Title

Exploring Dark Matter: A Magnification of the Black Male Experience Within Male Success Initiatives at Predominantly White Institutions

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Exploring Dark Matter: A Magnification of the Black Male Experience Within Male Success Initiatives at Predominantly White Institutions

By

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Higher education in the United States has persistently failed to ensure equitable success for Black males, who remain underrepresented in college matriculation, persistence, retention, and graduation rates. Despite efforts to increase access, Black males face unique challenges that impede their academic success, including hostile campus climates and pre-existing socio-cultural detriments. This dissertation examines the experiences of Black males who successfully completed a male success initiative at a predominantly White institution (PWI).

This study sought to understand the impact of experiences through the lens of the Black male participants. Through qualitative research, it addresses the following questions: (1) What factors lead Black males to participate in a male success initiative? (2) What benefits do Black males report from participating in the program, and which aspects of the program do they attribute these benefits to? (3) What design elements do Black males believe would improve their experiences in the program?

Using a phenomenological approach and Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework, this study employed semi-structured focus groups involving 11 Black males to understand participants' experiences. Findings revealed that participants faced numerous pre-institutional hardships, campus challenges, and racialized anxieties, aligning with existing literature on the collegiate experiences of Black males. The participants reported that the male success initiative provided affirmation, encouragement, and skill development opportunities, helping them navigate institutional barriers, build relationships, and improve their self-efficacy.

There is a need in the future to explore community support networks, the role of validating agents, and differential implementation models to enhance the success of Black males in higher education.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Zelma Elaine McLemore, who passed away on November 30, 2013. She spoke life into this journey long before it started and this signifies a promise kept between mother and son. To my children, Jaelyn, Jezus, and Jaxon, I dedicate this to your future. Let this serve as an example of what's possible when your diligence outweighs your obstacle. I love you and in the words of our McLemore foreparents, "Never quit, never give up".

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To my wife Martha A. McLemore, you are my best friend, confidante, cheerleader, procrastination-deterrent, safe place, and brainstorm buddy. No one has had more patience with this process than you. Your motivating words on tired nights, understanding on early morning writing sessions, and grace during writing retreats all ensured the completion of this dissertation. You were committed to this process, even when I was not, and so this is a win for both of us. I love you and am honored to be your husband.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Higher education in the United States has continued to fail at providing equitable success for Black males who gain entry to postsecondary institutions. While many colleges and universities have moved to increase access for Black males, these students continue to be underrepresented in both college matriculation, persistence, retention, and graduation rates (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper 2006, 2012a; Strayhorn, 2010; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). Student success has continued to be an evolving umbrella term as emerging research has sought to explore the student experience. Traditional quantitative definitions have looked to objective metrics to measure success. These have included student grades, degree attainment, consecutive credit hours earned, skill development, and knowledge proficiency (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Strauss & Volkwein, 2002). Other, more subjective measures qualify student success as student satisfaction, perception of institutional quality, and sense of direction and confidence to pursue that direction (Astin, 1993; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Indeed, the intersections of both quantitative achievements and positive qualitative experiences are factors that combine to create a holistic sense of success for students and help institutional goals of graduating students in a timely manner (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). Unfortunately, Black males face additional challenges to traditional ideologies of student success than their peers. When compared to their female counterparts, other underrepresented racial minorities, and White peers, Black males rank amongst the lowest in persistence, retention, and degree attainment (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, Smith, & Davis III, 2018; Lee Jr & Ransom, 2011; Strayhorn, 2010; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010).

An abundance of research has explored contributing factors for these trends of underachievement. Many of these studies have described the dismal campus climate for Black males, as they have reported high levels of hostile and unwelcoming atmospheres at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Barker & Avery, 2012; Harper, 2006). Additionally, according to Harper (2012a), many undergraduate Black males come to college campuses having already experienced culturally specific detriments (racism, stereotype threat, micro-aggressions, low academic preparation, low academic expectations). The systems, mechanisms, and policies that perpetuate these results are a consequence of both institutional and structural discriminatory practices (Pincus & Ehrlich, 1994; Harper, 2006, 2012b; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). These students are then faced with campus climates that reinforce social inequities, impeding Black males' abilities to successfully navigate a collegiate lifestyle and develop an academic identity (Barker & Avery, 2012; Harper 2006, 2012a; Harper et al., 2011).

Many postsecondary institutions have looked to address institutional, structural, and social barriers to achievement for Black males. One such group of institutions is the California State University (CSU) system. The CSU consists of 23 campuses and is the largest four-year public system of higher education in the United States (California State University, 2018). While the CSU has followed national trends of increased access for historically underserved students, the system also mirrors the crisis that is Black male underachievement. The average male four-year graduation rate over a ten-year period (2004-2013) in the CSU was 13.6% compared to the average Black male four-year graduation rate of 6.3%. Looking at five-year graduation rates during the same time, the yields were 47.1% and 31.3% respectively. Additionally, the Black male first-year persistence rate from 2004-2013 was 72.2% versus the all-male average of 81.2%. Indeed, when compared to all other demographically recorded groups within the CSU

during this time, Black males on average rank the lowest in time-to-graduation, overall graduation, and persistence, with the gaps widening within the last recorded cohorts (California State University, 2019a; California State University, 2019c; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). To address this, the CSU implemented a graduation initiative in 2016 to eradicate all achievement gaps by 2025 (California State University, 2019b).

As a result, a number of PWIs within the CSU System created male success initiatives focused on increasing academic achievement, persistence, retention, and time-to-graduation rates for men of color. By the start of the 2019 academic year, over half of the 23 CSU campuses initiated such a program (California State University, 2019b). Some institutions encompassed male students as a whole and others developed programs focused on historically underserved (Native American, Black, Latino, first-generation college students, Pell-eligible) male groups (Salvador, 2018). These programs serve as mechanisms for providing academic and social integration for participants. This can include academic support, mentorship, social gatherings, cultural/ethnic/racial confirmation(s), and/or needs-based support.

Many of these initiatives build upon research that correlate levels of student involvement with attitudes towards academic investment (Astin, 1984; DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Tinto, 1975). For many men of color, a sense of belonging must first be validated in order to combat deterrents to involvement. This includes unlocking a sense of self-efficacy to overcome additional socialized pressures unique to racially minoritized students. These male initiative programs have become vehicles to provide and promote a process of validation and self-efficacy for men of color. Black males who participate in these programs have the opportunity to use them as institutional intermediaries to counter adverse campus climate factors at PWIs. While these

programs are becoming more prevalent within the CSU, the direct effect on Black male success is under-researched.

This study seeks to better understand the effectiveness of male success initiatives at PWIs by exploring the experiences of Black male participants. The following research questions are posed to help guide the structure of this study:

Research Questions

1. What factors lead Black males to participate in a male success initiative?
2. What benefits do Black males report from participating in the program? What parts of the program do they attribute these benefits to?
3. What design elements do Black males believe would improve their experiences in the program?

Chapter II

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Black male students who have participated in male success initiatives and the factors influencing outcomes from their participation in and completion of these types of programs. This review opens with a discussion of key influences and factors that contribute to student success. This includes traditional models of student involvement and the evolution of engagement within higher education. A critique of these works is then presented to highlight gaps that neglect to be inclusive of the unique influences and challenges that Black males face (e.g., microaggressions, stereotype threat, and marginalization).

Following this critique, I then discuss ways that institutions can marshal approaches such as validation to boost Black males' self-efficacy and engagement, both of which I argue constitute approaches to anti-deficit engagement. Finally, I discuss male success initiatives as institutional efforts that try to promote targeted positive engagement.

From Student Involvement to Student Engagement

The role of student involvement as a mechanism for increasing student success finds its early origins within Tinto's *Model of Student Departure* (1975, 1987, 1993) and Astin's *Student Involvement Theory* (1984). Within these studies, both Astin and Tinto set frameworks to conceptualize the importance of and correlation between student involvement and collegiate success.

Tinto's original model examines the process of student departure from college. He suggests that before attrition occurs, students go through a process of withdrawal from their institution in correlation to a lack of connection with the ideals, values, and goals of that campus

(Tinto, 1975). This model attributes this lack of connection to students' predisposed social constructs (i.e. previous social interactions, academic preparation, familial connectivity, established value system(s), etc.) (Tinto, 1975). He expands upon his model to explain, "eventual persistence requires that individuals make the transition to college and become incorporated into the ongoing social and intellectual life of the college" (Tinto, 1987, p. 126). This transition involves the disconnection with those previous constructs in order to assimilate into the campus climate. Through this process of disconnection and eventual re-affiliation, a student will become more connected, and have a greater desire to persist (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

Comparatively, Astin (1984) states that, "Student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). The involvement of a student is characterized as being a multifaceted experience that can differ from student to student, and while these differences occur, it is the accumulation of campus interactions that influence a student's decision to stay at an institution (Astin, 1984). These interactions are provided in the forms of student organizations, collegiate athletics, faculty engagement, student programs, campus resources, and campus jobs (Astin, 1984).

While Tinto and Astin establish frameworks to understand many individual factors contributing to student involvement, a number of scholars have raised critiques pointing to the need for greater understanding of how institutions may alienate students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds.

Cultural Representation in Student Engagement

Critiques of Tinto and Astin's early works point to the exclusion of cultural identities and their effect on the process of student involvement (Cuyjet, 2006; Guiffrida, 2006; Harper, 2006). There has been significant research outlining considerable differences in value structures,

educational access opportunities, and acquisitions of cultural capital between Black students and their White counterparts (Brooms, 2018; DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Guiffrida, 2006; Harper, 2006, 2012a). Moreover, because of the challenging climates presented to Black students at PWIs, the process of detachment from home and campus integration, as presented by Tinto, has the possibility to be more detrimental to these students than beneficial (Barker & Avery, 2012; Guiffrida, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010).

Many of these Black students have learned to navigate social-emotional barriers, academic structures, and varying social climates from a culturally-specific lens and support system. Furthermore, PWIs have not traditionally been designed to engage and support Black students. For this reason, Black students have often been oriented with actions and resources that exclude their likeness from the campus community. An example of this comes in the act of institutions providing "resource guides" for incoming students, outlining campus and community resources. Many times, these resources reflect the homogeneity of the campus and sometimes do not extend to include all aspects of diversity within the student body. This may provide cultural conflicts for Black students when places and spaces provided as resources do not reflect their ethnic, racial, or cultural needs (e.g. ethnically common foods, clothing, grooming and hygiene needs, etc.). An accumulation of these instances can trigger a lack of investment in the collegiate experience and lead Black students to distance themselves from needed resources (Harris & Wood, 2016; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007).

According to Cabrera and Nora (1994), "When members of an institution do not accept the values and ways of behaving associated with a particular subculture on campus, members of this subculture view this as lack a of tolerance" (p. 388). This feeling of being de-valued or undervalued can be operationalized in the form of culturally insensitive faculty interactions,

stagnant learning environments, a lack of culturally representative student organizations, or under-resourced cultural programs and resources (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Guiffrida, 2006). While both Black males and females experience these challenges, Black males seem to find themselves at an additional disadvantage in navigating these experiences (Fleming, 1985).

Without proper institutional agents to facilitate academic and social integration, each negative occurrence presents a hurdle to engagement for Black males (Brooms, 2018; Harper, 2012a; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Harris & Wood, 2016). As presented by Strayhorn and DeVita (2010), "Once in college, Black men face additional challenges that, without support, may compromise their academic success: difficulty seeking help, becoming involved in clubs and organizations, and establishing supportive relationships with faculty members, administrators, and peers" (p. 88). The authors go on to explain, "Under these circumstances, Black men are less likely to become academically and socially integrated into college life" (Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010, p.88). To address campus challenges, these students often refer back to family, friends, and communities who reflect their ethnic, racial, or cultural background (Kiyama, 2010). Therefore, a process that emphasizes divorcing these culturally relevant skills, familial/communal ties, and historical knowledge bases can lead Black males to have feelings of being alienated, undervalued, and disconnected (Guiffrida, & Douthit, 2010; Kiyama, 2010; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). This can lead to a lack of motivation and increase the probability of attrition (Brooms, 2018; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010; Tinto, 1993)

Acknowledging both the importance of student involvement and the institutional barriers to achieving this, advancing research has leaned away from placing responsibility on students to centering institutional obligations to provide environments that are more welcoming and conducive to building engagement for a broad and diverse set of students (Kuh, 2009; Kuh et al.,

2006). This line of thinking has led institutions to evaluate program and service offerings, including both what are offered and how they are delivered to students. These reviews have helped institutions move beyond merely introducing activities and towards encouraging participation through meaningful engagement (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Kuh, 2009; Schroeder & Kuh, 2003; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). As an example, faculty members are required to have approximately one hour per course taught to host office hours for students. Many faculty announce the times and places of their hours and/or write this information in their syllabi. According to Astin (1984), this would constitute an institutional effort to provide formalized faculty interactions. However, this may create the possibility for misunderstanding for students who are not aware that these office hours are an opportunity for students to meet with faculty for help, planning, or mentorship. An institutional commitment to engagement would come in the form of providing incentives for faculty to host office hours in student-dominated spaces, specifically those frequented by marginalized populations. This has the opportunity to address a number of possible barriers including demystifying faculty interactions.

Subsequently, while many colleges and universities have made a philosophical shift to better engage students at large, many researchers have noted institutions' inability to effectively engage Black males and its detriment to their collegiate success (Brooms, 2018; Harper, 2012a; Harris & Wood, 2016; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Strayhorn, 2010). In order to build strategies for improving engagement amongst minoritized populations, researchers have looked to a number of theoretical frameworks and philosophical understandings that act as potential promoting factors for or hurdles to student engagement.

An Internalized Threat

In addition to campus climates that are not necessarily built to validate their cultural backgrounds, Black students must contend with a culture that harbors multiple negative stereotypes that depict them as intellectually inferior, hyper-violent, lazy, athletic admits, unmotivated, or affirmative action matriculants (Brooms, 2018; Cuyjet, 2006; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Harper et al., 2011). Steele and Aronson (1995) discussed that when students are aware of these stereotypes it can inhibit their ability to perform academically. This phenomenon is described as *stereotype threat* and is explained as "a social-psychological predicament that can arise from widely-known negative stereotypes about one's group" and furthermore, "existence of such a stereotype means that anything one does or any of one's features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others" (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797). For Black males, stereotype threat can be particularly harmful as it not only has the ability to impede academic performance in daily educational occurrences for fear of upholding racialized stereotypes- class presentations, test-taking, group-work, homework (Steele, 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Strayhorn, 2010), but also can deter these students from seeking services and resources for fear of not adhering to traditional masculine stereotypes of being competent, self-sufficient, organized, or in control (O'Neil, 2008; O'Neil et al.,1986; Wester et al., 2006).

According to Aronson et al. (2002), stereotype threat undercuts academic achievement in two significant ways: Inducing anxiety in educational settings and disidentifying from or devaluing of the educational process. Stress-provoking incidences for Black males can come in the form of having to self-identify race on tests, being introduced to a class as a student athlete, or having to self-select into working groups in predominantly White climates (Brooms, 2018; Harper 2006, 2012a; Harper et al., 2011; Steele & Aronson, 1995). In all of these scenarios

Black males are instantly faced with the "threat" of affirming negative stereotypes, which can be anxiety-inducing pressure-points.

Additionally, disidentification is a self-preserving mechanism to protect students' ego against the effects of actual or projected failure (Aronson et al., 2002). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) illustrate this in the phenomenon of "acting white", wherein the academy is not viewed as a natural arena for Black cultural experiences. Therefore, there is a cognitive disconnect between personal effort and anticipated outcomes. Validating experiences, e.g., inclusive pedagogical frameworks, diverse classrooms, or racially representative faculty and staff, may be useful in alleviating the burden posed by stereotype threat.

Dark Matter

In addition to facing stereotype threats, Black males may be less likely to feel that they "matter" on campuses due to hostile or non-welcoming campus climates. The concept of mattering is well described by Rosenberg and McCullough as "a motive: a feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension [which] exercises a powerful influence on our actions" (as cited in Schlossberg, 1989, p. 7). This line of inquiry is expanded by Schlossberg (1989) in five characteristic constructs of what it means to matter: (1) Feeling we have the attention or interest of others, (2) believing others are concerned about our fortune, (3) feeling that others take an empathetic stake in our accomplishments and failures, (4) others depending on us, and (5) believing our efforts are appreciated.

Schlossberg's (1989) study contrasts the notion of mattering to marginality. She discusses the three ways in which marginalization can become salient. One is characterized as *situational marginalization*-when a person enters a new role or is in transition. Examples of this can be seen

in students attending a new campus, enrolling in a new class, or joining a new student organization. Another kind is *personality type marginalization* -when a person seeks a place in a dominant societal structure, but is challenged to do so because of prejudiced beliefs or conditions towards that person's cultural/social ties. This can be illustrated by students who are deaf arriving to orientations where communication is predominantly verbal. The third type is called *permanent condition marginalization* -when a person may have two or more dominant identities that cause them to not fully engage in either one. An example of this that represents a growing population of many campuses comes from multiracial students whose decisions are continuously influenced by being a part of at least two racial groups.

To matter is to feel equally human and mattering is a basic social reciprocal contract. While it is well documented that positive engagement has strong correlations to institutional commitment, persistence, and graduation rates (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2009; Kuh et al., 2006), campus climates that negatively impact students' ability to feel like they matter create barriers in the form of repetitive marginalizing occurrences (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Strayhorn, 2008, 2018). For Black males, marginalization is magnified due historically held prejudices and institutionally biased practices based on their racialized and gendered identifications. Increased marginalization correlates with a decreased sense of mattering (Schlossberg, 1989), which is critical for Black males to have a sense of belonging on college campuses (Strayhorn, 2008).

Strayhorn (2018) outlines the benefits of belonging and its importance in the trajectory of success for students. He describes this phenomenon as students' "perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers" (p. 4). This amalgamation of factors may accrue more

rarely for Black males. Harper (2012a) outlines how the investment in ensuring Black males have a sense of belonging at PWIs usually settles at two points: In protection of their athletic success and in an attempt to address those who are already underachieving. This line of engagement excludes Black male achievers who are not athletes nor high risks to institutional analytic benchmarks. The gap in engagement neglects a large portion of Black males who may face impediments to a sense of belonging and yet have no outlet to counteract them.

The selective attention that institutions pay to Black males in some ways echoes the long-standing quandary among astrophysicists around observation of *dark matter*. While dark matter makes up a majority of the universe, according to CERN (n.d.), "it does not absorb, reflect or emit light, making it extremely hard to spot. In fact, researchers have been able to infer the existence of dark matter only from the gravitational effect it seems to have on visible matter" (p. 1). For many Black males, a college degree has been touted as a key to financial freedom and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1973; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper et al., 2018). Regardless of where they fall on the spectrum of achievement, Black males continue to endure years of Euro-centric education and indoctrination in order to matriculate to a university with hopes of attaining that key (Fordham, & Ogbu, 1986; Harper, 2006; Hossler, et al., 1999). For many, merely being admitted by a university means the fulfillment of both a personal and familial goals. Conversely, Black males' physical presence on the campus of a PWI means being confronted with a climate that does not reflect cultural comforts, may adhere to detrimental policies and procedures, and does not provide an atmosphere for them to academically excel. Cabrera and Nora (1994) discuss how these types of campus climates can produce perceptions of prejudice and adhere to discriminatory practices. In doing so, they create pathways to alienation and disengagement for minority students. Black males who are collegiate athletes receive their valuation in producing

fans and fundraising tools for their university (Harper, 2012a). Many underachieving Black males do not receive institutional attention until their underachievement provides a statistical negative impact to the bottom-line of academic analytics at their university. By this time, these students are already at risk of being disqualified or prolonging graduation (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Harper, 2006, 2009). For Black males who fall outside these two populations, who are in transition of achievement, who have to overcome stereotypes and other negative influences, a sense of belonging becomes harder to reach. Therefore, I argue that Black males often find themselves matriculating and existing in the blind spots of many institutions unless they become visible through their effect on institutional fundraising or through deficit-oriented engagement. Thus, they are both physically and figuratively dark matter on many predominantly White campuses.

Validation

A lack of mattering is mirrored in lower levels of validation. In 1994 Dr. Laura Rendon introduced the theoretical implications of validation within student development. She described validation as "an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in and out of class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development" (Rendon, 1994, p. 44). This definition was later expanded to include:

> Intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) in order to: 1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and 2) foster personal development and social adjustment. (Linares & Muñoz, 2011, p. 12)

Building upon feminist theory that looked at internalization of oppressive societal factors and their effect(s) on women in educational settings (Belenky, Clichy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), Rendon (1994) expanded this research to include a growing population of non-traditional students. These students included a more diversified student body than the academy was originally established to serve (including women, racial minorities, first-year students over 25, first-generation students, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds). Rendon's theory suggests that the process of overcoming the disposition to learning and reluctance to seeing one's self as a producer of knowledge, presented by Belenky et al. (1986) as factors in women's marginalization, can be applied to a broader and more diverse student population. The growing percentage of students who identify as people of color, first-generation, and low socioeconomic status continue to increase at PWIs. These students face a number of invalidating experiences, both within and outside the classroom (Barnett, 2011; Rendon, 1994, 2002; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010; Sue et al., 2007). This is intensified for Black males who arrive on campuses historically defined by Euro-centric curricula, activities, faculty, staff, and overall climates (Brooms, 2018; Cuyjet, 2006; Guiffrida, & Douthit, 2010; Harper, 2006, 2012a; Rendon, 1994, Strayhorn, & DeVita, 2010). To address these challenges, validation theory ascribes to promoting the incorporation of peer and elder authorities who serve as affirming agents towards a student's potential and sense of belonging (Rendon 1994, 2002). These can exist in the forms of peer-mentorship programs, research fellowships, student organization advisement, academic advisement, or coaching, but barriers to connectivity can arise due to perceived cultural differences.

Dahlvig (2010) discusses the importance of these types of mentoring relationships and their correlation to retention, but speaks to the challenges for Black students. Often Black

students will seek out affirming connections with faculty, staff, and peers who they believe share a respect for their cultural experiences and understand the context behind their perceptions of campus climate (Dahlvig, 2010; Strayhorn, 2008). For Black males, inabilities to connect with Black faculty and staff or join predominantly Black organizations due to a lack of critical mass can invalidate their sense of belonging (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Harper, 2006; Harris & Wood, 2016; Strayhorn, 2008). Furthermore, Strayhorn (2014) suggests "Black males' academic success, or lack thereof, is a function of meaningful interactions with diverse peers, supportive relationships with university faculty and staff, as well as frequent and educationally purposeful engagement in campus activities and student organizations" (p. 2). While validation finds significance during intentional engagement opportunities, its importance comes in serving as a prerequisite for many students developing agency in their educational journey (Rendon, 1994). As described previously in chapter one, Black males disproportionately have to navigate an onslaught of social, structural, and institutional challenges before even attending a PWI (Harris & Wood, 2016). Validating agents are critical to helping these students overcome internalized barriers and acting as a bridge to campus involvement, retention, persistence, and timely graduation (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Harper, 2006; Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Rendon, 1994; Strayhorn, 2014).

Anti-Deficit Engagement

How institutions approach efforts to boost student engagement can have important implications for those efforts' success. Dr. Shaun Harper (2006) conducted a study of Black male achievement at over 40 flagship institutions across 20 states. His findings along with previous research influenced the development of his Anti-Deficit Framework when addressing the educational challenges facing Black males. According to Harper (2012a) "The framework

inverts questions that are commonly asked about educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and Black male student attrition" (p. 5). As an example, a deficit-oriented process of problem-solving may bring about the question, "Why do Black males fail math courses at a higher rate". This may cause solutions to this issue to be focused on the implied deficit or dysfunction of the student and negate institutional or social factors affecting success. The anti-deficit inversion necessitates asking, "How do Black males navigate institutional and social barriers in order to excel in math courses". By centering Black males as experts of their own experience in addressing the issue, the institution simultaneously creates a heuristic opportunity for Black males to acknowledge their individual achievements (affirmed efficacy) and become stakeholders in designing future success (agency). Through this informed decision-making process, institutions become better aligned with serving the needs of these students and minimizing barriers to success.

Because centering the experiences of Black males is a key factor in anti-deficit engagement, it is imperative to affirm accumulated knowledge, skills, and social connections unique to their cultural identity that may have been neglected or shunned within the educational pipeline. Bourdieu (1986) describes the accumulation of competencies, values, and networks as *cultural capital*. He illustrates a hierarchal society built upon a financial caste system, where the wealthy are at the top and influence what society deems valuable. This dictates what knowledge, skills, and familial ties those in lower socioeconomic statuses must secure to be deemed valuable within society. Additionally, the lower a person is in socioeconomic status, the more likely they are to be denied opportunities to attain these elements of value (e.g., access to technology and how to use it, reading and writing proficient tutelage, finance management beyond survival-mode budgeting, ability to develop self-advocacy skills without high risk, etc.).

Bourdieu explicates the primary path of social mobility as one that is firmly connected to the formal education system. He describes the educational system as a distribution mechanism used to reproduce those elements of our culture that are "socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed" (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 488). Colleges and universities are commonly viewed as the pinnacle of the US educational system. Black males who matriculate are expected to have the same values, skills, and connections that the system was established to reiterate and duplicate. Unfortunately, due to the historical disenfranchisement of Black people, many of these students come to these campuses with juxtaposed value systems and skillsets developed to succeed on the fringes of social access and mobility.

Yosso (2005) critiques Bourdieu's theory as being drawn from White middle-class values and neglecting the contributions and value systems of people of color. Building on Bourdieu's theory, Yosso presents the concept of *community cultural wealth* to explain how people of color navigate social mobility. Community cultural wealth is defined as an "array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). It presents itself through six distinctive, collaborative, and often overlapping forms of capital: Aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistance.

For Black males, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the concept of community cultural wealth is important because it adds a construct of value to their experiences. Students who participate in male success initiatives are offered opportunities to gain capital within the breath and scope of these programs (e.g., access to educational resources, mentorship, study and life management skills, etc.). Furthermore, Black males who participate in programs

specifically tailored to reveal and recognize forms of capital they have grown to rely on, encourage connection between value systems.

A Path to Self-Efficacy and Agency

For decades researchers have centralized the success of students around their ability of commitment to achieving academic success. This ability to overcome obstacles in pursuit of their goals has been described in the educational setting as persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 1993), educational resiliency (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994), and grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Strayhorn, 2014). The capacity to endure the academic journey has been well documented, and common amongst all themes is the importance of institutional factors in providing students with the environment to develop a sense of self. While aspects of validation require students to feel that they matter, a sense of belonging does not necessitate competence nor confidence. Therefore, validation also entails the cultivation of a perceived self-efficacy and a sense of agency in students.

Perceived self-efficacy is best described by Wood and Bandura (1989) as "beliefs in one's capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands" (p. 408). This theory is furthered in research by Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2001), who argue that self-efficacy is the composite of optimism and confidence in one's abilities, emphasizing the importance of efficacy in navigating transitions in life. They posit that perceived self-efficacy centers around the "ability to manage the stressors created in demanding situations by means of a more positive analysis of extant risks and available coping resources, which results in the tendency to see demanding situations as challenges rather than threats" (p. 56). Belief in one's abilities is fundamental to the process of decision making and task completion. According to Bandura and Adams (1977) this belief "affects people's choice of

activities and behavioral settings, how much effort they expend, and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences" (p. 288).

Hostile campus climates, Euro-centric pedagogies, and policies that disproportionately create negative effects for students of color erode self-efficacy amongst Black males, even if they are not actively seeking to do so (Brooms, 2018; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006, 2012a; Harris & Wood, 2016; Rendon, 1994). Diminished self-efficacy may affect the classes they choose to take (e.g., choosing courses or major pathways where they already feel confident in lieu of exploring new courses or subjects outside of their comfort zone), student organizations they choose to engage in (e.g., seeking out groups that affirm known skills vs groups that help to develop new ones), resources they choose to pursue for help (e.g., not knowing what resources are available and not seeking help to find them), and both short-term and long-term goal development and completion (e.g., not applying for internships or jobs due to feeling a lack of "readiness"). Support for building perceptions of efficacy in Black males is driven by two premises: One, that feelings of self-efficacy are a foundational component of human agency and two, (as noted above) historically negative attitudes connected to Black males' racial identity have challenged their conceptualization of human agency within the academy.

Human agency is described within social science research as "the capacity to exercise control over one's own thought processes, motivation, and action" (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175). While initially thought of as willful decision-making free of outside authority, it was later conceptualized as a combination of previous experiences, environment, and social constructs that influence a person's choices (Bandura, 1989). Historically, universities have taken a deficit-oriented approach to recruiting, welcoming, and retaining Black males on predominantly White campuses (Astin, 1984; Harper, 2012a; Strayhorn, 2010, 2014; Tinto, 1975), with heavy

concentrations around athletics (Beamon, 2008; Harper, 2009). As a result, it may be true that Black males find primary examples of agency within the arena of collegiate athletics (Beamon, 2008, 2010). While on its own merits the idea of providing an avenue to create agency is beneficial, historic societal views that "valued" strong Black slaves as income-producing property have transitioned to paint Black males as "naturally athletic". This has created a social system that encourages Black males to prioritize athletics as an access point to college (Beamon, 2010; Dancy, Edwards, & Earl-Davis, 2018). Consequently, Black males are influenced to build their efficacy on the court or on the field, instead of in the classroom. This greatly impacts the ability for Black males to see a future that does not involve sports as a primary source of livelihood or achievement. This study explores one type of program that aims to build self-efficacy and agency for men of color: Male success initiatives.

Summary and Ties to Male Success Initiatives

The Black male experience at PWIs has been historically tied to deficit-oriented approaches when addressing the plight of academic achievement within this population (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006, 2009, 2012a). This has put the onus of achievement and failure primarily on the shoulders of these students and neglected to take into account societal and institutional agents producing barriers to success (Kuh, 2009; Kuh et al., 2006). As stated above, feeling invalidated can lead to marginalization, isolation, underperformance, and early departure from the college campus (Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2008; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Validation of the Black male experience starts with understanding the historical and systematic challenges they may have endured before entering the collegiate setting and how the climate of a campus can exacerbate feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy (Rendon, 1994, Rendon et al., 2000). The scope of how Black male success is attained and sustained requires a multi-faceted approach to engaging Black

male achievers and underachievers alike. Additionally, PWIs must take initiative to engage Black males before and beyond the immediate interests of the institution. By creating mechanisms to involve Black males as co-creators in their own educational success, PWIs can improve the educational trajectory of Black males.

Male success initiatives are examples of how campuses are trying to engage Black males to combat the negative forces confronting them and to promote positive experiences. As previously discussed, these initiatives use an array of different frameworks. While all focus on male students (e.g., the primary target group includes all self-identifying males), some disaggregate this population to focus on men of color (e.g., initiatives only enroll those who identify as Asian, Black, Native American, or Latino) or give particular attention to specific ethnic/racial groups (e.g., Black male initiatives, Latino male initiatives, or Asian male initiatives). Though these programs may share common goals of increasing recruitment, retention and time to graduation for participating populations, the paths to attaining said goals may diverge in implementation.

For male success initiatives, implementation may dictate differential outcomes for different demographics within the program. An initiative that encompasses all male students may do a great job helping students to navigate campus resources and validating students' academic capacity, but neglect to adequately address challenges that arise from racialized identities (e.g., stereotype threat, lack of a sense of belonging, combatting deficit-oriented thinking). In contrast, male success initiatives that hold a primary focus that includes both race and gender may be great at creating a sense of belonging within the program, but do less to help students develop agency in navigating the greater campus climate. This study looks at a single male success initiative to get a sense of how that program's implementation was experienced by participants.

In addition to leaning on past literature to conceptualize likely effects of male success initiatives on program participants, this study also grounds its analysis in Critical Race Theory as its central theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

In congruence with centering the experiences of Black males, this study is informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT) to give voice to the perceptions of those who have participated in male success programs at PWIs. In its infancy, CRT developed as a critique of the US legal system and legal studies following the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Matsuda (1992) encapsulates the early research within CRT as:

> The work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination. (p. 1331)

Central to the epistemology of CRT are that race and racism are defining factors in the American experience and are so engrained in every facet of life that it seems, "normal, not aberrant, in American society" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). Furthermore, in his literary mosaic, Bell (1992) explicates racism as a permanent and fundamental fixture in the social system of the US. According to Solorzano, (1997), CRT challenges the ideologies of the dominant culture by elevating the narratives of the minoritized, marginalized, and oppressed. CRT finds its themes and influence within these five tenets:

1. *Centrality and Intersectionality of Race and Racism*- Race and racism are central to a person's experience within society and intersect with other forms of marginalization (e.g. gender, socioeconomic status, ability).

2. *Challenge to Dominant Ideology*- Societal institutions (political, legal, educational) are not objective systems of meritocracy, race neutrality, nor equal opportunity.
3. *Commitment to Social Justice*- Ending racism is part of the broader movement to eradicate other forms of discrimination.
4. *Centrality of Experiential Knowledge*- People of color are experts of their own lived experiences. Therefore, knowledge of their experiences should be drawn directly from them and can include reflective techniques like storytelling, narratives, and scenarios.
5. *Interdisciplinary Perspective*- In order to adequately research and address race and racism within the legal system, interdisciplinary methods must be used to combat Eurocentric ahistorical analysis.

Using the CRT lens to frame this study will afford the opportunity to examine a perspective that, due to historically held social structures, is commonly over-shadowed and under-studied. At a time when access is being improved and attention is being turned towards the needs of Black males, there is a void of perspective from those who are the beneficiaries of these endeavors. Centralizing Black males as experts of their experience, as this project does, gives credence to self-authorship of their challenges and solutions. CRT allows the study to provide a subjective lens to interpreting the experiences of Black males who may be traditionally measured against objective metrics. Furthermore, the study takes a social justice orientation that specifically hopes to provide insights to change institutions and allow them to better serve Black males.

Chapter III

Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of Black males who participated in a male success initiative while attending a PWI. Originating in disciplines of philosophy and psychology, phenomenological research is described as, "a qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in the study" (Creswell, 2014, p. 245). Furthermore, this study utilized a qualitative approach to explore these students' perceptions as to why they sought out this program, the benefits they accrued, and the outcomes of their time in the program.

By adhering to a CRT framework, this study provides a subjective assessment of these types of programs and their impact on Black males who participate. Due to both historic and contemporary educational challenges facing Black males, this research is critical to continued design and re-imagining of programmatic interventions at the collegiate level. To provide an overview of the study, this chapter consists of the following: Research questions used to guide this study, research design process description, study site description, descriptions of participants, data collection description, and a description of the process of data analysis.

Research Questions

The research questions that present a foundation for this study are:

1. What factors lead Black males to participate in a male success initiative?
2. What benefits do Black males report from participating in the program? What parts of the program do they attribute these benefits to?

3. What design elements do Black males believe would improve their experiences in the program?

Research Design

This study was conducted with a qualitative approach. According to Creswell (2014), "The intent of qualitative research is to understand a particular social situation, event, role, group, or interaction" (p. 205). Using this approach centered the experiences of participants and allowed for me to examine factors within the male success initiative from the lens of Black males who participated in it. By using a qualitative design, I was able to better understand how these students made meaning of their experiences and outcomes.

Setting

The research site was a public four-year university (which I call "State University") situated in rural northern California. As of the fall 2019 semester, total enrollment consisted of approximately 17,000 students, with undergraduates accounting for 96.6% (16,436) and graduate students making up the remaining 3.4% (583). During the 2019-2020 academic year the racial demographics of the campus consisted of: White-43.6% (7,414), Hispanic-34.2% (5,816), API-5.7% (973), Black-2.7% (461), Native American-0.5% (88), other-13.3% (2,267). Approximately 54% of the student population identified as female, 45.97% identified as male, and .03% identified as Nonbinary.

In 2016 the university met the qualifications to be designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). Schools are eligible for HSI designation when Hispanic students comprise 25% or more of the total enrollment. The HSI designation depends on statistical analyses of enrollment and provides an opportunity for campuses to apply for additional federal funding to support Hispanic students (US Department of Education, 2023). This is in contrast to the term

PWI, which as stated in chapter one, speaks directly to the climate of the institution in both a historical and contemporary context. While the student demographics of the focal institution had diversified over recent years, the faculty, staff, building names, art, food, and promotion of distinguished alumni all contributed to a hegemonically Euro-centric feel on the campus. It is important to note that one designation does not cancel out the other, as an institution can simultaneously fall under both designations.

I chose this site because it was one of the few PWIs in California that conducted a male success initiative for at least three years. The male success initiative at this site (which I call "the male success initiative" in place of the initiative's real name) had its first cohort in 2018. It enrolled an initial 17 men of color (Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander) in the 2018 cohort, and approximately 25-30 participants in the cohorts entering in 2019 and 2020. At the time of this study, this program was the only male initiative at the institution.

The initiative at this institution focused on freshman and sophomore class level students who self-identified as underrepresented racial minority (URM) males. While this was the primary target of the program, upper division transfer students who identified as URM males were welcomed to join as well. Additionally, the initiative did not exclude non-URM students nor those who identified as women. However, potential participants fitting the intended demographic were targeted using disaggregated institutional data and recruited through emails and recommendations from faculty, staff, and previous participants of the initiative.

The initiative provided open programming in the fall to recruit new students and build camaraderie amongst participants. Programs were centered around identity development, socials events, and academic integration for men of color. These were often on campus (i.e. culturally relevant game nights, movie nights, study breaks, TED Talk discussions) with a few occurring

off campus (i.e. camping trips, visiting local businesses owned by men of color, community service opportunities). The following spring semester, these same students were provided an opportunity to enroll in a course designed for men of color. The class analyzed leadership by focusing on masculinities and cultural development models through case studies of men of color in positions of power and influence. Furthermore, students in this course examined theoretical and practical approaches of leadership development in the areas of academic excellence, personal values, civic engagement, self-efficacy, and career integration to identify custom pathways to success.

Upon completion of the course, there was a program graduation and participants were afforded the opportunity to be mentors during the subsequent fall and spring for the initiative. By doing this, the initiative had the potential to engage participants beyond the initial one-year requirement.

The setting offered many assets to the study. Because of where the campus was situated, the experience of Black males was unique compared to those who may have participated in similar programs at more urban or diverse institutions. Additionally, because the program had both newer participants and also a significant number of historical (graduated) participants, I was able to produce a more informed sample (e.g., participants who had additional years of reflection or more time to actualize program impact or outcomes). Lastly, my familiarity with the university allowed for an easier identification of participants and increased probability of enrollment in the study.

Participants

The sample for this study included feedback from 11 Black males that participated in a male success initiative as undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution. The

sample consisted of both undergraduates (sophomores, juniors, seniors) and recent alums (no more than 3 years removed). These participants were contacted through purposeful sampling to best inquire as the effects of their experiences with the male success initiative. According to Creswell (2014), "To purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual materials) means that qualitative researchers select individuals who will best help them understand the research problem and the research questions" (p. 246). I elected to recruit participants who had completed the entire male success initiative curriculum from start to finish. By doing this, those who entered the initiative late or did not complete it were left out of the sample. This was done to ensure that the sample was conducive to a holistic examination of all components of the male success initiative. The limitation(s) that this presented are discussed in the conclusion section.

The process of participant recruitment was initially conducted through email. Approximately 25-30 Black males were contacted to participate in the study. Of this group, 11 responded with interest in participating in the study. I obtained permission from the study site to obtain the contact list of all participants of the male success initiative to access the emails of those who were still students at the study site. Additionally, contact information was requested of other past initiative participants who were no longer students. While I asked participants to help fill in blanks in my contact list for a pre-determined list of people I hoped to invite to participate, I view this as distinct from snowball sampling, where existing participants suggest new participants to the researcher (Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016). This contact information came in the form of phone numbers, social media accounts, or current email addresses. An initial letter was sent out during the recruitment process to explain the purpose of the study, time commitments of participants, and that the study was to be conducted in a focus

group format. Additionally, the letter explained that steps would be taken to protect the identities of all the participants and that information would be reported in a way to protect their anonymity.

Data Collection

I implemented semi-structured qualitative focus groups in this study to provide an opportunity for richer data collection. According to Morgan (1996) focus groups, "reveal aspects of experiences and perspectives that would be not as accessible without group interaction" (p. 20). Additionally, in line with CRT, focus groups are highly effective when working with historically marginalized communities, as "one of their strengths is certainly the fact that they can 'give voice' to groups that would otherwise not be heard" (Morgan, 1996, p. 20).
Before the study began, I took steps to make sure that the study was ethically sound. In an examination of ethics within qualitative research, Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden, (2001) concluded that, "The difficulties inherent in qualitative research can be alleviated by awareness and use of well-established ethical principles, specifically autonomy, beneficence, and justice" (p. 95). These principles helped to guide the procedures and behaviors throughout this study. A significant prerequisite to the study was to submit it for review from an institutional review board (IRB) from the study site. Once permission was granted, I subsequently finalized participant selection, and sought informed consent from each of the participants.

Moving forward with those that provided consent to be a part of this study, a demographic pre-survey was sent to the participants. This survey helped to provide more specific findings in shaping a holistic view of the participants. Data encompassed: Year in college at time of entry into the male success initiative (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), Pell eligibility, first-gen status, major, and current grade level (sophomore, junior, senior, alum). Due to the small percentage of Black males who attended the study site, participants were given the

opportunity to choose pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Participants were split into 3-4 focus groups of 3-4 participants in line with recommended focus group sizes (Barbour, 2007). The focus groups were conducted over Zoom and transcribed using the Zoom transcription tool. An additional device was implemented to record the sessions in case data was somehow lost due to digital disruption, corruption, or failure.

Each focus group took approximately an hour to an hour and a half for each session. Prior to beginning the process, careful consideration was taken to troubleshoot possible communication or transcription challenges. I conducted a pilot interview to make sure that all needed functions were enabled and working. I also used this time to make sure that the questions used during the focus groups were designed to fulfill the needs of the study.

To support the overarching research questions, focus group questions were put into themed categories to better align feedback to the study focus. Questions (provided in the protocol in Appendix A) were predominantly open-ended to solicit participant perceptions of their experience.

Analysis

According to Creswell (2014), analysis of data in quantitative research is a linear process where data analysis commences after the data has already been collected. Contrary to this procedure, qualitative research necessitates that data collection and analysis be contemporaneous and complimentary processes. In order to build thematic insights, continuous attention was given to assess for patterns throughout the focus group process. For instance, to mitigate potential data loss or damage, field memos were taken subsequent to each focus group session, even before formal coding efforts started.

Once data had been organized and prepared for further analysis, I examined all data for additional insights and moved to coding the data. In keeping with the values of CRT, *in vivo* coding was the method used during the initial round of coding. According to Saldaña (2011), "The root meaning of 'in vivo' is 'in that which is alive' and refers to a code based on the actual language used by the participant" (p. 99). *In vivo* coding provided me the opportunity to "draw explicitly on the lived experiences" of the participants (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26), in line with the tenet of CRT, *centrality of experiential knowledge*. This coding approach was used to sustain the original voices and interpretations of the participants' lived experience(s). During this first cycle of coding, thematic categories stemmed directly from the language used by the Black males in the sample. Quotes were edited lightly to eliminate filler words (e.g., "you know", "like", "I guess" etc.), but adhered to the integrity of the original the quotes. To incorporate a standardized connection to previous research and theories, the data went through a second cycle using pattern coding.

Saldaña (2013) explains that pattern coding signifies "explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis" (p. 210). This helped put common interpretations on shared experiences that had differential explanations. Because this study sought to research the effects male success initiatives had on Black males, I felt both *in vivo* and pattern coding established sufficient themes. To ensure trustworthiness, data was shared with my advisor throughout the codification and coding process. I particularly highlighted data that were brought up by multiple participants across the focus groups. In contrast to a single participant's unshared experience, the aggregate of commonly shared experiences and perceptions provided clearly defined themes from the most salient data.

Positionality

It is important to address the lens through which this study was conducted. My salient identities and roles as a practitioner may have had a possible influence on data collection, access to study participants, participants' willingness to provide information, and data analysis. To sustain validity and transparency, the following summary is provided.

At the time of the study, my sphere of leadership was at a four-year university, considered a PWI. I oversaw programs and spaces directed towards serving historically underserved students. It was a position that continuously put me in contact with a number of historically minoritized students, including Black males. During my tenure as a practitioner, I had both seen first-hand and researched the achievement gaps between Black males and their peers. This influenced me to be an advocate for providing equitable resources and services to address institutional shortfalls. My role afforded me the opportunity to connect with students, faculty, and staff who provide and receive similar direction for Black males across many PWIs and HSIs. These collegial networks could have influenced participant willingness and relatability towards me. Participants may have been reluctant to be critical of their experiences, my efforts, or colleagues' endeavors in order to be supportive in their evaluations. For this reason, I took particular care to emphasize at the beginning of each focus group that this study sought to gain information to help improve the Black male experience and that all reflections and critiques helped in that effort. This necessitated being honest about both the positive and negative aspects of their experiences.

Because I identify as a Black male, much of this research was reflective. Therefore, it was important to remain conscientious of any subjective effects stemming from personal

experiences. I was raised by my mother in a low socioeconomic household. I was the first person in my family to attend college, and although I did not participate in a male success initiative, I attended a PWI for both undergrad and graduate years. While my life shared similarities to many Black males in college, the lives of Black males should never be considered monolithic. Each participant found their path to and through college on their own terms. My role as a researcher was to be open and reflective as possible in exploring the experiences of Black males in hopes of expanding on the current body of literature.

Summary

There are countless ways that Black males have their voices stripped from them throughout their life. The challenges set before them on their educational journey are historical, structural, social, and personal. This study sought to give voice to students as experts of their own experience. They deserve the opportunity to stake their claim in the process of dismantling the challenges that have and will be presented to them for the foreseeable future. This chapter outlined the qualitative process of securing the informed data of Black males who all experienced the same phenomenon of participating in a male success initiative at a PWI. This chapter illustrated how recollections of this phenomenon were captured through focus groups, which I analyzed to highlight possible insights on Black male success. Further comprehension of Black male experiences, derived from this analysis, will help educational leaders to better serve the needs of their Black male students.

Chapter IV

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and examine the experiences of Black males who participated in a male success initiative at a PWI. Through in-depth focus groups with a diverse group of Black males, several key themes emerged in their experiences, including the importance of social engagement, the role of identity support, significance of opportunities to build self-efficacy, implications of validating factors, and the influence of institutional agents. Eleven Black males were interviewed in focus groups, using a semi-structured protocol. All the participants participated in a male success initiative at the same PWI as undergraduates. The participants consisted of both undergraduates (sophomores, juniors, seniors) and recent alums (no more than 3 years removed). Prior to participating in the focus groups, data were collected from each participant using a demographic survey. Each focus group consisted of 3-4 participants, was conducted over Zoom, and lasted approximately one to one and half hours.

This chapter presents the findings from this study and aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on experiences of Black males in higher education. It will begin with an overview of participants, outlining data collected from the demographic survey, as well as laying out some of the factors that led them to State University. Then, findings from this study will be presented, using identified major and subsidiary themes. Data will be provided on students' experiences that led them to enter the program, as well as on their experiences during the program. This chapter is structured to help the reader see connectivity from how pre-program experiences influence decision-making, through participants time in the male success initiative, to highlights on how to improve upon the experiences for Black males.

Overall, this chapter seeks to offer insights that may be useful to educators, practitioners, and other stakeholders by addressing the following research questions:

1. What factors lead Black males to participate in a male success initiative?
2. What benefits do Black males report from participating in the program? What parts of the program do they attribute these benefits to?
3. What design elements do Black males believe would improve their experiences in the program?

Participant Descriptions

The participants in this study all self-identified as Black males. Nine (82%) out of the eleven participants identified as first-generation college students and 10 out of 11 (91%) were Pell-eligible at the time of participating in the male success initiative. The majors of participants spanned across five of the seven colleges represented at the institution, with almost half (46%) having majors within behavioral and social sciences. Participation in the initiative occurred between 2018 and 2020 with 9% being freshmen, 9% being sophomores, 55% being juniors, 27% being seniors at the time of beginning the program. At the time this study was conducted, the status of participants was 9% juniors, 36% seniors, and 55% alumni. The table below illustrates these demographics:

Name	First-Gen Student	Pell-Eligible	Year in School During Program Participation	Year in School at Time of Study
Abdul	Yes	Yes	Junior	Alum
Bob	No	No	Sophomore	Alum
Chance	Yes	Yes	Senior	Alum
Charles	Yes	Yes	Junior	Alum
Cornelius	Yes	Yes	Junior	Senior
David	No	Yes	Junior	Senior
Jeff	Yes	Yes	Junior	Senior

John	Yes	Yes	Senior	Alum
King	Yes	Yes	Senior	Alum
Nick	Yes	Yes	Junior	Senior
TC	Yes	Yes	Freshman	Junior

Research details the influence of social factors in the educational trajectory of Black males and how that pathway can be guided or neglected from a very early age (Beamon, 2010; Cabrera & Nora, 1994). While this study sought to understand the experiences of Black males in a male success program, the interview protocol also asked about what brought them to State University, and common predetermining factors and social influences, prior to starting the program, became evident amongst all of the participants. For example, 90% of the participants enrolled at State University because of a pre-college connection to someone at the institution. This came in the form of recruiters who were in consistent contact with them during their junior and senior year, coaches, older siblings/friends who attended the university, or teachers who were alumni. For instance, John identified a personal connection by explaining, "I had a mentor that was working at State University and I knew that's what I needed when going to college. I needed a support system." Abdul illustrated a more structural connection in identifying that, "My high school had a program with the MESA program. So, there was a lot of students from my school that were here at the time. So, it kind of helped me push towards going to State University". The importance and impact of these types of relationships are reiterated throughout the findings.

Another factor woven throughout the findings was the concentration on finances. While pre-college connections were the most salient factor in institutional choice, financial aid packages also influenced students' decision-making process. Anxieties over the cost of

attendance, mixed with the availability of financial support, led students to prioritize State University over other institutions. Chance provided insight on the matter:

> I think for some of us that come from low-income backgrounds, we're looking for our school to be paid for and not for us to be in a lot of debt. It was one of the reasons why, or the main reason why I chose State University.

Nick also cited a mixture of both pre-college connections and financial support: “I applied to State University because it had the biggest financial aid package and I was just convinced to take a chance by the recruiter to go there, so I did”. The affordability of State University made the institution attractive to the participants.

Distance from home communities was another key theme that emerged. Most of the participants were from Southern California and finding a university that was distant from the participants’ communities provided an opportunity for study participants to practice a sense of autonomy. Some participants moved hundreds of miles away from their home communities. For many of them, this was among their first lessons in agency. David explained, “I wanted to be somewhere where I can still kind of be with my support system, but also still be a distance away where I feel like I'm actually independent.” This was reiterated by Bob, who said, “I just wanted to have that college experience where I'm away from home. Because it was either that or [Southern California University], and I didn't really want to stay with my parents”.

The process of being accepted and making it to a university was the goal for many of the participants interviewed. This was in contrast to seeing successful degree attainment as a benchmark to career goals. The assumption presented was that there was a feeling of “now what” once physically on the campus. These reflections provide context that help ground the major findings within this study. In order to present the findings in a congruent manner, themes and

subthemes will be organized in a linear fashion. Figure 1.1 outlines the remaining flow of this chapter.

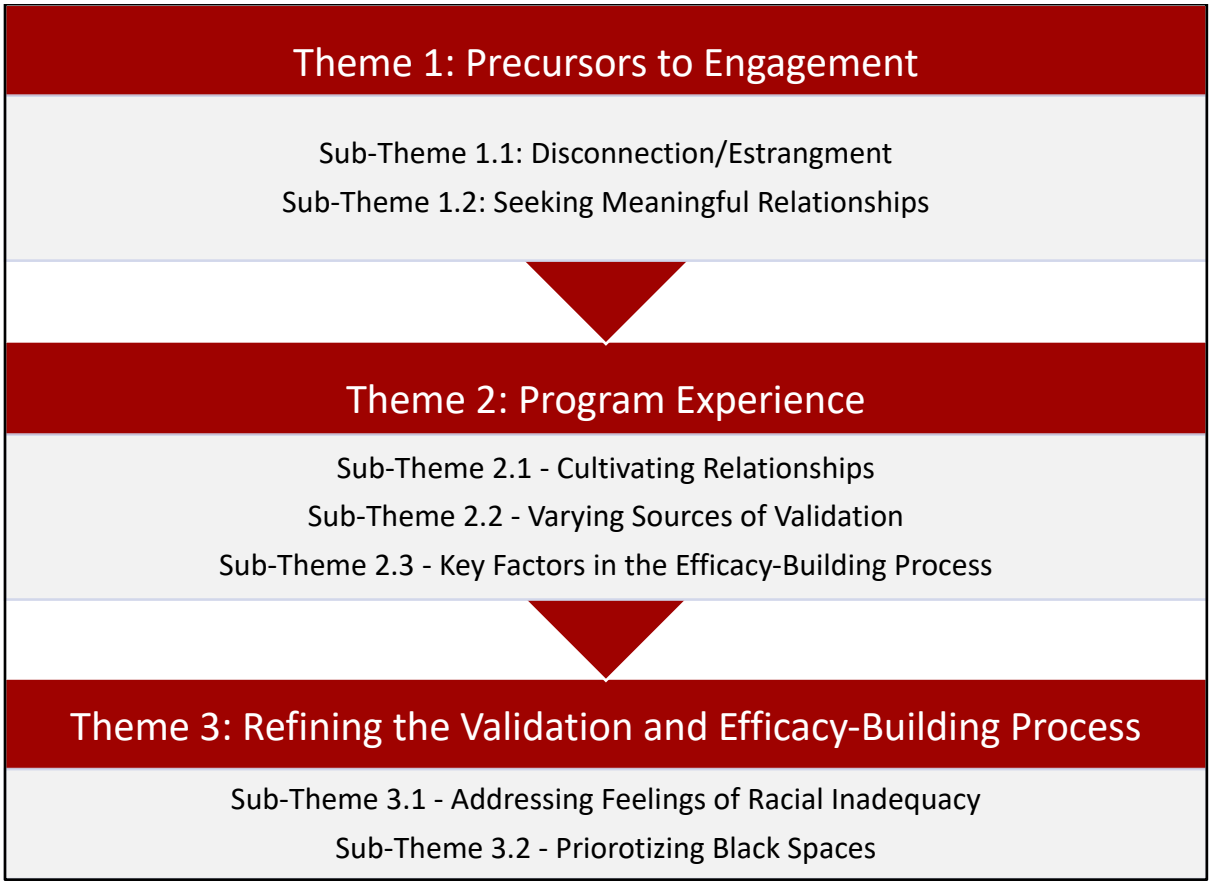

Figure 1.1: Organization of Themes

The first theme discusses student experiences before they joined the male success initiative/program. The second theme describes experiences participants had in the program, including the new relationships they built in the program and the ways that they experienced validation through the program, both of which contributed to heightened self-efficacy on the part of program participants. The final theme details participants' suggestions for further program improvement.

Theme 1. Precursors to Engagement

Sub-Theme 1.1: Disconnection/Estrangement

According to Harper (2015), “Numerous researchers have called attention to the underrepresentation, social isolation, cultural incongruence, academic hurdles, and racism that Black students endure on predominantly White campuses” (p. 647). The Black males in this study described often facing unique challenges to social and academic integration that led to feelings of disconnectedness almost immediately. These feelings stemmed from a lack of cultural representation, racial visibility, lack of navigational knowledge, and stereotype threat.

Feelings of disconnection/estrangement prior to engagement with the male success initiative was the most repeated theme regarding the study participants’ time before joining the program. Participants provided myriad factors influencing feelings of isolation and a lack of belonging. Abdul lamented about his initial experiences with housing. Due to not having access to institutional support services, he, like many Black males in the study, could not afford to live on campus in his first year.

> My first year was pretty much hell. Like I said, State University was, in a sense, my second option. So, when I didn't get into the EOP [Educational Opportunity Program], it was kind of difficult, so I had to scramble to find housing and whatnot. So immediately off the bat, it was just a bad start. And then when I got here, it was just the diversity aspect of things. They just didn't have it, especially since I didn’t live in the dorms. So, it would just be going to class then come home. I didn't really get to experience people that looked like me or came from the same type of background. So, it was really tough.

While Abdul attributed his initial lack of connection to living off campus, Bob, who spent his first year living on campus, relayed similar outcomes from his experience. He described his first year as, “kind of lonely. I didn't have many friends. I didn't know anybody. I stayed in the

dorms my first year and I didn't really like anyone in the dorms. Just for whatever reason. Well, not whatever reason, but we just didn't have the same interests or backgrounds".

These two stories presented an interesting phenomenon, where feelings of isolation on campus were compounded by the participants inability to find adequate space and/or resources to gain a sense of social-cultural revitalization. Whereas feelings of institutional disconnection or discontent during students' years in the K-12 system may have been mitigated by familial or communal ties, immediate access to community and family support was lacking in college.

Many participants spoke to feelings of not fitting in. King, who came to State University as an athlete, discussed his first year as one filled with challenges, "Definitely difficult that first year coming to State University. I didn't really know nobody until I joined the male success initiative, but before that, it was kind of hard to find the area where you fit in, especially as a Black male." Other participants described feelings of alienation or discomfort accessing resources or spaces on campus. Jeff and Charles both spoke about a multi-purpose room at State University that served as a center for campus events and a gaming space. Though it was meant to serve as a community space, both found it alienating. Jeff explained:

> I was definitely very nervous when it came to the [multi-purpose space] because I felt like the [multi-purpose space] was not where I belonged. They had the Wii in there, big screen TV, you know a lot of nice things. I just felt it was uncomfortable to try to access some of those things for some reason. I don't really know exactly where that pinpointed from, but I remember just being very nervous stepping in there. And I probably only been there one time.

Charles piggybacked on the sentiment and added, "It can be very uncomfortable to feel like you want to access certain things, but you can feel yourself being watched when you go over

to touch them. So yeah, I know what he's talking about". He later expanded on this notion of feeling "watched" by encapsulating his experiences, "State University has this little sticker that says, 'State University values diversity' and you still feel like that black dot on the whiteboard". Charles' statement gave credence to the idea of dealing with the internal struggle of feeling out of place, exacerbated by the public nature in which this happens. His feelings of being surveilled illustrated the nonverbal communication that happens in predominantly white spaces and can cause Black males to feel unwelcomed in these spaces supposedly designed to encourage community-building. Furthermore, Charles' metaphor demonstrated the amalgamated force of not just feeling out of place, but having others passively or intentionally cause you to feel unworthy to take up space.

Sub-Theme 1.2: Seeking Meaningful Relationships

Participants reported taking similar actions as a response to not feeling connected. Whether these feelings were the result of a lack of representation, encountering bias from others on campus, or seemingly hostile atmospheres, all of the Black males in the sample sought to combat social isolation by seeking out other Black faculty, staff and students. Specific campus spaces were mentioned repeatedly as spaces where connections were sought out. These were places the men in my sample anticipated they would be likely to find more Black people, welcoming environments, or supportive atmospheres to practice leadership qualities: the Cultural Center, an underserved student academic center, and Black organizations. Cornelius stated:

> When I got here, I asked around about a BSU [Black Student Union], but I was told that we didn't have one. I asked my RA, and she was like, "I don't think we have one," and I was like, "That doesn't sound right. But okay, I guess." I hoped to be like a part of a bigger community of color and to get my degree.

TC likewise reported seeking out spaces that fostered Black community:

> When I came to State University, one of the first things I wanted to do was go into business, originally ag [agricultural] business, business administration or business entrepreneurship and also wanted to be a leader, a strong Black lead in a Black community in college. That was something I wanted to do, like be the president of BSU, or the president of some organization that impacted the Black community.

The participants' responses highlighted two particularly important points when addressing success of Black males. First, was the creation of Black-identified spaces, Black-focused courses (i.e., African American History, African American Literature, Black Experience course, etc.), and Black organizations on campus. The second was the sustainability of these areas, services, and resources. When Cornelius asked about a BSU, the RA was correct in relaying that at the time of his attendance, there was not a BSU at State University. Unfortunately, the long-standing organization had died out 2-3 years before he arrived on campus.

The participants in the sample also touched on the importance of having the option to engage with other same-race peers versus such engagement being (or feeling) mandatory. King explained:

> The fact that it [the male success initiative] wasn't seen as something like forced upon [made the program attractive]. It was more so a given option, like you have the choice to show up if you want to, but also you have the choice to be a part of something that a lot of people don't get to be a part of or have access to.

King emphasized the importance of having the option to engage rather than feeling obligated to do so. As he noted, the male success initiative was perceived as an optional opportunity rather than a mandatory obligation, providing individuals with the freedom to choose their level of

involvement. Additionally, because the program was geared towards men of color, the participants saw it as something specially designed for them, suggesting that commitment to the male success initiative may in part have been associated with the perceived exclusiveness of the program.

While the program was marketed as an academic success initiative for men of color (in general), participants described the opportunity to form connections specifically with other Black males as perhaps the largest draw of the program. An example of this was provided by David:

> I was mostly just looking for that space to be with other people of color or like specifically Black people. We already established that we didn't have anybody our freshman year and sophomore year. It was like completely alone and we kind of just had each other as like men of color. But then like the program, I was like, "Oh, now I can actually be in a space where there will for sure be people who are like me and like share similar identities."

Through narratives provided by the study participants, they were able to articulate their lived experiences. The stories that were told validated the tenet that race and racism were important parts of their experience before and during their time in college.

Participants shared feelings of disconnectedness and discontent during their time in college, previous to joining the male success initiative. An important finding extrapolated from the discussions was that the students took it upon themselves to seek out relationships to address these issues. They could not accept the atmospheres that were presented to them and sought to find or build the communities they desired. This reflected previous works by other authors who observed Black males going through similar processes of disconnection during transitions to college (Brooms, 2018; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Harris & Wood, 2016). A key part of the study

participants joining the program was that State University and its agents (faculty, staff, older students, peers, etc.) provided an outlet for participants to address what they were feeling and gave them an opportunity to find the connections they were seeking. As described in the next section, this included experiences that allowed them to cultivate strong relationships, navigate college better, and receive validation of their identities at State University.

Theme 2. Program Experience

Sub-Theme 2.1: Cultivating Relationships

In discussions about the participants' experiences during their time in the male success initiative, four sub-themes became readily apparent. The most salient of these surrounded their explanations of having the opportunity to find and cultivate meaningful relationships. While every participant touched on the broader scope of the relationship-building process, their stories fell into three specific categorical areas: Faculty and staff relationships, off-campus experiences, and diversification of peer friendships.

Faculty and Staff Relationships

Positive interactions with faculty and staff increase the likelihood of retention and provide opportunities to gain navigational tools (Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). The male success initiative at State University provided engagement opportunities that seemed to mitigate or neutralize hierarchal barriers students previously felt. An exchange between Bob and Abdul succinctly illustrates this point:

> *Bob*- Once I was in the male success initiative, my relationships with faculty did improve. I went to office hours more, I tried to talk to faculty a lot more. It eventually helped me to be able to get a research grant. I feel it helped me to reach out to more staff on campus as

well and develop those relationships some more too. I think the male success initiative helped in that aspect.

Abdul- [A] lot of my cohort members, they all started reaching out to the different campus resources. I believe that just being exposed to them allowed people to be comfortable and now take risks. I feel that wasn't necessarily something we would do prior to the program. That exposure that we had within the program allowed us to do that.

Bob- [Being] exposed to the different staff across campus was really helpful because it allowed us to become familiarized with them without a little bit of that anxiety when it comes to actually having to go and speak with them one-on-one. It's just a more early introduction to then give us the courage to be able to like, okay, now I know this face. I know they're here to help and it makes it a lot easier with actually going to them in person.

This conversation between Bob and Abdul illustrates the importance of positive institutional agents and the role they play as bridge-builders between students and campus resources. Whether real or perceived, the barriers these students felt before initial contact with faculty and staff inhibited their connectivity to services they may have needed.

Off-Campus Experiences and Peer Relationships

Participants also reported improved relationships with peers. When prompted to discuss instances in which major connections were made or bonds were formed, the participants almost unanimously pointed to off-campus excursions. These came in the form of overnight camping trips (done in tents or open-air cabins) and weekend retreats (held in rental homes or facilities). Each off-campus experience was designed to gather groups of students and nudge them to become closer by the end of the experience. Institutional agents facilitated and curated each of

these outings to engage in culturally responsive activities, aiming to establish and build trust among the attending students. One of the participants, David, spoke to his experience at a retreat with his cohort:

> The retreat really pushed me to actually learn people's names and actually learn about them and what they were going through and stuff. Just doing activities together, eating together, and having laughs together, it was a really great experience. Because now they weren't just like classmates, they were genuine connections and friends. In my point of view, after the retreat, I was able to come in and be greeted, and I knew these people might feel even more comfortable in the space. So, the retreat definitely grew all the connections that we had.

This sense of building connection and community was shared by all participants in the study. The sentiment was echoed by Jeff:

> I would definitely say, man some of those retreats we had were just profound, just in terms of going on a trip, expenses paid— let's make sure that's out there, AND EXPENSES PAID—free food, whatever, but still get to be able to do activities, do something out of your norm, leave our innate area of State University, you know our small space that we have access to, and go somewhere with these fellas. [We] experienced some stuff we never did before, did some silly games that we would never saw ourselves doing, spending some real quality time with one another, and learning each other. I would definitely say those specific retreats were very profound and definitely added toward that community that I've been speaking of so much.

Recollections of the retreats were discussed with jubilation and fondness. The participants in the study talked about having the opportunity to step outside of their comfort zones in a challenging,

yet positive way. This allowed for them to build connections and as shown, be able to leave these retreats with stories to share about what happened in the unstructured time.

While David and Jeff touched on the retreats, others spoke to the unique experience of camping. King reflected on moments that were key for him:

> Definitely going on a camping trip with all the brothers and realizing that we all in a way came from areas where we didn't get to see stuff like that. We went to the Golden Gate Bridge and for a majority of us, it was the first time we all ever went camping and actually did the tents and all that other stuff, activities, and we got a chance to actually feel a little bit more free.

This positive assessment was echoed by John, who noted "I've never seen that many men of color in that setting in the wilderness really just laughing enjoying their time, and you know just loving life. I think that was a new experience. It's something that definitely stuck out for me." Whereas the participants in this sample found themselves in constant states of anxiety, these retreats offered them brief moments of cultural tranquility.

Even though these off-campus experiences lasted one to two nights, the participants reiterated the lasting effect those moments had on them. This idea of lasting bonds was best encapsulated by T.C.:

> The house trip [spring retreat at a rental house] is usually around my birthday time so it's always a good time and it's funny because you know I would originally rather be around family celebrating my birthday but I can say that every time that I've went to a house trip I felt like I was around loved ones and people who actually wanted to have fun and celebrate with me, and it was also a learning experience so probably one of the most positive times just to get all the camaraderie to enjoy my birthday.

As an extension of these off-campus moments, the participants took time to speak about what those connections and time bond-building moments meant for them once they returned back to the university. As noted by Jeff:

> I have people who I originally wouldn't have associated with or socialized with. Now they're more than just friends, they're family, you know, we became a real tight group. So, it's kind of just those relationships just lead on to outside of just our one classroom. And now we're all on each other's team. We're all looking at who's going to graduate, and what they got going on. We all support one another. We had a student who was a barber, and everybody who he cut was part of the male success initiative. So, I definitely can think of many ways of how our community we built within the male success initiative resonated throughout what we did on campus and outside of campus. This reflection was a great example of how Black men were able to build cross-cultural bonds of mutual support among the participants in the program.

King, who was recruited for the track team, talked about how spending time with the other program participants helped him overcome social barriers with his teammates despite his initial resistance to embracing the ethos that the track team was intended to be like family:

> The male success initiative helped me kind of accept my track teammates a little bit more. I did not get to down with the "Ohana" [family] stuff [from the track team]. I really didn't. When I was there, I did the Kobe thing, "There's no 'I' in team, but there's a 'm-e' in that muthafucka". That's what my mentality was. More so, I was there to get mine and not worry about anybody else. But, as I stay with the male success initiative and hang out with the people that are in it, I kind of learn from them. We got to change how we were from back where we came from, but also build that relationship here where you at.

The male success initiative helped these students build bonds within the program. Furthermore, it helped them branch out and connect beyond program participants to other students, faculty, and staff.

While King touched on how his experiences helped him build connections with other campus groups, Chance explained the extent to which the participants within the male success initiative used their experience to become responsible for each other:

> A few of us really created a tight bond throughout being in the male success initiative. I felt like that was something we were attached to, and through that, I think we were able to hold each other accountable. You know, socially, academically, financially, personally, mentally, spiritually: in all types of facets.

Diversification of Peer Friendships

The opportunities for participants to start and make meaning of relationships with faculty, staff, and peers was prioritized in significance throughout the discussions. Specifically, being able to build allyship with peer and professional men of color was described as each of the participants portrayed their process and outcomes as personally beneficial. Over half of the participants recognized the diversification of friends, confidants, and thoughts towards different identities. While it wasn't explicitly discussed as important, participants acknowledged that going through this experience with other students who differed from them, was significant in changing attitudes and challenged previously held assumptions about others' identities. Cornelius approached this subject from the perspective of addressing loneliness in part due to there being small numbers of Black males on campus:

> The fact that there were other men of color that weren't just Black, and that were not just Latinos, but other men of color in general, and were going through similar things was really what helped me feel less alone.

Recognizing a sense of loneliness was widely shared by men across a variety of different backgrounds allowed Cornelius to find commonality and shared support in his fellow participants. This signified the transformative nature of fostering connections across shared experiences. Cornelius' ability to relate to others, despite differences, not only alleviated feelings of isolation but also underscored the importance of community in addressing social and emotional needs.

While Cornelius was an early adopter in articulating appreciation of the diverse spectrum of participants in the male success initiative, others had to overcome previously-held notions that created barriers along racial lines. Chance spoke to the significance of being able to experience this:

> Just growing up in certain environments and neighborhoods, that sometimes doesn't mix. For us to all come together, despite of where we're from, you know, collab and teach each other, as a freshman, I felt like that was really powerful to see that in my transition coming from high school to college.

In reflecting on his experience, Chance encapsulated the transformative nature of his time within the male success initiative, highlighting the impact on breaking down barriers and fostering kinship among participants from diverse backgrounds.

In addition to addressing and breaking down barriers between participants from different racial backgrounds, participants also tackled the assumptive monolith of manhood. Participants reflected on the complexities of gender and masculinity, particularly the complexities that

surfaced when accounting for the intersectionality of race and gender. Jeff hinted at the breakdown of masculine stereotypes in defining what it means to be "a man" through their shared experience:

> Many of the relationships I had definitely gave me a different perspective on campus… We had men within the program who were more effeminate. There were men in the program who were from different sexualities, men in the program who were from different races, but all identified as men, and knew that we all still had that in common.

Participants articulated being able to make connections across a swath of cultural and sexual identities that expanded their definitions of manhood, caused them to question previously held perceptions of self and others.

As T.C. explained, the exposure the program provided to men with a diverse set of backgrounds and sexual identities helped to expand participants' network of accountability:

> I don't know if it was intentional or unintentional, but it definitely opened your eyes up and, in some ways, you end up an ally to other groups around campus. I feel like that kind of bridged the gap between young men coming into college, because sometimes a lot of young men coming into college aren't allies of every group. So, I would say it made my environment different socially, for sure.

T.C.'s observation illustrated how participants' perspectives regarding the intersection of identities were broadened and encouraged a sense of allyship within their college environment.

As participants discussed their experience during the male success initiative, the ability to build relationships was a theme that rose to the top as a core memory and key outcome for them. Whether it was breaking barriers between faculty/staff, broadening their horizons regarding

masculinities, or crossing racial lines to develop a pseudo brotherhood, being able to cultivate these relationships set a base and tone for growth within the program.

In contrast to Tinto's vision of disconnection from previous constructs (e.g., family, previous cultural enclaves) to promote affiliation to the college, the male success initiative worked to enhance affiliation with the college by *validating* previous cultural orientations. Institutional agents acknowledged the importance of cultural norms within the home communities of participants and encouraged participants to illustrate and integrate them into their campus lives. This happened through expressions of music, language, fashion, and storytelling during the participants' time in the program. Additionally, as supported by Strayhorn (2008, 2010), the program promoted settings where participants went to matter to and support each other. While the participants were encouraged to express their culture on campus, the gatherings for the male success initiative gave participants a focal point to connect through those shared experiences. The participants' recollections illustrated how providing a space for connection and belonging provided or improved the ability for participants to broaden their awareness of race-specific and intersectional challenges faced by men of color on campus.

The study participants emphasized how the male success initiative facilitated connections with faculty, staff, and peers, highlighting the diversity within these relationships. Building these networks helped foster a sense of community and belonging. Through processes of understanding other's identities, some shared and some not, this provided a reprieve from the feelings of social isolation many participants had experienced on campus.

Sub-Theme 2.2: Varying Sources of Validation

In discussing the impact of their experience, participants in this study seemed to go into a storytelling mode when sharing about pivotal moments regarding their time in the male success

initiative. What came from these stories were feelings of affirmation. For some it was a gradual buildup of affirming occurrences and others described feelings of pride in themselves and their peers that were tied to specific moments. I discuss three forms of validation men reported receiving from the program: validation through explicit recognition, validation through program affiliation, and validation through the program's affirmation of Blackness.

Validation Through Recognition

One way that the program provided validation for students was by explicitly facilitating recognition of program members by campus leaders. This was expressed through discussion of two program events, final projects and the male success initiative graduation ceremony. For the final projects, participants were asked to creatively express what they learned about and how they interpreted what it meant to be a man of color. These projects encompassed a spectrum of expression, from canvas paintings, photo collages, and poems, to music videos, spoken word performances and dance routines. The program graduation ceremony was a formal event where families and friends were invited to recognize the participants. Campus leaders were invited to both as a way to showcase the ineffable moments.

Jeff described the end-of-the-year project he worked on as a key moment for him. In Jeff's recollection of the presentations of the final projects, he recognized that the program coordinator invited campus leaders—such as College Deans or Vice Presidents of the campus—to attend the culminating event, and this was something that stood out to him:

> "He'll always invite some random staff or someone that really you would be like, 'Why are they even here'. You know, just shows how proud that he was and how confident he was in this program and how he wanted his students to be heard on that level.

Inviting campus leaders to the presentations of final projects highlighted to the participants how program leaders believed in the work and growth of the participants.

The sense of validation was also heightened by the reaction the guests had to what the students shared. Jeff spoke to how the presentations gave the students an opportunity to share their stories in a creative way and the visible impact it had on attendees, “They would just look profound at everyone else in the class and just hearing people's stories and the art and just seeing their reaction to what we were able to create and what we were able to accomplish throughout the year”. He then suggested that the presentations contrasted misconceptions and stereotypes of men of color on campus, adding that being a part of that experience and seeing those outcomes is what made those moments special to him:

> We’re just this body of students that you know, reside on this campus that they might not have even been introduced to, but they find out how brilliant some of these students are and how much they can truly offer to the campus. I think that that was definitely a real profound moment within the male success initiative, just seeing how people react to the different ways that men of color would express themselves during our final project.

Jeff highlighted two important points: First, the importance of being able to give free and full expressions of oneself and experience and second, the validation that comes with that expression being valued by others.

The program also validated participants through facilitation of rites of passage. A huge part of the male success initiative was to signify the completion of the program. This was done at the end of spring semester during a program graduation ceremony, where the participants received professional clothing and certificates of completion. Friends and family of the cohort often attended, so the audience usually consisted of both program alumni and future participants.

The ceremony also included words of reflection and encouragement from a participant in that cohort. This was a moment that two participants brought to light. Nick was the first to mention the graduation:

> I think mine [moment that stood out] is the end-of-year culmination, because you…see who stuck it through, got something out of it, and then got to kind of get recognized. Probably a lot of guys not gonna get that before graduation or since their high school graduation. So, seeing some of the guys you helped mentor along the way or just helped along the way or just was studying with them, or whatever the case may be, seeing the culmination of that and the success and the genuine joy, it's always a great feeling for me.

The sentiment was echoed by Chance:

> Giving people a platform [at the graduation] to get suits and the recognition of their hard work and dedication throughout the program and to see people that stick it out, stick it through, and to be rewarded at the end with a big ceremony for it to all, comes together full circle. I think that's really powerful.

The ceremony marked the completion of the program for participants and provided a platform for reflection and encouragement, showcasing the dedication and success of those who persevered. Nick and Chance emphasized the impact of participating in and witnessing the culmination of their peers' hard work, underscoring the affirming nature of the graduation ceremony.

Validation Through Affiliation/Representation of Something Greater

T.C. and John both tied affirming moments to representation of the program. This line of thinking related to being a part of something they felt was greater than themselves. T.C. painted a picture of a specific day focused on raising funds for the program:

> One of the days that really stood out to me, I think it was one of our giving days before the pandemic. And this was also when the [Women's Success Initiative] was in full effect. It was just a day where we were, really good at marketing ourselves. We all had our T-shirts, burgundy T-shirts and teal T-shirts for women, and just the investment of the community. People were willing to give money to us because they believed in the idea. We stood there as leaders, trying to market these organizations on campus, and it was just a good feeling that day, probably one of the best days.

T.C. seemed to find validation in both being provided the tools, time, and space to advocate for something he cared about and being able to represent the program to the community.

John bordered the same concept as he outlined a shift in how people treated him when he was wearing paraphernalia tied to the male success initiative:

> I had an older gentleman or woman come up to me and their whole phrase like, 'Oh my gosh, you're a part of the male success initiative' or 'I've heard about you guys. You guys are great'. The conversations almost all started pretty much just like that. If I was to meet them without the male success initiative swag on, I think their approach to me would be completely and has been completely different… I think wearing the swag really made people think of us differently. I don't know if that's because of how it was advertised or if people just finally saw us for who we really were.

The experiences described by T.C. and John underscore the impact of representation, highlighting a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves. T.C. These affirming moments reflect the power of visibility in fostering a supportive community for program participants.

Validation Through Affirmation of Blackness

Participants in the study collectively discussed their experiences with building relationships, learning about themselves, gaining new skills, and having feelings of increased courage to tackle adversity. What also became evident during these conversations was that the participants recognized that their experience was skewed because of the color of their skin. As the male success initiative was a program developed for men of color, the contrasts created by race/ethnicity were also talked about as possible causal factors in magnifying certain experiences.

Charles gave an overview of the disposition of Black males at State University and in the program. His words provided a backdrop to the nuances felt during participant experiences:

> When you look at 2%-3% of the population at State University are Black, half of that are the males, and then you break that down, half of them don't even actually attend school, like, whoa, I think all the Black people, all the Black males that I know, are in the male success initiative now… It was great to be able to see majority of the other Black men on campus and be like, 'Oh, we're all together', but it also kind of hurt because we're like, 'Damn, this is it. This is all we got'.

Due to the small population of Black males on campus, many of the participants looked to the male success initiative to provide a safe space to see other Black males, discuss racial issues, be removed from code-switching, and feel their authentic selves. John and Chance were in the same focus group and compounded this notion, with John stating:

> I think the male success initiative was a place where all men of color could really be themselves and really find like true bonds and really find people that can connect and uphold us to succeed in college. But, I really feel like it was really the one place on

> campus where Black men can be unapologetically themselves that we don't have to say sorry for being ourselves.

Chance followed immediately with similar remarks, noting that the program was the "first space" where Black male participants could "really have fun with your culture, laugh, joke, play around, and make funny jokes or jokes that are not probably politically correct on campus. I think it really just gave us… another home away from home that we weren't receiving on the campus." Nick, who was in another focus group, shared similar perspectives:

> In my opinion, there aren't really any places for a Black man to be a Black man without having to alter it a little bit, without having to tailor it back or really be a 'token negro', to be honest. So, I feel like that's one of the or at least for me, that is the only place that's an actual space and ran by the school or supported by the school, where you can be you.

The male success initiative created a sanctuary for Black males on campus, offering them a rare opportunity embrace their authentic selves.

According to the participants, another key aspect for Black males in the program was the opportunity to build intergenerational networks and mentoring connections with older Black males on campus and in the community. This was something that seemed to have an empowering effect on them by providing role models that reflected their race and culture. Abdul described how the male success initiative impacted him in this way by recalling when he was introduced to a Black male in a professional position that contradicted his previously held beliefs. He then explained how it opened his mind to new experiences and job opportunities:

> I'll say we went up north to…the national park or something. We had a Black ranger that showed us around and it was just because based off that experience, like you don't expect an African American male to be a park ranger… It kind of gave us a different outlook on

like, you could do different things. I'll say that experience kind of led me to working with the California Conservation Corps. I'll say that had a really, really positive affect on me.

This encounter challenged Abdul's preconceived notions and expanded his perspective on career possibilities. His story highlights the importance of connections to older Black males in the program, demonstrating how exposure to diverse role models can positively influence Black male participants.

Another example illustrating the benefits of intergenerational exposure came in the form of Nick's perception of the program coordinator, who was a Black male. Nick used him as a gauge to reassess and redefine what success meant for him. He acknowledged that for most of his life, he only knew of the stereotypical examples of success for Black men. These came in the form of social portrayals of professional athletes, actors, and musical artists:

> Coming from So-Cal, Inglewood specifically, I had never seen a successful Black man that wasn't a millionaire. It was either broke, check to check, or you're a millionaire. There was no middle ground. So, when I got involved in the male success initiative, just getting closer to [the program coordinator], working for him, hanging out with him, and different aspects, I saw you don't have to be a millionaire to be successful.

Nick demonstrated how proximity to alternative examples of success can impact the way in which Black males see themselves and form perceptions of common pathways to success.

For Charles, he recalled the importance of seeing himself and his culturally normative linguistics (i.e. commonly used slang terms, culturally specific syntax, and common understandings based on shared experiences) reflected in a guest speaker. The speaker was a Black male therapist, with a doctorate in psychology, who was presenting on the topic of healthy relationships. Charles summarized his feelings on the moment, "It felt like I wasn't talking to a

therapist who was trying to break through this wall of connectivity with me. Instead, it felt like I was able to talk to somebody who innately understood what I was saying." When Charles had the opportunity to ask a question, he talked about not having to code-switch or tailor his question to seem more professional or understandable. He explained, "I brought up the aspect of when you talk to a woman and go to woopty woopty woop…" Looking back, Charles appreciated that he didn't have to explain that "woopty woopty woop" meant having sex. What compounded that moment as a key memory for Charles was later in the presentation when the speaker used him as an example, pointing him out as, "Mr. Woopty Woop over here".

Charles went on to explain how this moment contrasted his previous experiences with non-Black therapists, "I had recently gone through a situation in that timeframe where I was trying to talk to a therapist on campus. I actually ended up getting like, just dropped off from the whole session". After going through that ordeal, he expressed why that discussion meant so much to him:

> Being able to speak to someone, and let me know that I'm not crazy, or that I'm not just this violent, aggressive individual, even though people don't always get to see that side of me, like, just getting to hear that there is more to me and that it's okay to talk, it's okay to express my emotions, it's okay to say 'I'm not okay' sometimes, and to hear that from a Black man, even if he doesn't look like me, specifically, he represented something that I would hope to be able to represent for other people.

The Black males in this study used storytelling to connect and share pivotal moments in the Program. What emerged were feelings of affirmation, myriad validating agents, and an emphasis on the transformative impact of the male success initiative on both the academic and professional development among its participants. The program also facilitated connections with

older Black males, providing role models that challenged preconceived notions about career possibilities. Some participants explained how they found inspiration in seeing successful Black professionals who redefined their understanding of success. The affirming moments expressed by the participants substantiate the process of validation presented by Rendon (1994, 2002) and is amplified by the centrality of race described by Solorzano, (1997).

Sub-theme 2.3: Key Factors in the Self-Efficacy Building Process

In addition to cultivating deeper relationships on campus, the men in the study sample also detailed how the program built their feelings of self-efficacy in navigating through different aspects of college. Wood and Bandura (1989) define self-efficacy as the belief in oneself to complete a task or reach a determined goal. Because self-efficacy is directed at one's perceived ability, it is closely correlated to agency, or the actual ability to take action towards completing one's goals or tasks. A thematic outcome that seemingly resulted from the participants' time in the male success initiative was a sense of increased self-determination brought on by the connections that were formed with peers, faculty, and staff. The thought process of feeling capable of and willing to address challenges was discussed in chapter two regarding self-efficacy.

I highlight two ways in which participants recounted their self-efficacy increasing via program participation. Men described growth in their confidence and personal accountability for managing their own engagement in college. They also recounted how their growing belief in their own potential as leaders led them to move beyond helping themselves and gain confidence in their ability to help others.

Introspection Towards Accountability and Exploration Beyond Comfort

Charles demonstrated efficacious behaviors in explaining his process of thinking though the habits he needed to adopt to be successful and the self-inflicted challenges he needed to be accountable for overcoming:

> I was either, 'There's love everywhere' or 'Fuck this shit. It's all burning. Like forget it'. So, learning how to build and nurture relationships on campus, I had to kind of learn to see the middle between those two. I really learned about the balance of, I can go talk to this professor and hopefully they help change my grade, but also have to look at the work that I've been doing that whole time in class… Are they potentially going to change my grade because I've been doing the work or are they not going to because they ain't never seen me and I just don't want to fail?

Charles further discussed how his participation in the program caused him to reflect on what he was doing as a student and what type of student he wanted to be:

> The male success initiative, I can say helped with the level of assertion and assertiveness and also self-awareness with my own self. So, you know one of the best relationships you can have is the loving one you have with yourself. I was already a mentor for students for the most part, so a lot of the work I had to do was working with me so I could become better for me and for everybody else.

In finding balance between optimism and pessimism, Charles discovered the importance of taking responsibility for his academic efforts while also recognizing the value of seeking support from faculty and staff. This illustrated a process of first questioning himself, then self-reflection, ending with self-actualization.

Two-thirds of the participants in this study portrayed feelings of improved efficacy towards finding and using campus resources, connecting with faculty and staff, and/or taking on

new leadership roles. As alluded by the participants, relationship-building was a dominant component of their experience. Many participants went on to illustrate how those initial bonds influenced them to branch out, take risks, and break through barriers to address their needs. They described their journey of entering the male success initiative not knowing how to identify nor address their needs. They then explained their varied paths evolving to recognize and seek assistance for their needs, eventually emerging with a sense of purpose to help others address theirs.

Abdul's reflection gave the best summation of where many of the participants started when they entered the program to the extent that participants reflected a lack of confidence in their ability to navigate campus life and academic support services to reach their goal:

> Initially, I kind of walked head down, slouched, and nobody entered the program standing up straight and full on ready to tackle anything. I think the whole program was a confidence booster, [and] allowed me to approach the world in different ways, re-evaluate my thoughts into a positive way. You know, just get rid of that impostor syndrome, because I feel a lot of Black males have that, and I feel like those who aren't Black during the program didn't.

Before embarking on this growth process, Abdul first had to address the main barrier, which he explained, "I don't like to ask for help". This sentiment was echoed by others as a learned behavior of self-reliance or an outcome of being let down by others. Abdul then went on to explain the little needle that was moved for him:

> I believe that just being exposed to them [faculty and staff], allowed people to be comfortable and now take risks and whatnot. I feel that wasn't necessarily what we would do prior to the program. That exposure that we had within the program, allowed us to do

> that… The fact that I was able to reach out to new people that I've met, or even people that I knew before, and actually utilize the advice that they've been giving me, kind of, in a sense, gave me a better outlook on things.

This viewpoint demonstrated how many participants in the sample came into the male success initiative not trusting that the institution or its agents would help Black men navigate the collegiate climate. However, through exposure to invested institutional representatives, the participants were able to participate in alliance-building and improve both their trust in the institution and confidence in being able to navigate the collegiate process.

Following the same thought process towards seeking help, Nick was more specific about how his experience walked a fine line between providing resources and encouraging participants to seek them out themselves:

> I felt like everything that you needed was available. It was just on, like 80/20. The male success initiative will give you 80% but you have to get that last 20%, and that's perfect. That's a great way of doing things, especially for men of color because you do have to learn how to ask for help. Even me with my struggles, academically and even socially at times, I had to kind of get over the hump of 'I don't know what I'm doing'. And then the second I did, I got multiple resources to help me accomplish whatever I was trying to do.

Through building relationships with peers, faculty, and staff, study participants experienced a notable increase in self-determination and agency. Furthermore, the introspective process can't be overlooked, as it was essential in choosing to address challenges and pursue their academic goals with greater confidence. This allowed them to move from a place of not asking for help, to being willing and able to first acknowledge a need, then actively seek assistance of their own volition.

Inspiration from Others and Aspiration to do More for Others

In addition to improving their confidence in asking for help on their own behalf, participants also addressed how program participation helped them develop newfound courage to tackle social issues surrounding the African American community. T.C. was able to instantiate this process of efficacy-building with his summation, "The male success initiative was my steppingstone that encouraged me to go out and be more courageous, or even take a strong stance to be a representative of my community".

The need to address challenges in the Black community was heightened in part by heavily-publicized murders of unarmed Black males at the hands of police during the participants' time in high school (Tamir Rice-2014, Michael Brown-2014, Eric Garner-2014, Walter Scott-2015, Freddie Gray-2015, Sam Dubose-2015, Philando Castile-2015, Alton Sterling-2016) which led to the mass eruption of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM). According to the Howard University School of Law (2023):

> In 2013, three female Black organizers — Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi — created a Black-centered political will and movement building project called Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter began with a social media hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin back in 2012.

BLM was a national movement to address police brutality, specifically against the Black community. The participants in the sample spoke about how the movement created a sense of angst regarding how to be involved as college students and their transition of ideals about what it means to be engaged in civil action.

As the media coverage primarily focused on the mass protests and marches within the BLM movement, there were slim-to-none examples of alternative ways to lead the charge in addressing racially-charged social issues. Nick was one who struggled with the idea of protesting: “I'm not gonna march. That's just not how I'm doing it. So, I had to figure out a different way to help my community.” He then went on to provide examples of how seeing professional Black males navigate systematic change through the male success program helped him to see a possible role as a change agent:

> I saw [the male success initiative Coordinator] and the Chief Diversity Officer, [both Black males], kind of blocking for us in certain areas, and saw how that yielded results. I remember [the coordinator] fighting for a space for us, and then like, just the program itself all the time. Then all the people, all the students, Black and other races, successfully got something out of that. Those are students whose paths were altered, just from the few Black men we have on campus.

In seeing Black male leaders within the program provide an alternative to protesting by seeking change within the systems created, Nick went on to talk about his newly manifested belief:

> All processes have their place. I feel the most effective way to make change is to become the changes in the system you want to see. So, I feel like, with me, I didn't know that before… I learned, if I become the male success initiative Coordinator at a different school that's predominantly white, it's no telling who I may affect.

The media's predominant focus on mass protests within the BLM movement obscured alternative avenues for addressing racially charged social issues. Nick illustrated ways in which the study participants were able to envision different pathways to contribute to their communities, partly due to their participation in the program. Inspired by Black male leaders within the male success

initiative, he recognized the potential for effecting change from within the system. This opened a path for him to exercise self-efficacy in addressing social issues, in a way that felt comfortable to him.

In contrast, Charles was heavily involved in student marches and protests on campus before and during his time in the male success initiative. He discussed a realization he had while mentoring others in the program:

> I was known as the militant Black guy. I was always ready to put boots on the ground, and be like 'Aye bro, we charging it. Blow it up. I don't care. Get rid of it'. What I would say is, being able to be a student and a mentor, I got to provide a different perspective and have a different conversation with students who didn't necessarily think about it [police brutality towards Black people] too much. They felt that it didn't matter, or that the Black folks who were getting killed deserved it… I would say the male success initiative gave me an opportunity to educate and to learn other people's perspectives and put boots on the ground a couple times.

Reflecting on his experiences, Charles acknowledged being perceived as always being ready to take direct action. However, through his role as a mentor in the program, he gained insight into the importance of providing diverse perspectives and engaging in meaningful conversations, particularly regarding issues such as police brutality against Black people. The male success initiative offered him the opportunity to grow in his ability to be an effective advocate both by educating others and expanding his own understanding while remaining committed to activism.

Abdul, who was in one of the earlier cohorts, was able to provide a more longitudinal overview of what he saw of the few cohorts after him, and offered his synopsis:

> I feel like with our Black males, the numbers just being so small on campus, the program boosted our confidence out of the water. That was just a great feeling as a Black male. I think even witnessing after the program was over, through graduation, and the amount of Black males that I saw starting to do things positively on campus, just being involved… That speaks on the strength of the program for Black males.

Many of the participants in this study described their state of mind before entering the male success initiative as lacking confidence in the ability to navigate instances of need and having limited competence of institutional agents and resources to seek out towards addressing these needs. Through their experience, they described changes in philosophies, emotions, and awareness of self. They described being inspired to acknowledge when they were in need, and seeking resources to address those needs. At the same time, they described how the program helped them move beyond having self-efficacy to advocate for themselves and allowed them to take steps to lead, particularly on issues related to racial climate, in ways they did not know they could previous to their program experience. A simplification of this process shows them going from help-averse, to help-seeking, to help-providing.

As described by the study participants, the male success initiative equipped them with the tools and perspectives needed to advocate for themselves and their community. This transformative journey not only empowered them to tackle immediate challenges but also inspired a long-term commitment to leadership and advocacy, underscoring the enduring value of implementing several key tenets of CRT in programming (i.e. challenging dominant ideologies and fostering a commitment to social justice) as a constant fixture in the validation and efficacy-building processes for Black males.

Theme 3. Refining the Validation and Efficacy-Building Process

The participants in this study provided a slew of examples that outlined their shared experiences with identified moments of racialized anxiety, growth, affirmation, and development. Overall, they exuded positive expressions about their experiences and the effect those relationships have had on them post-program. However, across the discussions there were elements that became evident influencers in shaping their experience, specifically as Black males. These are submitted with an understanding that these are areas where the male success initiative or similar programs can improve in serving Black males. The summation of these factors fell into two distinct areas, feelings of inadequacy and the importance of Black-identified safe spaces. The participants offered examples of challenges and possible solutions that prioritized Blackness. Understanding these components give way to increasing efficacious and validating instances through increased intention and deliberation.

Sub-theme 3.1: Addressing Feelings of Racial Inadequacy

Some participants expressed feelings of inadequacy centered around the low number of Black males at State University and in the program. While the male success initiative served men of color in general, the program was situated at a PWI that was designated as an HSI. According to some participants, these dynamics introduced some barriers to belonging within the program. T.C. set the stage for the phenomenon:

> Every cohort of [the male success initiative], there's probably six African American men or eight African American men in the class, but there's almost like 15 or 12 Latinx men, and then you probably can trickle in maybe like three Pacific Islander men, so it's kind of just tough.

King dovetailed this sentiment with his own assessment:

> At the end of the day, if we didn't have white people to worry about [in the program], we still had Latinx, so it was more so a struggle to come together as one. We still were competing with somebody else to prove that we have a right to be there.

These discussions emphasize the cultural clashes that can still develop in spaces intended to prioritize men of color. Specifically, how feelings of anti-Blackness may emerge due to perceived and actualized lack of solidarity from non-Black peers. Moreover, this speaks to the pervasive way in which anti-Blackness is entrenched in PWIs and HSIs, leaving Black students to often navigate compounded social hostilities (Pirtle, Brock, Aldonza, Leke, & Edge, 2024). Additionally, Lu and Newton (2019) summarized that Black students are a "minority within a minority-serving institution" (p. 67). Charles provided an abridged version of this, relaying that because other racial/ethnic groups predominated, Black men were still "the other of the other".

Even as participants recognized the potential benefits to the diverse group in the male success initiative, as discussed in the *cultivating relationships* section, some also expressed that the mixture of Black men with other men of color left them feeling still a bit guarded towards their fellow participants.

Sub-theme 3.2: Prioritizing Black Spaces

While men expressed that the composition of program participants could potentially affect their feelings of belonging in the program, others emphasized the importance of physical space. Over the tenure of the male success initiative, there had always been a space provided for the participants to meet together, drop their guard, and take a collective ownership over. Whether it was a campus center, classroom, library room, or computer lab, there was a consistent space for them to always go to during their time in the program. The idea of having dedicated Black spaces was described as creating an identity of support. This is important to note as the

participants in the study talked about both the need for space and the effects of losing that space in times of transition.

During T.C.'s time in the initiative, their cohort had a center dedicated to supporting the participants. When he came back as a mentor, a following cohort had to go off campus due to the COVID pandemic. He explained what he felt in trying to connect with other participants, "I feel like the program was largely about mentorship, but I will use a different word like nurturing, and Zoom doesn't have that same effect. Adding to that, we didn't have our center, and that was kind of like we didn't have our space and our space made us feel more comfortable". Also touching on the contrast between digital space and physical space, King lamented at the difference and how it made him feel, "When it came to having to go to Zoom, and instead of being in a classroom setting, or being able to see everybody from a cohort, I gotta say, that was the most lowest point I felt in the program". Both T.C. and King illustrated the importance of dedicated spaces and the role these spaces serve in propping up engagement and wellbeing.

Jeff also put an identified space on his wish list, "Just open up a space where Blacks can organize, navigate, talk through, and hold conversation. That's all I could really ask for. I think that will be very beneficial to Black people and will ultimately benefit the rest of the campus". When asked about the benefits to the campus, Jeff offered this explanation:

> I feel like just having a space and the time will be very beneficial to create identity on campus for Black people. I think it's, at least on our campus, dang near zero [Black students]. I feel like it would build an identity, give us a chance to show what we're made of essentially as a people. Not saying that we're there to prove anything of that nature, but just to truly organize on our own, build on our own, create on our own and see what we come up with.

Charles added a key note in the discussion about not just the importance of space, but filling that space with validating agents, who in this case were explained as “Black faces” that represented the participants from a cultural standpoint. These could be in the form of Black faculty, staff, student staff, or older students. He illustrated his take on the subject from personal experience:

> If you have no space on campus, or you don't really have a feeling of what campus is, you don't really tend to just walk in [a space] and be like ‘Hey, what is this. I want to go in there’. Somebody usually be like, ‘Hey, we had a class together. I see you around. You should come in this spot with me’. And so it was the space that I seen there were a lot of different people, but for me, the biggest connection was I saw there were more Black people.

Charles then touched on the nuances of prioritizing Black voices that seemed to contrast the discussions of other study participants, suggesting neither separation of Black men from other students (segregation) nor an undifferentiated blending (melting pot), but a synergetic evolution of ideas that interact and build upon each other (salad bowl). He stressed the importance of allyship with other men of color as imperative for Black males when the numbers are so low. To accomplish this, he offered this suggestion:

> Give the Black men the opportunity to have a class themselves, not excluded from everybody else, but hold the class themselves and pick a discussion that they want to talk about and kind of just get to express that however they want to they might be they just want to have a casual conversation in front of everybody and they kind of get to see what it's like to be a Black man.

The participants in this study provided in-depth feedback on ways in which they were challenged as Back males while participating in experiences that were meant to serve them. They then offered suggestions to be more intentional about addressing those challenges in ways that prioritize the needs of Black males in these types of programs. By being aware of the distinct social difference between men of color, being intentional about recruitment of Black males, providing space for them to organize, and giving them the opportunity to share their stories in camaraderie, men of color programs can improve positive outcomes for Black males.

Chapter V

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Black males who participated in a male success initiative at a predominantly white institution (PWI). The principal focus was on the initiation and support of validation and efficacy-building. Utilizing a phenomenological approach, I sought to understand participants' experiences through qualitative analysis. The study was conducted using semi-structured focus groups involving a sample of Black males who participated in a male success initiative at one university. This study employed Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework to effectively gather, evaluate and make sense of the experiences the sample participants had. Using tenets of CRT provided me with a structure that afforded study participants the opportunity to share expertise of their lived experience through recollection and storytelling. The following research questions were posed to help guide this study:

1. What factors lead Black males to participate in a male success initiative?
2. What benefits do Black males report from participating in the program? What parts of the program do they attribute these benefits to?
3. What design elements do Black males believe would improve their experiences in the program?

Participants in this study identified myriad examples of pre-institutional hardships, campus challenges, and racialized social anxieties that support contemporary literature on the collegiate experiences of Black males. Furthermore, participants recalled a swath of occurrences during their time in a male success initiative that provided them with feelings of affirmation,

encouragement, and opportunities to develop skills and mind-sets to challenge these social and institutional barriers. Findings from this study show that participants were able to build networks of support, increase navigational tools of institutional complexities, and receive moments of affirmation that spoke directly to their racialized identity. This study indicates factors that influenced participants' decisions to participate in the male success initiative, benefits of a program like this, and ways it can improve. The study illustrates the importance of anti-deficit framing when addressing the equitable needs of Black males. This chapter structures an overview of the findings from the study, its correlation to established literature, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

Matriculating into Hostile Environments

This study focused on the experiences Black males had during their time in a male success initiative. The Black males in this study were able to examine and interpret their experiences to provide contextualized recollections during shared discussions. This process is grounded by CRT in amplifying the importance of examining race and racism through storytelling and counter-narratives from the perspective of the oppressed (Solorzano,1997). What was first uncovered was the predisposition of racialized anxieties that led the study participants to seek out this type of program. Shared themes amongst the study participants were almost immediate feelings of disconnection and estrangement within the first semester at their institution. Participants ascribed these feelings to housing disparities, lack of access to and knowledge of support services, scarcity of Black students in courses and social areas, feeling stereotyped in social spaces, and disparate value systems, interests, and backgrounds from their non-Black peers.

The experiences of the study participants support research detailed in the literature review outlining harsh campus climates for Black males at PWIs (Brooms, 2018; Harper, 2012a; Harper, 2015; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Furthermore, these findings align themselves with critiques of both Astin(year) and Tinto (year). Whereas opportunities to be involved were available, due to unwelcoming environments, stereotype threat, values and experience conflicts, and/or microaggressions, the study participants did not feel a sense of comfort or desire to access these opportunities. Therefore, ideals of campus integration presented by Tinto and campus involvement presented by Astin were undermined by racialized barriers. Furthermore, in contrast to Tinto's *Model of Student Departure* (1975, 1987, 1993), any distancing from previously held communal or familial ties had the potential to force study participants further into isolation and alimentation, due to the unmet social needs on their campus.

Relationships are Integral to Belonging

The study participants described the importance of relationships and their impact on collegiate decision-making. Starting with pre-matriculation contact with institutional agents, study participants described how early and consistent contact with institutional representatives helped guide them to attend State University. These came in the form of recruiters, coaches, alumni, current university students, faculty, and staff. Conversely, the study participants described how there was little continuity between relationships formed previous to attending and after starting classes on campus. The lack of connection encouraged the study participants to seek out relationships on campus to combat feelings of isolation. These came in the forms of Black student organizations, historically Black fraternities, cultural centers, and the male success initiative, which they all participated in.

When prompted about essential parts of their experience, the study participants overwhelmingly focused on relationships and how they impacted them during their time in the program. These fell into three common categories: Peers who were Black males, older Black males (faculty, staff, guest speakers, etc.), and other non-Black men of color. These relationships served as peer accountability mechanisms, pathways to view role modeling, and contacts for building supportive resources in navigating college.

The outcomes of these relationships illustrated an increased sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2018) described a sense of belonging as, "perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers" (p. 4). This was reflected by a majority of study participants as they discussed moving from a place of isolation to finding "brothers" and "community" in the program. Furthermore, findings supported the research and positions posited by Harris and Wood (2016) that, "perceiving the campus as accepting and affirming is paramount to men of color's willingness to engage, seek help, and establish authentic relationships with faculty, student services professionals, and other students" (p. 42). Each participant in this study was able to connect a path from first encounters, to cultivating relationships, to feelings of affirmation in pursuing personal goals. Whether it was Abdul, who credited meeting a Black park ranger for his switch in career path, or Nick's exposure to Black faculty and staff showing him examples on navigating contentious situation, or T.C. evolving from mentee to mentor, the study participants were able to use these relationships as springboards into larger and mor engaged roles on their campus. What was also made evident in the findings was the institution's role in not just

providing access to these opportunities, but also employing institutional agents to garner student interest and investment in these opportunities.

Validation is a Foundational Effect

The Black men in this study presented a collective storyline of accumulated instances of validating experiences, spanning from pre-college to post male success initiative completion. Many participants highlighted how support from peers and institutional agents impacted them during significant points in their collegiate journey. This was evidenced by descriptions of recognitions by campus leaders, rites of passage ceremonies, affirmations of their Black identity, and opportunities to contribute to the campus community. They often expressed their experiences, emphasizing these moments as evoking feelings of affirmation. These stories align with research that states, "Validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (Rendon, 1994, p. 44). The participants also shared how this validation increased their self-worth, self-reliance, confidence, competence, and trust in their ability to navigate campus resources. These outcomes also support Rendon's assertion that, "when external agents took the initiative to validate students, academically and/or interpersonally, students began to believe they could be successful" (1994, p. 40). These findings support established research outlining the role of validation and validating agents as both a forerunner and collaborative ethos to building self-efficacy.

Participants Built Self-Efficacy in Advocating for Themselves and Others

Many of the participants in the study shared similar sentiments of not being able to identify when they needed help, not knowing where to seek help, or not being willing to pursue helpful resources and services during their first year(s) of college. As previously discussed, the

role of relationships and the process of relationship building were key factors in positive outcomes for the participants. When addressing the barriers to seeking help, the participants often tied their ability to surpass that hurdle to a connection made in the male success initiative with a peer, faculty, or staff member. Institutional agents—e.g., program staff—provided students with opportunities to learn and practice efficacious behaviors. These included increasing knowledge of resources, ally-building amongst faculty and staff, and being introduced to varying degrees of leadership styles and techniques. The study participants concluded by demonstrating the various ways in which those initial encounters afforded them the opportunity to take control of their collegiate trajectories, assume leadership roles, and address social issues regarding race and gender bias. These outcomes confirmed earlier findings by Harris and Wood (2016) that, "faculty-student interactions can shape a student's self-efficacy and perceptions of the utility of college" (p. 42), furthermore affirming, "self-efficacy and degree utility can then shape future interactions with other faculty members" (p. 43). According to the participants in this study, they took advantage of opportunities to connect and explore in a supportive atmosphere, which they attributed much of their growth to.

Nuance Matters When Serving and Supporting Black Males

Compound Minoritization

Participants also addressed challenges faced during their experience in the male success initiative. Issues were brought up surrounding racialized segregation within the program and abilities to recruit and increase the number of Black males participating in the program. Participants in the study grappled with feelings of inadequacy stemming from the low representation of Black males, both at State University and within the program itself. Despite the broader aims to support men of color, Black men sometimes felt overshadowed or secondary,

highlighting the disparity in representation among different racial groups. Noting the overwhelming presence of Latinx men compared to Black men, this circumstance made salient how programs like these can still inadvertently compound minoritization by othering Black men. Harper (2012b) provides a backdrop to this phenomenon, writing that "Persons are not born into a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social context (e.g., their families, racially homogeneous friendship groups, or places of worship). Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of Whiteness" (p. 9).

As it relates to this study, the Black men who participated in the male success initiative already had feelings of being minoritized compared to the predominantly white population of State University. The additional imbalance within the program between them and the larger body of Latinx men created a reemergence of those feelings and underscored the complex dynamics of identity and belonging within the program's environment. This compound minoritization is evidenced by emerging research outlining the strain of anti-Blackness at HSIs. While institutions and programs move to serve men of color, Pirtle et al. (2024) contest that "anti-Afrolatinidad, or Black/Afro-Latinx rejection within the Latinx community, additionally shape perceptions of anti-Blackness and is another theme that fuels the relationship between Black and Latinx students on a college campus" (p. 337)

Inadvertent Invalidation

A common thread that was woven through the feedback received from the study participants was this notion that they were unable or unwilling to access spaces, resources, or programs because they did not feel invited nor welcomed. In many cases, this was not due to the actions of people, but the nature in which these things were structured. Although they had access,

and in some cases were even invited to, the Black men did not feel welcomed because their racial identity or culture was not reflected. This rang true for many the participants, where it was described that spaces and programs were marketed as diverse and inclusive spaces, but there were no Black people present. Some study participants spoke specifically to the male success initiative in that they didn't think the program was for them, until another Black male vouched for the program. The potential causal factor for this phenomenon of opting out of potential places or experiences can be characterized as microinvalidation. Microinvalidations can be distinguished as communications that "exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274).

Overall, the participants' narratives shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced by Black males in navigating their identities, highlighting the need for nuanced approaches to fostering inclusivity and belonging within such programs. These challenges that were displayed by the study participants illustrated further alignment with CRT principles, calling to attention the centrality of race and racism in their experiences and that the objectivity or neutrality of their institution is null (Solorzano, 1997; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Implications for Practice

Institutions of higher education have historically been seen as gatekeepers to both social stability and mobility. For many marginalized populations, the path through that gate has been nonexistent, blocked, and boobytrapped. For Black males, the journey to gaining access has been arduous at best. While access has increased for Black males over the last few decades, equitable success after enrollment has remained a daunting task for many institutions (Barker & Avery, 2012; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Harper, Smith, & Davis III, 2018.) For these reasons, this study finds significance in the success of Black males prior to, during and after college.

A vast majority of Black males make their undergraduate pursuits at PWIs (Richardson, Jones-Fosu, & Lewis, 2019). Unfortunately, at PWIs, many Black males find themselves in an uphill battle of academic integration, social acceptance, and institutional climate adjustments (Brooms, 2018; Harper, 2006, 2012a; Pincus & Ehrlich, 1994; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). This study seeks to enhance institutional effectiveness of male success initiatives that are indirectly or directly focused on increasing success for Black males. By providing insights and perceptions from Black males who have experienced current institutionally driven male success initiatives, universities will be able to glean information to inform future engagement pathways inside and outside of the classroom. These findings provide opportunities to improve programs and experiences similar to the one in this study by identifying aspects of the program that participants find useful or supportive. Alternatively, it provides insight as to what factors may be less supportive or not have the intended effect. The information provided may also be able to identify best practices and opportunities for improvement that can be turned into transferable endeavors to help a broader population of males in similar programs or on similar campuses.

Results from this study may add understanding of the significance of directed support programs at PWIs. Furthermore, it has the possibility to not only inform the framework of these experiences, but also provide evidence as to why Black males see benefits in joining these types of programs.

Limitations

The purpose of this study was to provide prospective on the experiences of Black males who have shared a similar phenomenon: participation in State University's male success initiative. Due to the parameters of the study, there may be a few limitations worth noting. While this study focused on the experiences of Black males who participated in a male success

initiative, the data may not be indicative of the vast spectrum of experiences Black males have had when going through similar programs. Additionally, the sample for this study included those who identified as Black males. Even though they may represent myriad educational backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and ages, readers of the study must remain attentive to the applicability of the findings to other demographic populations.

Another limitation surrounded my identity as a Black male who ran the program in question. This could have caused participants to offer information that they believed I wanted to hear. Along the same line, because data were collected through focus groups, participants potentially knew each other and put forth information they perceived to be socially acceptable by other Black males. Conversely, participants could have withheld information to uphold a perception of pleasing me or their peers. To mitigate the possibility of these challenges, I frontloaded the focus groups by setting an atmosphere of trust, honesty, and neutrality. This gave permission for participants to provide rich and in-depth information.

Because the sample for this study did not include those who did not complete the entirety of a male success initiative, a limitation exists in not being able to access their feedback. While this removed participants who may have offered critical input on their experiences during earlier sections of the program, it is important to note that they would also not be able to provide input on their experiences during later sections where issues or challenges may have been addressed. Additionally, as the program under study does not remove participants, failure to complete the program is often due to extenuating circumstances beyond the program's or the student's control (e.g., death in the family, severe illness, accident, etc.).

Lastly, the Black males who make up the sample for this study were situated on a predominantly white campus in a predominantly white community. Special care must be taken in

building correlations between Black males' experiences with other programs, campuses, and communities that are more diverse, or have a higher percentage of Black people. In consideration, these limitations provide opportunities for further research into both the experiences of Black males and the effects of male success initiatives at PWIs.

Recommendations for Future Research

Despite the advances in research surrounding the success of Black men in higher education, researchers have continued to illustrate the dismal outcomes towards achievements, especially as it pertains to Black men at PWIs (Brooms, 2018; Harper, 2012a). Therefore, findings from this study have the potential to provide guidance on how to create more concerted and concentrated efforts to research ongoing supports for Black men and fine-tune established initiatives to address gaps in outcomes.

Future research in the area of supporting Black men in higher education should focus on several key areas identified in the findings. Men of color are not a monolith. While many of the male success initiatives move to serve men of color, there is a need for continued research on both the disparities between Black men and their counterparts, as well as the similarities among various minoritized student populations. Understanding the unique challenges faced by Black men while also acknowledging commonalities with other marginalized groups can inform more inclusive and effective support strategies.

Additional recommendations include examining the responsibilities of institutional agents in supporting Black men by initiating efficacy-building opportunities. Understanding the proactive role that institutional agents can play in addressing these challenges is critical for creating more inclusive environments for Black men.

Moreover, I recommend a renewed focus on the role of validating agents in the efficacy-building process for Black men. Investigating how validating experiences contribute to the development of self-efficacy and academic success among Black male students can inform the design of more supportive interventions and programs. Researching these areas can increase the knowledge base on what types of experiences shape positive outcomes for Black males, the interconnectedness of Black male perceptions of success and mentorship, and the effect of these types of programs on the post baccalaureate choices (i.e. job selection, graduate school, moving back in with family, etc.).

There is an African proverb that is commonly used in the Black community that says, "it takes a village to raise a child." Many Black males enter high education having been sustained and encourage in their educational trajectory by myriad community and familial supports. The participants in this study illustrated the importance of rapport-building in the process of providing services and resources. Research should investigate how community support networks can contribute to the success of Black male students. Findings from these studies can help institutions leverage these networks to provide transformational support throughout their college experience.

Finally, these types of programs are greatly under-researched, especially when looking at programs that exist in predominantly White communities and campuses. Suggested research may include exploring differential implementation models, institutional support for these types of programs, the effect of funding and staffing on recruitment, retention, and outcomes, or how community diversity may influence participants' sense of belonging. By examining these areas, future research can better support the diverse needs and experiences of Black men on college campuses.

Conclusion

It is imperative for higher education institutions to continue to support research and develop best practices towards improving success metrics for Black males. The findings from this study set an outline for diving deeper into the needs of these students. The participant stories provided in this study necessitates reevaluating prioritization of programming and resources focused on improving achievement metrics for Black males. Their narratives offered profound insights into the complex experiences of Black males within male success initiatives at predominantly white institutions. Their accounts underscored the strained nature of their relationship with campus climates, where feelings of disconnection intersected with systemic barriers to involvement.

In spite of these obstacles, participants highlighted the pivotal role of relationships in their collegiate journey, emphasizing the importance of peer support, mentorship from older Black males, and connections with other men of color. These relationships not only fostered a sense of belonging but also empowered participants to navigate their academic and social environments, ultimately contributing to their personal growth and success.

Furthermore, this study illuminated the nuanced challenges representation plays in inhibiting validation for Black males. Participants in the study grappled with feelings of inadequacy stemming from underrepresentation and racialized segregation within programs like these. Their experiences underscored the need for expanded research on the disaggregated outcomes of participants of similar programs. These findings call for a reevaluation of program structures and recruitment strategies to ensure equitable access and support for Black males. Overall, this study reaffirms the importance of centering Black males as experts of their own experiences and co-creators of solutions in facing their challenges.

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Appendix A. Interview Protocol

Pre-Program Effects:

1. Walk me through the process of why you decided to get involved with Men of Chico?
2. What about Men of Chico was attractive or enticing to you?
3. What types of experiences were you looking to get out of the program?
4. How connected to the campus did you feel prior to the program? This can include faculty, staff, students, or campus resources.
5. How knowledgeable did you feel you were about campus resources before the program?

Program Effects:

1. Tell me about a time when you had a particularly positive experience in the program? What made that moment so positive for you?
2. Were there specific moments during the program that especially resonated with you?
3. Was there anything about the program that helped you to think differently about your experiences on campus?
4. Were there aspects of the program that affected your relationships on campus: Faculty, staff, other students, or what resources you used?
5. Were there any aspects of the program that you think you experienced differently as a Black man compared to your non-Black peers?

Post-Program Effects:

1. What aspect(s) of the program do you believe was/were most beneficial for you?
2. What parts of the program do you think were little to no benefit?
3. If you could change two things about the program to specifically address the needs of Black males, what would they be? Why?

4. How would you describe the pros and cons of the program to an incoming Black male student?