the distrust that many veterans may have towards the general
public and can contribute to the reported strain in family relationships (which 48% report) and how they are able to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (which 37% reported) (Kurzynski, 2014). Also known as “shadow” issues, as they are not ones that can outwardly be seen, but rather can have dramatic effects on a person’s life in and out of an academic setting “Add to these challenges, an adjustment to the academic culture, which emphasizes individual accomplishment, independent organization, and a fairly slow pace, all of which are directly opposite of the military culture” (Hamrick et al., 2013). All of those challenges are navigated with a complicated, strictly regulated system to access V.A. education benefits.

Barriers to assistance with financial issues (personal, V.A. policies, or family-related), having to navigate education benefits, lack of access to physical and mental health services, and general re-orientation into the civilian or academic world cause massive amounts of frustrations for student veterans. It is essential for faculty and administrators to understand the context of the veteran’s frustrations (Kurzynaski, 2014).

The way language is used and how some specific words are chosen create a sticking point for many student veterans. It is a source of frustration when these students follow a faculty member’s instructions as if they are orders from their chain of command, only to find out that the instructions and due date are more abstract than hard and fast rules. This frustration can become exacerbated if the faculty member is inexperienced with navigating this type of confrontation.

“The Veterans Affairs office is the central source for all their vital information, and the students can (and do) drop into the office whenever the need arises, or to say “hi” correctly described this strategy as the effective method to help “reduce the bureaucratic obfuscation that may arise by bridging the gap between the structured design of the military and the more amorphous campus environment” (Kurzynski, 2014). Connecting student veterans with their peers in order to discuss both the military and their classwork is an essential component in guaranteeing their return the following semester (Kurzynski, 2014; Military.com, 2019). As Michael Kirchner (2017) notes, $50 billion is spent annually on building leadership within the military: these service members are walking onto our campus with the ability to lift the rest of the student body, but their leadership abilities are under-utilized. Institutions should also focus on finding ways to utilize the skills of their student veterans.

Guiding Framework

Theoretical Framework

Tinto’s Model of Student Integration (1975 & 1993) allows for the persistence and withdrawal factors between a student and the completion of their education. Student veterans come into institutions of higher education with external factors that can prohibit their ability to transition to college life in a manner that facilitates learning. The ability of student veterans is no different from their classmates: their capacity for completing tasks on time and precisely following directions excels due to their prior training, and their leadership skills can shine when they are given the ability to illustrate these skills. However, the factors that exist before enrollment differentiate student veterans from the majority of classmates that they will encounter during their education. Tinto’s model allows for the measurement of resilience in these students.

Tinto’s model suggests that students come to college with background traits (e.g., race,
secondary school achievement, academic aptitude, family education, and economic contexts). These characteristics lead to initial commitments, both to the goal of graduation from college and to the specific institution attended. Tinto’s model is centered around a “diathesis of pre-existing vulnerabilities” and coming off of the center are the different elements effecting a student’s decision to withdraw or persist (Arnekrans, 2014). See Appendix A.

Student veterans are at an increased risk of having mental health challenges, including PTSD, thoughts of suicide, and feelings of displacement, all at a rate that far surpasses that of their student counterparts (Factsheets, 2018). These are significant factors that veterans may bring with them to campus which could cause them to drop courses.

Tinto’s model is unique because it combines all the factors that students bring with them, both those that will help to persist and those that, without support, will cause a student to decide to drop out. Persistence is theorized to be “dramatically affected” by student peer culture. In an educational setting, persistence has a strong emphasis on a student’s ability and willingness to integrate into a campus (Scott, 2000). Using the framework Tinto has laid out, this study aims to evaluate institutional programming that aligns with student needs to help insures persistence and student success.

Fast Facts (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018):

- 62% of student veterans were first-generation: Tinto’s model uses Family Background as one of the starting factors for success.
- 47% of student veterans were parents: Tinto’s model looks at Individual Attributes before a student enters college. Additionally, in the academic system a student’s peer group interactions are connected to grade performance; depending on the way the veteran is taking classes, they may be the only parent in a class.
- Only 15% of student veterans were traditionally aged (18-23): Tinto’s track for following institutional commitment has both Peer-Group Interactions and Social Integration. With only 15% falling in the traditional age range, there may be an added generational gap to a student will have to adjust.
- The average timeframe out of school is 5 years
- 38% of veterans enrolled in community colleges
- 23% of veterans enrolled in private for-profit institutions
- The average GPA (in 2016) of a student veteran was 3.35

Research Participants

The research is a combination of interviews with administrative staff on college campuses about their current veteran programs, analysis of current programs based on established best practices, and interviews with current student veterans to establish their student needs. Each institutions’ public website will also be used to collect data about their offerings.

Two populations will be included in the direct research portion: administrators and student veterans. The administrators represent the different segments of higher education—community college, four-year college, university—in the New England area who have established student veteran programs. Also, the administrators at these six institutions work directly with the student veterans at their respective institutions. Student veterans volunteered to
participate when learning of the project and wanted their voices to be considered. Up to five open-ended questions were presented to these volunteers, allowing them to share their experience on campus. Eight student veterans took part in the survey and two of the eight students are female, representing the larger population of veterans on campus.

Research Instrument

Administrators and students were contacted via phone, email, or in person explaining the purpose of the research and requesting their participation. Ten administrators were contacted, and six of them agreed to participate in the research. These institutions were selected to be representative of different types of educational institutions in New England. The student veterans had a 100% response rate with eight students, six male and two females, participating. The following questions for administrators and student veterans were created for the purpose of this research. See Appendix B for Administrator Questions. See Appendix C for Student Veteran Questions.

Report Card

The report card below was created for this research using a combination of best practices published by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (V.A.) and Student Veterans of America (SVA). In Appendix D is a copy of the outline created and used to evaluate the institutions based on interviews with their administrators and information available on the institution’s public website.

Project Limitations

The limitations of this analysis are mainly due to the scale of the study. Even though the analysis and findings can be applied to institutions across the country, the administrators and student veterans included in this research are based solely in New England. Although sample size was not large enough to break down the institutions into subsections of higher education (i.e., community colleges, private 4-year, and public 4-year), each type of institution is represented in the research.

Findings & Analysis

The purpose of this research is to align best practices as published by national veteran organizations with current student veteran needs. This analysis will be assessing the findings against the report card I created using published best practices. Selected from recommendations of national veterans’ organizations such as the V.A. and SVA. Tinto’s Model of Student Integration was also used to select which established best practices would have the most significant impact on the persistence and withdrawal factors for the student veterans.

The findings will be used along with established literature to address this project’s research question: “What are the current programs that higher education institutions utilize to support the needs of student veterans?” The report cards will then be compared with the responses of student veterans to see if the institutions are addressing their needs and to make recommendations for moving forward.
All six institutions that participated in this study have a separate report card. Note that not all of the students selected were matched with the institutions that responded. Students B, C, D, E, and G are all current students from the institutions represented.

Tinto’s Model of Student Integration takes into account students’ outside commitments and the overall structure of the academic/social system. Institution A recognizes that student veterans are coming onto campus with barriers that may be beyond what the school can address without support. By reaching out to outside resources like the local V.A. hospital, Institution A is able to address medical and mental health barriers, such as PTSD, impacting student veterans. According to Kurzynski (2014), 37% of student veterans are battling Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Institution A does not currently have a dedicated space for student veterans. The student veterans unanimously shared the importance of having a private space where they can meet with other student veterans.

Prior to attending Institution B, Student C was a college dropout with a ten-year gap in education. Student C expresses the difficulty of fitting in and how they leaned heavily on the “established community” at the institution. Tinto’s framework takes into consideration family background; Student C expressed that not only were they a student veteran, but also a first-generation college student.

The administrator and Student C expressed that a 9/11 memorial event was held on campus by the student center, and neither the veterans’ affairs office nor the student veterans club was not invited to help coordinate or plan. This example illustrates how isolated student veterans can feel from the rest of the campus community. Student veterans are already at an increased risk of facing mental health challenges and feelings of displacement (Factsheets, 2018).

An established veteran center is one of the best practices mentioned in nearly every piece of literature on the topic. During the interviews, 100% of the student veterans commented about a veteran-specific space. i.e.,

The director and staff in the [Institution B] office made enrolling possible for me as I learned to navigate college once again. I was given credit for as much of my military training as the law would allow. They gave me a chance to be a work study to earn more income. They even went out of their way to assist in resources for me to find a place to live. Needless to say, “fitting in” with the general population was the last of my worries. Instead, I leaned heavily on the established community [Institution B] had waiting for me. Everyone has challenges that could keep them from graduating college. Mine just happen to be due to my military service. (Interview with Student C)

Maintaining a welcoming veteran-specific space on an institution’s campus allows student veterans to have a place to gather. Student veterans use a functional, established veteran center to build camaraderie while in school, receive assistance for their unique needs, gather internal and external resource information, and have social events (Fishback, 2015; Kirchner, 2017; Kurzynski, 2014; Military.com, 2019).

Institution C has a dedicated room, but it is not utilized in a way that creates this type of community. Peer-group interactions are a key component in Tinto’s model (1975), and maintaining positive peer-group and faculty interactions are two key components of social
integration into an institution. Institution D does not have a dedicated veteran space; it is plausible this is due to the small size of the institution as a whole.

Additionally, the way in which civilians and veterans use language can be a conflict in the classroom, and assumptions can be made about student veterans due to their military background. “One incident I had was with a professor at the end of my first semester. She accused me of having an issue with black women in charge. She also made a comment earlier in the semester insinuating that military members enjoyed life on a base because of the alcohol” (Student B). The way that student veterans speak, and address authority is firm and respectful; these students like to have information and due dates clarified so they understand expectations placed on them. In the military time is an integral part of success, which is in direct contradiction to the more relaxed attitudes on college/university campuses. Student veterans expressed being frustrated with last-minute changes with assignments, class schedules, and expectations. There is a tendency for civilian students and faculty to debate expectations in class, which goes against years of training for student veterans. Having a communication conflict can be disruptive to the academic and social integration for a student (Tinto, 1975).

When an institution prioritizes the retention of student veterans, you will see programming like the kind that Institution E has implemented. Three out of the eight administrators included in this survey have a dedicated advisor or priority registration among their “wish list” items. Institution E stands alone in its current ability to give veteran students this level of attention. Student C, Student D, and Student F spoke of student veterans benefiting from additional assistance in navigating courses, advising, and registration. Student veterans have diverse backgrounds and could be attempting to balance education with family responsibilities, a career, mental illness, financial troubles, or even continued military duty.

Finances for many military members and their families are often a struggle. Some student veterans depend on their educational benefits to pay for part or all of their tuition and help them maintain a stable housing situation. Half of all administrators and students interviewed highlighted financial struggles as a barrier to the completion of a program for student veterans. When worrying about basic needs for themselves and their families, it can be difficult for student veterans to concentrate on their education. Institution E takes part in the Yellow Ribbon program: in order to help student veterans cover the cost of education without the need for additional loans. The institution covers whatever tuition balance remains on their program after 100% of their post-9/11 benefit has been used. For many student veterans, the ability to attend school, receive a housing allowance, and not have to incur additional financial burdens is crucial for completing their academic programs successfully.

Creating a community and programming in an institution takes time, which at Institution F was started when the current administrator received a grant. Here is another good example of an institution addressing student veteran needs. Administrators and students both highlighted access to community support and being able to communicate issues as major retention factors for student veterans. For over thirty years the administrator at Institution F has been developing and using faculty and staff training to create positive interactions among institutional professionals, faculty, and student veterans.

The dedication to these programs shows an institutional commitment to the success of student veterans, which is the connection between commitments and the academic and social system within Tinto’s Student Integration Model (1975). The programs available to address
student veteran needs were evaluated using the “Report Card” based on published best practices, the information provided by the administrators, and the student interviews. The “Report Card” was created and successfully utilized during this evaluation process.

**Recommendations**

After synthesizing the research findings based on the interviews with administrators and students and reflecting on previously established best practices, I make the following recommendations to assist the student veteran population in higher education.

Create a central point of contact on campus for veterans (administrative)
A central point of contact on the college campus allows student veterans to get information based on their unique needs. This recommendation is based on administrators’ experience with student veterans who become frustrated with the lack of clarity during their first experiences with the campus. By having a central point of contact it removes the need to find multiple offices or speak to numerous people before a problem is addressed.

Provide a dedicated advisor for the veteran population
The administrator(s) dedicated to veterans would have resources about their specific needs, knowledge of the different educational benefits they might be dealing with, experience with the V.A. certifying system, and connections to community resources for addressing problems like mental health, housing needs, or other issues. Based on the analysis, 50% of the students and administrators believed that this would improve services on campus.

Access to mental health services
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and thoughts of suicide are more prevalent among the student veteran community than their civilian student classmates (Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, 1944). Due to these shadow factors, it is vital that mental health services on campus and in the community are easily accessible and well-communicated to student veterans.

Establish a community of veterans, for veterans (center)
The student veterans expressed the importance in having an established sense of belonging and community on campus. Our analysis showed that administrators who are able to create this on their campus have a higher percentage of student veterans who attend that institution.

Staff and faculty training
Addressing the communication and use of language will change the quality of the conversations that administrators, faculty, and civilian students have with student veterans. By providing the community with the knowledge of how and why student veterans respond to directions, frustrations on both sides can be eliminated.

Extended policies regarding transferable credit and credit for prior learning
Student veterans often receive training while in the military and may take single classes at a few
institutions based on where they are located. Understanding that these students are trying to piece together a degree while serving in the military should be considered when an institution decides how many transfer credits to accept. Half of the institutions noted that for student veterans, they accept up to thirty additional credits over what is accepted for traditional students.

Specific tutor(s) who are experienced in on-campus and virtual classrooms
Student veterans often do not like to ask for help. By having a designated tutor in the veteran space, institutions will increase the likelihood that these students will do so. It would be beneficial if this person was military themselves and had experience with learning in different formats or spaces.

Internal annual institutional review of veteran-specific services
Institutions must show a commitment to the continued success of their student veterans. One way to do this would be to conduct an internal review process on an annual basis, in order to evaluate the changing needs of students as well as what programs are successful at the institution, and which need to be reassessed. This could be done by using the “report card” created for this research, since it is based on published best practices.

Veteran specific orientation
A specific orientation for student veterans would be able to cover the benefits and programs offered at the institution for those students. This would also be the ideal time to introduce the peer mentoring program and tour the veteran center on campus. Student veterans would then be able to meet peers who might have similar life experiences and allow them to begin to establish a community on the campus.

References
Appendix A

![Flowchart of Tinto's Student Integration Model](image)

**Figure 1** Tinto’s Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975). Adapted from “Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research,” by V. Tinto, 1975, Review of Educational Research, 45(1), pp.89-125.

[Image Description: flowchart of Tinto’s Student Integration Model]

Appendix B

Questions for administrators working with student veterans:

1. Name and Email
2. Title
3. Institution
4. What is the percentage of student veterans on your campus? Are the majority using V.A. educational benefits?
5. From your experience, please share some unique characteristics of student veterans.
6. Which student veteran needs is your institution currently addressing?
7. Which needs still have to be addressed?
8. Is there a current mentor program for student veterans? If yes, please explain.
9. Many student veterans experience frustration when it comes to communication on campus. Please share the communication policy or any training/programs that exist to facilitate a positive interaction with these students.
10. Please share resources that are currently available for student veterans within your institution.
11. If money and policy restrictions were not a factor, what trainings or programs would you institute to improve the student veteran experience and why?
Appendix C

Questions for interviews with student veterans:
1. Email, institution, program of study.
2. What were you looking for in an institution when looking to apply?
   a. Anticipated answers would be along the lines of advancement or change career fields, experience something new, networking, etc.
3. Follow up question: What are your goals and objectives with education and after completion?
4. To your level of comfort, please share your experience and any challenges that have arisen.
   a. Anticipated answers will be along the lines of institutional blocks and social conflicts between other students/faculty members.
5. Is there anything else you feel is important for civilian administrators/faculty to know when working with student veterans?

Appendix D

Report card given to institutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Report Card: Institution</th>
<th>(X= not available, U= campus has but is not meeting recommended standards, S= satisfactory, E= excelling)</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central point of contact on campus for veterans</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dedicated advisor (registration)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Veteran-specific space</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to identify student veterans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student veteran organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff and faculty training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opening lines of communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic preparation (veteran</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic tutoring</td>
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<td>Veteran to veteran mentoring</td>
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<td>Mental health services</td>
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<td>Engaging student veterans</td>
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<td>Expanded housing options</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yellow ribbon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Campus and community support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transferable credits for military training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principles of excellence participant</td>
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<tr>
<td>(list of schools in agreement with the V.A., available online)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of veterans who graduate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Streamline disability and veteran services</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Alternative Text:
The list of best practices are as follows. An answer of X means it is not available, U means the campus has it but is not meeting recommended standards, S means it is satisfactory, and E means excelling.

- Central point of contact on campus for veterans
- Dedicated advisor (registration)
- Veteran-specific space
- Ability to identify student veterans
- Student veteran organization
- Staff and faculty training
- Opening lines of communication
• Academic preparation (veteran orientation)
• Academic tutoring
• Veteran to veteran mentoring
• Mental health services
• Engaging student veterans
• Expanded housing options
• Yellow ribbon
• Campus and community support
• Transferable credits for military training
• Principles of excellence participant (list of schools in agreement with the V.A., available online)
• Percentage of veterans who graduate
• Streamline disability and veteran services
Are Living Learning Communities Beneficial?

Rachel L. Choset
New York University

Introduction

Finding community is a critical part of the college student experience. During a student’s first year, there is typically an adjustment period of living independently and feeling a sense of belonging that helps students overcome obstacles they may face in trying to navigate a new world. Students can find community in classrooms, joining a club or organization, forming an outside study group, and often through Living Learning Communities. Living Learning Communities (LLCs), also known as Living Learning Programs (LLPs), integrate “community and academic work into a student’s campus residence [to] create a fully co-curricular experience” (Buell et al., 2017, p. 87) through the use of intentional curricula for learning and community building. LLCs work to engage students in the residence halls by hosting events, discussions, or activities that allow like-minded students to get together in their campus homes and find others who are similar to them. LLCs date back to the 1920s and are meant to act as a link for students to create a deeper sense of connection and community through engaging in shared experiences outside of the classroom. Practitioners in the higher education field are continually investigating LLCs' effect on the community and how they benefit students. Research shows that LLCs offer a beneficial opportunity for students, but also come with many unintended challenges. By reviewing the existing literature, recommendations can be made to better serve students living in LLCs and how they can overcome challenges to support a co-curricular student experience within higher education.

Historical Context

The idea of LLCs was created by John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn, where they “founded experimental schools…where they could put into practice their theories about learning as a social process” (Love, 2012, p. 8). Focusing on the work of Meiklejohn and higher education, the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin was “a required research project to be done by students during the summer between their freshman and sophomore years” and examinations of the students’ “sociological and political patterns” investigated what can be applied to them from the “real world” to their classrooms (Love, 2012, pp. 8-9). These concepts would then shape a curriculum for students to know what they need to learn prior to attending a university. The Experimental College had the first two years of students at the university stay “[in] a design of the college [that] included students’ social networks that would reinforce academic habits and culture” (Love, 2012, p. 9). Through the conceptualization of interdisciplinary teaching within the residence hall and inside classrooms, LLCs started to form.

In the Experimental College’s residence hall, there were several teachers, known as advisors, who would also live and work in the residence hall to “foster maximum social and intellectual interaction” (Nelson, 2001, p. 141). After much hesitation about housing the
Experimental College, the Wisconsin state legislature agreed to support Meiklejohn in working with his Experimental College. With 119 students admitted into the school, and numerous faculty willing to cultivate interdisciplinary conversations, Meiklejohn’s next challenge would be to encourage students to want to learn and participate in this new way. However, five years after its opening, the Experimental College closed due to effects from the Great Depression and the public’s criticism that the Experimental College was teaching students to be undisciplined. Meiklejohn showed that learning can be done anywhere on a college campus, not just in a classroom. There was not a huge wave of this new initiative of LLCs seen until years later, starting in the 1960s, when colleges and universities became more residential and implemented programming inside residence halls.

**Benefits of Living Learning Communities**

With the heightened interest of incorporating LLCs on college campuses, administration was able to get creative in establishing different kinds of communities that could stimulate deeper learning outside the classroom. LLCs allow residential students to experience a co-curricular academic and living community through a variety of types of LLCs: including academic-based (engineering and science communities), identity-based (international student community), and interest-based (the arts and entrepreneurship communities), just to name a few. Research shows that students who are a part of LLCs are “more likely to hold out-of-class discussions with their peers on topics introduced in their coursework as well as on social and cultural issues” (Inkelas et al., 2008, p. 14) which can lead to an increase in stimulating intellectual perspectives and arguments. LLCs can help students build skills so they are able to hold conversations based on interdisciplinary teaching compared to solely conversations within a classroom, a type of style that does not work for every kind of student. LLCs also work to promote student development by creating ways for students to work and learn through high engagement practices (Buell et al., 2017). Students who join LLC programs early in their college experience are shown to outwardly use critical thinking skills and are more likely than non-LLC students to engage with faculty. Key studies also show that students participating in learning communities display “enhanced academic performance, integration of academic and social experiences, gains in multiple areas of skill, competence, and knowledge, and overall satisfaction with the college experience” (Otto et al., 2015, p. 2). Though critical thinking and academic grades are different statistics, students involved in LLCs challenge themselves academically and push themselves to understand the world a little differently than they once knew it. LLCs have well established their intent to develop interdisciplinary studies through positive student growth and feedback that can contribute to student success in college and beyond.

LLCs also capitalize on Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement in that LLCs require high levels of student engagement both in and outside of the classroom, which according to Astin, is directly related to the amount of personal and professional growth that a student experiences (1999). Astin suggests that “frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement” (Astin, 1999, p. 525), something LLCs positively contribute to in fostering that interaction. In turn, LLCs see “increased student retention rates and higher grade point averages” (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016, p. 3) and may be particularly of value for students who are most at risk for not graduating (Otto et al.,
Student engagement and a student’s sense of community and belonging has also been studied through the use of Living Learning Communities. Regardless of the type of LLC, research from Buell et al. indicates that “student outcomes in LLCs include a sense of belonging and positive relationships with peers and faculty” (2017, p. 90). LLCs encourage student socialization with a variety of community members, including students, staff, and faculty. A 2016 study of 80,000 students from over 360 four-year institutions concluded that “students in LLCs felt more connected to their faculty and had the confidence to ask for help from their faculty members” (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, p. 4). Additionally, students in the Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell study indicated having great respect for their faculty and feeling that they were more approachable, concurring with Astin’s theory. In addition to these benefits, Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell notes that a “significant portion of the impact of college is influenced by students’ socialization on campus” (2016, p. 3) with all community members, including students, staff, and faculty. The Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell research around LLCs show there is a mutual benefit between student and institution, as the LLC can provide students with a greater sense of ability and social feeling that potentially leaves them with a higher GPA and connection with faculty, factors often positively associated with retention.

Overtime, LLCs were also able to strengthen students’ engagement and belonging on their campus. Studies revealed students feel a “higher sense of community and belonging in residence halls among LLC students compared to non-LLC students” and that LLCs are “fulfilling [students’] general goal of creating a supportive, student-focused environment within the context of a larger college or university setting” (Spanierman et al., 2013, p. 320). In this research of community and belonging, Spanierman et al. identified that the LLC with the highest level of these values was the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) Women LLC. It appeared that this STEM Women LLC “provided social support for women who explained that others might perceive them as ‘nerdy’” and women in this LLC explained that “support from other women was critical” where women felt unjudged and settled in a quiet study environment (Spanierman et al., 2013, p. 320). This type of communal feeling is not uncommon amongst LLC-type communities within higher education. Students feel more supported in their LLC when they are able to be with like-minded people who can both support and challenge their work by having shared perspectives and experiences. Overall, the higher education community continues to recognize LLCs as a high impact learning initiative that shows positive effects on student success.

Challenges of Living Learning Communities

Even with positive results found, there are still some challenges that question the meaning of and goals associated with LLCs. The higher education community has felt that LLC programs are “operating without a clear purpose or mission, noting that too many learning communities are little more than block registration devices, with little alteration of the teaching and learning environment” (Smith, 2015, p. 3). LLCs, at face value, are very useful tools in building community, but higher education practitioners may not fully understand how intricate these programs are and the strong campus partnerships needed to build it, questioning an LLC’s overall benefit and value to the institution at large. This indicates a strong need for periodic reviewal in understanding whether the programs are working or not and why; programs
may be over-produced without keeping the goals of the LLC and values of the institution in mind.

In a 2007 survey, the National Study of Living Learning Programs found that “faculty involvement in LLC programs was overall, quite low...23% included no faculty participation, and 64% utilized somewhere between one and three faculty members” (Council of Independent Colleges, 2015, p. 5). Of the LLCs that did have faculty members, they were limited to faculty involvement of teaching courses and academic advising, but not assisting with the larger development of the co-curricular and extracurricular activities. This suggests that faculty may not fully understand their duties as participants in an LLC and how it differs from that of a typical faculty role in the classroom. Consequently, because of the vital role faculty play in an LLC, their lack of involvement and enthusiasm may cause disinterest in student involvement. Moreover, faculty involvement may be compounded by the type of institution the LLC is operating in; at large research institutions, it may be more challenging for faculty to get involved if they are also concerned with other courses they teach and producing independent research if required by their academic department.

While Living Learning Communities offer students a deeper sense of connection with their faculty and peers, researchers have found that the connections made can “sometimes lead to cliques within the respective LLCs, leaving some students feeling isolated from other students” (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016, p. 12). The same researchers note that the social adjustment in college is critical in the high school to college transition and not immune to the development of conflict. Students can create tension unknowingly by forming a type of social circle that isolates others from the conversation in a single LLC. Those who feel ostracized from the LLC may be more inclined to retract from the community or withdraw altogether. Looking at first-year students in the residence halls, it is important to remember that these students are coming from high school environments and it takes time to relearn new environments. This means “a small group of traditional-aged first-year students can also recreate and reinforce a ‘high school-like environment’ with the attitudes and behaviors that accompany it” (Jaffee et al., 2008, p. 58). While some hope an LLC brings people together to form a cohesive living community, there are shortfalls in LLCs to allow for a proper high school to college life transition.

Additionally, the dualistic nature of LLCs means that conflicts that happen in the classroom may easily seep into the dynamics of the residence hall community. Institutions should be cautious of students creating a detachment from the larger campus and choosing to isolate themselves in their residence halls in a group of people similar to them. Students might enjoy their LLC so much that they choose to have their residence hall be their primary community instead of having multiple communities of equal comfort. This overinvestment in the community may become a breeding ground for increased risky behaviors, such as the consumption of alcohol or drugs, and peer pressure situations (Smith, 2015). This in turn can lead to students choosing to participate more in such risky behaviors over the communal conversations and stimulation that are seen in LLCs. The emphasis on students living together should not be reason alone that a community is built, especially if there is a specific focus on bringing peers and faculty together and an overlooked consideration of students wanting to be experiential in decision-making when they enter a college campus.
Recommendations

Many research studies have illustrated that Living Learning Communities have a positive effect on a student’s GPA and overall sense of community at an institution. However, after considering the challenges, there are still some steps institutions can take in order to alleviate any issues they might face. The recurrence of exclusive cliques can impede LLCs’ goal of creating community, so Residence Life leaders could establish explicit values and expectations for inclusivity within the LLC and engage students in developing guidelines for their LLC that address needs and interests of the students. In addition, bringing all the LLCs that exist on a campus together in some capacity to share experiences may bring together the multiple interdisciplinary conversations that are occurring on one campus and establish another space for students’ sense of belonging. Residence Life staff may also help in encouraging students within one LLC to engage with other students in another LLC. Mentoring programs may also be of use in LLCs, as it may encourage students to interact with others that they may not normally engage with and can provide another layer of support. Additionally, considering the risk of dangerous behavior in these types of communities, Residence Life staff can proactively provide alcohol and drug education, sexual violence awareness, and other educational programming to help students make educated decisions. Residence Life leaders should continue emphasizing and enforcing consequences for policy violations that every campus has on these behaviors.

The Council of Independent Colleges (2015) sees assessment as critical in understanding the impact of LLCs; through direct and indirect methods of assessment, higher education professionals can see what their students are taking away from their LLC experience and where there are areas for improvement. Consistent assessment will share with administration whether or not the LLC is functioning in line with the campus’ mission and goals. When it becomes clear through assessment that LLCs are losing student interest, leaders can focus on the areas that need improvement and intentionally use the assessment to better the student experience while being student-centered and keeping the overall mission in mind. It is vital that LLCs continue to act as a co-curricular and interdisciplinary feature that stimulates student development and growth while at the college, aside from just focusing on connection and high GPA.

Considering the important role that faculty play in the facilitation of the LLC, Residence Life collaborating with and training LLC faculty is a critical component to making sure that the right people are a part of the community. Residence Life staff should also structure faculty responsibilities to align with their faculty roles and knowledge, which can make sure faculty know what they are getting into as LLC faculty and set realistic expectations for their duties. Training further reinforces this by giving them the tools they need to effectively engage with their students in and outside of the classroom. Strong partnerships between the LLC faculty and staff can create a united front amongst the professionals running the LLC and indicate to students that they are fully supported by the LLC faculty and Residence Life staff.

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed the functions of LLCs where they have not been quite the same as most institutions have operated fully or partially remote. It is up to the Residence Life teams and their respective institutions on how LLCs will continue to live on their campuses post COVID-19. While LLCs are meant to be housed in residence halls, there is still a thriving community aspect that can still be honed in and established in a virtual platform. Institutions will need to see LLCs as flexible as academic
classrooms were made to continue its work of faculty and student engagement, as well as creating a space of connection, which is much needed in the time of the pandemic. With students no longer living on campus in their LLC, they are no longer able to experience the dual living and learning components of the program. This has caused universities and colleges to reconsider how they can best replicate the LLC environment in a virtual platform. Because a virtual LLC may not give students the same benefits as an in-person one, students may feel less willing to join one. Residence Life has been one of the most affected offices within higher education since it is incredibly challenging to have students co-exist in the same space while also enforcing safety guidelines of physical distancing and mask wearing. Additionally, Residence Life staff is less driven by programmatic aspects and more concerned about “the pressure of both lower operating capacity and refunding housing costs have put a financial strain on institutions” that can lead to an increase in hiring freezes and furloughing staff (Williams, 2020). Safety should be an institution's priority, but it raises the question of where community building falls within the reopening strategy.

During the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, safety concerns prompted institutions across the country to close residence halls and send students home. The following Fall 2020, many residence halls stayed closed, and the ones that re-opened had limited programming. While the pandemic can be seen as a hindrance to in-person community building, LLCs do not necessarily have to disappear in a virtual world. Facilitators of LLCs are already established, with a faculty and/or staff member prepared for discussions and activities. Even if the pandemic kept residence halls closed, learning communities already have intact partnerships that can be transitioned into a virtual setting. Some sort of reconstruction might be required to continue with discussions and activities, but learning communities are still able to bring members together for academic and social reasons. The National Learning Community Collaborative (2020) notes, “the cherished traditions that solidify a sense of community on campus can be offered online in innovative ways that maintain a high-quality learning community experience that engages students...” (paragraph 5) driving the point that these communities do not have to be neglected because there is a lack of physical setting but can be transformed for a virtual setting and continue the out-of-classroom experience.

Conclusion

Living Learning Communities were established to bridge the gap between academic and non-academic worlds. The student subpopulation in the residence halls benefits greatly from LLCs because they can experience programming and discussions that are geared towards their interests. Students who participate in LLCs also develop skills outside the classroom and build community with other students who are similar in interests and identities. Students in LLCs are more engaged with faculty and peers and feel a stronger sense of community, which could influence higher GPAs and increased retention. While LLCs create a plethora of benefits, there are a few notable caveats that may inadvertently cause challenges for students, staff and faculty. LLC faculty engagement increases students' sense of belonging, but in most applications, the faculty may have unrealistic expectations for their role and may lead to a lack of involvement in the living learning community. Moving forward, LLCs need to create stronger and individual assessments to evaluate the LLCs and if
student needs are being met. The COVID-19 pandemic has halted the functions of LLCs and may shift the way intellectual conversations as part of an LLC are conducted in the future. Despite their challenges, Living Learning Communities are a strong addition to campus communities and provide space for critical personal and intellectual growth.

References


Examining the Influence of Peers on the Identity Development of Latinx Men in Male-Centered Programs

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Introduction

Student identities are critical in order to understand the experiences of students in higher education. Scholars have linked identity development to have a positive influence on the success of undergraduate students (Chickering, 1969; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Patrón & Garcia, 2016). Recently, there has been a greater focus directed towards the collegiate experiences and success of male students of color on college campuses. Previous studies have shown they do not experience success at the same rates of their female counterparts and other White identified peers (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Wood & Harris III, 2013). In response, many campuses have begun implementing interventions or programs for the purpose of retaining Latinx men and men of color. These programs are referred to as Minority Male Initiatives and focus on promoting the persistence of men of color through interventions including mentoring, service learning, professional development, and holding critical conversations regarding racial and gender identity (Estrada et al., 2017; Keflezighi, Sebahari & Wood, 2016). Male-centered student programs provide Latinx men with a community and a space to share their experiences and backgrounds and explore their identities with their peers and mentors. However, few studies have analyzed whether these types of interventions are influencing the identity development of the student participants. Specifically, for Latinx male students, the intersectionality of their identities (ethnicity, race, gender, class, etc.) have an influence in how they navigate spaces in higher education and interact with their peers (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). This study will examine Latinx men and male-centered programs at four-year universities by answering the following research question: What influence, if any, do connections cultivated in male-centered student initiatives have on the identity development of Latinx men enrolled at four-year universities?

Literature Review

Scholars have pointed to different factors that contribute to the experiences of men of color such as learned gender norms and expectations (Harris III & Harper, 2008) and their socialization prior to entering higher education (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Though research on male college students of color continues to expand, there is limited literature on the unique experiences of Latinx men. More specifically, there is limited research that explores the identity development of Latinx men on college campuses and how they come to understand their intersecting identities. The next section will provide an overview of trends among Latinx men as students in higher education as well as external and internal barriers that may influence their persistence and retention in higher education.
Identity Development for Latinx Men

Dependent on their social environments and upbringing, students enter higher education at different stages of their identity development (Baxter Magolda, 2003; Chickering, 1969; Dancy, 2011; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Patrón & Garcia, 2016; Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009). For Latinx male college students, the intersectionality of their identities influence how they navigate spaces in higher education and interact with their peers (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). Two influential cultural values that tend to inform and shape Latinx men’s identity development are machismo and caballerismo.

Machismo

In order to contextualize the educational experiences of Latinx men, we must understand gendered expectations for men set by the Latinx community. Previous scholars have referred to those expectations and behaviors as machismo, a form of masculinity within the Latinx community (Arciniega et al., 2008; Estrada & Jimenez, 2018). Many researchers have pointed to gender roles and gender role socialization as an influence on the experiences of Latinx male students in higher education. James O’Neil (1981) defined gender roles as “behaviors, expectations, and role set defined by society as masculine or feminine which are embodied in the behavior of the individual man or woman and culturally regarded as appropriate to males and females” (p. 2013). Machismo refers to a standard of values taught to Latinx men and is often associated with hyper masculine behaviors such as violence, patriarchy, and intimidation (Arciniega et al., 2008). Throughout their lives, Latinx men and boys receive cues from their families, communities, and society that inform them how to perform the role of a man (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Estrada & Jimenez, 2018; Figueroa, Perez & Vega, 2016; Saenz, Bukoski, Lu & Rodriguez, 2013). From a young age, Latinx men are expected to act in a certain way and aspire to certain roles that have been prescribed to them. In a study by Figueroa, Perez and Vega (2016), many of those expectations are carried into adulthood and continue to evolve as Latinx men grow older. In their study, participants indicated that their families placed heavy responsibilities on them as they grew older, such as becoming a provider for the home (Figueroa et al., 2016). In much of the literature published on Latinx men attending college, the performance of machismo has been an important theme in understanding their educational experiences (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Sáenz et al., 2013; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009, Sáenz, Mayo, Miller & Rodriguez, 2015).

Researchers have also found that men of color in general develop a fear of appearing subordinate and being prideful (Saenz et al., 2013). In a study conducted by Saenz et al. (2013), participants discussed refusing help in an effort to avoid being perceived as subordinate. This presents a challenge in the educational experiences of Latinx male students as it leads them to restrict themselves from seeking help from faculty, administrators, and peers. Similarly, Bukoski and Hatch (2016) found through their collected narratives that both Black and Latinx men felt the need to navigate college on their own in order to prove their worth in order to demonstrate their power and status to other peers. For many Latinx men, higher education and educational achievement is seen as a conflict to the gender norms and what they have been taught growing up (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; McGowan, Tillapaugh & Harris III, 2019; Saenz et al., 2013). The majority of the literature focusing on the influence of machismo on the educational experiences of Latinx men tends to highlight how machismo has hindered the ability
of Latinx men to succeed in higher education. This understanding of Latinx men has clouded the way they are viewed in higher education and has led professionals to look at men of color, particularly Latinx men, through a deficit-focused perspective (McGowan et al., 2019). Though machismo is associated with negative traits such as hypermasculinity, dominance, and sexism, scholars have argued it is only one side to understanding masculinity within Latinx communities and Latinx men possess the cultural wealth to persist and succeed in higher education (Arciniega et al., 2008; Estrada & Jimenez, 2018).

**Caballerismo**

Positive traits associated with Latinx masculinity, or *caballerismo*, can be described as a code of masculinity that includes “nurturing, family centered, and chivalrous” (Arciniega et al., 2008, p. 21). Though some authors have identified traits of caballerismo among self-identified Latinx men, research on caballerismo is scant and has not been studied among Latinx male students in higher education (Arciniega et al., 2008; Sáenz et al., 2013; Sáenz et al., 2015; Estrada & Jimenez, 2018). Arciniega et al. (2008) were the first group of scholars to attempt to create an understanding of caballerismo and how it differs from traditional machismo. Behaviors associated with caballerismo include affiliation, emotional connectedness, and psychological well-being (Arciniega et al., 2008).

Though research on caballerismo is limited, previous studies focused on Latinx men have found that those who are high achieving in college demonstrate behaviors associated with caballerismo (Estrada & Jimenez, 2018; McGowan et al., 2019; Perez & Taylor, 2016; Perez & Saenz, 2017). Thriving Latinx men in higher education exhibit caballerismo through their abilities to develop relationships with peers and create community on campus, specifically with other Latinos (Arciniega et al., 2008; Perez & Taylor, 2016; Perez & Saenz, 2017). Estrada et al. (2017) also identified that through *hermandad*, or brotherhood, Latino student organizations promoted the engagement of Latinx men in higher education. Through these connections, Latinx men created a sense of support and promoted behaviors associated with caballerismo with other members (Estrada et al., 2017). In understanding how caballerismo manifests among Latinx men, it guides the understanding of how some Latinx men navigate institutions of higher education.

**Male-Centered Programs**

As college faculty, staff, and administrators create programming to support men of color, each initiative will vary from one college to the next based on the goals and needs of the institution. Programs may differ in their developmental focus such as mentorship (Sáenz, Ponjuan, Segovia & Del Real Viramontes, 2105; Smith, Klobassa, & Salinas, 2019; Torrens, Salinas, & Floyd, 2017), leadership, professionalism, socio-emotional support, identity development, and academic coaching. Some programs may be comprehensive and integrate all aspects of their program curriculum (Beatty, McElderry, & Dorsette, 2019). For the most part, programs established at four-year universities focus on the holistic development of men of color. Beatty et al. (2019) noted that comprehensive programs may draw from student engagement, ethnic/racial, and gender development theories to guide their program models. A notable program, the Male Success Initiative (MSI) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), operates under four-pillars which target multiple aspects of the undergraduate experiences of
men of color: Academic Coaching/Tailored Mentoring, L.E.E.D. (Leadership, Engagement, Enrichment & Development), Career Trajectory, and Gender & Masculinity (CSUF, n.d.). Paquette and Wall (2019) asserted that retreats serve college students well in that they are isolated with their peers and focused and committed to a single issue. Through retreats, men of color challenge their learned behaviors and grow to be vulnerable with one another (Paquette & Wall, 2019).

**Theoretical Framework**

This research study is guided by Yosso’s (2005) model of community cultural wealth. Studies using Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth shift the paradigm in how scholars examine the experiences of Latinx male students in higher education. Rather than noting what Latinx men are missing in terms of social and cultural capital, the narrative switches to what they are bringing to their campuses and how are they using their cultural wealth to achieve success (Perez & Taylor, 2015; Perez & Sáenz, 2017; Sáenz et al., 2018; Yosso, 2005). Through Yosso’s work (2005), campuses must get creative in the ways they receive students of color and promote the sharing of capital and cultural wealth.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

This qualitative research study used a narrative design to better understand the lived experiences of four-year university Latinx male students and how relationships within a male-centered program have an influence on the participants’ identity development, particularly how they come to understand their identity as men of color (Mertler, 2019).

The study took place at South Coast University (SCU) (a pseudonym), a four-year, residential university located in Southern California. The institution is a private religiously affiliated campus in a small, affluent community. SCU recently received a large Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) grant to establish initiatives to support racially-minoritized students and their success. One part of this grant established the AVANZAR program (a pseudonym), which was focused on retaining male students of color attending college. Currently in its second year of implementation, AVANZAR participants at SCU are required to attend weekly class sessions facilitated by faculty, administrators, and graduate student mentors. The program also offers a peer mentorship program in which male students who attend SCU, serve as mentors for other male students who attend a local community college. Other activities include a men’s summer leadership retreat which consists of three days where participants get to know each other and participate in activities that guide them in building resilience, leadership, social and cultural capital, and community engagement.

**Participants**

Participants for this study met the following criteria: (a) identified as Latinx; (b) identified as men; and (c) were involved in a male-specific program at a specific religiously-affiliated university in Southern California. Below is a brief background on each of the two participants. I have assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Both participants were involved in the
same programs and campus and knew each other prior to the interview.

Vicente is currently a senior majoring in Mathematics and Computer Science at South Coast University. Throughout his college experience, Vicente has been a commuter and is a resident in Southern California. After graduating, he aspires to pursue a career as a mathematics professor who is actively involved in research. Vicente identifies as Mexican-American.

Marco is currently a senior at South Coast University majoring in Biochemistry with a minor in Mathematics and aspires to be a physician scientist. Marco is a resident of Southern California and has been a commuter student throughout his college experience. Marco identifies as Mexican-American.

Data Collection

Data was collected during an hour-long focus group that took place in a private, reserved location at SCU and was only disclosed to the student participants. Responses were recorded using the researcher’s iPhone, as well as Zoom. Three students had agreed to participate in the study; however, only two students showed up at the set time. Given the circumstances at the time with a global pandemic, options to participate in-person or via Zoom were offered to participants. One participant was in-person, while the other utilized Zoom. The focus group consisted of 14 questions asking about their experiences in the male-specific program and the relationships they cultivated within said program.

Researcher Positionality

I identify as a Latinx, specifically Mexican-American, man, and a first-generation graduate from a four-year university. As a student, I never participated in programs such as the one being studied. Also, I have studied the experiences of Latinx male students in higher education throughout my graduate school experience. I removed my personal experiences and knowledge regarding Latinx men from influencing the way the data was analyzed by critically thinking about how the focus group questions were worded and how the data was presented.

Limitations

A limitation of the study was that it occurred at the beginning of a global pandemic and the campus where it took place had begun transitioning to remote learning. Therefore, students were no longer required to come to campus. The pandemic forced me to provide alternative options for participants to attend the focus group, while allowing them to practice physical distancing. Although the focus group still took place on campus, only two of the three students participated, which limited the amount of data collected. Also, one student was limited to joining the focus group via Zoom from his home. This hindered my ability to observe non-verbal behaviors and their reactions to questions and responses. Another limitation was the sample size of the study. Given that only two students participated, the data presented in this study cannot be used to generalize and should continue to be examined.
Results & Discussion

From the findings within the analysis, three themes were identified: (a) interpersonal relationships; (b) mentorship; and (c) identity development. Using three sources of capital, aspirational, social, and resistant, from Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth, I examined the identified themes and their influence on the identity development of the participants.

Interpersonal Relationships as Sources of Aspirational Capital

There was a clear connection between the participants and their peers within the AVANZAR program. Though both participants did not describe their connections in depth, there was an apparent influence in how the participants viewed their educational experience alongside their peers within the program. Within the AVANZAR program and other identity-based programs on campus, participants were able to connect with peers who shared similar ethnic, racial, gender, and first-generation college student identities. More specifically, through the AVANZAR program, which is designed specifically to support male students of color, they felt a sense of validation in being Latinx men pursuing a postsecondary education. They both mentioned that prior to enrolling for their first-year at SCU, a primarily White campus, they did not have many peers from high school who also pursued a higher education, which led to a feeling of isolation on campus and in their communities. As college students of color enter new spaces where their identities are salient, or where students realize they are a minority on campus, they develop stronger ties to their identities (Torres, 2003). For participants, transitioning from primarily Latinx communities to SCU, though labeled a HSI is a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), raised their awareness of their own identities and propelled them to find community among those who share them. After joining AVANZAR, they felt motivated sharing space with other men of color who share similar goals and the program encouraged them to build a community within a new environment. For example, both participants were aware of the careers they wanted to pursue while at SCU. Their peers within the program maintained their aspirations to pursue graduate school and doctoral degrees regardless of knowing there is already a small percentage of Latinx men that go on to pursue and obtain graduate degrees (Yosso, 2005). Vicente noted that connecting with other men of color pursuing a higher education has increased his motivation to continue past his undergraduate education:

It allows me to be exposed to, I guess, even a more targeted group that I can relate to, that being underrepresented [men] where a majority of Latinx descent, which is good, because now you’re seeing familiar faces with people who share similar stories, and the fact that you’re able to share stories or just share the space and what you’re here for. Just sharing these things, it allows you to continue the motivation you have for what you want to do.

It is important for higher education administrators and faculty to understand the power of creating and providing spaces for minoritized student populations in fostering the aspirational capital of students. Within these spaces, students can share stories of their own experiences with peers of similar identities and motivate each other to persist in their education.
Interpersonal Relationships as Sources of Social Capital

Within the networks cultivated through the AVANZAR program, participants indicated that the program provided a space where they felt they could escape from their lives as students. Within the space, participants engaged in conversations that were different from what they talked about in their academic courses. Being that both participants were majoring in STEM programs, opportunities to talk about life with their peers was a stress reliever. One participant described their seminars with peers as a therapy session where they not only heard how their peers dealt with certain personal situations, but learned to share more about themselves. For Marco, the weekly seminars and additional programs with the staff and other participants in the program provide a space where he feels comfortable sharing his experiences and developing deeper connections with other men of color:

I think all its events where they have us together, like we’d have dinner together, the basketball game, that was really cool. I didn’t get to go to the summer retreat, but I’m sure that’s also part of it. Every class is just talking. Most of the class is actually us talking to each other than lecturing at us. I feel that’s also where you can build those deeper connections as well.

Peers in this case served as sources of emotional support in that they cultivated a space to talk through their problems, personal or academic (Estrada et al., 2017; Yosso, 2005). Through this, peers also helped participants of the study to deconstruct behaviors of internalizing their personal problems and not seeking help, which is often associated with the concept of machismo (Arciniega et al., 2008; Estrada & Jimenez, 2018). For Marco, being in AVANZAR helped him realize that seeking help and taking care of his mental health is okay:

I feel like for me, it has helped me as a student because understanding what machismo is, there’s a lot of stuff I didn’t know, I’ll be honest, before the program. It helped me take care of my mental health, which ultimately helps me be a better student. I’m learning how to talk about whatever issues I may be having. That it’s okay to talk about them. As simple as it may sound, it’s really not something I did. I think it also helps for understanding my community like that also helps with the idea of what it could be like to be a leader and why we need to be leaders for our community.

However, that was not the case for Vicente. While both participants welcomed discussions about their personal lives in the seminars and other events, Vicente noted hesitation in talking about his personal problems with others because it is solely up to him to solve them. Based on his response, this behavior is associated with machismo. Vicente wants to maintain a sense of independence when it comes to their own personal life by avoiding sharing as a means to be cautious of being perceived incapable of handling his own problems (Saenz et al. 2013). Saenz et al. (2013) found within their study that Latino men often restrict being expressive or sharing about themselves as a means to maintain a sense of pride and status among their peers.
Identity Development as Resistant Capital

Scholars in previous studies have focused on how behaviors associated with machismo have hindered the educational experiences of Latinx male students in higher education (Saenz et al., 2013; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Latinx men may be taught in their homes or communities to exhibit these behaviors and often continue them once they step onto a college campus (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Saenz et al., 2013). It has also been noted that within communities of hermandad, or brotherhood, Latinx men worked towards counteracting traditional hypermasculine machismo (Estrada et al., 2017).

In the responses from the study, participants engaged in conversations with their peers about what it means to be a man. Yosso (2005) posited that within communities of color, lessons of challenging societal messages are taught amongst families. Through the focus groups, participants noted that while they learned from both program faculty and staff about behaviors associated with machismo, they learned how to deconstruct those behaviors through interactions with their peers. For Marco, conversations with peers helped him identify some of those “problematic behaviors” and used the help of his peers to learn how to combat them and practice healthier help-seeking behaviors. Vicente noted that he had an understanding that these aspects of Latinx masculinity were “bad” and used the discussions with his peers as affirmation to what he already believed:

My experience with the seminar, it was nice in the sense that a lot of the information that I just knew was tucked into my head, reinforced through the seminar...If you think a certain way, and then you have people supporting what you’re saying, you feel good.

Nevertheless, both of them were able to learn more about how behaviors associated with machismo have affected their personal lives and participants began challenging behaviors that were passed down from their families and communities and reflecting on how they have hindered their own experiences growing up (Yosso, 2005).

Implications for Professional Practice

The data analysis of the focus groups yielded different implications for professional practice. Among them was a desire for Latinx men to connect further with other men of color on campus. A critical implication would be for student affairs practitioners to assess their campus’s ability to foster a program designed for supporting men of color. The program utilized in the study was done at a PWI; however, the campus recently obtained the status of being a HSI. The campus has had grants and programs established for serving minoritized students and program participants are able to access support in different areas. However, it would be important to consider the amount of opportunities of involvement available for men of color to become engaged throughout campus.

As campuses consider the implementation of programs designed to support men of color, within the program design it is critical to keep peer to peer learning at the forefront of the program objectives. Through the analysis, the participants noted that some of the high points of the program included that they were able to just talk to their peers. More specifically, in their program seminars, it allows them to learn more about each other and discuss relevant topics.
among their community. As seen through the study, participants began learning more about how machismo appears in their own experience through interactions with their peers, as well as learning about healthier behaviors to support their mental health. Through peer-to-peer learning, practitioners should focus on facilitating dialogue among participants and have a group counseling component to allow space for participants to share about their experiences. A group counseling component for Latinx men, or men of color more broadly, would provide space for participants to further explore aspects of their identities within a supportive, group setting. As with all program components, the group counseling sessions should focus on facilitating dialogue among participants, as well as empowering them to unlearn hypermasculine behaviors and learn more about their behaviors associated with caballerismo.

Another implication for practice found within the study was the importance of having a peer mentorship component to the program. As participants talked about mentorship, there was a desire to share the knowledge they had gained about their college experiences and what they had learned about their identity as Latinx men. Even though participants were involved in a co-curricular program that does not pay them or give them academic unit credit, they still demonstrated a strong desire to be involved and be a mentor to other students. Through these types of mentorship programs, student leaders who identify as men of color can provide the opportunity to support incoming first-time and transfer students outside of the classroom and enable participants to connect with other men of color in meaningful ways outside of the classroom. Additionally, it is recommended that these programs incorporate partnerships for men of the program to engage in mentorship with students in local K-12 schools as means to promote a college-going culture among boys of color. This would serve as another opportunity for men of color in college to share their lived experiences and knowledge as well as guide younger boys in their journey to understanding their own identities and assist them in unlearning hypermasculine behaviors from a young age.

Implications for Future Research

The limitations and delimitations of the current study show a need for further research examining the influence of peer relationships within male-centered programs on the identity development of Latinx men. Given the size of the study and the timeframe, additional research should focus on increasing the amount of data collected from a larger sample size. For future research on the topic, a larger sample consisting of participants from diverse Latinx ethnicities and different higher education institutions should be considered. Both study participants identified as Mexican-American and from a relatively local region in California, warranting attention to male students who may identify with other ethnicities and may differ in generational status in the United States would help to better generalize to the broader Latinx population. Different Latinx ethnic sub-groups may share differing cultural values and practices; therefore, it would be beneficial to gain as much perspective as possible to further understand how Latinx men experience the development of their identity.

Furthermore, the male-centered program studied was recently established, and the participants had only been involved for a limited amount of time. It would be beneficial for scholars to examine the effectiveness of these programs on the persistence and engagement of participants. Longitudinal studies may also be effective in understanding the long-term impact that these programs can have on participants’ overall sense of self and identity development.
As more campuses consider implementing programming specific to men of color programs, it would be insightful to have information on how these programs affect the educational experience of program participants. Though the program may be focused on social and community engagement, further understanding how their involvement mediates students' academic and post-graduation life would provide great support in establishing such programs on a campus. For example, future research utilizing a mixed methods approach to determine the level of effectiveness of programs by analyzing data collected through academic transcripts, semester to semester persistence rates and six-year graduation rates, while also collecting qualitative responses through interviews and focus groups to identify key factors in students' success would be helpful to extend the collective understanding around the impact of these programs.

Lastly, other opportunities for future research include the impact of being in peer mentorship roles on Latinx men, or men of color, and their understanding of their own gender, racial, and ethnic identities. Throughout the study, participants indicated a strong interest in becoming more involved in their peer leader roles. They found a sense of fulfillment in their roles and felt that they had a duty to pass down the information they gained from the discussions within the program. Previous authors (see Garcia et al., 2017) have noted that serving in leadership roles has had an impact in the development of leadership identities among college Latinx men. Within peer mentor roles, not only do students develop their own leadership skills and identities as a leader, but they also understand how their position has an impact on the experiences of their mentees. For both participants in the study, exploring and learning more about their identities went beyond their own personal development but they knew that it was information that they could pass down to the community they serve and may serve in their professional roles. Examining how these roles impact the experiences and development of Latinx men in peer mentor positions would highlight the importance of these opportunities in the development of identities of not only Latinx men, but men of color in higher education more broadly.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study was designed to examine the influence of peer relationships within male-centered programs on the identity development of Latinx male students at four-year universities. Study participants revealed that through their involvement with the male-centered program and interactions with their peers, they felt a sense of validation in being a Latinx man pursuing a college degree. They also shared a desire to become mentors within the program, but also within their community and in their future careers as professors in the STEM field. Lastly, participants were able to not only learn more about their own identities, but also reflect upon them and deconstruct learned behaviors that they identified as hindering their interpersonal relationships and their academic experiences. The program in the study was not just a co-curricular experience for students to add to their resume, but also a space for them to dig deeper into their personal identities as well as to be validated by simply sharing space with other men of color who shared similar goals.
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Humanizing Campus Discourse: Teaching Humanization to Facilitate Student Development in a Polarized World

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Introduction

Freedom of speech and civil discourse in higher education are crucial to the personal and academic development of students. This development occurs via official and unofficial opportunities to engage inside the classroom and throughout campus. Students are in school to learn and evolve. Is the campus a safe space to bring up their own underdeveloped worldviews? If students cannot, or will not, share their viewpoints, then maybe they will miss the chance for their personal worldviews to be addressed and refined by the perspectives of others who come from completely different backgrounds and experiences. Mature civil discourse is healthy for an appropriate exchange of ideas, but what happens when students feel a tension on their freedom of speech, and are unsure where the lines are drawn as to what should be said and what should not? Beyond that, how do we ensure that students have a framework to communicate and connect with one another, regardless of the divisiveness or uncertainties of the topic or climate, in order to allow, respect, welcome and learn from different perspectives and backgrounds?

This essay attempts to address these questions, beginning with a brief overview of the protected status of freedom of speech, and the connection to civil discourse in higher education. Then, the issue of growing divisiveness in American society is examined, and how this 1) spills into college campuses and poisons the usage of free speech, 2) adversely affects the marginalization of students, and 3) leads to a “chilling effect” (students inhibiting their own self-expression) and other types of censorship on college campuses – all of which negatively impact the capability to have a culture of robust and healthy student civil discourse. The essay then briefly introduces the practice of intergroup dialogue (guided conversations to increase mutual understanding between social groups) and touches on its use as an aid for students to come together over divides. Finally, questions are posed regarding possibilities for using humanization (an organic product of intergroup dialogue) as a separate, more refined process and skill that can serve as an overarching worldview and framework. There is little to no literature found regarding humanization as a teachable subject in higher education, where student identity development intersects with powerful campus ideological influences. Incorporating the teaching of humanization through mandatory classes or specialized instructors will lead college students to instinctively employ empathy and human connection to naturally navigate intercultural challenges and divisiveness more broadly, effectively, and consistently. This will help students engage in healthy, productive interactions that enable greater personal and ideological development despite our polarized society.
The Value of Free Speech and Civil Discourse on College Campuses

Free speech has been challenged many times but has a firm history of being upheld by the American court system. In these judicial decisions that have maintained the protection of free speech, we are often reminded of the value that it holds not only for the general American public, but especially for our university campuses:

The vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools. The classroom is peculiarly the “marketplace of ideas.” The Nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth “out of a multitude of tongues, rather than through any kind of authoritative selection.” (U.S. Supreme Court, 1967, as cited in Combs, 2018, p. 175).

Here the U.S. Supreme Court has acknowledged that higher education is where ideas, perspectives, backgrounds, and ideologies are expected to collide, not only for the good of the individuals involved, but for the collective good of this nation by virtue of the development of these college students meeting in self-discovery and self-expression. Our nation knows that our university system is ground zero for healthy, civil, ideological combat, and through these opportunities for students to bring together varying perspectives and backgrounds, a healthy and productive civil discourse is meant to be born. Civil discourse increases “cultural knowledge, respect for people and places, skills of reflection and communication, critical thinking abilities, creativity, and a sense of empathy to make their workplace, the world they will inherit, safe, equitable, and productive” (Morris, 2016, p. 361). U.S. society depends on the “role that post-secondary education plays in improving civil discourse nationally and creating safe spaces for dialogue and personal growth on campuses” (Morris, 2016, p. 361). Without the kind of environment that fosters the exchange of ideas, campuses suffer a decrease in opportunities for learning and development.

Harmful Free Speech

Civil discourse in higher education today faces grave challenges. There are many examples on college campuses showing that unfettered free speech does not necessarily equate to healthy, developmental civil discourse:

There were people making comments about BLM, All Lives Matter, the Klu Klux Klan, and the Back to Africa Movement, and how these discussions created “civil discourse” among our campus community. However, given that civil discourse is understood to be an engagement in conversation/discourse to better understanding, there was no true civil discourse on campus. Instead, campus was divided, and it created conflict. (Kirby, 2018, p. 54).

This highlights a problematic aspect of freedom of speech in higher education today, which is that it exists in a highly toxic environment that is reflective of the divisiveness pervading
all layers of this country. From violent common street demonstrations and counter-protests, to
the stubborn, partisan ineptitude that seems to get worse every election cycle in the United
States, people of conflicting points of view are not putting in the work needed to communicate,
let alone come to successful understanding and compromise. Americans on all strata of society
are increasingly unwilling to come together, listen to, and connect with each other over differing
opinions to solve problems. Linvill & Pyle (2017), through a 2014 study by the Pew Research
Center, found that "Americans are more politically polarized now than they have been for the
past 20 years, and political animosity has increased throughout this same period" (p. 214).
Unfortunately, the negative influences of this divisive toxicity have a huge impact on higher
education. Morris (2016) writes that "colleges and universities cannot exist, untainted, in a
context of incivility, violence, and bigotry" (p. 361). Combs (2018) tells us that “with the growing
hostile political climate, there is an increased need for tolerance of varying viewpoints,
especially in the educational setting” (p. 170).

This divisiveness can be especially painful for marginalized students and groups
whenever free speech is wielded bluntly or sharply, knowingly or unknowingly, as a weapon of
ignorant, irresponsible, and uncompassionate rhetoric. With the growing divisiveness on college
campuses today, there are many examples all across the country where students are using free
speech in ways that are truly alarming, harmful, and extremely painful to their fellow students of
marginalized identities:

One of the hardest things that I had to do at that time was listen to my residents
as they voiced their concerns and frustrations because they did not see how the
rhetoric that was being used was harmful to those of marginalized identities.
(Kirby, 2018, p. 54).

This has led to calls from social justice movements and many others for the need to
protect students of marginalized identities from growing instances of painful, harmful vitriol on
college campuses – vitriol that has been increasingly open and flaunted, flying under the banner
of freedom of speech as a justification for its existence and expression. Even though certain
advocates for free speech would not recognize any limitations on their rights, there is indeed a
set of parameters guiding the right to free speech specifically in the higher education setting:

The First Amendment does not guarantee the right to communicate one’s view at
all times and places or in any manner that may be desired. Accordingly,
universities may place restrictions on the time, place and manner of protected
speech, as long as it is not based on the content of the speech. Moreover, the
restriction must be narrowly tailored to serve a compelling interest, which in this
case would be student safety. (Combs, 2018, p. 172).

This fault line in higher education between the sanctity of American free speech, and the
safety of students’ mental, emotional, and physical well-being, is a place of much tension,
ambiguity, disagreement, and confusion on college campuses. In fact, even college students of
marginalized identities may experience an inner conflict between the right to free speech and
the need to protect themselves from it.
It was difficult for me (as one of their peers and, on top of that, someone who was supposed to provide them guidance) to separate myself from how I felt personally and what I could do and say professionally. For me, this was the first time that I truly felt that I had to separate myself as a student, a peer, and as a student worker on my campus because I did not want to violate my peers’ or my residents’ right to freedom of speech. However, I also wanted to be able to voice my concern that what was being said could possibly be considered hate speech. (Kirby, 2018, p. 55).

**Censorship as a Reaction**

The tension between freedom of speech and student mental and physical safety has led to different forms of censorship on campus. One explicit form of widespread censorship is the overall absence of official campus conversations and debates regarding sociopolitical hot topics such as immigration, gun control, and abortion policies (La Noue, 2019). Ironically, this means that the sociopolitical divisiveness on campus itself is leading to a reduction in the very kind of civil discourse that could serve to remedy much of that same harmful and ignorant divisiveness; this includes higher education professionals who also feel pressure to steer clear from sensitive topics and particular stances (La Noue, 2019). The divisiveness in this way is acting as an autoimmune disease, attacking the very system that would serve as a defense and healing mechanism against it.

In addition to the lack of official student debates or conversations on critical sociopolitical topics, self-censorship in higher education can take other forms, such as when students do not believe there is a safe space (or a “brave space”) to express themselves:

However, I did notice a significant change in how I operated within the classroom for my social work course. When we addressed topics related to race, I found it difficult to articulate my beliefs or opinions because I did not want to be known as the “angry black guy.” (Kirby, 2018, p. 55).

Another kind of self-censorship that may be occurring on college campuses is when students of privilege are well-intentioned but unable to exercise their desire to engage in certain conversations because they do not sense that there is the space to speak from privileged ignorance without being shamed for that ignorance. This would-be expression may have taken the form of raising genuine, logical questions to resolve their cognitive dissonance and inexperience. The self-censorship of a student with privilege will likely not be nearly as painful or engrossing as the self-censorship of the marginalized student; however, both cases create a silencing fear that serves to further obfuscate these delicate subject matters:

[The] restriction on speech that is deemed controversial or offensive may deter students of varying viewpoints from speaking altogether. Such a restriction creates a lack of diverse viewpoints and is so overbroad that it leaves students unsure of what sort of speech is permitted and what is prohibited. Consequently,
students refrain from speaking altogether because they fear that they will be punished for their expression. Thus, this sort of restriction has a chilling effect, which not only is prohibited by law but also prevents discussion and the exchange of ideas that are particularly critical in the educational environment. (Combs, 2018, p. 173).

This chilling effect goes against the natural student instinct to seek clarity. On the losing end of the lack of challenging, authentic, nuanced, and impactful conversations are other students within the vicinity, whether in the same classroom, dorm room, locker room, Zoom room, etc., that would have been privy to these real conversations. These are powerfully formative conversations where, for example, a student with a marginalized identity might speak personally and directly, but non-judgmentally, to a student who holds privilege. Another example of these powerfully formative conversations is when students who hold opposing values speak openly and humanely with one another to describe exactly what is and is not offensive, and what is and is not true regarding their own identities and beliefs. In this way students discover each other more genuinely and make progress in understanding real reasons for differences between them. These difficult, authentic conversations, whether students are directly involved or are experiencing them as first-hand witnesses, also have the capacity to break students through to higher levels of moral cognitive development (Hurtado et al., 2012). Instead, not only does the chilling effect impact student and campus development, it can also lead to an array of destructive pathological effects for those who are silencing themselves. These pathologies include increased stress, depression, a perception that one’s perspective does not matter, limiting of creativity, declining interest in one’s work, and declining efficacy of decision making (Perlow & Repenning, 2009). It is clear that higher education needs a way to resolve this tension so that students can speak and express themselves openly while embracing the humanity in themselves and one another.

Midpoint Summary

Thus far, we have recognition that a) freedom of speech is important for healthy civil discourse in higher education; b) colleges and universities must provide the environment and opportunities for civil discourse for students to develop into leaders, professionals, and the kinds of individuals this world needs to make a better present and future; c) for these reasons, free speech has a historic judicial precedence of being legally protected on college campuses; d) universities must balance free speech with the need to protect students physically, mentally, and emotionally; e) striking this balance today is a formidable challenge that is further exacerbated by a tumultuous, dangerous American sociopolitical climate; f) bowing to the fear and destruction that this climate generates, and the avoidance of addressing this issue head on, causes unquantifiable negative damage to student development, human connections, and campus environments. Now let us approach concepts of how these challenges can be addressed to improve higher education.
Teaching Humanization

One reason given for the extreme polarization in the United States today is that people who disagree with each other do not put effort into seeing the good that exists in one another (Noddings, 2018). The solution to this may include “the idea that we can abandon the goal of defeating our opponents, and instead embrace the goal of accommodating one another” (Muldoon, 2017, p. 331). Intergroup dialogue incorporates these notions of seeing the good in one another and striving to accommodate and work together for mutual benefit. This practice is considered useful for resolving sociopolitical tensions, misunderstandings, and divisions:

At its most fundamental, dialogue refers to a process where parties come together with the goal of increased mutual understanding. It is distinct from other forms of group interactions in its intention, goals, structure, and process, which are designed to elicit safety, understanding, learning, and often healing and transformational shifts in conflicted contexts. Dialogue has often been used as a peacebuilding tool in conflicted societies and recent decades have shown an increase in the use of structured dialogue as a means of addressing intergroup conflict and long-standing communal issues. (Tint, 2011, p. 332).

Wholehearted intergroup dialogue is seen as an environment conducive to healthy civil discourse. “Ultimately, the free speech argument may melt away when people sit down in dialogue one-on-one or in small groups, and speak from their heart about what they feel, believe, assume, and have experienced” (Zúñiga et al., 2007, as cited in Dessei et al., 2012). One pivotal aspect of intergroup dialogue that is often not mentioned is the humanization that occurs as an underlying process:

The hope is that, through these contact experiences, parties will engage in ways that shift the relationship of enmity, reduce the power of competing social identities, increase the potential for humanization of the “other,” and forge new relational and situational possibilities in the future. (Tint, 2011, p. 333).

The technical definition of humanization includes: “to attribute human qualities to” and “to make humane” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). To understand the natural humanization that occurs when individuals or groups openly and vulnerably engage in dialogue, it can be helpful to look at its exact opposite: dehumanization.

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who survived years of dehumanization and torture in the Nazi concentration camps. The following is a personal recount, first published in the German language in 1946, where he illustrates what it is to experience the feeling of dehumanization as a prisoner in these concentration camps, and how that feeling of dehumanization was more painful than any physical or verbal injury:

Strangely enough, a blow which does not even find its mark can, under certain circumstances, hurt more than one that finds its mark. Once I was standing on a railway track in a snowstorm. In spite of the weather our party had to keep on working. I worked quite hard at mending the track with gravel, since that was the
only way to keep warm. For only one moment I paused to get my breath and to lean on my shovel. Unfortunately the guard turned around just then and thought I was loafing. The pain he caused me was not from any insults or any blows. That guard did not think it worth his while to say anything, not even a swearword, to the ragged, emaciated figure standing before him, which probably reminded him only vaguely of a human form. Instead, he playfully picked up a stone and threw it at me. That, to me, seemed the way to attract the attention of a beast, to call a domestic animal back to its job, a creature with which you have so little in common that you do not even punish it. (Frankl, 1992, p. 36).

Frankl vividly illustrates how humans need to feel “seen” by one another; we need to know in our souls that the other person or group is engaging with us with the respect and honor that is due to a living, feeling, imperfect human being who is also vulnerable to pain and suffering, and who also longs for the same kind of undefinable human connection. These needs in us may require more study, but they are there, and they are wrapped up in the word and practice of “humanization.”

What if humanization is the real “meat” of the intergroup dialogue process? “Within dialogue, it is the humanization of the other that allows the fractured past to emerge into a different vision of the future” (Tint, 2011, p. 333). Could humanization be the most impactful aspect of intergroup dialogue that improves the capability to engage in healthy civil discourse?

There is a lack of research regarding the practice and development of humanization between students on college campuses. What if it is possible to isolate the key components that build humanization, and teach these components to students outside of intergroup dialogue? Could college students learn humanization in a more generalized sense towards all humanity instead of having it develop only towards the specific social identities in an intergroup dialogue session? If college students were taught to apply humanization to humanity as a whole, would these students more ably navigate unpredictable and novel social situations, disagreements, moral dilemmas, and times of cognitive dissonance?

This is not to say that the use of intergroup dialogue on campuses should be reduced at all. Rather, these questions point to the possibility of expanding a crucially effective part of intergroup dialogue by focusing on and honing the essentials of what causes one person to humanize another, and then instilling that skillset and instinct into the student’s psyche to create a more generalized humanizing habit. This would serve as a more encompassing, natural, and effective way to help solve these current issues of marginalization, hate speech, campus censorship, and the national inability to engage in constructive civil discourse. Students would use a humanized worldview to perceive cultures, sociopolitical divides, personal backgrounds, and the ignorance of others who have a lack of experience; students would have greater tolerance because they would see in others the same humanistic qualities they see in themselves. This would not be known solely cognitively, but would be “felt” through empathy and greater aptitude for developing human connections.

Opportunities for Research and Action

There is a need for additional research on how to effectively teach humanization in
higher education, including the need for insight into appropriate course content, pedagogical methods and practical learning outcomes. A course on humanization may deserve the designation as a requirement among all first-year college students. This is not a far stretch considering that this country has been unable to unify to combat existential threats like global warming, the COVID-19 pandemic, and systemic oppression, which cost thousands upon thousands of lives and much undue suffering. Grand solutions to these threats require the ability for us to understand each other and compromise towards mutual benefits.

Once proper pedagogy is established for teaching humanization on campus, one possible way to assess for effectiveness is to utilize the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). The IDI is a survey instrument with proven validity and reliability used to gauge intercultural competence and responsiveness. As humanization is taught to students, the humanizing worldviews and skills acquired could be reflected in an improved IDI score. The IDI could be administered to students before they begin their humanization training, and again after they finish the course to see if scores improve. Another way to assess for results would be to implement a yearly survey on the feeling of belonging on campus. As more first-year students take the humanization course, a yearly campus-wide assessment should reflect an increase in greater belonging that students feel as they are able to make more genuine, deeper connections with one another. An additional way to gauge success of humanization training is to observe whether there is an increase in substantive conversations or debates on divisive topics occurring on campus; in other words, censorship would be decreased because the increase in humanization would allow productive civil discourse to prevail. The increase in these conversations can be tracked through any campus office which registers and promotes student events. Increased student interest in service-learning opportunities, which could be measured by the number of inquiries made by the students, would also be an indicator of successful humanization training, because as students learn to humanize they will be more apt to recognize and empathize with the critical needs of other populations and communities.

**Conclusion**

Intergroup dialogue incorporates the participants developing the ability to humanize one another. However, whereas intergroup dialogue requires time with people of different social or group identities, the underlying process of humanization can be taught outside of intergroup dialogue. It is possible to deliberately focus on this foundational aspect of intergroup dialogue to help students create a general mental muscle of humanization so that it becomes an instinctive reflex that arises regardless of who or what they encounter. One could see how an instinct to humanize could make the student less likely to use freedom of speech in ways that are painful, even in situations where the student had no specific training, prior exposure or experience. Teaching humanization might create an underlying habit for students of privilege to find connection with the social identities and personal values of others that they do not yet have exposure to or understand. Teaching humanization might also help marginalized students to better connect with students of privilege, even when the barriers include ignorant and painful speech and actions. Having humanization taught this way on college campuses might help tailor reactions and counter-reactions to ignorance, allowing greater willingness for openness between agent and target groups.

In essence, humanization should be further studied and researched to be used as a
critical preliminary passive and reflexive mental skillset that influence the way students see and behave towards others. The hope is that humanization would occur before intergroup dialogue, and not the other way around. Teaching humanization could facilitate student development through a capability for deeper connections and empathy. This may be key to bringing healthier civil discourse to college campuses, more naturally, broadly, and effectively, all the while still protecting our freedom of speech, and simultaneously continuing our society’s progress on social justice reforms.

References


Many theories that student affairs professionals learn and practice, both in past and present, have been created and applied to understand the development of students with historically privileged identities (Patton et al., 2016). While theories of student development have expanded to include students with minoritized identities, there are still many scholars that do not acknowledge how theory may not be easily applied to all students equally, or how certain theories can be inapplicable for some students based on their backgrounds, experiences, and intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Because of this exclusionary history, we have decided to explore the intersection of gender and first-generation status. Although women are attending college and university at higher average rates, than men today (Matias, 2019), and that 56% of today's college students identify as first-generation (RTI International, 2019), these populations have largely been ignored in previous developmental theories. We present hypotheses that recognize the unique social development of first-generation women students. We also address how the differing states of various relationships contribute to feelings of support and belonging within higher education. This feeling of support and belonging is important because as an antecedent to involvement on campus and in the classroom, students need to feel like they matter and are cared for (Schlossberg, 1989). Additionally, when students feel connected and supported, they feel more committed to the institution, and therefore are more likely to persist in their education (Brown, Morning, & Watkins, 2005; Tinto, 2017).

In order to further understand relationships and the impact that they have on the development of first-generation women students, we have chosen to focus on three types of interpersonal relationships. We emphasize family relationships, peer relationships, and mentor relationships as being impactful on the development of first-generation women students’ sense of belonging in higher education because of the array of evidence that suggests these relationships are significant for first-generation students generally (Rodriguez et al, 2003; Morse & Shulze, 2013; Martina, 2019; Demetriou et al 2017). Our selection of relationships is also informed by Bronfenbrenner's definition of interpersonal relationships in a student's microsystem (1993). This will be discussed further in the relevant theories section.

The hypotheses will explore how these relationships contribute to the students’ sense of belonging and development overall in college. Before we examine these different relationships, we will discuss important considerations for this research and why we have chosen to study this population.

Finally, we would be remiss if there was no mention of the subjectivity in the formulation of our hypotheses. This work has not been replicated to prove validity, nor have we collected qualitative or quantitative data to support our claims. We address this further in the practical application section of this paper. We refer to our work as hypotheses and not as a theory.
because, as Love (2012) describes, our work cannot explain, predict, or control student behavior in the way "formal" theory might, but it can guide the behavior of practitioners working with this population. Love articulates that formal theory is typically considered more valid than informal theory in the academy, but we resist this pattern. Grounded in academic research, our work has also been guided by self-reflection, exploration, and storytelling with other women and first-generation students in our lives. We suggest that these informal types of data collection are all worthy sources of information.

Considerations

There are varying definitions of what it means to be a first-generation college student. For the purpose of this work, we refer to the definition used by the Higher Education Act (HEA). The HEA defines a first-generation college student as “(A) An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or (B) In the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree.” (Amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965). This definition is widely accepted by many support programs for first-generation students, including federally funded TRiO programs and programs through student affairs organizations such as NASPA (“Council for Opportunity in Education: Events”, n.d.). We have chosen to use this definition in an effort to reach a wider scope of students than more restrictive definitions may allow.

The overall body of research on first-generation students has expanded considerably in the last two decades. Much of this research analyzes first-generation status alone, though often in tandem with social class and/or socioeconomic status (SES) (Ardoin, 2018; Azmitia et al., 2018; Hurst, 2010). While SES refers to income and other forms of wealth, social class encompasses wealth along with forms of capital, educational status, occupation and culture (Ardoin, 2018). In the literature, first-generation students are often found to come from low-income or working-class backgrounds (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). When discussing the development of first-generation students in higher education, we believe that the use of social class is often a better fit, given that the definition describes a more holistic experience. For example, if first-generations students do not come from a poor SES background, the term “social class” (whether it be working-class, lower-middle class, etc.) may still encompass and describe their experiences. Since the higher education system historically aligns with middle and upper-class norms and values, using the term "class" instead of SES may be beneficial in helping faculty, staff, and researchers understand the students’ experience as it relates or differs from the middle and upper-class culture of higher education beyond fiscal terms. Given that the system of higher education in the United States is highly stratified and privileges middle and upper-class students, it is almost certain that students who come from poor, working or lower-class backgrounds will recognize differences in the norms, values, and beliefs of their families and social networks compared to those in the higher education system (Kammerer, 2019).

For this work, we hypothesize that the intersection of first-generation status with gender identity can have a significant impact on student development. While there is growing work on first-generation students and women in higher education, the intersection of these identities has
not been explored sufficiently in the academy thus far. At the time of this paper, the only formal scholarly research we discovered on this specific population was the work of Youngblood-Giles (2018). Based on our own experiences, anecdotal evidence, and research, we need to address the intersection of these identities the specific biases and discrimination first-generation women students face due to the unique intersection of classism and patriarchy.

**Women and their Relationships**

Much of the research that explores the development of women or first-generation students in higher education is often framed in a deficit lens, focusing on what first-generation students do not have in relation to other students, or what they need to do to “catch up” to their peers (Ardoin, 2018). Instead of focusing on what first-generation women do not possess, our theory will focus on the ways in which this population’s ability to cultivate relationships serves as an asset in their development.

One reason to examine the relationships between these women is because students do not learn and grow in isolation. Much of the development that students undergo in college is in community or relationships with others (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); this is especially salient for women students. According to Janet L. Surrey’s 1983 “self-in-relation” theory of women’s development, women do not typically view relationships as separate from work or activities and are encouraged to work and act in connection with others. Self-in-relation theory posits that for women, the primary experience of the “self” is developed relationally, or in the context of their important relationships (Surrey, 1983). Additionally, women’s self-concept is more highly defined by interpersonal relationships than that of other genders, especially during transition to the late adolescent stage of development, which is often correlated with college attendance and is the age group on which our theory focuses (Hagerty, Willaims, Coyne, & Early, 1997).

It is our view that women’s capacity for empathy and interest in connection with others is a unique strength; thus, an emphasis on interpersonal relationships is necessary for a deeper understanding of this demographic’s development. These components of development are often overlooked as a consequence of the aforementioned exclusionary history of higher education in the United States. High value is often placed on notions of self-reliance and independence that are rooted in an individualistic perspective (Surrey, 1983), and we seek to challenge that assumption by orienting our work towards community, and centering relationships as essential to student development.

Finally, focusing on women can motivate other women-identified scholars and students to feel empowered in their abilities, inspired by the individuals and communities they engage with, and more deeply connected to the relationships they have. As described previously, relationships are an essential component of students’ feelings of belonging and support in a higher education setting (Brown, Morning, & Watkins, 2005; Tinto 2017). It is our hope that when other first-generation women (or continuing generation women) read this work, it inspires them to reflect on the effectiveness, productivity, and congruence of their current relationships and how they can cultivate new relationships that will encourage growth and provide support in their educational experience.
Relevant Theories

It is widely understood that relationships are considered significant developmental factors for college students, for example in Bronfenbrenner's Developmental Ecology Model (1979). There are four components to development ecology: process, person, context, and time. Most relevant to this discussion is context, where Bronfenbrenner outlines a nested model of the levels of context (drawn as concentric circles by Renn and Arnold (2003) to illustrate the collegiate environment). The example includes the macrosystem, the exosystem, the mesosystem, and the microsystem, all surrounding the student. A student's microsystem includes patterns of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships that students experience as they develop in college (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). The microsystem's inclusion of relationships as a part of development makes this contextual element most pertinent to our discussion, as it honors that students are shaped by their social environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship has three dimensions: the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Specifically looking at the interpersonal dimension, the question that students must ask of themselves is "How will I choose to construct relationships with others?" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 366). In following Baxter Magolda's (2001) developmental phases, students begin by allowing others to define them in phase 1, to being more authentic instead of waiting for others to define them in phase 2, to renegotiating relationships to meet their needs in phase 3, to having mutuality in relationships in phase 4. The interpersonal dimension can help us understand how students may or may not choose to be engaged with relationships depending on which phase they are in. In phases 1 and 2, students may feel more restricted and allow other individuals in relationships to dictate how they will function (2001). In contrast, in phases 3 and 4, students may feel that if relationships are not adding anything to their lives or development, or if they feel their relationships are unsupportive and not meeting their needs, they may choose to end those relationships and find other individuals in the same type of relational category (2001). They may find a different mentor or may seek out other individuals to provide the support they need (e.g., if your family is unsupportive, you find more peers in your same situation and bond over mutual experiences).

Relationship Development Model

![Relationship Development Model Diagram]

The structural model for our hypotheses represents a triangle that surrounds the student,
with each type of interpersonal relationship forming each side. As the student begins to cultivate these engaging and encouraging relationships, the student should feel a strong sense of belonging and support. This visual representation speaks to the nature of positive and affirmative relationships, which can surround the student with care and support to help them feel empowered and motivated in their academic studies and engagement outside of the classroom (Schlossberg, 1989).

If these relationships are established before the student pursues higher education, they will most likely shift and change when the student encounters new information that they bring to the relationship. The changes and adaptations in relationships continue as the student has new experiences over the course of their education. The new knowledge that the student acquires contributes to shaping the individual's values, identity and social relationships (Patton et al., 2016, p. 355). Because of the dynamic nature of relationships, this model is fluid and malleable across time. As individuals change, so do their relationships, which causes fluctuation in levels of support that those relationships provide.

In the following sections, we describe how the nature of these relationships runs along a spectrum, with changing levels of support as they relate to the student in a higher education setting. At any point, each relationship may be at a different point on the spectrum, which can indicate more or less support coming from these relationships. This scale is meant to be used as a general guideline to help students and scholars assess relationships, but not to define them into absolute categories. We contend that as relationships lean towards the more supportive and encouraging end of the spectrum, the student will feel a greater sense of belonging to their college or university.

Additionally, if a student has multiple relationships that do not lean towards the supportive side of the spectrum, this is not a reflection on the student. This does not necessarily imply that the student lacks any personal characteristics that prevent them from having supportive relationships, nor does it mean that the student cannot ever feel supported or like they belong in a higher education environment. Finally, though the three relationships we have included are particularly consequential for first-generation women, it is worth noting that other forms of support outside of familial, mentor, and peer relationships can also be beneficial for students such as romantic partnerships or peer mentorships.
**Familial Relationships**

| Family discourages educational goals, do not provide any type of support (emotional, informational, appraisal or instrumental) and have no contact | Family is encouraging of educational goals, student has contact with family, but family is unable to provide any support because of lack of resources | Family is encouraging of educational goals, student has contact with family, family provides minimal support | Family is encouraging of educational goals, student has frequent contact with family, family provides a great deal of support |

For first-generation students, beginning a journey in higher education often means moving away from family and moving up in social class upon completion of a degree. It also means learning the norms and values of the higher education system, which may conflict or differ from those that the student already holds. This time also can mark a new phase of life and increased independence. Because of these changes, there are often tensions or disagreements between a first-generation student and their family. There are several ways this tension may manifest.

First, if the student decides to adapt to their environment with the new norms and beliefs they are presented with, the family can feel as though the student is betraying them. The family may see this as an attempt to assimilate into an environment the family is unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with, or does not want to identify with (Azmitia, Sumabat-Estrada, Cheong & Covarrubias 2018). They could also see this assimilation as a way to reach upward class mobility, which may look as though the student is embarrassed of their class of origin (Ardoin 2018; Hurst 2010). Additionally, the family may feel upset or struggle with division of labor once the student begins attending college, since women are often seen as, and act as, caretakers, homemakers, and emotional laborers for family units (Mollaeva, 2018). However, families could also see this adaptation and assimilation as a positive change in that the student is achieving what was not possible for them. If the student assimilates in an attempt to move into a higher social stratum, this upward mobility could also potentially increase the class status of their entire family in being able to provide them with resources they may not have previously possessed (Azmitia et al., 2018).

If students reject the notions of the upper and middle class and commit to their poor or working-class identity while in college or university, their families may feel more inclined to support them in their goals knowing their student is not leaving them behind. This may also be an opportunity for students to take their knowledge from their education and use it to give back to their communities (Ardoin, 2018; Hurst 2010). This may also be an expectation for first-generation women rather than an opportunity, as women are socialized to work in helping professions such as social services or education (Mollaeva 2018). We also argue that the possibility exists that if the student continues to identify with their class of origin the family may feel as though the student is not using their resources wisely and should be making an effort to
move up in social class.

Whichever way the student chooses to identify, it is most important that the family supports this choice. Strong and encouraging family relationships not only provide motivation, but they can also be a source of social support through the transition into university (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; O’Shea, 2013). This support can be emotional, such as expressing empathy and care; instrumental, which includes sharing tangible aid like financial support; informational, which can be advice or suggestions; and appraisal, which provides the student with statements for self-evaluation like saying “I know you can do it!” if or when a student is experiencing negative emotions and thoughts (University of Pennsylvania, n.d.).

Familial relationships are also important because they provide familial capital for the student. Yosso (2005) defines familial capital as the knowledge gained through family interactions and experiences. While this capital may not include direct knowledge of the collegiate environment, there are many skills and other forms of capital children and young adults accumulate from their families that may aid them during their time in higher education. These could include aspirational capital, navigational capital, linguistic capital, and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005). This capital in itself can be a source of support, if the student can effectively recognize or employ the strengths they learned from family. This could include things such as work ethic and goal-oriented behavior (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014).

### Peer Relationships or Friendships

| Relationships are purely transactional, or no close peer relationships | Relationships are inauthentic or lack a sense of connection or closeness | Relationships are authentic and possess personal connection or closeness. They potentially lack in relatability | Relationships are relatable and authentic. Individuals share values and have a mutual sense of connection or closeness |

The importance of peer support has been studied in the context of many demographic groups, such as Latino students (Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris, & Cardoza, 2003) and students with significant mental health concerns (Morse & Schluze, 2013). We assert that peer support plays a significant role for first-generation women students, as it assists in creating a sense of belonging for first-generation students, which in turn can lead to increased self-efficacy and likelihood to persist (Azmitia et al., 2018). This peer support can be found by students through numerous methods, including student organizations, community service, or on-campus housing communities. We suggest that peer relationships are most beneficial for first-generation women when they are authentic through mutual support and care, involve personal connection formed by emotional bonds and interactions, and are with peers that have relatable experiences or values.

It is worthwhile to note that the peer relationships we outline below are markedly
different from peer mentor relationships. We equate the peer relationships discussed in this section to friendships. Though students may look up to and admire their friends, there is no intentionality behind the mentorship aspect of the relationship, and they may participate in casual activities together to become close for the sake of closeness, not for the purpose of a mentorship.

All 16 students from Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, and Powell’s study of the roles, relationships, and activities of successful first-generation students reported joining some form of small community on their campus, whether it be a student organization, major departments, housing communities, and employment (2017). These relationships contribute to first-generation women students’ sense of belonging by giving them a network of people that they know and can engage with on campus. One student from Demetriou et al.’s study describes the impact of something as simple as seeing other students around campus that they met at the campus recreation center: “I can walk around and see people all the time saying hey to me that I know from [the campus recreation center] alone. So that’s been very important. It made me feel a part of [the university]” (2017, p. 27).

Peers are also a major source of emotional support, a factor that can also lead to enhanced sense of belonging (Schlossberg, 1989). In Demetriou et al., one female student describes the other women in her Bible study group as integral to her successful college career due to the encouragement her peers provided and trust they established (2017). This emotional support is also identified as impactful on sense of belonging by the women in Nikki Youngblood Giles’ study of 8 low-income first-generation college women, especially when it comes from a peer whose experience is relatable to that of the student (2018). For example, one student described an experience where their mutual group of friends went out to dinner, and both the student and her peer had only ordered a soda due to budget constraints that were disclosed by both students to be because of their working-class backgrounds (2018). Their relationship grew from this interaction, and both students benefited from their mutual support as they discussed “...the joys and angst they both were feeling as they approached the unknown.” (2018, p. 32).

On the other hand, another woman in the study describes meeting her roommate for the first time and being shocked by “.... her family gathered in the room helping to put away what seemed like a never-ending supply of expensive looking clothing, sheets and towels, and toiletries” and that it made her feel “immediately out of place” (2018, p. 63). Though these anecdotes do not tell the full story of the friendships formed by these women, they provide insight into how peer relationships can play a role in first-generation women students’ development.
Mentor Relationships

There is a wealth of research on the impact of mentorship on college students, including women and first-generation students, though not necessarily for students who hold both identities. We assert that mentorship is particularly important for first-generation women students’ development because of these intersecting identities. Relationships that are authentic, empowering, personally close, and mutually engaging are most beneficial for the development of first-generation women students especially in terms of self-efficacy and belonging. Mentorships that do not exhibit these qualities may serve a purpose but are overall not as beneficial.

For first-generation students, mentors often play a key role during their transition and throughout their time in college by providing “insider” information or navigational capital that students cannot necessarily receive from adults in their families (Plaskett, Bali, Nakkula, & Harris, 2018; Yosso, 2005). This information sharing, called “instrumentality” by Plaskett et al. (2018, p. 47), is most beneficial to first generation students when given in the context of a close, mutually beneficial relationship. For women students specifically, the relational aspects of mentoring are thought to be a critical factor for successful mentor relationships (Liang, Tracey, Taylor, & Williams, 2002). Qualities of relationships that theorists consider to be “growth-fostering” include mutual engagement, authenticity, and empowerment (Liang et al., 2002).

Additionally, we acknowledge the many forms that mentor relationships can take. The level of formality, the origin, or the difference or lack thereof in power or positionality of mentor and mentee are important factors, and we wish to honor that each kind of mentor relationship can have a different impact on students. We explore relationships that are more formal and with members of faculty, staff, or someone who has a clearly differentiated positionality at the college or in the community, as well as intentional relationships with peers that a student looks up to. Lastly, we acknowledge that this categorization establishes a false dichotomy, and that many of these relationships fall outside or between the types of mentorship we have identified as relevant.

Relationships with Mentors

Supportive and individualized relationships with faculty have been associated with
enhanced learning for college students (Kuh, 2008). For first-generation students, not only do these relationships lead to enhanced learning, but also to feelings of self-efficacy. Demetriou et al.’s study of 16 “successful” first-generation college students (half of whom were women) describes that relationships with faculty (especially those connected to research) had an impact on how first-generation students perceive themselves and their abilities to succeed as researchers (2017). Similarly, in Youngblood-Giles’ study of 8 low-income first-generation college women, each of the students she interviews cites a relationship with a mentor that is developmentally beneficial (2018). Each student identifies a relationship with a teacher, instructor, or other faculty member that provided them with necessary knowledge but went above and beyond information-sharing. For instance, one student described her relationships with faculty members that began simply by attending office hours but developed into genuine relationships that resulted in her ability to participate in long-term research, and thus a shift in her self-perception where she began to view herself as a scholar (Youngblood-Giles, 2018).

Relationships with Peer Mentors

Peer mentor relationships are also significant for the development of first-generation women students. Social Learning Theory asserts learning vicariously through others can promote an individual’s self-efficacy (Newman & Newman, 2016). For first-generation women who do not have family members with which they can compare themselves in the context of attending college, having peer mentors who have gone through or are going through the same experience is integral, especially in the context of an academic program (Plaskett et al., 2018), as it allows students to see someone their age that they respect being successful (Demetriou et al., 2017). Similar to mentor relationships with faculty or staff, peer mentorships are longer lasting and meaningful when mentors don’t “just help [mentees] meet their immediate needs, but also bond with them personally” (Plaskett et al., 2018, p. 48). Thus, though providing mentees with information and helping them navigate systems on campus is important, the ability to relate and make connections remains significant for peer mentor relationships.

Finally, having peers as mentors also removes much of the stigma that can potentially be associated with asking for help from others (Plaskett et al., 2018), especially faculty or staff that have some level of power over students, whether formally or informally. Peer mentors have the benefit and challenge of balancing between being a mentor and a friend (Plaskett et al., 2018).

Practical Application for Student Affairs Educators

For student affairs educators, this theory could be used in a variety of ways. We present two different strategies to employ this theory as a framework for colleges including developing more inclusive first-generation programs and creating and assessing mentoring initiatives that serve first-generation women students.

First, the hypotheses can be used as a framework for developing family programs that address the intersections of first-generation status and gender. While colleges and universities across the country have begun developing first-generation programs for students and their families, none of them explicitly addressed the role that gender will play for the students along with their first-generation status. Some of the family initiatives that currently exist involve
monthly newsletters for parents, extra orientation sessions to discuss topics that families may not be aware of such as how to fill out FAFSA and paying for college, and website pages with useful resources designed specifically for first-generation students and their families (“First-Generation Families”, 2019; Martina, 2019). However, none of the university websites that we visited for first-generation programs for families and students displayed information exclusively for women (like women’s centers, scholarships, women’s studies courses, or organizations for women). When developing programs, professionals should keep intersectionality and multiple minoritized identities in mind and how first-generation students have identities beyond their education status. While providing them with information and resources related to their first-generation status is the obvious goal for these programs, this does not mean that they are not facing other identity-related concerns.

These hypotheses can also be used to create and evaluate mentoring programs that explicitly or implicitly serve a high population of first-generation women students. It may be of interest to consider our theory throughout the process of establishing a mentor program, such as when making decisions about how mentors are matched with mentees and what kind of requirements, if any, those relationships have. As close mentorship relationships are more impactful compared to less intimate mentorship relationships for the development of first-generation women students, intentionally reaching out and recruiting mentors who are interested in relationships with students that go beyond the typical student-to-faculty or staff relationships is important. Additionally, by understanding that mentorships should be mutually engaging, it may be of interest to recruit mentees based on their interest in a relationship with faculty or staff that goes beyond attending office hours or participating in research.

Further, our hypotheses can be used to evaluate existing mentoring initiatives that serve this population of students. For instance, when gathering feedback, it may be helpful to identify in the data collected whether relationships with mentors possess the identified beneficial qualities. If the relationships possess those qualities and it is correlated with success of the mentorships, it may be indicative of how the program can continue to gain positive momentum; if they do not, our hypotheses may be able to provide a framework for what shifts in structure or outcomes may need to occur in order to best serve first-generation women students.

**Limitations & Further Research**

We recognize that there are a multitude of intersecting identities beyond gender and education status. Because each student comes to the collegiate environment as more than just an individual with a gender and education history, we want to make clear that this work cannot necessarily be generalized to all first-generation women because of differences in race, sexuality, gender presentation, ability status, age, parental status, and religion. Contextual differences like institution type and location may also have an impact. Further, the fact that we are using the definition of a cis-gender woman, without intentionally including trans-women, or individuals who do not define themselves as women but outwardly present as feminine, narrows the scope for this theory and its ability to represent the relational experiences of all first-generation women. With these differing identities in mind, this work may not be applicable for all first-generation women.

Another limitation is the lack of research that specifically focuses on gender and first-
generation status. Because of this, much of our hypotheses are predicated on assumptions of connection between the narrow body of research that does exist which addresses gender and first-generation status coupled with our own life experiences at this intersection. We implore other scholars to use our hypotheses as a foundation for further studies in the future that can collect data through qualitative and quantitative research to test, learn, and understand the impact of interpersonal relationships to see if data confirms or rejects our presumptions about relational support, or lack thereof, and its impact on first-generation women college students.

In addition to our recommendation to formally collect data, we have provided several recommendations for further inquiry. The first is that scholars in the field should more broadly consider the qualities of different types of relationships. While research exists on what positive or successful relationships look like, the research is scarce when it comes to what negative qualities may be present in some of these relationships. We hypothesized a spectrum for each relationship displaying both positive and negative aspects for each relationship. However, much of the research does not give a good comparison to what qualities may constitute a "negative" relationship. While we understand the desire to focus on how relationships can be positive and successful, we believe it is important to also understand what qualities constitute a negative influence. With this understanding, other scholar-practitioners can employ informed strategies to develop negative relationships, into more positive ones.

**Conclusion**

These hypotheses explore familial, peer, and mentor relationships and the varying levels of support they can provide for first-generation women. We also describe the unique nature of each type of relationship, and the different types of support they can provide for the student. We describe the qualities of each relationship and outline what we believe to be the most beneficial for first-generation women students. By doing so, we have begun a conversation on understanding the development and fluidity of these relationships and how they contribute to the development of first-generation women’s sense of belonging in the collegiate environment. Based on our own experiences, we feel that this topic should be recognized with a theory to represent and describe the unique experiences of first-generation women. We hope that this work inspires other scholars to continue exploring these relationships and other intersecting identities.

**References**


Student Affairs Assessment: Measuring the Effectiveness of Assessment Plans Designed to Shrink the Academic Equity Gap

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Introduction

The period in which wealthy white males were the majority student population in the United States' higher education system is far from today's reality. As higher education has diversified, institutions recognize that all students are not created equal, and support systems and resources must be established to continue increasing academic success. Institutions have championed their increased accessibility due to greater equality since the post-World War II period (Tienda, 2013). Although this is true to an extent, there remains a misconception that the opportunity to access higher education and increased diversity in the sector has created equity (Glater, 2016). Equity is a multifaceted issue in higher education, and institutions have been challenged to address and improve upon for over a decade.

Research illustrates that student affairs are critical in decreasing inequity on college campuses (Schuh, 2010). The primary purpose of establishing such departments within higher education was to address individual students’ needs and development holistically so that upon graduation they were “well-rounded, balanced citizens who had a foundation in education and social and moral convictions” (Schuh, 2010, p. 64). The rise in students’ racial, ethnic, economic, and social diversity has only emphasized the need for student affairs professionals and proven how essential their role is with students' development and academic achievement (Henning & Roberts, 2016). The ever-growing complexities of students’ lives and their struggles, when enrolled in college, further illustrates the need for student affairs professionals to provide support outside of the classroom (McClellan & Stringer, 2016). In this way, student affairs are contributing to the decline of inequities across higher education institutions.

As the role of student affairs in higher education has become more prominent, assessing its effectiveness has been stressed. Although research indicates that such services positively impact equity gaps, institutions often receive pushback and criticism in establishing or enhancing their student support services (Henning & Roberts, 2016). The additional funding for new technology, staff, and expanded offices may be challenged by stakeholders, such as faculty, administrators, the board of trustees, and federal, state, and local governments (Owens, Thrill, & Rockey, 2017). These services must not only prove their effectiveness, but they should also illustrate they are worth investment funding.

Assessment plans, especially outcomes-based assessment plans, have become staples in measuring student affairs in higher education (Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott 2009). As data-driven decision-making is now essential in higher education, funding is critical to institutions’ survival, and data has become a necessity in showing stakeholders that positive change is occurring (Henning & Roberts, 2016). The continuous nature of assessment promotes the concept of constant improvement to meet the students’ needs (Bresciani et al.,
Most importantly, institutions face the challenge of retaining more underprepared and at-risk student populations, and being responsible for providing support for student success. This would hopefully lead to higher graduation rates for all students (Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, 2015). To accomplish this, institutions must understand the barriers and challenges that underserved and marginalized students face to better assist in their success. Institutions cannot provide students the necessary support without intentionally gathering data and assessing the services already in place (Gansemer-Topf, 2013). Therefore, creating outcomes-based assessment plans to measure the effectiveness of these support services is imperative in addressing inequities among student populations.

**Review of Literature**

**Equity**

*Definition*

Traditionally, equity has been defined as increased access to higher education for all society members (Tienda, 2013). If following this logic, the more diversity present across institutions, the more equitable higher education is, yet this definition does not reference the disparity in opportunities and societal stratification. Creating more diverse campuses does not mean students are provided the advantages and resources necessary for their success. In fact, it is the opposite. When accepting diverse student populations, financial resources, academic abilities, non-academic skills, and accessibility to off-campus assistance must be considered when thinking about potential academic success (Astin, 1990). Equity is a multidimensional term, referring to the assurance that all students are provided the resources and assistance necessary for their individual advancement, success, and mobility.

**History of Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education**

Racial and ethnic minority access to higher education did not begin to occur until after the Civil War. The federal government, wealthy White industrial philanthropists, White churches, and the Black community created educational institutions to assist in the learning of Blacks until the early 1900s (Gasman, Baez, & Turner, 2008). Yet, the stain of racism and segregation restricted where and what Blacks could learn. Black colleges and universities were often led by White administrators and faculty, or institutions were beholden to the White philanthropists investing in Black education for less than altruistic purposes (Gasman et al., 2008). However, since the seminal implementation of the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954, several court decisions and policies passed encouraging and promoting broader access to higher education for minorities (Hirt, 2006).

As society further diversified in racial and ethnic composition, it became important to recognize and increase access to other minorities. The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s helped establish progressive educational policies such as the Civil Rights Act (Thelin, 2004). Additionally, through the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), Minority Serving Institutions (MSI’s) are recognized in assisting and eligible for funding to support racial and ethnic minorities’ academic achievement and ultimate graduation (Gasman et al., 2008). Even with
these significant efforts, the access and quality of education for minority students remain a
deterrent in their advancement and mobility.

History of Socioeconomic Status in Higher Education

The ideological principle that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, be
provided the opportunity to attend college is unique to American higher education. It was not
until the Morrill Act of 1862, established amid the Civil War, that the federal government began
to encourage the creation and the development of programs geared toward agriculture,
mechanics, mining, and the military (Thelin, 2004). For the first time, male citizens of lower
economic status were provided the opportunity to receive postsecondary education for
professional and economic mobility.

Similarly, the G.I. Bill, established in 1944, created unprecedented access to higher
education for non-traditional students and those of lower economic status (Thelin, 2004). The
bill helped double enrollments, and by 1946, the G.I. Bill enrollments surpassed 1 million
participants (Glater, 2016). This enabled many soldiers, mostly white men of non-traditional age
and lower socioeconomic status, to earn a degree and bolster their economic mobility in society
(Glater, 2016).

The HEA of 1965 also increased access to postsecondary education for those of lower
socioeconomic status. The HEA consecrated that college is accessible to all citizens, and “the
idea was that equity in opportunity is part of who we are” (Glater, 2016, p.92). The creation of
Pell grants and the establishment of loan programs through the HEA increased the college’s
economic attainability for many Americans. Such policies recognized that lower-income
students are in high need of support and funding. Yet there remains a critical gap in what the
government and institutions have addressed and what the actual needs of these students are.

Equity Gaps

Definition

Equity gaps are referred to as the concept of identified “pockets of underachievement
among discrete populations” (Klonoski, Barker & Edghill-Walden, 2017, pg. 60). As
diversification expanded due to increased access, it became clear that certain populations
achieved and graduated at lower rates than White students with a privileged background. To
address these inequities in higher education, organizations and institutions have worked to
establish, measure, and then shrink these equity gaps on college campuses (Klonoski et al.,
2017). As academic equity is the focal point of this study, this gap will be addressed further.

Academic Equity Gap

The academic equity gap, also known as the achievement gap, focuses on course
completion rates and degree attainment between specific populations of students (Klonoski et
al., 2017). Several faculty-driven initiatives, such as remediation, learning communities, and
embedded tutoring in courses, constituted best practices in lessening academic inequity (Kuh,
2008). However, as will be discussed, with student affairs increasingly impacting students’
academic success, several student affairs best practices are established to address academic
inequity (ACPA, 1994).
Earning an undergraduate degree “remains the best vehicle for social advancement and enhanced quality of life” (Klonoski et al., 2017, p. 61), yet graduation rates remain relatively low for underserved populations. Minority students and those of lower socioeconomic status are typically less academically prepared for college-level coursework than White students and those from higher-income backgrounds. For example, a study conducted in 2015 at Northern Illinois University illustrates that minority and low-income students are more at risk of not completing the required 100 level coursework. A general education foundations course, taken by nearly 1,500 students annually, had a total pass rate of 81%. Yet, only 71% of Blacks passed the course with an A, B, or C. As some institutions create initiatives to address these academic gaps, others have created additional barriers for students. (Klonoski et al., 2017).

Minority students and lower socioeconomic status students are more at risk of not meeting college readiness due to under preparation for college coursework (Mejia et al., 2016). In fact, “Latino, African American, and low-income students are disproportionately represented among those taking developmental courses” (Mejia, Rodriguez, & Johnson, 2016, p.5). In a study of the 2009-2010 enrolled students at California’s community colleges by (Mejia et al., 2016), 41% of Hispanic students enrolled in remedial coursework, whereas only 23% were college ready. Lower-income students were placed in developmental coursework at a rate of 71% instead of 46% who were college-ready. The study also pointed out the inequity in the composition of who passed remedial coursework. Of those who took developmental math, 39% of Asians and 30% of White students completed the course, yet 24% of Hispanic students and 14% of Blacks passed with a grade of C or higher.

In reviewing the academic equity gap, research typically focuses on graduation rates of underrepresented and underserved students. According to research by Cahalan et al., as of 2015, Whites were the largest group of students earning associate and bachelor’s degrees in America. Blacks, consisting of 15% of the population nationwide for 18-to-24-year old’s, earned 12% of bachelor’s degrees. Blacks did earn 15% of associate degrees in 2015, which suggests that although Black students are underrepresented in earning bachelor’s degrees, they demonstrate parity for associate degrees. Likewise, when reviewing Hispanic student populations and their degree earning rates, Cahalan et al. found a strong indication that they are underrepresented in associate degrees and bachelor’s degrees. Hispanics are 21% of the nationwide population for 18-to-24-year old’s, yet in 2015 they earned 18% of associate degrees and 13% of bachelor’s degrees. The data presented above solidifies what has been pointed out throughout this publication: that although a more significant number of diverse students are enrolling in postsecondary education, inequity in degree attainment remains a challenge. (Cahalan et al., 2017).

**Student Affairs**

Although academic initiatives and curricular modifications have been made to address the achievement gap, student affairs divisions also play significant roles in shrinking academic inequity (McClellan & Stringer, 2016). In fact, best practices in addressing the academic equity gap state the importance of including these services in institutional planning and initiatives. The AACU (2015) recommends that advising professionals assist students in planning a “course of study keyed to students’ goals, attentive to students’ life contexts, and help them achieve Essential Learning Outcomes” (p. 25). Additionally, as student development research has
postulated, students need to be addressed holistically. Research also suggests that “in- and out-of-class experiences are interconnected components of complex processes shaping student change and development associated with classroom experiences and pedagogies, coursework, institutional environments and cultures, and an array of out-of-class activities” (Levy & Polnariev, 2011, p. 13).

Student affairs’ mission and goals are intrinsically related to social justice (McClellan & Stringer, 2016). Such a commitment means that the work conducted by student affairs professionals should be designed to assist in equitable outcomes and students’ upward mobility. Therefore, it is the primary responsibility of student affairs professionals to recognize students’ developmental changes while enrolled in college and simultaneously ensure that these changes support their academic success and ultimate degree completion (Fried & Harper, 2018).

Assessment

Definition

Assessment in higher education is a complex and ambiguous term, with multiple definitions. The assessment basis focuses on what is being evaluated and who the assessors are (Ewell & Cumming, 2017). Assessment can be considered as “a way to make decisions about the effectiveness of programs and services or what students learn” (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 19) or “any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, divisional, or agency effectiveness” (Bresciani et al., 2009, p. 15).

History

Assessment is a vital activity performed by postsecondary institutions to remain accountable and further improve student learning. Evaluating student learning outcomes at the course and academic program levels is ingrained within higher education’s culture, structure, and policies. Consideration for assessing student learning outside of the classroom originated in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s when research started connecting student academic performance and motivation and how these elements increased students’ learning process (Bresciani et al., 2009). It was not until the late 1970s that researchers applied assessment to student affairs, and not until the 1980s when institutions utilized such assessments to track student learning within their non-academic departments (Elkins, 2015).

Researchers and higher education scholars such as Alexander Astin, Harold Bowen, Robert Pace, and Vincent Tinto developed conceptual theories and assessment models emphasizing the importance of student learning outside of the classroom (Bresciani et al., 2009). These scholars and other researchers contributed to the assessment movement in higher education throughout their careers by highlighting the importance of analyzing student learning and contributing to a data-driven, assessment-based culture. Their work impacted the sector, especially throughout the 1980s and 1990s, when assessment became more prominent. For example, the first assessment conference was held in 1985 and was sponsored by respected organizations such as the National Institute of Education and the American Association for Higher Education (Elkins, 2015; Hutchings, 1993).

In the 1990s, the AAHE Assessment Forum released a set of nine guiding principles and best practices for assessing student learning. The principles are as follows:
1. The assessment of student learning begins with educational values.
2. Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.
3. Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.
4. Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.
5. Assessment works best when it is ongoing not episodic.
6. Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.
7. Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.
8. Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.

These principles, established by some of the top assessment researchers in the nation, have become the foundational tenets of higher education assessment. In addition to the nine principles, the AAHE Assessment Forum declared that “assessment works best when, among other things, student learning was recognized as multidimensional and integrated and when members across the educational community, including student affairs staff, were involved in its implementation” (Elkins, 2015, p. 40).

Outcomes-based Assessment

Outcomes-based assessment is the specific form of assessment that will be examined as part of this literature review. This form of assessment is utilized by students affairs divisions to collect data to review departmental effectiveness, assess the results, and recommend enhancements and improvements (Bresciani et al., 2009). The primary goal of assessment is to document student learning or program efficiency to inform decisions further (Henning & Roberts, 2016). Outcomes-based assessment is an intentional process designed to be systematic for improvement of programs (Bresciani et al., 2009).

There are five main purposes of outcomes-based assessment in student affairs: “to improve programs and services, to tell a story about the performance of students and staff, to support decision-making, to advance the division, and to enhance student learning” (Brown, 2017, p. 12). Based on this, student affairs professionals can craft objective, logical, and thoughtful assessments highlighting their essential services for students (Brown, 2017). They can also use this data to advance their work in student success continually. Overall, “outcomes-based assessment, when undertaken effectively, yields tangible results that demonstrate where and how learning is facilitated and enhanced in the cocurricular collegiate environment” (Bresciani et al., 2009, p. 33).

Student Affairs Assessment

With these principles, the higher education sector in the United States continued to
emphasize the importance of assessment. State and federal governments encouraged greater use of assessment for accountability purposes, especially to evaluate and prioritize funding due to declining resources (Bresciani et al., 2009). As research surrounding assessment grew, higher education associations, regional accreditations, and state governments urged for more intentional student learning, ultimately promoting and implementing assessment of student affairs (Ewell, 2009).

It was argued that assessment could be used to illustrate the clear connection between student affairs, the services they offer students, and the learning and development of students (Elkins, 2015). In the mid-1990s, the *Student Learning Imperative* by American College Personnel Association stated that “student affairs professionals must seize the present moment by affirming student learning and personal development as the primary goals of undergraduate education” (ACPA, 1994, p. 5). The ACPA’s reasoning for this publication was that “higher education is in the throes of a major transformation” mostly as a result of “economic conditions, eroding public confidence, accountability demands, and demographic shifts” (ACPA, 1994, p. 1). In this sense, student affairs could strategically point their impact on students’ academic success, and argue that they provided more than basic services or general information for students.

Assessments, specifically outcomes-based assessments, are the outlets in which student affairs can explain and illustrate efficiency in assisting with academic success and student learning (Fried & Harper, 2018). Since the 1990s, the use of outcomes-based assessment to measure student learning effectiveness in student affairs has grown exponentially (Elkins, 2015). As funding and resources continue to decrease, this form of assessment provides a lifeline for the student affairs departments across the country. Such assessment not only show the need for student affairs, but it also shows the impact on student learning and development and allows for continual improvement to better serve students (Bresciani et al., 2009).

**Challenges**

Although there are several benefits of outcomes-based assessment for measuring student development and learning, student affairs professionals face challenges when creating, maintaining, and examining the results of assessments (Henning & Roberts, 2016). Issues such as lack of available resources, continual assessment, time constraints, and biased professionals impact an assessment plan’s accuracy and quality. These challenges can cause assessments to be hindered and, at worst, never completed (Henning & Roberts, 2016), leaving student affairs departments without strategies to gather useful data to improve services and increase student achievement and equity.

Although key stakeholders in higher education realize the necessity of assessment and desire assessments to yield valuable data, there is also a lack of commitment from stakeholders to devote funding and personnel for student affairs assessments (Henning and Roberts, 2016). The Middle States Commission of Higher Education states that “human, financial, technical, physical facilities, and other expenditures are necessary to achieve an institution’s missions and goals” (2003, p. 59; Shipman, Aloi, & Jones, 2003, p. 336). When considering that assessment is not primarily devoted to measuring outcomes at the institutional level, nor at the department and program levels, the cost of resources and the time devoted to assessment causes
hesitation by decision-makers (Shipman et al., 2003).

Student affairs professionals are typically tasked with assessing their respective departments, initiatives, and programming (Henning & Roberts, 2016). Since it costs more for institutions to hire professionals dedicated to outcomes-based assessments, the challenges of the tasks associated with assessment are put on those student affairs professionals already dividing out their time between student engagement, program development, faculty collaborations, and more (Owens et al., 2017). If an institution lacks commitment to providing the necessary time and resources as a means to ensure accuracy and the continuous use of outcomes-based assessment, assessments will be negatively affected and the results may not be utilized to their full potential.

It is vital that administrators, staff, and faculty involved in outcomes-based assessment are provided with this form of professional development. Without sufficient training to effectively create an assessment and then measure the results, there could be various implications (Henning & Roberts, 2016). First, assessment is an objective activity, and those conducting assessments should not have preconceived notions of outcomes (Ewell & Cumming, 2017). Additionally, the staff and faculty engaging in assessment need to recognize their biases and correct them (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Student affairs professionals and faculty engaging in assessment practices need to know how to create, interact with, and utilize decisions from assessment plans. However, they also need to be aware of their potential biases and how they can influence the assessment plans (Henning & Roberts, 2016).

A crucial complication that professionals face with outcomes-based assessment is its continuous nature. There are no definitive answers yielded from assessment, only “provisional conclusions” that “need to be consistently re-visited and tested in the light of newer evidence” (Ewell & Cumming, 2017). The results are incorporated in Ewell and Cumming’s (2017) “Continuous Improvement Cycle,” which establishes that, upon producing outcomes for recommended improvements, these improvements are implemented and then assessed as part of the cycle. Such assessments can be burdensome for institutions due to the resources, funding, and time they consume (Ewell & Cumming, 2017). The continuous cycle must be followed to commit to outcomes-based assessment and further enhance student learning and development. If not, previously gathered data loses relevance and no longer assists professionals.

**Gaps in the Research and Significance of Study**

**Equity and Student Affairs Assessment**

Equity and outcomes-based assessments are inextricably linked, and student affairs professionals should be utilizing outcomes-based assessments to illustrate their impact on shrinking equity gaps further. As outcomes-based assessments are tied to student learning and development, they are also directly related to college campuses’ academic equity (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Student affairs divisions already utilizing outcomes-based assessments subsequently have an appropriately designed tool to measure their impact on shrinking academic inequity.

Over the past decade, research has linked equity to the practice of assessment in higher education. However, few researchers have linked student affairs assessments to equity, and
even fewer have researched the specific implications of academic equity gaps (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). There are a few reasons for this, being the hesitation of student affairs departments to declare responsibility for student learning the main one of them (Elkins, 2015). Student affairs have changed drastically in the past century, evolving as students’ needs changed and increased (Henning & Roberts, 2016). Yet, even with the drastic changes to higher education and student affairs, there remains a reluctance to claim that these professionals also enhance students’ minds and skills. For instance, certain professionals claim that “learning is the purview of the faculty, that program outcomes are impossible to measure, or that focusing on learning takes away from the services or programs students need” (Elkins, 2015, p. 45).

As mentioned in the aforementioned quotation, while establishing student learning outcomes are essential to an outcomes-based assessment, they may also be cumbersome for student affairs professionals to manage and track (Elkins, 2015). Over the past three decades of outcomes-based assessment rising to prominence in student affairs divisions in higher education, few studies have illustrated the results of student learning outcomes connected to outcomes-based assessments (Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2018). Higher education conferences and publications stress the importance of outcomes-based assessment, champion the researchers and institutions developing these assessments, and current best practices and case studies to be replicated by further researchers (Elkins, 2015). However, they do not present specific evidence of student learning (Jankowski et al., 2018). The lack of commitment in recognizing student affairs as a division that fosters student learning on college campuses has been a deterrent to outcomes-based assessment and contributed to this field’s slow progression (Elkins, 2015).

This study seeks to assess the effectiveness of assessment plans, also known as meta-assessments (Walker, 1999). According to Smith et al. (2015), few studies use meta-assessment in their research due to two main reasons: the first cycle of assessment has not yet concluded, and second because the study focuses on the results of the assessment than the assessment plan itself. Resources or studies rarely discuss the findings of a meta-assessment after it is conducted. For example, a study directed by researchers at James Madison University established that there are communication issues between higher education professionals when establishing assessment plans (Smith et al., 2015). These issues arise when there are misunderstandings about the language, definitions, and structure of an assessment plan. Smith et al. (2015) suggest that conducting meta-assessment will provide direction and improvement on the development of assessment plans at institutions. They reviewed and categorized published books and articles related to the topic but delivered limited guidance about what meta-assessment should look like and how it should be conducted. Although the researchers identified apparent issues within the assessment and meta-assessment field, they provided no explanation in how or when meta-assessment should occur, or how results should be interpreted (Smith et al., 2015).

Relevant Studies

Many studies relating equity to assessment, were centrally focused on the learning that occurs inside the classroom. For instance, Klonoski et al.’s (2017) article, “General Education: The Front Lines of Equity and Inclusion at a Midsize Public University,” discusses the important
decisions made by a university to shrink academic inequity on campus. The two initiatives that
the college committed to were “the identification and elimination of academic equity gaps among
students from underserved populations, especially in general education courses,” and “the
development of an equity-minded campus culture that embraces diversity and serves all
students equally” (Klonoski et al., 2017, p. 61). The university did highlight its multicultural
centers on campus, yet the institution failed to further include these centers and student affairs
offices in its implementation of the initiatives (Klonoski et al., 2017). Students engage with
student affairs departments regularly during their academic trajectory. Including student affairs
professionals in the proposed initiatives would have acknowledged this and how essential
student engagement with student affairs is to increasing equity.

After reflecting on the academic equity gaps for general education at the university, the
individual colleges formed “equity teams, comprising faculty, administrators, and staff” to
establish specific strategies to shrink academic equity gaps (Klonoski et al., 2017, p. 67). None
of the strategies noted in the article referenced how student affairs can further support student
development and learning to lessen academic inequity. According to Klonoski et al. (2017), the
equity teams did note that diversity in the hiring process is significant “with particular attention
paid to faculty and graduate teaching assistants.” The university is also planning to create a
“faculty-led Center for Academic Equity to provide faculty with the knowledge, skills, and
resources necessary to effect meaningful change in the classroom” (Klonoski et al., 2017, p.
68). Although this article highlights essential work in higher education to address academic
inequity, it also ignores the roles that non-teaching professionals, especially student affairs
professionals, play in students’ learning and development.

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment published an article in 2017
describing the importance of linking equity and assessment (Montenegro & Jankowski). The
authors critically pointed that “assessment, if not done with equity in mind, privileges and
validates certain types of learning and evidence of learning over others, can hinder the
validation of multiple means of demonstration, and can reinforce within students the false notion
that they do not belong in higher education,” (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017, p. 5). Although
this is important to note, Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) link equity and inclusivity to
students’ assessment in the classrooms. In this context, assessment is referred to as student
knowledge and their demonstration of such knowledge. As important as classroom learning is
for students, the article does not incorporate an analysis of the knowledge obtained by students
outside of the classroom. It also misses mentioning the importance of equity within those
external environments.

“Connecting Assessment and Strategic Planning to Advancing Equity on Campus,”
published in 2017, did highlight the role of student affairs assessment with equity, yet it focused
on social equity, rather than academic (Brown). In this study, the primary purpose was to create
a culture of inclusion, therefore the university linked inclusion with the Student Affairs 2020
Strategic Plan (Brown, 2017). Within the strategic plan, it was noted that student affairs would
encourage inclusion by implementing approaches such as “a Diversity and Inclusion Certificate,
staff recognition, and active participation in professional organizations” (Brown, 2017, p. 5). The
Diversity and Inclusion Certificate was offered to university employees as a chance to “explore
strategic areas around diversity and improve their ability to contribute to the enhancement of
Southeastern’s welcoming and inclusive environment” (Brown, 2017, p. 5). Similarly,
recognition and participation in professional organizations also allowed for staff and administrators to receive professional development in diversity and inclusion issues. The primary reasons as to why the university linked student affairs division’s outcomes-based assessment plans to equity was to “understand staff perceptions of the strategic direction, gather baseline data surrounding staff practices related to inclusivity, and apply results to practice,” (Brown, 2017, p. 13).

This study is critical because it strengthens inclusion and can potentially improve a sense of belonging for students from underserved backgrounds. It also connects student affairs professionals to the arguments made in this work. Although the goal was to increase “equity through professional practice” (Brown, 2017, p.17), this research does not indicate the connection between how these professional practices can positively impact students.

Ann Gansemer-Topf (2013) wrote a thorough article about how assessment can be used to promote students’ academic persistence. She highlights the importance of students interacting with their environment as an indicator of increased retention and discusses ways of assessing these interactions. Seidman’s Retention Formula for retention and student success is reviewed in this study and includes “identification and interventions that are early, intensive, and continuous,” and the model implies that there are “strategies, programs, and services that, when provided to the student, should lead to student success” (Gansemer-Topf, 2013, p. 66). Although not explicitly stated, Seidman’s Retention Formula could easily strengthen the argument that increased engagement of student affairs professionals and students leads to increased student learning, retention, and academic success. The article ties assessment to Seidman’s Retention Formula, but it falls short in connecting retention and student success to academic equity. The study also does not mention specific examples of the work higher education staff and administrators do to foster increased retention and academic success, which ultimately leads to greater academic equity.

Achieving the Dream, a national organization devoted to equity and student success of community college students has done significant work and research in shrinking equity gaps (Torres, Hagedorn, & Heacock, 2018, p. 74). The organization created a “new form of assessment” which “is making progress closing academic achievement gaps and accelerating student success through a unique change process that builds each college’s institutional capacities in seven essential areas” (Torres et al., 2018, p. 74). According to Torres et al., (2018), to assist in assessment, Achieving the Dream created the Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT), which focuses on teaching and learning, and support in non-academic areas. This tool also incorporates engagement and communication, strategy and planning, policies and practices, leadership and vision, and data and technology as essential areas to be reviewed. Incorporating these areas allows for a holistic examination of the college so that informed actions can take place to create a more equitable campus.

The ICAT is provided as a diagnostic tool and the foundational first step in assessing an institution’s impact on equity. Achieving the Dream then supports community colleges to take the next steps in becoming more equitable campuses and increasing student success (Torres et al., 2018). Although student affairs are not explicitly discussed in this article, it is included within the ICAT as an essential consideration in addressing institutions’ equity. By working with community colleges, Achieving the Dream has provided a tool to measure the impact of equity through assessments (Torres et al., 2018).
However, the ICAT and Achieving the Dream do have their limitations. Most critically, Achieving the Dream is an organization primarily for community colleges and, therefore, their services and resources are not accessible for the 4-year public or private institutions (“About Us,” 2020). This problem has developed over several decades. Since community colleges are open-access institutions, equity is emphasized because of the large numbers of underrepresented and underserved students enrolling (Owens et al., 2017). Much of the responsibility to address equity is laid upon community colleges. As previous studies have shown, 4-year institutions accept underrepresented and underserved populations, which also makes them responsible for addressing equity.

Conclusion

There is a need to study student affairs’ outcomes-based assessment plans that measure the services’ effectiveness in shrinking academic equity. It is important to recognize that, as higher education has become more diverse, the urgency to address inequity on college campuses has increased (Ewell, 2009). Institutions must address these equity gaps and further support the achievement of all students. The roles of student affairs divisions have adapted over several decades to address these barriers and assist student success (Henning & Roberts, 2016).

In reviewing the literature, the historical implications of inequity in higher education point out that as society marginalized certain societal groups, so did higher education (Hirt, 2006). Institutions are working diligently to expand their reach to underrepresented and underserved populations and correct the racial and immoral actions of the United States. However, these students continue to face challenges and barriers. It is vital that student affairs divisions measure their effectiveness in helping students from underrepresented backgrounds succeed, while also using outcomes-based assessment to improve these efforts continually. It is critical for higher education institutions to commit their resources to create equitable outcomes for all students (Schuh, 2010). In this way, with holistic and equitable intentions, student affairs divisions can improve and tailor their services so that there is effective support to increase student academic success.

References


Examining the Practices and Challenges of Virtual Academic Advising in Higher Education During COVID-19

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Abstract

The purpose of this mixed methods research study was to explore the practice of academic advising and the challenges associated with virtual advising in California higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Advising is a retention practice recognized as critical to student success because advisors are one of few personnel interactions students are guaranteed to have with a concerned institutional representative. Though advising is historically a face-to-face practice in a social profession, COVID-19 has forced advising to become remote due to public health concerns during the pandemic. Data was collected from 74 participants representing 43 higher education institutions across California through an online survey that analyzed how academic advising currently functions and how it has changed since COVID-19. Generally, reported challenges were largely technological, particularly regarding access to reliable technology. Advisors were mixed on working virtually but highly willing to combat technological challenges if it meant students benefited from the practice. Academic advisors and their institutions may consider testing alternative virtual advising platforms to determine best fit, implementing automated advising systems for minor advising tasks, offering optional virtual advising training to all appropriate faculty and staff, and creating a standard assessment method for all advising. Future research should explore virtual advising from the student perspective to better understand the role of virtual advising in student integration.

Introduction

Academic advising, a retention practice critical to student success, has long been the subject of discussion within the realm of higher education. Although the history of advising can be difficult to delineate, it has maintained a constant presence in higher education and continued to evolve since the early days of postsecondary education. Academic advising was initially limited in scope, but it is expected that most contemporary institutions employ an array of advisors catering to different student populations. In recent years, academic advising has most commonly been associated with one-on-one, face-to-face sessions between a student and an advisor. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced American colleges and universities to adapt almost exclusively to virtual advising, an uncommon but not unusual practice in the technologically savvy 21st century. Up to 83% of colleges that used mandatory academic advising for online learners in 2019 found it to be at least somewhat effective for success, retention, and completion, suggesting that virtual advising practices can be successful (Ruffalo
Noel Levitz, 2019).

The pandemic has created uncertainty in the future of traditional higher education. This uncertainty has further created a sense of urgency in the world of academic advising, in that advising must continue rapidly evolving to accommodate the changes accompanying the pandemic. The present research looks to contribute to prior research on academic advising by observing how the pandemic has affected academic advising and analyzing how potential challenges can be mitigated.

**Literature Review**

Good academic advising provides “perhaps the only opportunity for all students to develop a personal, consistent relationship with someone in the institution who cares about them” (Drake, 2011, p. 10). In many cases, students are assigned to an academic advisor for an extended period. As such, when founded on strong interpersonal relationships, academic advising “influences student self-efficacy, emotional commitment to the institution, as well as persistence and loyalty” (Vianden & Barlow, 2015, p. 15).

The definition of academic advising is difficult to determine. Larson et al. (2018) stated that those involved in academic advising “did not share a common understanding, purpose, or activity” (p. 81) and these variances have created a lack of cohesion in interpretations of advising goals. However, with the use of analytic induction as discussed by Merriam (2009), Larson et al. (2018) concluded that “academic advising applies knowledge of the field to empower students and campus and community members to successfully navigate academic interactions related to higher education” (p. 89). With this interpretation in mind, one might be able to establish the services to be provided under the umbrella of an academic advisor position.

For the purpose of this research, academic advising is defined as the process of assisting students with defining, clarifying, and planning their education and future. Virtual academic advising is defined similarly with the addition of technology to accommodate students who cannot or do not want to be physically present for advising appointments. For example, video conferencing, online forums such as Cranium Cafe, phone meetings, and email communication can all be classified as virtual advising.

It should be noted that due to a general lack of unification in defining academic advising as a professional field, the features of academic advising can vary among institutions, academic departments, administrative departments, and even individuals. Larson et al. (2018) pointed out that the title of academic advisor does not encompass one specific set of practices and goals and even academic advisors within the same department can occupy distinctly separate roles. Nemeth Tuttle (2000) outlined some common advising responsibilities, including: advising students on general education requirements, serving as a liaison between students and academic departments and schools, and maintaining academic records. Hunter and White (2004) have expressed the value of advising succinctly:

Under the guidance of an academic adviser, students can clarify the purposes of their college attendance, achieve vital personal connections with mentors, plan for the future, determine their role and responsibilities in a democratic society, and come to understand how they can achieve their potential. (para. 4)
The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated a lack of uniformity within the field of academic advising. While campus closures were initially expected to be temporary, many American campuses were forced to transition to virtual learning throughout the pandemic. These changes produced many unexpected consequences, leaving students, faculty, and staff underprepared and overwhelmed, while every institution navigated the transition differently. Perhaps at the forefront of these consequences is the mental health and well-being of college students. Suspending classes and evacuating campuses may leave students struggling with loneliness and isolation; feelings of anxiety and depression; betrayal over the loss of a homelike atmosphere; and frustration surrounding either the potential of delayed graduation or the loss of access to their research projects, internships, jobs, and counseling services (Zhai & Du, 2020). Although academic advising has been thoroughly researched, virtual academic advising practices have not been examined quite as exhaustively. Despite the existence of virtual academic advising prior to COVID-19, most research surrounding its use related more to inclusion within a host of other services. Moore (2012) laid out several virtual methods of communication an advisor could use with each advisee, including email, telephone, and web conferencing, all of which can be used during the pandemic as well as with on-ground advising.

Best Practices in Academic Advising

Folsom, et al. (2015) suggested one practice foregone by many advisors: planning and preparing for the advising session. The first step in this process requires advisors to be proactive in their communication with advisees. There need not be a specific goal in mind with advisor outreach, but advisors should be consistent with communication and use it to invite students in for a session, congratulate students on an achievement, or check on students’ academic progress (Folsom et al., 2015). The final step is planning uninterrupted time with each advisee. Folsom, et al. (2015) highlighted that technology has made this increasingly difficult with incoming phone calls, popup notifications, and email distractions, further enhancing the value of scheduled appointments as opposed to drop-in sessions. Scheduled appointments give advisors time to silence notifications in preparation for their upcoming meeting with a student.

Moses (2015) found that community college advisors listed such practices as building working relationships with faculty, one-on-one contact with students several times during the semester, and professional learning and development as key practices in the implementation of successful advising programs. Alternatively, Moses (2015) found that advisors at four-year institutions focused instead on the inclusion of a First Year Experience; consistency and accuracy of information; central advising systems that require all freshman to complete career exploration and course planning before being assigned a faculty advisor; mandatory advising at least twice per semester; training and professional development; and aiding online students in finding a connection and sense of community by providing them with an advocate. Additionally, Bryant (2016) suggested connecting students with faculty advisors early in their academic career, encouraging advisors to develop relationships with their advisees beyond the bare minimum, and offering triage services for students during peak hours.
Issues and Challenges with Virtual Academic Advising

Prior research suggests that the umbrella of technology is a common challenge with virtual advising, specifically the learning curve and depersonalization of increased technology use (Leonard, 2004). The means of communication Moore (2012) laid out also carry their own set of challenges, including the overuse of email and the need for advanced scheduling for phone or video conferencing. Dhawan (2020) additionally noted the inequities highlighted by the digital divide among higher education students.

Methodology

The purpose of this mixed-methods research study was to examine the practice of academic advising during COVID-19 and explore challenges associated with virtual advising in higher education institutions across California. The research question guiding this study was: How has the practice of academic advising been affected by COVID-19?

Participants

The targeted population for this study was individuals employed in roles involving academic advising services within California institutions of higher education. Accredited, non-profit institutions were randomly selected by type: private four-year universities; public four-year universities; and two-year colleges. Individuals were selected from each institution based on availability of contact information on the institutions’ websites. Individuals invited to participate were asked to participate only if they provided academic advising services in their current role. All individuals invited to participate received an email invitation with a link to an anonymous online survey that included a consent form outlining the parameters of the study.

Research Instruments

All data was collected through the anonymous online survey platform, SurveyPlanet. Participants were first presented with a consent form and those who selected “I do NOT agree” were immediately removed. Survey questions (see Appendix) were primarily qualitative to establish participants’ thoughts and perspectives about virtual academic advising practices at their respective institutions. Responses were categorized by similarity and compared against other categories or against the responses of participants from other institutional types as necessary.

Findings

Results of this study are discussed by the following institutional types: California State University (CSU), University of California (UC), Private, or Two-Year (community college). Individuals from 13 of the 23 CSU campuses, all 10 UC campuses, 8 private universities, and 18 of the 116 California Community Colleges were invited to participate in this research. Responses were received from 74 individuals representing 43 of the 47 invited institutions,
yielding an institutional participation rate of 91.5%. Participants most frequently listed their titles as being some variation of “Academic Advisor” (n=32), “Academic Counselor” (n=15), or “Instructor” (n=13), though many participants reported various responsibilities. Approximately 39% of participants reported they were faculty and 61% reported being staff advisors (See Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of Faculty Advisors and Staff Advisors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Type</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSU</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UC</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-Year</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were asked to elaborate on any training made available by their institution for virtual advising during COVID-19. Several noted that training was made available only to faculty, geared toward teaching online instead of advising online, or that trainings provided were not for advising but may have had a module for advising included. Table 2 depicts how training differed by institutional type.

Table 2: Trainings Offered by Institutional Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Type</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Faculty Only</th>
<th>Unsure / Unused</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSU</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-Year</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Because participants were not asked to specify whether available training was specific to certain employees, some responses may not accurately reflect the institutions’ offerings.

Participants were also asked how long they had held a position involving academic advising services at their institution of employment at the time of this study (see Table 3). Most participants (n=24) selected that they had been employed for over 10 years and 21 participants noted that they had been employed for three to five years.
Table 3: Length of Employment by Institutional Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Employment</th>
<th>CSU</th>
<th>UC</th>
<th>Private</th>
<th>Two-Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 6 months</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-12 months</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked if advising is mandatory for students at their institutions, 54.1% (n=40) of participants reported that advising is mandatory only for specific student subpopulations, 25.7% (n=19) listed advising as not being mandatory for any students, and 20.3% (n=15) listed advising as being mandatory for all students. Private universities were the only institutional type to list advising as mandatory for all students, as compared to some or no students, most frequently.

Participants were asked to discuss whether their institution provided any virtual advising practices prior to COVID-19. Participants’ responses were analyzed and grouped according to the following common thematic categories: email, phone, video, other, and none/unsure. Table 4 breaks down participants’ responses.

Table 4: Types of Virtual Advising Offered Pre-Covid-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage Breakdown</th>
<th>N/A (29 participants)</th>
<th>Other (22 participants)</th>
<th>Video (20 participants)</th>
<th>Phone (16 participants)</th>
<th>Email (9 participants)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest %</td>
<td>Private (75%)</td>
<td>Two-year (50%)</td>
<td>Two-year (38.9%)</td>
<td>CSU (29.4%)</td>
<td>Two-year (27.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Highest %</td>
<td>UC (50%)</td>
<td>UC (35.7%)</td>
<td>CSU (26.5%)</td>
<td>Two-year (27.8%)</td>
<td>CSU (8.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Highest %</td>
<td>CSU (35.3%)</td>
<td>CSU (20.6%)</td>
<td>UC (21.4%)</td>
<td>Private (12.5%)</td>
<td>UC (7.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest %</td>
<td>Two-year (22.2%)</td>
<td>Private (12.5%)</td>
<td>Private (12.5%)</td>
<td>UC (0%)</td>
<td>Private (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants were asked to use a scale of one to five to rate how receptive they perceived their students to be to virtual advising practices and how comfortable they personally felt with using virtual advising services to advise. Figure 1 provides a breakdown of participants' responses by institutional type.

Figure 1: Average Participant Scores

Note. The total average perceived student receptiveness score from all 74 participants was 3.97. The total average advisor comfort level among all 73 participants who responded was 4.01.

Finally, participants were asked to discuss challenges they encountered both with the transition to virtual advising and with the practice of virtual advising. Responses were analyzed to uncover any common themes and categorized accordingly. The most frequently listed challenges were related to technology and interpersonal communication. Technological challenges included poor Wi-Fi connectivity, power outages, subpar home office equipment, and lack of availability of the necessary equipment. Interpersonal challenges included the lack of a human element and difficulties reading non-verbal cues, building a sense of community among advisors and students, gauging student comprehension and satisfaction, and learning the appropriate boundaries between students and faculty.

Analysis

Results of the survey were unfortunately scattered in nature. Participants frequently cited
conflicting opinions with one another, making it difficult to accurately compare results by job title, institutional type, or most other categorical divisions. One interesting aspect to compare was the participants’ perception of student receptiveness. Their perception of student receptiveness was somewhat in line with the average reported student satisfaction scores outlined a Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL) (2016) report in the following areas: advisor’s knowledgeability about major requirements, advisor’s approachability, and advisor’s concern about individual student success. The RNL report (2016) listed private schools as having the highest student satisfaction with an average of 66%, while the present study showed the UC system and private universities as having almost identical average perceived student receptiveness scores. Like the RNL report, community colleges provided the lowest average score. In the RNL report (2016), community college students were the least satisfied with their advising experiences overall, with an average of 59% satisfaction, while the perceived student receptiveness in this study was 77.8% for community colleges. Although student receptiveness is not interchangeable with student satisfaction, this is a compelling comparison to note because both the reported student satisfaction levels and the reported student receptiveness exhibit relatively similar trends. Had more private university participants been included in the study, the results may have more accurately reflected the student satisfaction reported by RNL because the results of the present study showed a difference of only .01 in the student receptiveness scores between private universities and UC institutions.

Paradoxically, while private universities listed one of the higher levels of student receptiveness, they reported the lowest scores in advisor comfort level. Conversely, community colleges listed the lowest student receptiveness but reported the highest advisor comfort level. This may be attributed to the availability of training reported by community college participants. Community colleges indicated the highest reported rate of available training; all participants stated that training was offered (one stated that training was available to faculty only). However, because all 18 community college participants were faculty members and participants were not asked to specify to whom any available training was provided, the available training may have been largely specific to faculty and online teaching. This thereby provided participants from community colleges with a general advantage regarding the use of virtual practices. In addition to training, community college participants also reported the availability of virtual advising practices prior to COVID-19 most frequently.

Community college participants, all of whom were faculty members, tended to report the most experience, the most training, and the highest advisor comfort level with virtual practices. This suggests that faculty members would be best suited to advising and community college students would have an advantage over other students regarding virtual advising outcomes. However, it should be noted that community college participants also reported the lowest overall perceived student receptiveness to virtual advising practices. The question of whether advising was mandatory may play a role in this comparison. Community college participants were more likely to report that advising was not mandatory for any students at their institutions, while private universities were more likely to report that advising was mandatory for all students at their institutions. Comparatively, community college participants had the lowest overall student receptiveness rating while private universities had the highest overall student receptiveness rating, suggesting the potential for mandatory academic advising also having a positive effect.

Perhaps most noticeable in this study was the disorganization with which academic
advising is provided to students in higher education. As Larson et al. (2018) highlighted, due to the general lack of unification in defining academic advising as a professional field, the features of academic advising can vary, and the title of “academic advisor” does not encompass one specific set of practices and goals. Even academic advisors within the same department can occupy distinctly separate roles. By inviting individuals who provided academic advising services to participate in this study, all participants exemplified this concept quite clearly with about 20% of participants listing job titles that are not included under the umbrella of academic advisor, academic counselor, or instructor (presumably a faculty advisor). One participant suggested that their institution should move away from faculty advising because, as the students’ secondary advisor, they saw inconsistencies in the faculty advising system. It was not clear whether every listed job title included advising services. The mixed results of this study and the fact that nearly every participant filled several roles at their respective institution implies that there may be significant variation in their professional roles. That variation supports the lack of unification pointed out by Larson et al. (2018) and suggests that even professional academic advisors may depict a certain level of inconsistency within their field.

Another significant point was the distinct representation of the “no one-size-fits-all” concept. Participants frequently offered conflicting information with very mixed responses to questions. The clearest presentation of this was in response to questions about training. Beyond reporting different levels of training provided by their institutions, participants reported mixed feelings about training. Some wanted more; some were happy with what they received; and some were adamantly against training, stating that they were “allergic” to it or that any trainings provided by their institution “defy physics in that they simultaneously suck and blow”. There was also no theme or similarity in responses among participants from a single institutional type, suggesting that there is no consensus within any of the California public or private institutions. This was an interesting detail considering at least one community college participant’s reference to the California Community Colleges system and the system-wide training it provided or a top-down general preference for platforms to be implemented system-wide during COVID-19.

**Recommendations**

An analysis of the data presented in this study suggests the following considerations:

- Increase collaboration between faculty advisors and staff advisors to improve the uniformity of advising services.
- Assign faculty advisors early in students’ academic career to ensure they receive consistent advising and regular access to knowledgeable professionals in their field.
- Make advising mandatory for all students.
- Reallocate resources for students and staff. For example: create stipends, loanable technology, or optional paid training opportunities.
- Create and provide alternative accessibility options such as transcriptions sent by email following a meeting or presentation, subtitles in students’ native languages during a video meeting, or staggered and socially distanced in-person meetings.
Limitations

- Academic advising was only observed within institutions located in California, which may create a lack of applicability to institutions in other states.
- Not all California institutions were included in the study, so results of this study may not apply as well in some cases, such as for-profit institutions.
- All participants were from institutions listing employee contact information publicly on their websites, reducing the researcher’s ability to fully randomize invitations. This created uneven representation among types of advisors and students they advise (i.e., graduate versus undergraduate).
- There were no student participants, so certain factors may have a higher bias considering the one-sided perspectives of an all-employee participant group.
- There was no differentiation between different types of advising when inviting individuals for participation, resulting in mixed responses that may have obscured important results.
- Heavy use of open-ended questions resulted in several unclear responses from participants and a survey method does not allow for additional clarifying questions.
- Participant responses often brought up other interesting or relevant points that could not be further discussed due to lack of information or further questions on that topic.

Conclusion

The practice of academic advising continues to be integral to the overall success of students in higher education. However, COVID-19 has effectively created a roadblock in the path of traditional advising. While some institutions of higher education were already beginning the transition to virtual educational practices, many institutions had not yet begun the transition to virtual academic advising. The present study aims to contribute to prior research on academic advising by observing how the pandemic has affected advising and analyzing how potential challenges with virtual practices can be mitigated. The purpose of this research was to examine the practice of academic advising among institutions of higher education across California during COVID-19 as it adapted to virtual practices. Based on the data collected as part of this research study, despite the technological and interpersonal challenges encountered, advisors were passionate about the job and the success of their students. However, with technology often making communication more difficult and creating additional distractions for both advisor and student, academic advisors cannot expect to provide suitable virtual advising to at-risk students. Valuable suggestions for improvement include increased optional training and professional development opportunities, adjusting how faculty advises, increasing resources for advisors and students, and creating alternative accessibility options for virtual advising. Limitations of this research suggest that future researchers should expand the participant pool to increase the applicability of the results, add student participants to gain a more comprehensive perspective on virtual advising, and use a different research method such as an interview or follow-up surveys to expand on unclear participant responses.
References


Appendix

Survey Questions

1. How long have you been in a position involving academic advising services at your current institution?
   a. Under 6 months
   b. 6-12 months
   c. 1-2 years
   d. 3-5 years
   e. 6-10 years
   f. 10+ years

2. How and in what way has academic advising changed for you since Covid-19?

3. Please list or describe any issues that you have personally encountered or found challenging regarding the transition from traditional (on-ground) academic advising to virtual or distance academic advising.

4. Please list or describe any issues you have personally encountered or found challenging with the actual practice of virtual/distance academic advising.

5. If budget and resources were not an issue, what could your institution or department do to improve the practice of virtual/distance academic advising for you specifically and/or for your students?

6. What, if any, positive outcomes have you personally encountered as a result of transitioning to distance or virtual academic advising?

7. If your institution offered any virtual or distance academic advising practices/opportunities prior to Covid-19, please explain what sort of virtual or distance advising practices were available. (if not, put N/A)

8. Has your institution or department provided any kind of training for current virtual or distance academic advising practices? If yes, please elaborate.

9. Were you given options to develop a virtual/distance advising model as a department or were you given a preset procedure to follow?
   a. We worked as a department
   b. We were given a preset procedure
   c. Other

10. Approximately how many students did you advise during the average quarter/semester (depending on which option your institution uses) prior to Covid-19? Approximately how many students have you advised on average in the most recent quarter/semester since Covid-19?

11. Is academic advising mandatory for students at your institution? If yes, is this for all students?
   a. No, advising is optional
   b. Yes, all students
   c. Yes, only specific students (please specify by student subpopulation)

12. Are any students at your institution assigned to specific academic advisors? (e.g., by last name, by concentration)
a. No, they select their own
b. No, there is only walk-in advising
c. Yes, all students have assigned academic advisors
d. Yes, some students have assigned academic advisors (please elaborate)

13. How receptive do you personally believe the students at your institution have been to the changes in academic advising practices?
   a. 1 (not receptive at all) to 5 (very receptive)

14. How comfortable are you with the current virtual/distance academic advising practices in your department or institution considering any prior or current experiences and any training?
   a. 1 (extremely uncomfortable) to 5 (extremely comfortable)

15. Do you primarily serve undergraduates, graduates, or both?

16. Which of the following best describes the type of academic advising you are responsible for? (select all that apply)
   a. General advising from a central advising office available to all students
   b. Program advising for a specific school/major/concentration
   c. Advising for a specific student subpopulation (e.g., transfers, EOP, online students)
   d. Other (please explain)

17. Are you a faculty member?

18. What is your official job title?

19. What is the name of the institution you are currently employed by?
Higher Education Institutional Preparedness for Diverse Student Communities
Laura A. Meyer
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Abstract

This paper examines whether colleges and universities in the United States striving to diversify their student communities are creating an inclusive environment that will effectively support these students throughout their academic careers. Current research on the experiences of students who identify as minoritized members of college communities indicate that a sense of belonging is critical for a student’s success. Using three different student retention models, Tinto’s Institutional Departure Model (1975), Spady’s Undergraduate Dropout Process Model (1970, 1971), and Bean’s Student Attrition Model (1980, 1982), this paper makes recommendations on how to foster a sense of belonging across vital aspects of the student experience to improve retention and student support. Key elements from these models are applied to the following areas: student affairs, academic and faculty affairs, the institutional workforce, and leadership.

Introduction

The world of higher education is a fertile ground for diverse thought and exchange across an expansive community of students, faculty and administrators. Nationally, institutions aim to increase diversity across culture, race, religion, region and gender because a more diverse community leads to a learning space with varied perspectives. Students experience a more well-rounded education when they engage with individuals from different backgrounds, inviting critical thinking and new ideas (Moody, 2020). Based on the admissions data collected from universities across the United States regarding the undergraduate classes of 2024, press releases nationwide vaunted their diverse student populations. At Princeton University, the Office of Admission claimed, “this year’s admission process reflects the University’s enduring commitment to attract, enroll and support extraordinary students from all backgrounds,” with 17% of the class first-generation college students and 61% self-identified as people of color, including biracial and multiracial students (2020, para. 1). New York University released a similar statement citing, “The New York campus admitted class maintains last year’s record levels of diversity: 9 percent are African American and 18 percent are Latinx. No ethnic group makes up more than 20 percent of the total students admitted to the New York campus” (Beckman, 2020, para. 2). Although these figures are meant to indicate that classes are becoming increasingly diverse each year, a deeper examination shows that minoritized students continue to be drastically underrepresented.[1] While New York University shares that it matched “record levels of diversity,” the statement is paired with the statistic that only 27% of the class identifies as members of minoritized groups (Beckman, 2020), which arguably displays stark numbers of representation across identities captured under the umbrella of “underrepresented
minorities.”

Note that the term “minoritized” is used as Patten et al. (2016) explains to “signify the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities. Persons are not born into a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social context” (pp. 20-21).

Institutions are only scratching the surface of what it means to be a diverse community. Beyond admissions and enrollment, what practices can universities implement to support not only their current students but the student community they seek to admit? How can these practices impact their rates of retention, an accepted measure of success for universities, that inform national rankings (Bean, 1980, 1982; Burke, 2019; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975)? This paper explores how institutions can best support and retain a diverse student community by cultivating a sense of belonging across all aspects of a student’s educational experience.

**Literature Review**

**Student Retention Models**

Students are the beating heart of a college, and their return year after year keeps the institution alive and conventionally successful. A critical component in determining if a college or university is successful is by measuring a high retention rate (Burke, 2019). While a student may withdraw from an institution due to financial reasons or other external factors (Christie et al., 2004), a key reason reflecting a student’s desire to return is the level of comfort they feel within the atmosphere created by leadership (Burke, 2019). This level of comfort can be measured through a synthesis of three retention models that focus on vital aspects of the college environment. These three models are: Tinto’s Institutional Departure Model (1975), Spady’s Undergraduate Dropout Process Model (1971) and Bean’s Student Attrition Model (1980, 1982) (Burke, 2019).

Tinto’s Institutional Departure Model (1975) concentrates on the impact of the student’s integration into the school and their social relationships, Spady’s Undergraduate Dropout Process Model (1970, 1971) measures retention based on whether a student finds enough achievement socially and academically to warrant returning to campus, and Bean’s Student Attrition Model (1980, 1982) directly relates student retention to faculty and administrator retention. Each model addresses different facets of a student’s college experience: social, academic, and faculty and administrative support, all of which reflect how an institution bolsters the student’s ability to adjust to college life. For institutions seeking student community diversification, these aspects must be adapted to accommodate a new population and invite belongingness throughout the entire collegiate experience. By applying the following programming and practices that reach each corner of the college environment, institutions are then likely to see success in higher retention rates.

**Peer Support**

Undergraduate students who enter their first year of college between the ages of 17-20 are emerging into adulthood biologically, socially and economically. The natural changes that an 18-year-old is experiencing paired with the new stressors of college will directly impact their
mental health and their need for peer-to-peer relationships and support (Roberts, 2018). Biologically, a student’s brain development introduces challenges that intersect with their introduction to college life (Roberts, 2018). These changes bring about vulnerability in a setting that is already charged with stress triggers. For students who associate with a particular minoritized race, religion, gender, culture or economic status, the stresses of being alone, misunderstood or mistreated will be even greater and will further impact their mental wellbeing (Roberts, 2018). When an individual feels vulnerable, they seek comfort from peers with shared identities providing them with a sense of belonging. In a study of undergraduate students’ perspectives on why an individual might withdraw from an institution, students were asked to articulate if there was a difference in what someone might share with a peer as opposed to their actual thoughts about withdrawing from a university (Boddy, 2020). The majority of the students’ responses were emotional and tied to loneliness and homesickness (Boddy, 2020). Boddy concluded, “results tie in with Tinto’s model of student retention, but the uniqueness of the method allows the importance of the social integration side of Tinto’s model to emerge more than these issues typically do” (2020, p.248). Boddy’s unconventional way of uncovering a student’s perception as to why a peer might withdraw highlights students’ unspoken desire to belong and seek emotional support.

If an institution is aiming to create a diverse setting where students feel a sense of belonging, then it must offer opportunities for students to join groups in which they can identify with their peers (Boddy, 2020; McCabe, 2009; Roberts, 2016). Sociologist, Janice McCabe, conducted a university study with a predominately white student body to learn firsthand about the experiences of students who identified as minoritized members of the community (2009). The common thread interwoven throughout each individual’s experience was the constant combatting of microaggressions, which led to seeking strength from their peers undergoing the same experience and developing coping mechanisms as a group (McCabe, 2009). One student shared, “minority students anywhere at any university…already feel marginalized by being a minority in college…. It’s really hard on a day-to-day basis and to have other minorities lift you up…is encouraging” (McCabe, 2009, p.144). Without peers who understand exactly what a student is going through and who can serve as a comfortable support, the feeling of isolation and loneliness can become overwhelming. In McCabe’s study (2009), the interviewees sought connection in groups and programs in which they identified culturally and socially such as historically Black fraternities, Latinx student organizations and female business clubs to gain the support necessary for the feeling of belongingness. To complement these clubs and organizations, allyship and affinity groups can provide space for students of all identities to embrace commonalities. This will, in turn, empower peers to learn from one another and create an inclusive community. Peer relationships and support are integral to the student experience, and institutions that invite relationship building across identities will increase students’ sense of belonging and their likelihood of not only returning to campus but also thriving socially (Boddy, 2020; McCabe, 2009; Roberts, 2016; Tinto, 1975).

Academic Support

While Tinto focused on the social aspects of the college experience, Spady’s Undergraduate Process Model considers academic achievement to be critical in measuring retention (1970, 1971). In shifting to a more diverse community, the academic environment must
adapt to be inclusive of new perspectives. For example, Science, Technology, Engineering, Math (STEM) classrooms and departments have been known to feel unwelcoming to minoritized groups; this has led to lower rates of retention among these students (Hilts et al., 2018). Ong et al. state, “Within STEM, examples may also include departmental hallways decorated with only pictures of famous White male scientists, a shortage of women’s bathrooms in engineering buildings, hiring practices with built-in biases, … and inaction against discrimination by those in power” (2018, pp. 210-211). Ong et al.’s research on the experiences of women of color in STEM and their recommendation of counterspaces, i.e., supportive and inclusive spaces that promote belongingness, can be positively impactful for students across minoritized groups (2018). Participants of their research reflected on feeling isolated and experiencing microaggressions, but 94.1% recognized counterspaces as a safe space to gain the sense of belonging necessary for success (Ong et al., 2018). Counterspaces qualified as both physical and emotional settings, ranging from peer-to-peer relationships, conferences, student organizations, female identified faculty member mentorships, and departmental offerings (Ong et al., 2018). Although academic departments are rarely considered “safe spaces,” one participant found safety in an entire department when its members encouraged her to incorporate different elements of her identity into her thesis topic by merging her social background and STEM research (Ong et al., 2018). In providing counterspaces for students to feel a sense of belonging in the academic sphere, their achievement levels will strengthen the commitment to the institution, and their likelihood of returning for the duration of their undergraduate career (Hilts et al., 2018; Ong et al., 2018; Spady 1970, 1971).

Faculty and Administrator Support

Faculty and administrators at higher education institutions play an influential role in the experience of the student community. According to Bean’s Student Attrition Model (1980, 1982), there is a strong correlation between student retention and employee retention. Bean argues the motives behind a student’s decision to withdraw are often similar to an employee’s decision to resign because they are centered around social integration and feelings of belonging at the institution (1980, 1982). Research suggests that diverse faculty representation is not increasing at the same rate as diverse student enrollment (Stout et al., 2017). Stout et al.’s research found that the greater the representation of diverse faculty members, the higher the graduation rates for students who identified as underrepresented minorities (2017). A critical step in providing an inclusive environment is emphasizing diversification of the workforce. In doing so, students will have the opportunity to learn from educators and mentors whom they can relate to, or who can provide them with different and well-rounded perspectives. Beyond recruiting a diverse faculty and workforce that reflect a diverse student body, providing programming and training for all institutional employees will guide them on how to incorporate inclusivity into the classroom or their work (Cook & Matthews, 2018). The Transformative Diversity Education Framework (the Framework) (2018) is used as a model to address the lack of institution-wide feelings of belonging and implement necessary change to support diversification. The Framework discusses six components that will help initiate transformative change: climate, value, partnerships, planning and coordination, curriculum and delivery, and assessment and evaluation (2018). Diversity-related professional development, implementation of diverse materials into pedagogical practice, and continuous evaluation and assessment of existing
programs, are the first steps to prepare faculty and staff to be better equipped in shaping a safe environment for not only the students, but their colleagues as well (Cook & Matthews, 2018).

An institution can also foster a more supportive environment for the broader community by increasing an emphasis on allyship opportunities (Pryor, 2020). While faculty and staff diversification are necessary, commitment across non-identifying members of minoritized groups is essential for an inclusive community. In 2020, Pryor conducted a study exploring how non-identifying LGBTQ staff members can advocate for queer equity within an institution and instill campus change. Administrators showed their commitment to LGBTQ allyship by leading and implementing the chosen name and gender pronoun policy, expanding gender inclusive restroom spaces, and initiating campus safe zone training (Pryor, 2020). A combination of allyship opportunities, recruitment of a diverse workforce, and inclusive-focused programming and training is necessary to support all members of an institution’s community (Bean 1980, 1982; Cook & Matthews, 2018; Pryor, 2020; Stout et al., 2017).

Role of Leadership

The sustainability of diversity-focused initiatives is dependent on the expressed commitment and follow-through of an institution’s leadership team. In Ong et al.’s study a participant stated,

At [my institution] …They made it very clear, from the top down, that diversity was important, and that’s much easier for those people who actually do diversity as their job to get their job done, because they knew they had the support of the president, versus kind of doing it on their own, on their own team, with their own class (2017, p. 228).

When leadership recognizes diversity, inclusion, and equity as central values for the institution, it is clarifying the expectation that all participants are responsible for cultivating an environment that embraces varied perspectives. However, it is not enough to verbally express that diversity, inclusion, and equity is a priority; it is also imperative that leadership take direct action. In 2012, the University of Georgia’s Office of Institutional Diversity used the pillars of the Transformative Diversity Education Framework to launch a Certificate in Diversity and Inclusion program to train the faculty, administrators, and staff in educating and supporting a diverse community (Cook & Matthews, 2018). The institution also adjusted its infrastructure by detailing diversity support as a core characteristic in its mission statement: “a commitment to excellence in a teaching/learning environment dedicated to serving a diverse and well-prepared student body, to promoting high levels of student achievement, and to providing appropriate academic support services” (University of Georgia, 2016). The program has shown promise since its implementation and has been recognized for its efforts for the past seven years by earning the INSIGHT into Diversity Higher Education Excellence in Diversity Award, which is the only national award that recognizes efforts in diversity and inclusion (Fahmy, 2019).

The Framework implemented by the University of Georgia through the certificate program demonstrates that interpersonal training and programming under the guidance of committed leadership, as well as revitalizing a university’s mission, can improve the wellbeing of the student community (Cook & Matthews, 2018). One year before the program was implemented, the University of Georgia welcomed a freshman class where only 14.1% students
identified as either African American or Hispanic (Hannon, 2011). In 2020, the University of Georgia’s graduating class of 2024 more than doubled this enrollment percentage at 35% (Rawlins, 2020). Although there is still vast room for improvement, the implementation of a university-wide effort suggests that students are more likely to feel comfortable not only enrolling at the institution, but also returning for the remainder of their undergraduate academic career. With a current retention rate of 95%, the University of Georgia leads its peer institutions within the Southern Eastern Conference which holds an average retention rate of 89% (Graduation Comparison, 2021). The application of this Framework takes commitment from all members of the institution, but it is up to university leadership to drive structural changes that will transform the existing environment.

Conclusion

As institutions shift to include more diverse perspectives, they must adapt their environments to better suit the needs of their communities (Cook & Matthews, 2018; Hilts et al. 2018; Jayakumar et al., 2009; McCabe, 2009; Moody, 2020; Parson, 2018; Pryor, 2020; Stout et al., 2018). It is an institution’s responsibility, ethically and economically, to not only attract talented and diverse students, but also support them throughout the duration of their academic careers. While this paper provides recommendations in promoting a sense of belonging throughout the student experience, further research is needed to address how to quantifiably measure belongingness and its impact beyond the postsecondary sphere. With a growing community of diverse graduates, opportunities will emerge to glean insights about what made their experience inclusive and where institutions are still falling short. A continuous evaluation of student affairs, academic and faculty affairs, the institutional workforce, and leadership is necessary for an institution to evolve with its community, and implement changes that are necessary for student support. Keeping in mind the three retention models discussed in this paper, there is no single solution to adequately prepare an institution for a diverse community; rather a holistic approach is needed to create an environment in which students will thrive.

References


