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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN MARCOS

Black Student Success in Higher Education:
An Asset-Based Examination of Individual and Institutional Factors

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

Mary Taylor

Committee in charge:

California State University, San Marcos
Professor Erika Daniels, Chair

University of California San Diego
Professor Alan Daly
Professor Sherice Clarke

2021

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The dissertation of Mary Taylor is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California San Diego
California State University San Marcos

2021

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to those who have influenced my story with their love, care, and support.

To the family I have lost, who are with me in spirit, I love you, thank you, and carry you with me always.

To my husband Lawrence, thank you for being my friend, hero, and most dedicated supporter.

To my son, Jonathan, you make me proud every day.

To my wonderful family and friends, I thank you for all that you have done and continue to do to sustain my personal and educational journey.

EPIGRAPH

“We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience, and patience creates unity.” ~Malcolm X

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Finally, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the participants in this study who willingly and beautifully shared your stories. It has been my honor to help you bring your voices into the light.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

**Black Student Success in Higher Education:
An Asset-Based Examination of Individual and Institutional Factors**

by

Mary Taylor

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California San Diego, 2021
California State University San Marcos, 2021

Professor Erika Daniels, Chair

This study focused on both the voice and experience of successful Black students in higher education as well as the factors, both internal and institutional that they perceive as contributors to their success. This research is important because while a breadth of research exists that examines Black students and their relationship to higher education, much of it is framed in a deficit-based line of inquiry. As a response, and inspired by critical race theory (CRT) and Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework (ADAF), this study focused on successful Black college students' stories and what might be learned from them. The literature

shows that Black students bring a variety of strengths and abilities to their higher education experience that merit further attention by both researchers and educators especially since these students achieve in spite of the challenges so widely documented in the deficit-based literature. Using a narrative research approach, this study identified eight high-achieving students and explored their experiences, their success, and the factors they perceived as contributors to their achievement. Additionally, this study sought to highlight the students' experiences as a counternarrative to the existing discourse, add to the existing body of asset-based research and inquiry, enlist study participants as partners in the research process, facilitate their storytelling and amplify their voices. Data collected from eight semi-structured interviews and photojournal entries was restoried and coded for themes that yielded rich and meaningful insight into the strengths successful Black students bring to research and practice. The findings of this study reinforced those of the other asset-based researchers highlighted within this study and strengthen the need for more studies of this type. Study findings also included stories that were the result of the collaboration between researcher and participant as well as the themes that provided insight into their perceptions of the factors contributing to their success. Lastly, participants showed themselves to be willing and capable partners in the research process and offered a wealth of information that informed assertions relevant to research and practice. Among these were the importance of early influences, the students' strengths, the importance of their peers, and the ways that their lived experiences can inform a higher standard of research inquiry and care in the higher education setting.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

“Make up a story...For our sake and yours forget your name in the street; tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light.” ~ Toni Morrison (Nobel Prize Speech, 1993)

In the United States the Black educational experience has been negatively affected by history, legal policies, and economic inequality. Further, on the continuum that stretches from slavery through freedom, reconstruction, and civil rights, Black educational attainment and economic mobility have been hampered by racism and the legacy of inequality (Education Trust West, 2015; Levine & Levine, 2014). Coupled with this historical context is the role that economic inequality plays in providing a framework for understanding the educational experience of Black students. Income inequality, uneven distribution of wealth, and the downward trend of intergenerational mobility are interrelated companions to the historical inequity found in educational systems (Cruz & Haycock, 2012; Levine & Levine, 2014). In the United States, the median household income is \$63,179. For Black households however, the median income is \$41,361. Also, the poverty rate is higher for Blacks (20.8%) than the overall poverty rate (11.8%) (Semega, Kollar, Creamer, & Mohanty, 2018). With regard to intergenerational mobility, Black children born to parents in poverty have a 2.5% chance to attain high income levels, compared to 10.6% for whites. More concerning is the reality that Black children born to parents at high income levels are as likely to fall into poverty as they are to maintain the status of their parents (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, & Porter, 2018).

In California, Blacks make up 6.5% of the population and have a high school completion rate of 73% as compared to the state average of 83%. With regard to college enrollment in California, while the data show that students who attend four-year institutions are far more likely to earn degrees, the majority of Black students are enrolled in community colleges. (Education Trust West 2015). Further, with regard to college representation and completion, the Education

Trust West (2015) found that “Black youth are underrepresented in college, they are more likely than other racial groups to require remedial coursework, and are less likely to graduate” (p. 23).

While the picture outlined above seems bleak, it is not the whole story. As will be outlined in this study, there is a growing voice in research that is examining educational and societal inequity with a critical lens in an attempt to change Black students’ educational trajectory. Researcher and educator Ruth Nathan (2017) asks people to examine the reality of the lived experiences of her former students in contrast to educators’ perceptions of their experiences as they pursue higher education. She asserts that we as a society make assumptions and promises to students of color that mask both societal and educational inequity. Further, if we are to end the continuous marginalization of students based on their race and income, educators must push back against assumptions like: “race doesn’t matter”, “money doesn’t have to be an obstacle”, “just work harder” and “everyone can go to college”. Nathan proposes that instead of trying to change and blame children, we need to ask “what needs to change in pre-K-12 education and in higher education so that our promises are consistent with students’ reality?” (p. 164). It is through the efforts of courageous educators like Nathan that we will be able to put the statistics outlined above into the proper context in order to understand just what the voices of these students have to tell us about their success and the best means for nurturing and supporting it.

Statement of the Problem

The inequities and realities described above continue to result in decreased access to early education programs, increased likelihood of discipline incidents in K-12 schooling, higher drop-out rates, lower graduation rates, and inadequate access to the highest standards of curriculum for Black students (Education Trust West, 2015). At the university level, these students are more likely than their peers to need remediation, experience lower retention and

completion rates, and tend to be over-represented at private for-profit institutions (Ed Trust West, 2015; Musu-Gillette, de Brey, McFarland, Hussar, Sonnenberg & Wilkinson-Flicker, 2017).

With regard to access to quality education and equity in research, the literature shows that Black students have been excluded, misunderstood, and marginalized in both research and practice in higher education (Education Trust-West, 2015; Goings, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Further, Harper (2012) states that “educational outcomes for this population have remained stagnant or worsened in recent years. This is attributable, at least in part to the deficit orientation that is constantly reinforced in media, academic research journals, and educational practice” (p. 3). In spite of these realities, researchers like Harper have found that in spite of the challenges described here, Black students can and do experience success at all levels of education. In his study of 219 high achieving Black males, Harper (2012) found that participants were more than willing to share their perceptions of the factors contributing to their success. Most surprisingly, almost all of the participants noted that this was the first time anyone had asked them how and why they successfully navigated their higher educational journey. It is for these reasons that educators and researchers need to better understand the contradictions described here. Few research studies explore Black student success in order to develop a more meaningful understanding of the Black student experience in higher education. While the body of research is growing, only 13 of the authors cited in this study explicitly explore Black student success from an asset-based perspective.

Purpose of the Study

There is a growing body of scholarship that recognizes the large gaps in access and equity for Black students, seeks to change the narrative, and elevates the voices of those

previously marginalized and excluded from this dialogue. The purpose of this study was to add to the existing body of knowledge by exploring the experiences of successful Black students in higher education and examining their perceptions of the factors that contribute to their achievement. Further, this study incorporated study participants as partners in the research process. Particular attention was paid to both their perceptions of individual and inherent factors as well as the external institutional policies and behaviors they see as contributors to their success.

This study, using the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and anti-deficit achievement, examined the experiences and highlighted the stories of Black students achieving success at predominately White institutions in Southern California. Chapter two synthesizes the voice of the literature on the factors, both inherent and external contributing to Black student success and provides the basis for the importance of the research approach and methods applied in this study. Chapter 3 reviews the research design, approach and protocols necessary to conduct a qualitative narrative study as well as highlight the necessary alignment between the study purpose/questions and the methods used to answer those questions. Chapter 4 examines the data utilizing the processes of restorying and exploring emergent themes in relation to the research questions. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the findings in the form of assertions with implications relevant to research and practice.

Research Questions

It is within the contexts outlined above that this study seeks to explore the experiences of successful Black students in higher education and the factors that contribute to their success. Examination of this topic will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What do Black students perceive as the most important factors contributing to their success in higher education?
2. What is the lived experience of successful Black college students?

Significance

There is a breadth of existing research focused on Black students and their relationship to, and experiences with, all levels of education. This relationship has been shaped by historical, social, and economic factors that are a legacy of slavery and racism. In research and education, much attention has been paid to the deficits of this group and improvement efforts have focused on mitigating the deficits of the students as opposed to analyzing and/or addressing the deficits of the institutions tasked with serving them. Harper (2015) contends that this almost exclusive focus the literature places on barriers and underachievement with regard to Black students is problematic. He argues that “While important implications for policy and practice have been generated from these studies, much remains to be known about how students manage to excel and persist despite these challenges” (p. 647). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) further argue that with regard to research, the motivations and behaviors of Black students have been cast in contrast to the norms and values of dominant culture which, according to Anumba (2015) and Harper (2012), have led to a line of scholarly inquiry focused on their deficiencies and inability to persist. While a recognition of the historical impact of educational inequity and institutional racism is important, we must balance our inquiry to include the voices of those who achieve success in spite of these conditions (Anumba, 2015; Goings, 2016; Harper, 2012; Harper 2015).

The literature suggests that asset based inquiry is relatively new and that a greater incorporation of this framework could benefit all aspects of educational research by providing the platform for a balanced discourse that incorporates and amplifies the voices of Black

students (Anumba, 2015; Goings, 2016; Harper, 2012; Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg & Jalomo, 1994). Similarly, critical race theory is underused as a context for scholarly inquiry and an opening exists for more widespread and deeper applications (Iverson, 2007; Perez, Ashlee, Do, Karikari & Sim, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT aligns with asset-based inquiry through its assertion that racism is endemic to our institutions and that the voices and experiences of those previously marginalized is vital to progress in both research and practice. This study will seek to join the growing body of research that seeks to leverage the successes and experiences of Black students in the pursuit of educational equity. This intersection between successful Black students and the institutions serving them has more to teach us about student needs and motivations as well as institutional best practices. Highlighting behaviors, practices, and policies proven to be successful may aid practitioners committed to equity and access in the transformation of their institutions into environments that attract, retain, engage, and graduate Black students.

Conceptual Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework that draws upon scholarship in the fields of law and social sciences to critically examine race, power, and inequity in our systems, institutions, and society. Gloria Ladson-Billings has been widely credited with moving Derrick Bell's initial work on critical race theory into the arena of educational research and practice. In education, CRT provides the foundation upon which the discourse, curriculum, and policy based on dominant narratives can be challenged, the voice of the marginalized can be heard, and educational inequity can be recognized and addressed (Anumba, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Within the context of education, CRT informs our understanding of the central role that race plays in our analysis and understanding of educational inequality (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Brideman, 2011). If researchers approach scholarly inquiry with the assumptions that race, history, context, and voice matter, researchers will be able to engage in a deeper and more meaningful level of analysis of educational systems. For the purposes of this study, the following key tenets of CRT provided both the lens for inquiry and the guide for methodological design:

- Racism is endemic, not aberrant or rare, and deeply ingrained in our society both legally and culturally which renders society ill-equipped to redress it.
- CRT challenges claims of neutrality, colorblindness, and meritocracy in our society.
- The experiential knowledge of people of color is vital to understanding and analyzing racial inequality, therefore, we must amplify the voices of those not traditionally heard.

Aligned with Ladson-Billings' efforts to bring critical race theory into educational research and practice is Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework (ADAF). He presents this framework as an approach to achieving a better understanding of the experiences and behaviors of Black male collegians. Harper proposes that instead of posing questions based on the deficits of students, educators, researchers, and administrators should reframe their inquiry and examine this population from an anti-deficit perspective. According to Harper "the framework inverts questions that are commonly asked about educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and Black male student attrition." (p.7). Both CRT and ADAF demand that we challenge the way we look at our systems, our institutions, and our students. We must understand the role that the

dominant narrative, deficit inquiry and approaches, and the absence of the voices of those most marginalized have played in educational inequity. Both CRT and ADAF are closely aligned with the purpose of this study and are uniquely suited to frame the approach to answering the research questions posed above.

Methods Overview

In order to gain a rich and meaningful understanding of Black students' perceptions of the factors contributing to their success as well as their lived experiences in higher education, this study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry approach using data collected from personal semi structured interviews and other appropriate field texts (Creswell, 2012). The participant group was comprised of eight Black, college students attending local universities in at least their third year of college of which seven were American-born and one was an African immigrant. The restorying process was employed to analyze and rewrite the data which was coded into themes for further analysis (Creswell, 2012).

Definition of Terms and Concepts

Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF)-Defined by Harper (2012) as a framework that “inverts questions that are commonly asked about educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and...student attrition” (p. 5). This framework moves us beyond approaches rooted in deficit perspectives to tell the success stories of students and those people and systems that support them. This framework focuses us on the assets of study participants and what might be learned from them.

Black-Black or African Americans are “people having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). While the terms Black and African American are generally used interchangeably, the term Black will be used in this paper to describe who De

Walt (2011) defines as “those who are considered and/or identify as African American, Black, and/or of African descent based on their lived scripts resulting from being the heirs to the legacy of U.S. enslavement and the subsequential historical movements that occurred” (pp.483-484).

Counternarrative-Defined by Zamudio et al (2011) as the “emphasis on narratives and counterstories told from the the vantage point of the oppressed...the practice of retelling history from a minority perspective” (p. 5).

Critical Race Theory (CRT)-CRT within the context of education “highlights those aspects of society, institutions, schools and classrooms that tell the story of the functions, meanings, causes and consequences of racial educational equality” (Zamudio et al, 2011, pp. 2-3).

Perception- “Perception is a mode of apprehending reality and experience through the senses, thus enabling discernment of figure, form, language, behavior, and action. Individual perception influences opinion, judgment, understanding of a situation or person, meaning of an experience, and how one responds to a situation. A common way of defining perception is ‘how we see things’. However, perception is a process involving not only the senses but also complex underlying mechanisms” (Munhall, 2012 p. 2).

Success-Successful students as defined for the purposes of this study are those in a higher education setting who have earned good grades (3.0 or above), are on track to graduate in a timely manner, are engaged in multiple ways with their college environment, including leadership, advocacy, and activism. More broadly, success is also defined as the confluence of student behaviors that are both process and outcome oriented.

CHAPTER 2: Review of Literature

Introduction

There is a growing body of scholarship that recognizes the large gaps in access and equity for Black students, seeks to change the narrative, and elevates the voices of those previously marginalized and excluded from this dialogue. The purpose of this study was to add to the existing body of knowledge by exploring the experiences of successful Black students in higher education and examining their perceptions of the factors that contribute to their achievement. The concept of success and how it is defined was explored from multiple perspectives, and the voice of the literature on deficit vs. asset based inquiry was examined. Next, attention was paid to the individual and inherent factors leading to college success as well as the institutional policies and behaviors that contribute to successful recruitment, engagement and graduation of these students. Finally, the influence and use of critical race theory (CRT) and Harper's anti-deficit achievement framework (ADAF) in the literature was discussed.

Success Defined

Success within higher education can be defined in a variety of ways and be dependent on the perspective of those defining it (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). The authors cited in this review describe and interact with students who have a variety of characteristics, experiences, and abilities that contribute to their overall success. It is through their studies' design and methodology that insight is gained into how success itself has been defined and how those definitions informed the way success is defined for the purposes of this study.

Researchers. Participants in the studies reviewed shared some common aspects of success that were both academic and non-academic. Enrollment and persistence have been defined as elements of success (Anumba, 2015, Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002, Yan, 1999,

Yearwood, 2012), and, other researchers have highlighted grade point averages as key indicators of success (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015; Goings, 2016; Griffin, 2006; Harper, 2012; Hope, Chavous, Jagers, & Sellers, 2013). Researchers in the field included both quantifiable and qualitative indicators in their explorations of successful students. Qualitative factors included engagement with peers (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Yearwood & Jones, 2012), school community (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Harper, 2012; Stolle-McAllister, 2011; Yancy, Sutton-Haywood, Hermitte, Dawkins, Rainey, & Parker, 2008), and faculty engagement (Fries-Britt & Turner, (2002); Greer-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008; Harper, 2012). Further, in addition to the qualitative and quantitative factors, an analysis of students' social capital was included as an indicator of Black student success (Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014). Next, success as defined by both students and institutions is examined.

Students. In a variety of studies on the topic, students defined their own success in terms of college admission (Harper, 2012), engagement and leadership experiences (Anumba, 2015; Harper, 2012), their own determination and peer support (Goings, 2016), and high academic performance (Harper, 2012). They also identified the ability to establish connections, build networks, and utilize support systems as indicators of their success (Anumba, 2015; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harper, 2012). The participants in both Anumba (2015) and Harper's (2012) studies spoke of their success in terms of their own engagement with all areas of their educational experience. Their ideas of success were tied more to qualitative measures and less to the quantifiable outcomes that grew out of their engagement. For example, “the men believed they earned higher grades because they had less time to waste, interacted frequently with academically-driven others, and had reputations to uphold” (Harper, 2012, p. 12).

Institutions. While researchers and students identified a combination of shared and disparate definitions of success, it is also important to understand the ways institutions define success for their students. Institutional behaviors and processes are highlighted by some authors (Cruz & Haycock, 2012; Iverson, 2007), and others measure and determine their success by quantifiable means such as SAT scores, enrollment, retention, and graduation statistics (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Yearwood & Jones, 2012; Williams, 2006). Definitions of success can grow from a variety of perspectives, agendas, and interests. A clearer understanding of who defines it and how they define it can have important implications for institutional change and progress that should be the result of individual factors of the students themselves.

Success Defined For The Purpose of This Study. For the purposes of this study, success is defined as a confluence of student behaviors that include strong academic performance, high levels of engagement with their institutions both in and out of the classroom, as well as a clear path toward a timely graduation. Further, York et al (2015) remind us to consider “participants’ aspirations or educational goals within the design” (p. 10). They assert that it is important to both expand our definition of success beyond academic achievement and consider the voice of participants as we seek to define it (York et al, 2015).

Rejecting Deficit-Based Approaches to Black Students in Research and Practice

The practice of deficit minded inquiry and approaches with regard to Black students at all levels of education has been a barrier preventing a complete and meaningful understanding of the students themselves and obstructed a clear path to the improvements necessary for their success (Goings, 2016; Griffin, 2006; Harper, 2012; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012). While it is true that Black students have benefitted from higher education in a number of ways, it is also true that both researchers and educational institutions have fallen short in their duty to understand and

educate them (Education Trust-West, 2015; Ladson-Billings 2014). With this in mind, it is important to now examine the ways that a paradigm shift is taking place that recognizes the limitations of deficit-minded approaches in both research and higher education policy and practice.

There have been growing numbers of educational scholars drawing inspiration from the tenets of CRT and ADAF in their examination of the Black student experience in education (Anumba, 2015; Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2016; Iverson, 2007; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Perez, Ashlee, Do, Karikari, & Sim, 2017). Their influence can be seen in three important areas: the assertion that the bulk of research up to this point has focused heavily on the deficits of Black students; the inclusion of successful students as research participants; and the use of counter-storytelling to illuminate Black students' lived experiences. While it is important to note that recognition of the negative impacts of racism and institutional inequity is necessary, these scholars argued that a balance must be brought to our inquiry that includes the voices of those who achieve success in spite of these conditions.

For too long, scholarly inquiry has focused on Black students' inability to achieve, persist, and engage within their higher education environment (Anumba, 2015; Griffin, 2006; Harper, 2012; Perez et al, 2017). CRT and the ADAF have been employed in research to identify this phenomenon and change the discourse in order to mitigate its negative effects on the educational experience of Black students. Evidence of this shift is seen in the methodological choice to pose research questions based on the experiences of successful, high achieving students. Including successful Black students as research participants allows researchers to employ asset-based inquiry to highlight the previously unexplored ways that Black students might be engaging in, and contributing to their college experience (Harper, Anumba, 2015; Hope

et al., 2013; McGee & Martin, 2011; Yan, 1999; & Yearwood & Jones, 2012). Lastly, Solórzano & Yosso (2002) made a case for the role that counter-storytelling must play in educational research. Soloórzano & Yosso defined the counter-story as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” and “a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p. 32). The counter-story and illumination of the Black students’ voice in research inquiry and design has begun to change the nature of the discourse around the Black educational experience. Researchers using this approach solicit the rich experiential knowledge these students possess to gain a deeper and more meaningful understanding of their lived experiences and to more critically examine the institutions tasked with educating them (Anumba, 2015; Harper, 2012; Hope et al., 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Nathan, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Individual Factors Contributing to Black Student Success

Self-Esteem, Authorship, and Motivation. With regard to the characteristics students possess that contribute to their success in higher education, self-esteem, self-authorship, and self-motivation play a vital role in Black college student persistence (Anumba, 2015; Goings, 2016; Hope et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2014). It is through self-motivation that Black students are able to generate the focus and determination necessary to avoid non-academic distractions (Anumba, 2015). Similarly, self-authorship, which is defined as an individual’s ability to derive meaning from collected information based on one’s own beliefs and values, is positively correlated with academic achievement (Strayhorn, 2014). It is this self-understanding that facilitates the ability to resist peer pressure, challenge stereotypes, and pursue academic goals (Strayhorn, 2014). Further, the connections between self-esteem and academic performance for Black students are positively correlated and multilayered (Hope et al., 2013).

Additionally, the multilayered nature of the findings of the research around self-esteem and authorship caution that the heterogeneity of this group be taken into account (Griffin, 2006; Morales, 2014; Strayhorn, 2014). The research argued that factors which motivate high-achieving Black students are based on a complex integration of internal and external influences that warrant further examination (Strayhorn, 2014; Griffin, 2006; Hope et al., 2013).

Academic Self-Concept. Academic self-concept is defined as an individual's beliefs with regard to their self-efficacy within the domain of their academic experience (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). A positive academic self-concept of Black students has been shown by the research to be influenced by a number of factors to include: grade point average, parents' level of education, and student's progress toward degree (Franklin, Debb, & Colson, 2017). Franklin et al., (2017) also cautioned that the literature is limited on this topic and that "More research is needed to support these notions and further understand the relationship between racial identity and academic self-concept for African American students" (p. 649).

What researchers do seem to understand is that students with a higher level of belief in their academic abilities are more likely to recover from obstacles and successfully navigate unexpected challenges (Strayhorn, 2014). Successful students are those who when faced with academic difficulty, depended on their own determination, confidence, and resourcefulness to push past those barriers impeding their success (Griffin, 2006). So while academic self-concept in relation to Black students merits further inquiry, it was seen by scholars to be another individual factor that contributes to their success. As seen in the following section, the literature also supported racial cohesion and cultural orientation as important contributing factors.

Racial Cohesion and Cultural Orientation. Racial cohesion and cultural orientation are other internal factors that have been connected to Black student success. Racial cohesion is a

term that illustrates how a person's level of racial identity both affects, and is affected by both their conduct and their level of engagement within their own ethnic group (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015). High levels of racial cohesion for Black students were found to be statistically significant and positively correlated with resilience, academic achievement, and engagement in extracurricular activities (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015). Additionally, Africentric cultural orientation, defined by Williams & Chung (2013) is a progression towards awareness of one's racial identity and its integration into one's overall identity. This cultural orientation has been shown to be positively correlated with school engagement, academic class level, and academic self-concept (Williams & Chung, 2013). Also, students who expressed high levels of racial identity and cultural orientation through engagement with Black Studies departments, Black Cultural Centers, and Black faculty were more likely to achieve success (Adams, 2005; Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008; Patton, 2006).

Stereotype Threat Management. Related to a student's ability to positively identify with their racial identity is their ability to resist and manage stereotype threat. Stereotype threat within the higher education setting has been defined by McGee and Martin (2011) as the system of subtle and not-so-subtle behaviors and assumptions based on a severely limited understanding of the abilities and characteristics of Black students in the academic setting. Stereotype threat management as asserted by McGee and Martin (2011), is based within a student's evolving awareness of racism coupled with their growing understanding of what it means to them to be Black. The research shows that while it is true that stereotypes exist and can seem overwhelming to manage, Black students within the context of higher education have proven themselves adept at recognizing, challenging, and deflecting attempts to minimize or question their academic ability (Harper, 2015; McGee & Martin, 2011). Stereotype management proves to be a viable

response to the racist assumptions students face and is a skill that is positively correlated with their success both in and out of the classroom (Harper, 2012; Harper, 2015; McGee & Martin, 2011).

Engagement. While a discussion of the behaviors, programs, and policies of institutions contributing to the success of Black students is discussed in later sections of this review, it is important to note the role that students' willingness and ability to engage in such programs can play in their achievement and success. Students who readily connect with sororities and fraternities (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Yearwood & Jones, 2012), campus cultural centers and learning communities (Patton, 2006; Yancy, 2008), and summer bridge programs (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Stolle-McAllister, 2011) are more likely to enjoy success in both their academic and non-academic college experience. Other important student behaviors cited as contributors to success are strong relationships with faculty and other institutional agents (Adams, 2005; Anumba, 2015; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Goings, 2016; Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Museus, 2012; Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994; Wood & Newman, 2017; Yearwood, 2012) and strong leadership roles and participation in enriching educational experiences like study abroad programs and internships (Harper, 2012). While the literature identifies a positive connection between success and the internal strengths and behaviors that Black students bring to their college experience, the role that institutions play in contributing to the success and achievement of this group is also critical.

Institutional Factors Contributing to Black Student Success

University Leadership. To better understand the role that universities have played in the success of Black students, it is important to note leadership behaviors that have contributed to their success. Research showed that successful institutions have been those who have redirected

their discourse to focus on student success, and who both recognize their accountability, and accept responsibility for process and outcomes (Cruz & Haycock, 2012; Education Trust, 2017; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2016; Williams, 2006). Many universities focus their efforts on fixing the students as opposed to looking critically at their own policies, behaviors, and assumptions (Education Trust, 2017; Harper et al., 2016; Perez, Ashlee, Do, Karikari, & Sim, 2017). Critical re-examination and re-alignment of university policies and procedures in the areas of strategic planning (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012) and diversity and inclusion (Iverson, 2007) are important steps in this effort. Further, critically examining university policies through the lens of critical race theory exposes the limitations of a discourse that is based in deficit thinking about students of color and reflects the dominant narrative in which they are measured against a White, middle class standard (Iverson, 2007). This exposure of the dominant narrative opens the space for voices not previously included and generates a dialogue and discourse more equipped to attend to the needs of Black students (Goings, 2016; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Other areas of university policy and practice contributing to Black student success were improved, equitable, and inclusive enrollment (Education Trust, 2017), hiring practices (Adams, 2005; Museus & Neville, 2012), the effective use of data to expose institutional inequity (Education Trust, 2017; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012), and drawing allies from a wide variety of disciplines and departments to the cause of student achievement (Cruz & Haycock, 2012; Williams, 2006). The literature showed that institutions achieving the success described above usually have stable leaders capable of both communicating clear objectives, and building the alliances necessary to ensure that they are achieved (Cruz & Haycock, 2012; Williams, 2006). It is the university's commitment to strong leadership in policy and practice that sets the tone for

exploration of the behaviors of its faculty and other institutional agents that contribute to Black student success and achievement. Successful institutions as defined by the literature are those that both involve and examine entire systems and processes for the benefit of their students (Cruz & Haycock, 2012; Iverson, 2007; Museus & Neville, 2012; Williams, 2006).

University Faculty and Other Institutional Agents. A university willing to critically examine its own existing policy and practice is better positioned to support faculty and staff who nurture inclusion and student success (Cruz & Haycock, 2012; Williams, 2006). Engaged faculty who support student inclusion and achievement have been identified by the literature as a key factor in Black student success (Adams, 2005; Anumba, 2015; Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Harper, 2012; Museus & Neville, 2012; Wood & Newman, 2017; Yearwood and Jones, 2012). Also, successful Black students cite strong relationships with faculty that extend beyond the classroom as key to the successful navigation of their college environments (Anumba, 2015, Harper, 2012). Further, it has been shown that students connected with engaged and inclusive faculty were active and collaborative learners, experienced higher levels of educational enrichment, and enjoyed more supportive campus environments (Anumba, 2015; Yearwood, 2012). University faculty play a pivotal role in establishing campus environments that are inclusive and supportive of the success of Black students (Adams, 2005; Morales, 2014; Museus & Neville, 2012; Wood & Newman, 2017), and they can come from any background as long as they have a true commitment to establishing common ground, advocating for students, supporting their inclusion, and facilitating success both in and out of the classroom (Museus & Neville, 2012; Wood & Newman, 2017).

Aligned with the role that faculty play is the work that other institutional agents can do in contributing to Black student success. To begin, institutions should critically examine the process

by which their student affairs professionals are educated. This should be closely followed by recognition of the need for a paradigm shift towards a culturally sustaining curriculum and practice that includes consciousness of the role that the dominant narrative plays in misdirecting the efforts of well-intentioned educators (Perez et al., 2017). The research also supports the willingness and ability of student services staff to include cultural practices such as the seven principles of Kwanzaa (Nguzo Saba) as a way to enrich the educational experience of Black students and engage in more meaningful practice and dialogue (Johnson, 2001). The students also appreciated institutional agents who established common ground either ethnically or academically (Museus & Neville, 2012), provided holistic support (Museus & Neville, 2012; Wood & Newman, 2017), humanized the relationship, had a proactive approach to providing resources, and had a personal investment in their success (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Wood & Newman, 2017). Faculty and staff willing to engage with students in the ways described above provide the foundation for the programs and spaces that contribute to Black student success.

University Programs, Spaces, and Connections. In conjunction with the relationships established by faculty and other institutional agents, the programs and spaces provided by the university can have a positive impact on the success of Black students. Summer bridge programs have proven to be key providers of the agency needed to facilitate student success (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Stolle-McAllister, 2011). As a reinforcement to these findings, students in Harper's (2012) study named summer bridge programs that facilitated early orientation to course work and institutional resources as a contributor to their high achievement. Additionally, the literature also cited Black cultural centers and other culturally supportive spaces as key partners in creating an inclusive campus environment (Patton 2006; Yancy et al., 2008; Yearwood & Jones, 2012). With regard to program design, it has also been noted that research participants are

acutely aware of the difference between programs merely designed to attract Black students and those meant to truly meet their needs and support their ongoing success (Fries-Britt, 2002). To this end, Black cultural centers, learning communities, and intellectual spaces like Black Studies departments that are weaved into the fabric of the university can positively impact student satisfaction, increase student engagement, and improve learning outcomes (Adams, 2005; Patton, 2006; Wood & Newman, 2017; Yancy et al., 2008).

In addition to the programs and spaces that foster student success, peer networks also serve as contributors to student achievement. Specifically, same-race, higher-level student role models, networks of peer support, and membership in sororities and fraternities can be strong contributors to student success (Anumba, 2015; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Harper, 2012; Yearwood & Jones, 2012). Additionally, membership in historically Black sororities provided a level of support and belonging that they did not find in other cultural organizations and networks (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014). Whatever form the engagement takes, the literature identified strong peer networks as sources of connectedness, validation, intellectual stimulation, and empowerment (Grier-Reed et al., 2008).

As this area of research is expanded, it is important for researchers, administrators, and other institutional agents to be mindful that successful Black college students are a heterogeneous group. It follows then that efforts to study, attract, retain, and engage them must be as complex and multilayered as the students themselves (Griffin, 2006; Hope et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2014). Coupled with the voice of the literature on how success is defined and the factors contributing to student success, is the following discussion of the conceptual frameworks that informed this study.

Conceptual Frameworks

Critical Race Theory. A guiding tenet of critical race theory (CRT) is the assertion that racism is an embedded component of the structure of our society that serves to maintain the position of Whites as the beneficiaries of historical, institutional, and systemic inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As an example, Iverson (2007) provided an illustration of the impact that critical race theory can have on educational research in her examination of university diversity policies. She concluded that when examined through this lens, university efforts towards diversity and inclusion used the dominant, White narrative as the basis for the discourse and served to perpetuate the inequities they sought to eliminate.

Another important theme in critical race theory is the idea that equity can only be achieved if the voice of those who have been oppressed is highlighted and included as a balance and challenge to the dominant discourse. In their efforts to define the role that critical race theory plays in educational research, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) asserted that “without authentic voices of people of color (as teachers, parents, administrators, students, and community members) it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities” (p. 58). Ladson-Billings (2014) extended this line of thought in her discussion of culturally relevant pedagogy by identifying the keys to successful teaching and learning, which include academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical awareness. It is a confluence of factors that include understanding the world we live in, inclusion of the voices not previously heard, and practice with a focus on students’ assets that will allow “scholars and practitioners to learn *from* and not *about* African American students” (p. 76).

Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework. Closely aligned with critical race theory is Harper’s anti-deficit achievement framework (ADAF). ADAF argues that instead of posing

questions based on the deficits of students, researchers, educators, and administrators should reframe their inquiry and examine Black students from an asset-based perspective (Harper, 2012; Warren, Douglas & Howard, 2016). It is through an examination of the strengths of students that a more complete illustration can be drawn of the forces that drive them (Anumba, 2015; Griffin, 2006; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). It is within the context of history and economics, coupled with the frameworks of CRT and ADAF, that a deeper and more meaningful understanding can be gained of the factors that contribute to the success of Black students as well as what institutions of higher education can learn about how to better see, understand, and serve them.

Summary

From the literature we can conclude that successful Black college students possess a full complement of strengths and characteristics that position them for success in a variety of higher education environments. When asked, they are willing to discuss their success and engage in dialogue about their lived experiences. While the literature on those characteristics and behaviors that hinder success and achievement is extensive, there is also a growing body of research that has unearthed the resilience, self-esteem, academic self-concept, and racial cohesion that fit these students for achievement in higher education. These students have also shown themselves to be quite adept at navigating racist college environments, resisting stereotypes, and engaging in racially cohesive behaviors. They have a great deal to offer their university environments, and can be a wealth of information for researchers and educators looking to more meaningfully explore the intersection of successful students and successful higher education institutional practice.

The research also challenges higher education institutions to recognize the responsibility they bear to ensure the success of all their students (Anumba, 2015; Cruz & Haycock, 2012;

Harper, 2012; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Terenzini et al., 1994; Yearwood & Jones, 2012). To this end, they need to focus less on what students need to do, and spend more time examining what they themselves need to do to lead the efforts toward true engagement with, and achievement of Black students (Harper, 2012; Harper et al., 2016; Perez et al., 2017; Terenzini et al., 1994). Institutions achieving success in this regard have been shown to be willing to re-think, unlearn, and critically examine those policies and practices that harbor and uphold institutional inequity and adjust the discourse to include voices not previously heard (Cruz & Haycock, 2012; Iverson, 2007; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Finally, the literature suggested that asset based inquiry is relatively new and that a greater incorporation of this framework could benefit all aspects of educational research (Anumba, 2015; Goings, 2016; Harper, 2012; Terenzini et al., 1994). Similarly, critical race theory is underused as a context for scholarly inquiry and an opening exists for more widespread and deeper applications (Iverson, 2007; Perez et al., 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Lastly, to more effectively serve Black students, further research is required that recognizes the heterogeneous nature of this group. Beyond differentiating between genders, not much attention has been paid to the variety of within-group dynamics and characteristics that exist (Cokley, Obaseki, Moran-Jackson, Jones, & Vohra-Gupta, 2016). “It is important that researchers and practitioners consider the vast variation in Black students’ personal attributes, as well as contextual experiences in their academic and social domains” (Hope et al., 2013, pp.1147-1148).

There is an ever-growing body of research that seeks to leverage the assets of Black students in the pursuit of educational equity using their own voices and stories. This intersection between successful students and successful institutions is one that merits further study of Black students in higher education. This future research may contribute to the growing body of

research framed by critical race theory that utilizes an anti-deficit approach. Highlighting behaviors, practices, and policies proven to be successful may aid practitioners committed to equity and access in the transformation of their institutions into environments that successfully attract, retain, engage and graduate Black students.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

As has been noted in previous chapters, there is a growing body of scholarship that recognizes the large gaps in access and equity for Black students, seeks to change the narrative, and elevates the voices of those previously marginalized and excluded from this dialogue (Anumba, 2015; Goings, 2016; Harper, 2012). This study sought to further that research by exploring the experiences of successful Black students in higher education and examining their perceptions of the factors that contributed to their achievement. This study examined the Black student experience in higher education from an asset-based perspective and sought to incorporate study participants as partners in the research process. Particular attention was paid to their perceptions of both the individual factors as well as the institutional policies and behaviors contributing to their success. This approach which highlighted student voices and assets was informed by the conceptual frameworks of critical race theory (CRT) and Harper's anti-deficit achievement framework (ADAF).

Examination of this topic was guided by the following research questions:

1. What do Black students perceive as the most important factors contributing to their success in higher education?
2. What are the lived experiences of successful Black college students?

Methodological Approach

The literature presented in Chapter 2 reinforced the assertion that the Black student experience in higher education has mainly been examined through a deficit-based lens and failed to tell the complete story of both the variety and complexity of their needs and abilities. It is therefore incumbent upon researchers seeking to change the conditions under which

marginalized and silenced groups are seen and heard to ensure that the means by which we gather data are consistent with the desired goals and outcomes of our research (Givens, 2008). It was with this in mind that a methodological approach informed by a critical race lens was employed that gave voice to study participants by inviting their collaboration and partnership at all stages of the research process (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Givens, 2008). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argued that researchers must be willing to ask themselves and each other “whose stories are privileged in educational contexts and whose stories are distorted and silenced?” (p. 36). Critical race methodology was defined by Solórzano and Yosso as a “space to conduct and present research grounded in the experiences and knowledge of people of color” (p. 23). Critical race theory grounded the narrative design approach to provide a conduit for understanding the experiences of these students and exposed the value of the experiential knowledge they possessed (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) reinforced the importance of the voice of study participants and argued that the narrative process cannot begin without this key element. They further strengthened the relationship between narrative inquiry and critical race methodology by pointing out that the study participant “who has long been silenced in the research relationship, is given the time and space to tell her or his story so that it too gains the authority and validity that the research has long had” (p. 4). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) further asserted that counterstories “can be used as theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tools to challenge racism, sexism, and classism and work toward social justice” (p. 23).

In spite of the challenges and barriers presented by systemic racism and social and economic inequity, Black students can and do achieve success (Anumba, 2015; Ellington & Fredrick, 2010; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Goings, 2016; Harper 2012; Harper 2015; McGee & Martin, 2011; Strayhorn, 2014). In order to more clearly understand the ways in which Black

students successfully navigate their journey through higher education, this study provided a counterbalance to existing deficit-based approaches (Harper, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Building on the work of Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), Harper (2012), and other scholars, this study examined the experiences of successful Black students who attended predominately White institutions (PWIs) by seeking out successful students and engaging them in a dialogue about their perceptions of the keys to their success. The methodological approach as outlined below will include a discussion of the qualitative approach to inquiry, the rationale for studying successful Black students, discussion of the use of narrative inquiry, as well as a discussion of the setting, context, and both the collection and analysis of data.

Research Design

Because this study explored the research questions through the lens of critical race theory and the purpose was to better understand the perceptions and lived experiences of Black college students, the approach to inquiry was qualitative in nature. Creswell (2012) highlighted the importance of a clear alignment between the research problem and the methods used to address it. Maxwell (2013) furthered this point in his assertion that an effective research study is coherent in design with great emphasis being placed on the connection between the methodological design and the research questions being posed. It is through qualitative study that Black student success can be explored from the perspective of the study participants and that a deeper understanding of both the participants and the phenomenon can be obtained. (Creswell, 2012).

Further, because this study sought to provide a counternarrative using the stories of study participants, a narrative inquiry approach was employed. Narrative research as described by Creswell (2012) is the process of “gathering data through the collection of stories, reporting

individual experiences and discussing the meaning of those experiences for the individual” (p. 502). Connelly & Clandinin (1990) asserted that,

humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general concept is refined into the view that education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and other’s stories (p. 2).

The theoretical lenses of CRT and ADAF were used as guides for the narrative process and data was gathered through the use of interviews and journal entries that aided in the telling of the participant’s story in their own words (Creswell, 2012). This narrative study followed the seven-step process outlined by Creswell (2012) as follows:

1. Identify a phenomenon to explore that addresses an educational problem.
2. Purposefully select an individual from whom you can learn about the phenomenon.
3. Collect the story from the individual.
4. Restory or retell the individual’s story.
5. Collaborate with the participant-storyteller
6. Write a story about the participant’s experiences.
7. Validate the accuracy of the report.

Setting & Context

The setting and context for this study was Southern California University (SCU) (pseudonym) a predominately White institution located in Southern California. SCU enrolls just under 30,000 undergraduates and is nationally recognized for its research, study abroad programs, and diversity of its student body. Of the 30,000 undergraduate students, 54% are women, 45% are men and less than 1% identify as nonbinary. SCU currently enrolls 1,236 Black students who account for 4.2% of the undergraduate population.

This setting was chosen mainly due to both my past and present affiliations with the institution. I am an alumnus and serve as a Director in Student Affairs at SCU. It was through my own personal and professional experiences with this institution that I was able to gain access to data and research participants. My current proximity to this school has also allowed a close view of many of the challenges and successes of Black students at this institution. In recent history, Black students at this institution have experienced hostility, violence, microaggressions, and other forms of discrimination and racism. Yet in spite of these challenges, they are persisting, engaging, and graduating. It is for these reasons that I wished to bring their stories into the light.

Sampling Procedures

Because the intent of qualitative inquiry is to “develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 206), it is important for researchers to ensure that there is purpose and intent informing their participant selection procedures. Purposeful sampling allows quantitative researchers to choose participants based on their ability to provide a depth of knowledge and information important to the research purpose and questions. According to Maxwell (2013), “particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals, and can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 97). Creswell (2012) further highlighted the point that purposeful sampling not only aids in a more detailed understanding, but that this understanding can provide a voice to those who have been silenced. For these reasons, purposeful sampling was employed to identify participants for this study. Specifically, I worked with key staff and administrators at the university to identify 6-10 study participants. Among these were staff from departments such as the Educational Opportunity Program, Student Life and Leadership, Black Resource Center, and other departments and people committed to Black student success. The departments listed

above were uniquely suited to yield study participants as they contained the institutional agents working most closely with a variety of Black students.

Participants

The key staff described above were asked to identify 6-10 currently enrolled, full-time Black students. For the purposes of this study, participants were initially those defined by De Walt (2011) as “those who are considered and/or identify as African American, Black, and/or of African descent based on their lived scripts resulting from being the heirs to the legacy of U.S. enslavement and the subsequential historical movements that occurred” (pp.483-484). And while the majority of the students in this study were within the above definition, one identified as an African immigrant. The students had a GPA of at least 2.9, were at least in their third year, and were on track to graduate. The assumption behind the GPA requirement is that grades in roughly the 85th percentile, are evidence of a reasonable mastery of subject matter, analytical ability, and understanding of academic requirements. The students in this study also had some level of affiliation and engagement with the university and/or occupied positions of leadership. Overall, study participants were those who had good grades, were engaged in leadership activities, had strong community involvement, and had established relationships with key campus faculty and staff. Recruitment resulted in a total of eight students who met the above criteria and were willing to participate in this study.

The rationale behind this choice of participants was that the Black students finding success within the context of PWIs with low percentages of Black students could provide meaningful insight into the institutional policies, programs, and agents contributing to that success and potentially those that are not. The research showed us that there is still much to be learned about how and why Black students achieve success at PWIs. In choosing students in their

third year and beyond, I leveraged their higher levels of experience to gain rich data on both their perceptions and experiences. With regard to the number of participants included in this narrative study, my rationale is based on Creswell's (2012) assertion that "Although many narrative studies examine only a single individual, you may study several individuals in a project, each with a different story that may conflict with or be supportive of each other" (p. 515). It was the goal of this study to use multiple participants to determine the ways that the stories of these students both intersect and diverge. Allowing for a variety of voices and stories in this study provided greater opportunity for deeper and more meaningful comparisons with the added benefit of empowering a greater number of students.

Data Collection

The primary sources of data for this narrative study were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews and photojournal entries on spaces meaningful to their experience at SCU. The semi-structured interview in qualitative research uses open-ended questions to allow participants the space to "voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings" (Creswell, p. 218). It was within this space that the tenets of CRT were supported and the voice of study participants took the foreground in the research design. The individual semi-structured interview advanced the goals of CRT by providing the safe space for the sharing of the experiential knowledge that students possessed. With regard to the interview questions, Maxwell, (2013) reminds researchers to take care in understanding the relationship between research questions and interview questions. He asserted that our research questions are the phenomena that we seek to understand, while our interview questions are our method for gaining that understanding. Also, with Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement

framework as a guiding lens of this research, interview questions asked participants to reflect on their success and achievement rather than on deficits.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on the research questions that explored both the internal and external factors that Black students perceived to be the primary contributors to their success as well as tell the stories of their lived experiences in higher education. The interview protocol began with a section designed to gather demographic and background information to include age, gender, academic major, parents'/guardians' highest educational level, and socioeconomic status. The subsequent section was made up of open-ended questions designed to elicit the stories of study participants as well as their perceptions of the factors contributing to their success. Upon completion of the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to submit a photo of a campus space accompanied by a journal entry that explained why they chose the space and its meaning to them.

Research Design Overview

The following procedures were followed for the successful collection of data for this study:

- Individual face-to-face interview
- Collection of photojournal entries
- Follow-up individual interview

To begin this research collaboration, study participants were asked to engage in a face-to-face interview that took 60-90 minutes. Next, participants submitted photojournal entries that provided more meaningful insight into their lived experiences. Finally, after gathering and analyzing the participants' stories, we engaged in a final face-to-face interview to ensure that I have accurately captured and retold the story they wished to tell. The goal of this study was to

engage the participant as a true partner in the entire process of data collection and analysis so that both the lived story of the participant and the story of the research could be told. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Data Analysis

Once data were collected, I began the process of restorying. Restorying as defined by Creswell (2012) is the “process in which the researcher gathers stories, analyzes them for key elements of the story (e.g. time, place, plot, and scene), and then rewrites the story to place it in a chronological sequence” (p. 509). Vital to the restorying process was the in-depth examination of the raw data to find important elements of the story and the re-sequencing of those elements in a way that followed a logical progression. This allowed for a greater clarity of the story being told by the participant (Creswell, 2012). After conducting the interview, the conversation was transcribed using the Rev.com transcription application. Next, the data was manually retranscribed according to the key elements of the participants’ story. Once the key elements were identified, the story was organized according to the story elements outlined in Creswell (2012): setting, characters, actions, problem, and resolution. The results of this process and the subsequent collaboration with study participants is captured in the findings of chapter 4.

Aligned with the restorying process was the illumination of the story the research sought to tell. Coding the data allowed for greater insight and understanding of the data and facilitated the synthesis of the data into broad themes that help to tell the participants’ collective story and provide greater insight into the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2012). After reading through the raw data, the text was divided into segments which were labeled with codes and checked for redundancy. The codes were then reduced into a smaller number of themes that

aided in the representation and interpretation of findings according to the questions posed by this study.

Validity

According to Creswell (2012), it is of utmost importance that both findings and interpretation of those findings are accurate. As I sought to both understand and tell the story of study participants, I employed a number of methods to ensure that my time with each participant was authentic and accurately represented. Member checking, defined by Creswell (2012) as the process by which the researcher collaborates with study participants to verify the accuracy of the account, was employed as a strategy to validate the findings of this study. Closely related to member checking was the ability to validate the accuracy of findings through the close relationship that was built with research participants. According to Moen (2006), “This includes building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking to ascertain whether there are any misunderstandings and misinformation” (p. 65).

Ethical Considerations/Participant Risk

Creswell (2012) outlined ethical issues to consider in narrative research which included participants’ unwillingness or inability to tell the real story, the risk that researchers report stories that are not theirs to tell, the chance that the voice of the participant can be lost in the findings of the research, the question of what the researcher gains at the expense of the participant, and whether there are long-lasting negative effects of the participants’ engagement in this research study. Many of the validity procedures described above mitigated the damage posed by these ethical considerations. Specifically, ongoing collaboration and negotiation with participants on the accuracy of their story as well as obtaining their permission to interpret and report their stories addressed the issues of story ownership and participant voice. In addition, every

precaution was made to ensure the safety, confidentiality, and privacy of study participants. It should be noted that this was a voluntary study, and participants had the option at every stage of the process to opt out for any reason if they so chose. Confidentiality of participants was ensured using the following measures as outlined by Sieber and Tolich (2013):

1. Participants were presented with information about the safeguards to their safety and the confidentiality of their information in the informed consent agreement signed by both participant and researcher at the start of the research process.
2. Participant names were not used in the transcription and restorying process. Pseudonyms were used in place of participant names.
3. Transcription and analysis of data took place in the privacy of my home.
4. All notes and information used in this study were destroyed after successful dissertation defense.
5. Anything discussed during interviews was kept confidential unless a conflict arose with my role as a mandated reporter.

Researcher Positionality

As the researcher conducting this study, I recognized my position as a Black, female, first generation college graduate from a low-income background who attended the institution used as a setting in this study. I experienced many of the challenges so clearly described in the existing literature and recognized this experience as a driver of my desire to pursue Black student success as a topic of study. I also recognized my further experience as a student affairs professional at this school and the ways that I have attempted to advocate for and support students. In my work over the last 20 years, I have encountered many students of color facing the same challenges I did. I was aware that my desire to contribute to the dialogue on Black student success came

directly from my own experiences with higher education, both positive and negative, and as both student and educator. While I recognized and appreciated the fact that I was not neutral on this topic, I used all methods at my disposal to ensure that my position remained in the proper context and that all ethical considerations were explored. In my study of this topic, I endeavored to follow the example set by Peshkin (1998) who said “I do not therefore exercise my subjectivity. I do rather, enable myself to manage it-to preclude it from being unwittingly burdensome-as I progress through collecting, analyzing, and writing up my data” (p. 20). To this end, I employed the researcher identity memo described by Maxwell (2013) as a tool to “help you examine your goals, experiences, assumptions, feelings, and values as they relate to your research, and to discover what resources and potential concerns your identity and experience may create” (p.34). The researcher identity memo was key in helping me to analyze my analysis and maintain a consistent awareness of the choices I made and questions (and follow-up questions) I asked in this study. In addition to using myself as a critical partner in the research process, I also invited the perspective of colleagues as fresh pairs of eyes that provided me insight on the integrity and consistency of my research process.

Limitations of the Study

This narrative study engaged eight students as study participants. While a small number of participants would be considered a limitation in a quantitative study, Creswell (2012) asserted that in qualitative study, our goal is not to generalize to larger numbers, but to engage with, and understand a phenomenon more meaningfully to gain a deeper understanding that has the potential to benefit both research and practice. I noted above that narrative research often uses one participant, but that per Creswell (2012), multiple participants can be engaged in a single narrative study. While the use of multiple participants in a narrative study can pose questions

about a researcher's ability to fairly and equitably give voice to the stories of all study participants it was not a concern in this study. It was through the use of the measures described above and the leveraging of my position as a researcher with a vested interest in the well-being and empowerment of all students that mitigated this limitation.

Chapter 4: Findings

This study, using the lenses of critical race theory (CRT) and the anti-deficit achievement framework (ADAF), examined the experiences and highlighted the stories of Black students achieving success at a predominately White institution in Southern California. For the purposes of this study, CRT contends that racism is endemic to our society as well as our institutions and further serves to maintain the position of Whites as the beneficiaries of systemic inequities. Additionally, CRT declares that equity can only be achieved if there is a balance to the dominant discourse and the voice of the marginalized is heard (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As a complement to CRT, Harper's anti-deficit achievement framework challenges research and practice to reframe our inquiry and examine the experiences of Black students based on their assets and not their deficits (Harper, 2012; Warren, Douglas & Howard, 2016). To this end, there are key attributes of the study design that reflect a grounding in these frameworks. They are summarized in table 1.

Table 1: Study Attributes in Relation to Theoretical Frameworks

Study Attribute	Critical Race Theory	Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework
Qualitative/narrative design	X	
Research questions	X	X
Counternarrative/storytelling/participant voice	X	X
Historical/economic inequity as context for study	X	
Focus on asset-based research	X	X
Participants as partners in research	X	
Interview protocol	X	X

The findings of this study show students' perceptions of a variety of factors that have contributed to their success and achievement as well as provided a greater understanding of their

lived experience at a predominately White institution. While each of their stories is unique, the data show common themes across their perspectives and experiences. The data yielded 58 codes that were then organized into themes and subthemes organized according to the two research questions asked by this study:

- What do Black students perceive as the most important factors contributing to their success in higher education?
- What is the lived experience of successful Black college students?

The relationship of the themes and sub themes to the research questions is outlined in table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Research Questions and Related Themes/Sub themes

Q. 1- What Do Black Students Perceive As The Most Important Factors Contributing To Their Success In Higher Education?	
Themes	Sub Themes/Codes
Early Influences	
Family	Parents/Other Family Members
Environment	Peers/Teachers/Counselors/Advanced Coursework
Challenges	
Personal Characteristics	
Academic Self-Concept	
Self-Esteem	Self-Confidence/Self-Determination/Self-Doubt
Purpose/Motivation	Sense of Responsibility/Spirituality
Racial Cohesion	Black Identity/Black Pride/Black Love
Stereotype Threat Management	
The College Environment	
Faculty	Black Faculty
Staff/Other Institutional Agents	
Peers	Peer Quality/Peer Support
Programs	
Success	Success Defined/Success Achieved
Q. 2 - What Is The Lived Experience of Successful Black College Students?	
Themes	Sub Themes/Codes
Expectations	
First Impressions	Culture Shock/Challenges
Overall Experiences	Living/Learning/Involvement/Belonging/Community

Approach to Data Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews conducted via Zoom and from an additional photo journal submission. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Rev.com. Once all transcripts were checked for accuracy, the approach to analysis followed the narrative process outlined in Creswell (2012). First, the data collected from the

transcript of each participant were reorganized or retold to fit into a logical progression of time and place. Next, the story drafts were shared with each participant with an invitation to provide input, make corrections, and most importantly to verify that this was the story they wished to tell. The stories were then finalized for inclusion within the first section of this chapter. Next, I began the initial round of open coding to get an initial understanding of the new story that the data told that was independent of the themes already established by the literature review. Once I concluded this first round of open coding, I re-examined the codes for alignment with the themes brought forward from my review of the literature. A total of 58 codes were identified and while a number of new codes emerged from the data, they generally aligned with the themes and/or sub themes brought forward by the literature review.

This chapter summarizes the data collected from eight semi-structured interviews designed to explore both the internal and external factors that Black students perceive to be the primary contributors to their success as well as tell the stories of their lived experiences in higher education. The interview protocol began by gathering demographic and background information to include age, gender, academic major, parents'/guardians' highest educational level, and socioeconomic status. The subsequent section was made up of open-ended questions informed by CRT and ADAF and designed to elicit the stories of study participants, explore their definitions of success as well as their perceptions of the factors contributing to it. Along with the data collected from individual interviews, students completed a photo journaling assignment to elicit a visual rendering of the spaces meaningful to their lived experience at SCU.

Data Analysis

The Setting

Participants in this study were all students at Southern California University (SCU) (pseudonym). SCU enrolls just under 30,000 undergraduates and is nationally recognized for its research, study abroad programs, and diversity of its student body. Of the 30,000 undergraduate students, 54% are women, 45% are men and less than 1% identify as nonbinary. SCU currently enrolls 1,236 Black students who account for 4.2% of the undergraduate population.

Profile of Participants

This study focused on successful Black students pursuing a bachelor's degree at a PWI. A total of eight women and men were interviewed for this narrative study. Five of the students were women and three were men. All participants identified as Black or African American, and one participant also identified as an immigrant. They were between the ages of 19 and 25 with the average age of 22 years. At the time of data collection, all were full-time undergraduates at SCU. Seven out of the eight participants began as first-time freshmen and one was a transfer student from a local community college. All participants had some level of engagement with SCU through various organizations and programs, and all were employed either on or off campus. Participants had a variety of majors to include Business, Psychology, Political Science, Public Health, and Interdisciplinary Studies and had an average GPA of 3.22. As it was the goal of this study to include participants with a level of experience that elicits a more meaningful reflection of their experiences, all students were either upperclassmen or recent graduates of SCU. Six out of the eight participants graduated in May 2020, and the remaining two are a junior and a senior. With regard to family background, five identified their socioeconomic status as middle income, with two identifying as lower middle and one as upper middle. Additionally,

while two of the study participants are first-generation college students, all of the participants had at least one parent with some college experience, and with the exception of one outlier, the mothers were generally more highly educated than the fathers. The following chart summarizes the participant demographics:

Table 3: Participant Demographics

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Education (Mother)	Education (Father)	SES	Class/ Grad Yr	Major	GPA
Ailene	F	22	Master's	High School Diploma	Upper Middle	May 2020	Business Management	2.9
Chase	M	23	Bachelor's	Bachelor's	Lower Middle	May 2020	Business Administration	3.3
Isaac	M	22	Associate's	Bachelor's	Middle	May 2020	Interdisciplinary Studies (Africana Studies, Economics, Psychology)	3.6
Isabel	F	19	Some college	Associate's	Middle	Junior	Interdisciplinary Studies (Psychology, Africana Studies, Sociology)	3.4
Kendall	F	21	Master's	Associate's	Middle	Senior	Psychology	3.0
Miles	M	21	Master's	Ph.D.	Middle	May 2020	Political Science	3.4
Morgan	F	25	Associate's (RN)	High School Diploma	Middle	May 2020	Public Health	3.2
Trina	F	21	Associate's	Some High School	Lower Middle	May 2020	Psychology	3.0

Chapter Structure

It is through the lens of both CRT and ADAF that the data collected for this study were analyzed in order to achieve the following goals:

- Highlight the experiences and achievements of Black college students as a counternarrative to the existing discourse.
- Add to the existing body of asset-based scholarship by examining Black students' own perceptions of the factors that contribute to their achievement.
- Incorporate study participants as partners in the research process, tell their stories, and amplify their voices.

To that end, the remainder of this chapter first engages in a vertical storytelling structure which highlights the voices and individual stories of each participant. These stories are the product of the re-storying process as outlined by Creswell (2012). They are also the result of the ongoing collaboration between this researcher and the study participants. There are eight stories, and each begins with a quote that denotes a key experience, perspective, or turning point for study participants. Following the students' stories, the storytelling structure becomes a horizontal one as the larger story is told across their collective perceptions and experiences in relation to the research questions asked by this study. Finally, a selection of the students' photo journaling assignments highlights spaces on campus and the meaning they attribute to their influence on their lived experience.

Their Stories

Ailene (all names are pseudonyms)

"I think I am very capable of doing just as much as a White student in my position. I'm just as qualified to go to school to get a degree, become something."

Ailene is a quietly confident 22-year-old San Diego local who counted herself fortunate to be surrounded by family. She credited her mother as one of her greatest role models and supporters on her journey to college but appreciated the positive influence that other family members have had as well. She had some early difficulties in making the transition to a middle school that was outside of her neighborhood and predominately White. She was challenged with feelings of self-doubt and isolation but still managed to take advantage of the resources offered and begin advanced coursework that would prepare her for high school.

In high school, Ailene continued to pursue advanced coursework and felt that the presence of her peers and a supportive counselor kept her on track. She was also an athlete and later became the captain of the track team. As she began to plan for college, she did not have much support in the actual process of applying, but she did have a great deal of emotional support from her entire family.

In spite of the fact that she had never been to the campus, SCU was Ailene's top choice and dream school. She had a mild interest in attending an HBCU but did not want to go that far away from home. She entered SCU confident that it would challenge her academically and prepare her for her chosen career. Upon entering SCU, Ailene found the transition to be both interesting and rough. As the reality of the difficult balance between school and home was setting in, she also had a death in her family. Upon reflection of that time during her first year, she realized that she had been suffering from depression.

In her second year, as Ailene began to find and expand her peer group and get more involved with organizations like the Afrikan Student Union (ASU) and Student African American Sisterhood (SAAS), things got better. She spent time with friends in places like the East Commons, also known as Li'l Africa and the newly-formed Black Resource Center (BRC). Because she is a native of San Diego, Ailene also engaged with the larger Black community in San Diego and saw this as an opportunity to maintain strong connections in Southeast San Diego and to have greater options for involvement beyond SCU.

Ailene cited a number of peers, faculty, and staff who have supported her success at SCU. Particularly, she cited those in the Scholars Program, the Educational Opportunity Program, and the Black Resource Center as the main facilitators of her connection to the Black community at SCU. She was also able to study abroad due to the influence of a Black staff

member and appreciated the ways that this experience forced her out of her comfort zone. She was particularly appreciative of organizations like SAAS that brought together Black female students with Black staff and Faculty at SCU because she had a real concern about the scarcity of Black faculty and low numbers of Black students.

Ailene defined success as reaching her goals. She considers herself successful when she fulfills those that she has set for herself, not the expectations of others. She perceived herself as shy, introverted, and confident and saw her confidence as the key to her success both in and out of the classroom. Ailene graduated from SCU with a Bachelor's Degree in Business Management and a Minor in Cultural Proficiency.

Chase

“So one of us is going to be right and one of us is going to be wrong.”

Chase is a 23-year old young man solidly grounded in his identity as a Black man, a scholar, and a leader. He is a native of San Diego and chose SCU so that he could remain close to his family to support his mother and be a role model to his younger brother. Chase grew up with his mother in a single parent household but was also very heavily influenced and supported by his grandparents. He credited the three of them with holding him to high standards and providing the foundation for his solid value system.

Chase has attended predominately White schools for his entire educational career and has grown used to being the only Black student or one of two or three in his classrooms. He saw this as a challenge to set the standard and defy whatever perceptions may have been held about him. Chase did not want to attend his local high school and instead chose to attend an all-boys Catholic school where he could pursue an athletic scholarship opportunity. Chase recognized this

opportunity as a mutually beneficial one and was prepared to accept being used and tokenized as a Black male athlete in exchange for the resources the school would provide.

Due to the challenges of athletic injuries and the death of a family member, Chase was forced to re-examine his priorities in high school. He lost his athletic scholarship but worked out a deal with his mom that kept him in the school. He promised her that if she could support him through high school, he would support himself through college. The death of his little brother's father was the other component of the wake-up call that focused his intent to get to college and to be a role model to his younger brother.

Chase applied to a number of schools but chose SCU because it was local and more importantly, because he received a full-ride Presidential Scholarship and a spot at the Honor's College. Chase appreciated the opportunities for both teaching and learning offered by the Honor's College during his first year and credited that experience with laying the foundation for a decorated and successful college career. As time progressed, Chase began to reach increasingly higher levels of involvement and leadership at SCU. He became a member of a Black fraternity, took a position as a residential advisor, became a mentor for the Harambee Scholars Program, and ultimately became the leader of the largest student-run organization at SCU.

Chase felt a strong sense of belonging in the Black community and used his leadership position to challenge institutional inequities and inconsistencies as well as provide any support at his disposal to support Black students and students of color at SCU. He is very proud to have been instrumental in the founding of the Black Resource Center, but also has a bit of disappointment for the loss of the area described by the students as Li'l Africa. It was the informal, unstructured space that served as a gathering place for Black students before the BRC was opened. He wishes that they could both exist at the same time at SCU.

Chase defines success as relative and further defines it as reaching the goals you set for yourself. He felt that his self-esteem and confidence have contributed to his success because he has always been motivated to push past whatever doubts people may have about him to achieve his goals. He also credited his faith as another factor that has contributed to his success and believes in the power of prayer. Chase has never met his father, and says that his desire to succeed may also be fueled by a desire to show his father what he has missed out on.

Chase appreciated the people and programs that have supported his success over his entire educational career. He also wanted those who lack faith in his ability to succeed to know that he is not the one who will be wrong. He graduated from SCU with a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration with an Honor's Minor in Interdisciplinary Studies. He is pursuing a career in corporate finance with the goal of becoming a Black CEO and role model to Black youth.

Isaac

"I found my voice while being surrounded by little to nobody who looked like me, and it was truly empowering."

Isaac is a 22-year old native of Northern California. He described himself as a consistently academically focused person and credited his parents, and his dad especially, as the reason for his drive and focus. He pursued leadership early in his educational career and became the student body president during his fifth-grade year. He was also regularly recognized throughout his elementary and middle school years for academic excellence. He did note that in his last year of middle school he was accused of academic dishonesty and could not convince his teacher of his innocence. He was traumatized by this experience and regretted not having the

tools and ability at the time to effectively stand up for himself. While he was disappointed by this experience, it did not prevent him from going on to pursue academic success in high school.

In high school, Isaac was a multi-sport athlete and was very active in student government. Also, due to the influence of his counselor, he pursued a greater number of advanced placement courses and achieved a GPA above a 4.0. In addition to his family, Isaac cited the strong influences of his peers and counselor as great supports to his college-going aspirations. During his high school years, Isaac suffered a number of sports injuries that thwarted his plans to pursue athletics at the college level. He was disappointed by this but never doubted that he would still attend college and get a degree.

Isaac decided to attend SCU because he was confident that SCU would provide him the tools he needed to pursue his career goals. Isaac credited social media with helping him to establish early connections with other Black students at SCU. He said that their ability to get to know each other early made it easier to connect and find each other once school started. These connections were important to Isaac because he was feeling increasingly isolated when he went home to Northern California and was glad to have his circle of friends waiting for him when he returned to school. Isaac credited a number of people and places at SCU with providing him the support he needed to be successful at SCU. Some honorable mentions include the Black Resource Center, the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB), the African Student Union, Black sororities and fraternities and a handful of supportive faculty members.

Isaac felt that success is relative and described himself as a person who values significance over success. He felt that he has been successful because he has been in the position to help and guide other students. He acknowledged that while his self-esteem was high, this was not always the case. He grew in this area over his time at SCU and embraced the power that

came with knowing who you are and where you come from. While he was continually frustrated with the reality of how he was perceived as a Black man on campus, he did not let this distract him from his goals. Isaac was proud to have found his voice as a student at SCU and plans to use it for the benefit of others. He graduated from SCU with a Bachelor's Degree in Interdisciplinary Studies with emphasis in Africana Studies, Economics, and Psychology. After graduating from SCU, he attended law school at the University of Oregon.

Isabel

“School’s always been my number one priority, so I’ve never let anybody affect how I do in school regardless.”

Isabel is a focused and determined 19-year old woman from Northern California. She was a self-described high achiever and attributed her drive and success to the influence of her parents, her grandmother, and one of her school counselors. Isabel identified her early love of reading as the foundation to her academic aspirations. In middle school, she took accelerated classes, participated in extracurricular activities, and was a member of the cheerleading squad.

As Isabel entered high school, she continued to excel both in and out of the classroom. She took AP courses and continued as a cheerleader. Everything changed midway through her high school career when she was forced to change high schools because her family needed to relocate. She went from a highly resourced high school to a much less resourced one that did not have as much diversity. She hated her new school and felt out of her element. It was not until she met her counselor at her new school that she got back on the right track. She was quick to note however, that her grades did not suffer during this time because she would never let anything or anyone get in the way of her academic achievement. She just needed a connection and the encouragement necessary to keep her moving forward. It was also at this time that Isabel found an even higher level of focus. She was heavily influenced by Trayvon Martin's murder and the

subsequent trial and decided at that time that she wanted to pursue a legal career in order to fight for social justice.

As Isabel made plans to apply to college, she received a great deal of support from her family and appreciated them for trusting her to make the decision that was right for her. She was sure beyond a doubt that SCU was the school for her and was ready to begin her college career. It was not long though, before the difficulties set in and one of her greatest challenges was money. She was not able to afford to live on campus and was forced to get an off-campus job during her freshman year. She worried and felt unsure about her ability to make it through her first year and suffered through a great deal of anxiety. She leaned heavily on her mother's support to get her through this time.

In spite of her difficulties, Isabel moved forward and characterized her life at SCU as one driven by a self-created routine that supported her academic achievement. She cited the Black Resource Center, the Harambee Scholars Program, and the campus advising office staff as key supporters to her success. She also credited a Black counseling psychologist at SCU as a great support to her emotional and mental well-being during her second year at SCU. She said that once she was seeing the Black counselor, she could feel the difference in the quality of care she received in comparison to her first counselor who was White.

Isabel defined success as the achievement of the goals she sets for herself. She's a firm believer in getting it done and believes that she has achieved success, not just in getting good grades, but in the extra effort she employed to get her there. Isabel had a complicated view of her confidence, but saw herself as a smart Black woman who knew how to get her work done and did not procrastinate. Isabel is in her third year at SCU and her major is Interdisciplinary Studies with emphasis in Psychology, Africana Studies, and Sociology.

Kendall

“I literally took the reins of my life and said ‘Look, you can’t do this no more.’”

Kendall is a 21-year old native of Maryland. She has tremendous pride in herself as a Black woman and has achieved success in spite of her early challenges. Kendall described her childhood with her mom as being a challenge because her mother had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and battled depression and suicidal thoughts. Kendall later found out that her mother had been mis-diagnosed and that the treatment was actually making things worse. She cited this mis-diagnosis as evidence of the systemic oppression present in health care. In spite of these challenges, she characterized her relationship with her mother as a beautiful one and described her as her best friend.

Kendall described her middle school years as the most difficult of her life. Along with the challenges of her mother’s mental health, she was being bullied in school. She went through her own mental challenges that included severe depression and described herself as being in a really bad state. In spite of this she never wavered in her certainty that she would go to college. She was grateful to the AVID program for giving her the early exposure to college that kept her focused on her goals. Kendall was also heavily influenced by the culture of HBCUs, (majorette dancers specifically!) and was sure during middle school that she would pursue a college career at an HBCU.

As Kendall transitioned into high school, many things changed. She identified high school as a turning point where she transformed from a painfully shy victim of bullying into who she feels she is today. This is when she made the decision to no longer be a victim and to be in control of her life going forward. With regard to influences, Kendall’s parents and her grandmother were her biggest supporters as she navigated her journey towards college. While

they were not able to provide a great deal of guidance, she found their support to be solid and unwavering.

It was also during high school that Kendall realized that her college aspirations were evolving and she began to be interested in attending school in California. While her love of the HBCU culture didn't change, she realized that she needed to fulfill her desire to be far away from Maryland and to solidify her focus on a career in Psychology.

When Kendall arrived on SCU's campus, she was surprised by the distinct lack of visibility of the Black community and wondered where all the Black people were. She was worried until she got into the Harambee Scholars Program. She remembers the relief she felt when she walked into a class filled with 300 Black students and was happy to have found her community at SCU. Kendall was supported and encouraged by her older peers to get involved, be impactful, and make the most of her college experience. Kendall's list of accomplishments and involvements includes multiple roles in the Afrikan Student Union including President, the SDSU Diamonds, Out of State Admissions, and a host of planning committees for high school conferences as well as community service activities.

Kendall defines success in terms of the impact she has had on others. She also knows that her self-esteem has played a huge role in her success at SDSU. It has evolved over time and she has reached a point where she knows her worth, has trust in herself, and was able to let go of the thoughts and feelings that were keeping her from her potential. Kendall also credited her peer group, her faith, the strength of her character, and a fire in her to show the world what she is capable of as contributors to her success. Kendall is proud of the impact she has had on campus thus far and plans to continue this in her next year at SDSU. She is a fourth-year student at SCU with a major in Psychology and a minor in Social Change.

Miles

“So, what’s going on here with my identity?”

Miles is a 21-year old African man who embraces his role as a leader, role model and change-maker. Miles was born in Ethiopia and was brought to the United States as a baby with his parents who were seeking educational opportunities. Mile’s early years were plagued by severe health issues that were subsequently solved but left his family with medical debt that contributed to the family’s financial instability while his parents were students. In spite of these challenges, Miles credited his parents with exposing him to the world of academics and his high-achieving older sisters with inspiring his competitive nature. He said that reading was his thing, and that he would read at least one book a week when he was in elementary school.

Miles’ transition to middle school was a challenge because he had to leave the peers and the friends he was familiar with and go to a school that was different from the one his older sisters had attended. It was at this point that he shifted his identity because he was tired of being made fun of for being smart. He was willing to do whatever it took to fit in in middle school, so he stopped reading and taking honors classes and decided to join the band.

As Miles entered high school, he was back in the position of coming in with no friends because his middle school friends attended the rival high school and he went back to the school that was attended by his elementary school peers. As a result of the influence of his parents and older sisters, he did begrudgingly enter high school taking two honors classes. He was still very involved in band but was interested in math and more willing to take more demanding coursework. His turning point came during his junior year when he had his first Black male teacher. He was impressed by his teacher’s intelligence and began to see him as a role model. It was at this time that he realized that it actually was okay to be smart and his identity as a scholar

was re-established. Miles' identity was further affected by the shooting of Trayvon Martin and he began to see how important his identity as a Black male mattered within the context of the United States and its history of systematic racism. Miles knew about racism in the US but somehow never felt like it was connected to him. He realizes that even though his upbringing was different, he is not that different from his Black peers.

As he began to explore his college options, Miles was drawn to SCU because of the marching band. He was both relieved and excited to receive the SCU Presidential Scholarship. As Miles reflects on his beginnings at SCU, he realized that his identity formation as an African male was heavily informed by his ever-evolving connection and relationship to the Black student community. While he felt in the beginning as if he did not fit in, through the relationships he formed, he realized how much diversity exists within the Black community and the confidence he felt to say "okay, I belong here" was reinforced.

While Miles was building and strengthening his connections within the Black community, he was also doing this within the larger campus community as he began his leadership career at SDSU. It was through another Black student that he had met in the Harambee Scholars Program that he was introduced to student government and went on to become the President of the system-wide student organization. He was proud to say that he has been a role model and has inspired a lot of students to find their voice.

Miles acknowledged that he has achieved success at SCU and defined it as being able to do what you set out to do, and doing your best with what you are given. He cited his curiosity, his analytical nature, and his courage to speak up (in spite of being a self-described natural introvert) as contributors to his success. He said that while his self-confidence has fluctuated over time, he appreciated the role that his leadership journey has played in increasing his

confidence. Miles struggled a lot with the question of where he belonged. He did not know whether it was the African community, the African American community, the Political Science Community or the leadership community. What he realized is that he is a part of all of them and belongs to all of them and that there is power in understanding that. Miles graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science and went on to pursue a Master's degree at UC Berkeley's School of Public Policy.

Morgan

"I always knew that I was going to finish, so I just wasn't going to give up."

Morgan is a determined 25-year old transfer student who is a native of San Diego who said that her journey towards higher education has been a long one. She said that she has known that she was going to college since she was in middle school and has always had excellent grades, but she has also been plagued with self-doubt at many times along the way. Morgan credited her teachers in middle school and high school with providing her the inspiration to move forward. She was also grateful for the college exposure she received through the AVID Program. With regard to early influences, Morgan credited her mother, her sister, and her cousins who have all pursued higher education as strong influences on her plans to get a college degree.

Morgan graduated from high school in 2013 and enrolled at the local community college in the Fall. She cited a fear of rejection as the main reason she did not apply to a four-year university and regretted that she did not seize the opportunity to go straight to college after high school. When she arrived at the community college, she was still unsure of what she wanted to study and changed her major multiple times. This extended her time there because she could not always get the classes she needed. Her time at the community college was taking longer than she expected and she felt discouraged because friends she graduated from high school with were

already graduating from the university. In spite of feeling behind, Morgan knew that she would finish and was determined not to give up or get lost. She completed the work to transfer to SCU in Fall 2017. As far as her expectations of what to expect when she arrived at SCU, Morgan thought that SCU would be bigger, more academically challenging, and have many more opportunities to engage, network, and be involved in campus life.

As Morgan reflected on the reality of her experience at SCU, she struggled with feeling like she was a part of the campus and always felt a little bit out of place. She felt like everyone could tell she was a transfer student and initially did not engage very much at all with the campus. She said that while she definitely regrets it now, she just went to class and went home. As time went on, Morgan did become more involved in campus life and began to attend ASU meetings with her friend who had transferred the year before. This friend also helped her connect with the Black Resource Center and this inspired her to seek out greater connections and become more involved with the Black community at SCU. Morgan felt that while the Black community is small, it is inviting. She appreciated the collegiality and family-feel of the BRC and felt that students had strong relationships with each other. She had plans to host a paint party in the BRC this past Spring and regretted that COVID got in the way of her efforts to become more involved during her last semester.

A recurring theme for Morgan on her educational journey has been her self-doubt. While she has definitely had positive influences, this has been a challenge to her success. In spite of her doubts however, she does not give up and continues to work toward her goals. In addition to her involvement with the BRC, Morgan studied abroad, participated in an internship program related to her public health major, and is currently an AVID mentor at the high school she attended. She

uses all the lessons she has learned to encourage high school students to take advantage of resources, apply to college, and get the most out of their college experience.

Morgan defined success in terms of being happy with who and where she is, both personally and professionally. She acknowledged that she has achieved success thus far and is proud that her hard work and determination have paid off. Morgan graduated from SCU with a Bachelor's Degree in Public Health and plans to pursue graduate programs in Student Affairs.

Trina

"I know y'all looking, so I'm just going to go ahead and pass y'all up."

Trina is a tenacious 21-year old native of San Bernardino, California who credits her own mindset as a strong contributor to her college goals. She said that in her early years, because no one in her immediate family went to college, there was not much discussion about it in her household. It was not until later that extended family members who had degrees began to have an influence on her aspirations. She also pointed to her 7th grade year in middle school when she had her first Black teacher as a key moment in her ability to see herself going to college. While she was glad to have a Black teacher as a role model, Trina was still frustrated that she was never exposed to her own history in her middle school years. In spite of this, she decided that she would just pass all the tests, do what was required of her and keep pushing forward.

For Trina, it really was not until high school that her college-going aspirations took shape and became more focused. She reflected that she could not clearly see it for herself until she was surrounded by other students who had the same aspirations. In high school as she began to take AP classes, she was still frustrated by the absence of her own history in the courses she took, but enjoyed being in an environment where college was talked about and encouraged. She also found the Upward Bound Program helpful because through this program, she was actually able to visit

colleges and gain a better understanding of how to get there. With regard to the application process, Trina said that in spite of the fact that she participated in Upward Bound, her peers were her main support in getting her applications done. She recalled spending a lot of time in Starbucks working with her friends to get them done and says she did not receive much help or guidance from the school counselors. While she was initially very interested in attending an HBCU, she found the costs to be daunting and decided not to leave the state. She utilized fee waivers to apply to public schools in California.

As she entered SCU, Trina quickly realized that she had not been adequately prepared for the rigors of college coursework and struggled during her first year. She also experienced the culture shock that comes with being the only Black person on her dorm floor and being the only one in classes of over 300 students. She credited her mother with being a great source of support during difficult times by giving words of encouragement and helping her keep things in perspective.

In spite of the challenges she faced, Trina established a routine for herself at SCU that kept her focused on her studies as she began to connect with the BRC and other Black students on campus. She also described positive relationships with Black faculty as vital contributors to her success. By senior year, Trina's college experience was filled with a variety of jobs and involvements. She worked as an Admissions Ambassador and for an ice cream shop. She also worked as an academic coach at the BRC and enjoyed helping other Black students find their way at SCU.

Trina defined success as her ability to fulfill the goals she sets for herself. She acknowledged that while there are times where she questioned whether she could actually accomplish her goals, she overcame her doubts and continued to believe in herself. She said this

helped her to achieve her best. She said that being the only Black person in a large class just made her more competitive. She was aware that people were watching and was happy to show what she was capable of. She did not want to be defined by where she was from and was determined to create her own life, not one that was written for her. While Trina acknowledged that she has achieved success so far, she also said the following: “I see myself as a successful woman, but I also know that there are other things that I would like to achieve, so my success hasn’t been fulfilled yet.” Trina received her Bachelor’s Degree in Psychology and will pursue graduate study in School Psychology for a career as an Education Specialist.

What Do Black Students Perceive As The Most Important Factors Contributing To Their Success In Higher Education?

Themes

This section of chapter 4 will address the themes that have risen in relation to the research questions posed in this study. With regard to the first research question, the factors that study participants felt contributed to their success fell into three overall areas to include early influences, their personal attributes, and the college environment. While the individual stories of these students have been highlighted in the prior section of this chapter, their collective story in relation to these themes will now be examined.

Early Influences

While most of the themes and sub themes identified as an answer to this research question were either brought forward from, or aligned with those in the literature review, there were new themes that emerged from the data that will be brought forward as well. One such theme was the level of importance that participants placed on the early influences that facilitated their achievement and success. According to the students in this study, early emotional support

and high standards from family, a strong peer group, and caring teachers and counselors were very important to their forward progress. Below are participant accounts of how they perceived these early influences.

Family

Parents. As the participants in this study reflected on the beginnings to their journey towards higher education, all cited the supportive influence of their families as the key factor in their early aspirations to attend college. When asked about the greatest influence, participants consistently credited their parents with providing the initial emotional support needed to nurture their goals for higher education. And while the participants in this study were a mixture of first generation and non-first-generation students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, these distinctions did not seem to factor into the level of support they felt they received. Ailene, whose mother has a college degree, felt the pressure to follow in her mother's path and remembers her mother saying, "You have to match my degree or do better." Likewise, Chase said this of his college-educated mom: "My mom, who graduated from San Diego State, she was really big on education. And for her, excellence wasn't a surprise, it was a standard". Isabel, whose parents did not go to college, says, "It was always instilled in me that I was going to college. My parents, they were like 'I don't care if I didn't finish college. You're going to college'". Trina, who recognized the limited ability that her parents had to understand the college experience was still appreciative of their willingness to "just try to give me words of encouragement throughout". Isabel, whose father was "in and out of prison due to DUIs" was of great support to her and in spite of his circumstance, was very supportive of her college aspirations and loved hearing her success stories. She said, "it made me want to strive to be good so that I could make him proud".

Other Family Members. While parents were the most clear and consistent early influence on their college-going aspirations and subsequent success, participants spoke of other family members to include grandparents, aunts, and uncles as well as cousins and siblings.

Ailene, who was heavily influenced by her older cousin said the following:

I wanted to follow my cousin's footsteps. She's basically like a sister to me and she always did advanced placement stuff and honors this, and was doing all those things. And I wanted to basically follow that because it was working out. We're basically the same type of person. So once I got to middle school, when I had the opportunity to, I was able to take a higher math class.

Grandparents also played a strong role in the lives of many of the study participants. Trina's grandfather did not have a college degree, but she appreciated that he trusted her to always do what was best for herself and pledged to support her "all the way through". Isabel, whose grandmother was a strong influence on her says, "my grandma is a very big part of my life. I love to make her proud". Chase also said that his grandparents played a big role in his life. He credited them with instilling in him the "idea of what it meant to be a good person and a good Black man, and a man of faith".

Without exception, all participants in this study cited the influence of their families as the foundation for their college and career aspirations. While they felt their parents to be the most influential, they were clear that it was a variety of family members who provided both emotional and motivational support on their journey towards higher education.

Environment

Teachers. Study participants identified external support of their college aspirations during their primary and secondary school years in four main areas: teachers, counselors, programs, and peers. Of these, the teacher's influence was most regularly highlighted as a key to the success for many students in this study. Morgan, who in spite of good grades, has been

plagued with self-doubt throughout her educational journey, said the following about the influence of her teachers:

Until I got to high school, my grades were always super good. I had straight As, and my teachers always told me, "You have great potential." That's when I really had self-doubt in all of that stuff, but I had teachers who told me don't believe those thoughts. They were really positive for me. I had a teacher, my AP lit teacher for my senior year. She really encouraged me to achieve just anything, all my goals and stuff like that. I still keep in touch with her.

Kendall, who has aspired to study Psychology since high school values the relationship she built with her high school Psychology teacher and said, "we became great friends and I was a teacher's assistant. Because she saw how much I liked psychology and she was like 'I feel like every time I teach Psychology, you're picking my brain, I'm not picking yours'".

While the role of the teacher has been important, many students highlighted the added value and importance of having Black teachers along their educational journey. Kendall counted herself as "blessed to have Black teachers and staff in my childhood", and Trina, who had her first Black teacher in seventh grade said,

She's always been an influential force into wanting to go into higher education, and she was the first Black teacher I've ever had. I was like "okay, representation definitely matters because I'm like I see what you're doing. I kind of want to get like you.

And Miles, who departed from his scholarly identity during middle school in an effort to fit in had the following to say about his first Black male teacher during his junior year of high school:

I related to him, I was like, "Oh, this guy's smart." And I think that, at that point, now that I look back, I see it. I think junior year of high school is when I woke back up and went back, like "I kind of like this smart stuff again." I could take more AP classes.

Counselors. Along with teachers, study participants also identified school counselors who supported their college-going efforts. Isaac credited his high school counselor with keeping him motivated. He said that she was a resource when he needed classes and would push him out

of his comfort zone when he “was being lazy”. He admitted that it was due to her support that he achieved a GPA above 4.0 during his senior year. Isabel, was forced to switch schools in the middle of her high school career and struggled to adjust to her new environment. She said the following about her counselor:

I hated that school my first year, because I was just upset that I had to be there. I was just not in my element anymore. But there was this counselor named Mr. Palmer, and he kind of got me back on the right track. He was always encouraging me to work hard, and he was always making sure that I was doing okay and everything.

Intermingled with the students’ discussion of their early experiences with counselors, was the sub theme of early exposure to accelerated courses. For Ailene, a higher-level math class in middle school, led to advanced courses in high school. Similarly, Isabel began accelerated classes in sixth grade which kept her on track to take more rigorous high school courses. Also, as noted above, Isaac’s counselor steadily pushed him to take advanced coursework. Almost all participants were able to access Advanced Placement coursework during their high school careers and while counselors were not credited as consistently as teachers were among study participants as key to their success, it was clear that the role they played as points of access to the advanced coursework the students needed to be college ready was a meaningful one.

Programs. With regard to early college exposure programs, six of the study participants cited them as key to their exposure both to college in general as well as the application process. Half of the students in this study participated in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program. Both Ailene and Kendall described it as a program that prepared them for college, and Isaac said this of his experience in the program,

Yeah, the teachers were good. They also had friends and stuff who had attended colleges, and they were coming to us starting in middle school. And then, we took trips. There were even overnight trips. The one specifically I remember, we went to Stanford, San Jose State. I think Cal, Stanford, and San Jose State.

Morgan, who participated in AVID in middle school, worked as an AVID tutor at a local high school and saw this as an opportunity to help students like herself and “have an impact on how they see themselves”. Trina did not participate in the AVID program, but said,

I did participate in Upward Bound, and we went to travel to a couple colleges, and again, I had to apply to get into that. It wasn't even a big application. I don't want to say big application, what is the word? It wasn't broadcasted. I think a teacher told me about it, and I was like oh, that sounds like I want to go visit some colleges. Let's do that. My family didn't take me to visit colleges physically, so that program definitely gave me the opportunity to even go look at UCSD, UCR, even if it was in my backyard.

Chase also identified local community programs designed to support Black males in their college-going endeavors like *The Links Achievers* and *Boys To Men* as supports to his college going goals. He said, “those two programs were big because they were Black professionals”. He noted the strong positive influence that Black professional role models had on his aspirations. In addition to these school and community programs, the students were also heavily involved in a number of extra-curricular activities in middle and high school to include student government, competitive athletics, band, and cheerleading. Next, participants will discuss the role that early peer groups have played in their college going plans and aspirations.

Peers. The role that a like-minded peer group played in their college-going aspirations has been identified by seven of the eight participants as very important to their ability to remain focused on their goals within the K-12 setting. Trina, who was always encouraged by her family to go to college said, “I didn't really see it for myself until high school when I surrounded myself around people who were going to go to college”. Ailene also pointed to the people she surrounded herself with in her AP classes as a source of support in high school, and Chase said the following about the importance of his peer group in high school:

At Saints it was a group of maybe 20, 25 Black kids and we stuck together so close. And we were able to, I think, support each other through a lot of the BS that we were dealing with when it came to Saints to where we still talk until today. We link up and we have fun, and we go out. And it all started because we were able to love each other and support each other during that time.

Isaac, whose early peer group was also a source of support and motivation said,

My group was one that started in elementary school and grew up all the way to high school, so we picked up a few here and there from neighboring middle schools or high school. And so it was a tight 28. There wasn't one that didn't go to college.

While peers were a source of support for most of the study participants, Kendall, who was bullied for most of her childhood, was motivated to leave her peer group. She said the following:

I really just wanted to leave Maryland. I feel like a lot of my life in Maryland wasn't very positive. So, until high school, but even then, I was like I don't want to be stuck with the same people I've grown up with all my life. Not all my life but since junior year, I mean since middle school and elementary school and then see them another four years.

Study participants show that whether the influence was positive, or in Kendall's case a negative one, peers were a strong influence on their perceptions of their ability and eagerness to explore their college options. In spite of the many positive early influences in the participants' lives, they also faced challenges as they moved forward.

Challenges. While the study participants generally found their journey towards higher education to be one filled with supportive people and programs, they still encountered a number of challenges and difficulties that they were forced to overcome. Many of them pointed to the isolation they felt in their early years as a barrier to their progress. Ailene, Chase, Trina, and Miles spoke of their presence as either the only or one of a few Black students in their classes during their K-12 experience. Trina, who was also frustrated with a curriculum that did not

reflect her presence and history, said the following when asked about hindrances to her college-going goals:

I don't want to say hindered, it was just a lot of being taught by white people, and like I said, I know for me representation matters, so I'm looking at them teaching me not bland history, but not my own history. I was just like "okay, I'm just going to pass these tests and keep pushing.

In addition to isolation, students were also facing mental health challenges of their own as well as within their families. Kendall described her childhood as "emotionally hard" due to the bullying she suffered through and her subsequent depression. She was further challenged by her mother's mental health diagnosis of bipolar disorder. She said,

I'm thankful for how emotionally hard my childhood was for myself. And because my mother was going through her own mental health journey, I didn't really have her there as a support system because she's literally going through her own struggles and I learned that she was going through her own suicide battle with herself. So it was a by myself thing. I had to deal with it, I myself had to lick my own wounds.

Morgan also spoke of the mental health challenges she faced as she constantly battled her self-doubt and her need to be perfect. She said,

I tend to be a perfectionist and when things aren't perfect or what I deem as right, it can be a little negative because there's been times where I hadn't turned in an assignment because I don't think it's perfect. So that's negatively impacted my grades at some point.

Other difficulties faced include athletic injuries that prevented high school and college athletic scholarship opportunities. Both Isaac and Chase suffered hardships due to sports injuries in high school. Chase said,

So my first two years I had really bad injuries, tore my hamstring, tore ligaments in my ankle and my knee. And in my sophomore year, at this point, I couldn't play a game without having to ice two, three hours after it. And was like, "I just can't play no more." Me and my coach got into it, real bad argument. And he was like, "You're off the team." I was like, "All right, whatever." But when they cut me they took half my scholarship because part of my scholarship was on the basis of me playing basketball.

Another serious challenge faced by study participants was exposure to gun violence. Both Isabel and Kendall spoke of the trauma they suffered. Kendall said, “I dealt with a lot of loss of friends to police violence. Due to gun violence alone. People just shooting their guns off just without thinking. And a lot of that, this was happening right around my senior year”. Isabel said, “my self-care journey started in high school, because in Sacramento, I would go to parties and they would get shot up very often. So that traumatized me. I was just scared of loud noises and stuff”.

To summarize, study participants were able to articulate a number of ways that parents, family, teachers, counselors, and programs were an early support to their college-going aspirations. These early influences and supports set the foundation for their successful navigation of a pathway to college that comprised a number of challenges and obstacles. We will now turn from these early external influences to the students perceptions’ of the role that their inherent characteristics played in their achievement.

Personal Characteristics

When asked to discuss the connection between their success and their own personal strengths and characteristics, participants shared a variety of personal traits that enabled them to achieve both personally and academically. Their responses fell into four main themes: 1) academic self-concept, 2) self-esteem, 3) sense of purpose and self-motivation, and 4) racial cohesion with the sub theme of stereotype management. While spirituality did not rise as an overall theme, it was mentioned by more than one participant as a contributor to their success and will also be examined in this section. What follows is a discussion of these characteristics and the role the students perceive them to have played in their success and achievement.

Academic Self-Concept. How study participants saw themselves as scholars and learners was an important starting point for a discussion about their success in college. Academic self-

concept as defined by Bong & Skaalvik (2003) is the confidence an individual has with regard to their ability within the context of their academic experience. All eight students in the study were able to express a high level of confidence in their intelligence and academic ability. Isaac described himself as “one of those more naturally smart guys” while Trina said she has always been “the nerd of the family” and Isabel said “I just was always a high achiever”. Similarly, Ailene reflected that she has always been “into” school and that it has never been difficult for her. Additionally, many of them were also clear that it was their strong work ethic in tandem with their academic abilities that ensured their success. Kendall acknowledged that “if I really just hunker down, I normally do well” and Morgan asserted that “if you put your mind to something, you can do it”, she also said that “if I really tried my hardest, that good things could come of it”. Isabel described it as “the extra effort I put in” and provided the following example:

When I'm getting my grades and doing school work, I always feel confident, because a lot of people will wait until the deadline or right before the deadline to get stuff done, and I'm like, "Well, I'm not stressing over it, because I did it last week.

Whether they expressed a confidence in their inherent academic ability, or an assertion that school itself was just not hard for them, every student in their own way expressed a strong academic self-concept. This paves the way for their discussion on the role that self-esteem plays in their achievement.

Self Esteem. Self-esteem is important to the discussion of Black student success because it has been deemed to play a key role in their college persistence (Anumba, 2015; Goings, 2016; Hope et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2014). All participants in this study were able to engage in meaningful self-reflection in this regard and shared a variety of insights into the connections between their self-esteem and their success and achievement. While all students acknowledged

the connection between a strong sense of self-esteem, and the success they have achieved, many of them were clear that it was complicated and that their confidence in themselves has evolved over time. Further, for most of them, it is still a work in progress. Isabel said that her confidence wavered at times and really depended on what she was doing. While she was confident in her academic identity, she struggled at times with feeling confident in her appearance and was uncomfortable being the center of attention. She described herself as both shy and outgoing at the same time. Similarly, Miles said he was most confident in himself when he knew what was going on and described himself as pensive until he figures things out. He recognized that as he gained tenure in an environment, his confidence grew. Both Isaac and Morgan spoke of the evolution of their self-esteem over time. And Morgan, who cited her lack of confidence and shyness in the past as a hindrance to her academic achievement had the following to say:

I think it's definitely impacted my decisions and stuff like that because I always had in the back of my mind, well what if I can't do this or am I good enough, or just a whole bunch of things. But I would say that, as I've gotten older and stuff like that, that my confidence has gotten better.

Isaac reflected that his self-esteem is high now, but that this was not the case in his first two years at SCU. He recognized the difference in his engagement and achievement and regretted that he waited so late to become more involved and take more chances. Ailene, who presented as one of the most consistently confident of the group said the following:

I've always been a pretty self-confident person. Everybody will have things where you may not think you're going to do it, but my perception of myself in general is a pretty self-confident perception. I understand I may be the only Black person in the room, but I'm not going to let that just completely intimidate me from getting things done. I may not speak up, but that's just because I'm shy. Not because I feel like I'm stupid.

With regard to their self-esteem, study participants recognized that while it was strongly connected to their success, it could evolve and be influenced by a number of external factors.

This sets the stage for what the students had to say about their sense of purpose and self-motivation.

Sense of Purpose/Self-Motivation. All participants in this study expressed a strong sense of purpose and self-motivation that was focused in a variety of directions. Chase, Isabel, and Trina spoke specifically about their motivation to accomplish their academic goals. Chase, due to the loss of his athletic scholarship in high school, reflected on the moment when he felt the weight of responsibility for his education. He was in the car with his mom and said he told her “Mom, if you can get me through high school, I’ll get myself through college”. As he reflected on that conversation, he realized that he had no idea what he was promising in that moment, but saw it as a “wake up call” to grow up and focus on getting to college. Trina, who saw education as her ticket to life on her own terms said that she could see her future and was very focused on doing what she needed to do to get there.

In addition to being focused on their academic goals, study participants voiced a strong motivation to make their families proud and be role models to younger family members. Due to the death of his younger brother’s father, Chase felt the added responsibility to attend college close to home in order to be there for his brother. This realization fueled his motivation to attend SCU and to earn as many scholarships as possible.

In sum, seven out of the eight students expressed a sense of responsibility to those who came before them as well as those who follow behind them. This led to a motivation to positively represent their families and to do well, not just for themselves and those around them, but for the benefit of others. Miles spoke of this in terms of inspiring others, while Isabel and Kendall were focused on using their educations in the cause of social justice. Study participants have shown in their discussions about purpose, responsibility, and motivation that having them is just the first

step. The greater goal was to use their education to honor family, serve community, and effect social change.

As an addition to the personal characteristics described above, some students in this study identified their faith and/or spirituality as contributing to their sense of purpose.

When asked if there were any other personal factors that they believed contributed to their success, Chase, Isaac, and Kendall spoke of the role that their spirituality has played in giving them the strength to keep moving forward in spite of the difficulties they encountered. Isaac, who said that “having a church home is big for me”, credited the BRC with connecting him to the local church that was his home for his entire college career. Chase described himself as “a man of faith”. He said that “my faith means a lot. Prayer got me through some tough, tough, very tough times”. Similarly, Kendall, who had to fight her way out of depression, attributed her ability to be confident and trust in herself to her relationship with God. Because these students volunteered their faith as a contributor to their success, it was important to include their testimonies in this section. From here, we will learn about their perceptions of the role they felt that racial cohesion played in their achievement and success.

Racial Cohesion. Racial cohesion is defined as the ways in which a person’s level of racial identity impacts their level of engagement within their own ethnic group (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015). Put another way, Africentric cultural orientation as defined by Williams and Chung (2013), is the movement towards the incorporation of a person’s cultural identity into their overall identity. It is the assertion of this researcher that while a discussion of racial cohesion will be localized in this section, there has been evidence of a high level of racial cohesion on the part of study participants throughout these findings. Within this theme of racial

cohesion, a number of subthemes emerged to include Black identity and awareness, Black pride, and Black love.

The students in this study came to recognize and embrace their Black identity at different stages in their development and in response to a variety of experiences. Both Miles and Isabel reflected that the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 had a tremendous impact on their racial awareness. Miles, the son of African immigrant parents, who has struggled with his sense of belonging and identity, reflected that it was at this time in middle school that he realized how much his identity as a Black man matters as he navigates the challenges of prejudice and racism in the United States. For Isabel, who was in high school at the time, Trayvon's killing focused and galvanized her desire to become a lawyer. She said the following about her racial awareness:

I remember in high school when I decided I wanted to be a lawyer after the Trayvon Martin case. So after that, I was kind of like, "I want to fight for people like him. I want justice for all African Americans." That's when I started becoming more aware of my blackness. Ever since then, it's just been I just keep getting prouder and prouder of my people.

While some students came into their cultural identity and awareness before going to college, others point to their experiences at SCU. Isaac credited courses taken in SCU's Africana Studies Department with helping him to embrace his Black identity and understand his history. He said, "there's a lot of power in that, you feel everything that they have been through that got me here today". He went on to recognize that with regard to his education, "I'm not really just doing this for me anymore. They might not have realized that they were doing this for me, so I may not be realizing that I'm doing this for somebody else". Kendall, who comes from a predominately Black community on the East Coast, said the following about her experience at SCU:

The black experience here was so positive compared to what I was used to back home. I have no words. It's literally my home away from home. I just love being around, around, and around people. Around Black students at [SCU] because you

are definitely going through the same thing. We all walk into the classroom and I'm like okay one, okay two, two, three.

Chase, who occupied an important student leadership position at SCU, spoke of the importance of using his position to support Black students on campus. He said the following:

As a Black student, I made it my mission to try my hardest and take whatever resources that they were giving to me and utilize it to build up as much Black content and to make Black students feel as safe and as comfortable as possible when they were on campus.

Kendall echoed this sentiment when she reflected on the fact that her strong academic skills enabled her to use more of her time having an impact on the Black community at SCU. For Ailene, identity and awareness were a matter of being comfortable in her own skin. She said that as a Black woman, she knows that more is expected of her and that she will have to work harder, but that's already the type of person she is. This knowledge enabled her to be comfortable with herself within the college setting. Other ways study participants expressed their level of racial cohesion were in the ways they sought to engage with other Black students on the campus. Trina was frustrated at times with other Black students who do not acknowledge her presence and felt that there should be a minimum level of respect and recognition. She said,

If I see a Black person, I'm going to smile and nod because of how I feel on campus. I feel like everywhere I look, I don't see people that look like me so if I see you, I'm like hey. Smile or something. You don't even got to stop and talk about your classes, just smile and nod.

Chase expressed a similar sentiment and said, "I'm a give you a head nod whether I know you or not, just because you Black, and if you don't nod back at me, that's between you and God". He also voiced frustration with some of his peers being surprised that he was dating a Black woman. He said, "my girlfriend is Black and I have never hidden that and I even got pushback from people like 'Oh, you date Black girls?' I'm like 'Yes I do' and it's not a shock. Don't be shocked

because I do.” Chase goes on to assert that there needs to be “an awakening or revamp between Black love and it doesn’t need to be just all romantic love”. Miles, who felt he has benefitted from the love and acceptance from Black women on campus credited them with aiding his journey toward his own cultural awareness and acceptance. Kendall spoke similarly about appreciation from Black men on campus. She said “I’ve been celebrated...I’ve had someone tell me all the things they liked about me and I didn’t even know they saw me...it’s nice to have them support you, and nice for them to be like ‘I see you Queen’”.

Stereotype Threat Management. Closely connected to the students’ ability to understand and embrace their racial identity is their ability to resist stereotype threat. McGee and Martin (2011) define stereotype threat as it relates to higher education as the complex system of behaviors and presumptions based on a minimized understanding of the abilities and attributes of Black students within the higher education setting. The participants in this study have shown their ability to recognize and challenge stereotype threat in a mixture of ways. Trina was very clear in her understanding that, when she was the only Black woman in a class of 500, people were watching. Her response to the assumptions made about her was to “strive for an A all the time”. She said, “I’m just going to have to be better than everyone else in this class because I don’t know what else to do”. Isaac, who reflected on his first two years when he struggled to resist stereotype threat, said the following about his fears and experiences both in and out of the classroom:

When I was a freshman and sophomore, my identity as a black man, there's still that aspect of fear where I was scared to go to the professor's office hours or something, or scared of raising my hand in class even if I felt like I knew the right answer because there's just the aspect about, "Okay, if I don't know the answer, then the stereotypes they already have of me of being not smart and not belonging is going to be enhanced or amplified or whatever." Also, with safety and stuff, being cautious of wearing a hoodie, whatever, going around campus, especially at nighttime. I try to avoid walking behind a white girl or whatever, or just being in a

hood, whatever, anything around a white girl. If I'm anywhere close in proximity, I'm either just trying another route or I'll be on my scooter, like you saw, so I can zoom by for them to see I'm not lingering.

As Isaac explains how he has changed since then, he recognizes that while he still “felt that energy” in his classes, he’s now clear on the fact that “at the end of the day you’re going to see what I’m capable of”. The issue of safety and being perceived as a threat on campus came up repeatedly in Chase’s interview. For these young men, the fear of being accused of doing harm to a White woman was a real one. Chase who said he had been accused of “doing something to a White girl” felt lucky and relieved to have an alibi that proved that she had identified the wrong Black man. Both Isaac and Chase managed their fear in this regard by being vigilant and employing a number of tactics to appear less threatening. While they both expressed frustration with having to engage in these behaviors, they managed these threats just as adeptly as they did those they encountered in the classroom.

The personal characteristics of the students in this study were seen by them to be the key to their success and achievement. Their confidence in themselves, their self-reliance, and sense of purpose fueled their desire and ability to achieve both in and out of the classroom at SCU. However they have arrived at their identities and awareness as Black men and women, all of the participants in this study exhibited a high level of racial cohesion that was expressed in a multitude of ways. They exhibited a grounding in and appreciation for their Black identities and an overall desire to connect and engage within the Black community. Their ability to resist and defy the assumptions made about them enabled them to be successful within their college environment. This will lead us into the next discussion of their perceptions of the college supports and involvements that they felt contributed to their success.

College Environment

When the students in this study were asked to discuss the people and programs within the college setting that facilitated their success, their responses fell into four main areas: faculty, staff, peers, and programs. The students spoke honestly and passionately about the people and programs most meaningful to their belonging, and achievement at SCU. While each of the students in this study are engaged at varying levels, they were unanimous in their assertion that the role faculty, staff, peers and programs have played has been vital to their success.

Faculty. The strong correlation between engagement with university faculty and Black student success and achievement has been widely supported in the literature. The students in this study reinforced this connection and described the ways faculty have enhanced their experience at SCU. It is important to point out that in similarity to their discussion of K-12 teachers, the students highly valued the support of Black faculty and generally mentioned them by name, and often more than once. While a couple of students did speak about helpful non-Black faculty they have met along their educational journey, the majority of them credited Black faculty as the major contributors to their success. Study participants collectively named a total of five SCU Black faculty who they felt played a vital role in their SCU experience both in and out of the classroom. There was one professor in particular who was cited by half the students in this study as key to their success. Isaac, who had Dr. Ross (all names are pseudonyms) for an Africana Studies class his freshman year, credited her with providing him a strong foundation for both his academic career as well as his identity formation. He went on to say that the combination of a Black professor, teaching Black subject matter was key for him. He said the following:

I think that it's definitely important, the classes, just a Black faculty member, a Black class or ... because, the class is basically void if the professor doesn't really know what they're talking but or not teaching you anything. So, I think both of

those combined is very powerful and definitely has shaped my experience, for sure.

Additionally, Ailene, Morgan, and Trina all spoke of the influence that Dr. Ross has had on their experience at SCU. In addition to teaching, Dr. Ross directed the Black Resource Center (BRC) at SCU and Trina related the following about her experience:

I had not taken a class with her until my senior year, and I remember people would be like, "Oh yeah, [Dr. Ross] is like my [SCU] mom," and I'm like well, I don't know who she is, but every time I would see her, she'd be like, "You should come and talk to me. Email me." And I just never got around to doing it. Then when I took the class, and then I started working in the BRC, I was like oh yeah.

Three of the four remaining faculty that students found to be supportive were from the College of Education at SCU. Dr. West, the only male professor of the five, was identified by both Chase and Miles as a role model and support to them as Black men. Chase says, "he was somebody who I'm glad that we were able to be there for each other and I appreciate him". Similarly, Miles says "I consider him one of my mentors". Dr. Gordon, who directs the Henrietta Goodwin Scholars Program, formerly known as the Harambee Scholars Program, was described by Trina as "an influential force" who encouraged her to believe in herself. Lastly, Trina and Miles were both heavily influenced and supported by Dr. Morris who was the Assistant Dean in the College of Sciences. Trina, who initially went to her for scheduling classes, realized that she wanted to talk to her about anything that was going on and said that Dr. Morris "always encouraged me to just strive for whatever I want". Miles said that Dr. Morris "doesn't know how much of a difference she makes for Black science students...a lot of them would have switched majors if it wasn't for her". Miles went on to lament that in his Political Science major, there was not one Black faculty member.

While the quantity may be small, the quality of the interactions study participants enjoyed with the faculty mentioned above has been high. All participants were able to clearly articulate

the connection between these interactions and their achievement. What was key for these students can best be summed up by Isabel, who asserted that faculty who “care about students in and out of the classroom...that care to actually push their students to do better and be better” can make a difference.

Staff/Other Institutional Agents. While faculty were widely recognized by the students in this study as key to their success, other staff and institutional agents were mentioned by participants as important influences. Both Ailene and Chase credit Stephanie Watson, in the SCU EOP Program, with being a great source of support. For Ailene, Stephanie “has definitely been a big help since my freshman year”, and for Chase, she “showed major love and she allowed us to go to her and just vent”. With regard to higher level leadership at SCU, both Ailene and Chase identified Angela Marshall, one of the Associate Vice Presidents, as a great supporter and role model for Black students. Additionally, while the staff mentioned thus far have all been Black, both Chase and Miles had deep appreciation for Silvia Clark, who oversaw the Presidential Scholars Program that provided scholarships for high achieving students. Both Chase and Miles appreciated that her support extended beyond the scholarship program and that she was a resource and advocate for them during their entire college careers. Lastly, Isabel shared her experience with the Counseling center at SCU and described one of the counseling psychologists, Dr. Zora Brooks as a vital support to her mental health journey. The initial counselor she was assigned was not Black, so she was able to truly appreciate her experience with Dr. Brooks. She says, “she’s amazing, she definitely helped me, and she was the one who started teaching me about self-care”. Isabel said that it definitely made a difference to have a Black woman as a counselor because she felt like she could “be more open”.

It is clear from the students in this study that certain staff and institutional agents were important to their success and achievement. Further, as was the case with faculty, these professionals provided encouragement and support to these students that generally went beyond the scope of their prescribed duties at SCU. Next, the students will discuss the role that their college peers have played in their success.

Peers. For the participants in this study, the positive role that they perceived their peers to have played in their success and achievement, cannot be overstated. Many of the students in this study already had experience with the positive influence of a peer group in their K-12 experience and seem to have carried it forward into their college experience. Both Isaac and Isabel recalled the formation of their peer group over the summer before school started and credit it as the beginning of an amazing experience. Isaac counted himself as “blessed with the class I entered with”. He recounted that another student started a group message over the summer so that incoming Black students could get to know each other and that set the tone for his entire time at SCU. He said,

So, from there, we were very tight, and I think we were probably among the biggest and the tightest of ... just according to what other black students were saying like the upperclassmen, so I think that really set the foundation for my experience here being Black and at SDSU

Similarly, Isabel spoke appreciatively of the group chat started before her freshman year. She said “we all knew each other already, so I just felt like there was a unity in the Black community before I even got there”. It was through early connections like the group chats, and activities in the Harambee Program that students facilitated strong connections and were able to find good roommates and positive social circles. Miles reflected that he found his roommate while he was

still in high school when he came to SCU for the admitted Black students' weekend event. He said,

And that was also the first time when I was like, "These Black people are really smart." And that's how I met my freshman year roommate, and we decided to be roommates together. So, we had that kind of connection.

Kendall described her roommates that she has had since freshman year as "my Black community within the Black Community". She further indicated that,

When you have people around you like that it just pushes you. Why not? And it's not a competition. It's not like I want to be in the org because you're in the org. It's like I see you making strides for the community, I'm going to make strides.

Other ways that study participants engaged with their peers was through membership in various student organizations. The majority of study participants enjoyed varying levels of engagement with the Afrikan Student Union (ASU) at SCU and saw it as a source of community for Black students at SCU. Kendall who said of her first experience with ASU: "I don't know what this is, but I like it. I never perceived Black people so vocal and so knowledgeable", is now its President. Other student organizations focused on the Black experience that study participants held membership in are the Black Student Science Organization (BSSO), The Student African American Sisterhood (SAAS) and the student African American Brotherhood (SAAB). Participants in this study also mentioned the presence of Black sororities and fraternities as a source of community at SCU. While Chase was the only participant in this study who was a member of a fraternity, the majority of students saw them as an enhancement to their college experience. Chase, spoke of his fraternity brothers and the role they have played in his success in the following way:

I really do appreciate my fraternity brothers. Without them I don't know if I would have graduated the way I did because I was able to have mentors. I was able to have big brothers who told me, "Take this class. Don't take that professor. Here's

my books." They were big and very influential I think in my development, not only as a student but as a man.

As a summary and punctuation to this discussion on the role that study participants felt their peers have played in their success, Kendall said it best, "I just think that it's great to be surrounded by so many amazing Black men, Black friends, Black leaders, Black peers, older, younger, all of it. I love it. I love it".

Programs. Very closely tied to their peer experiences are the university programs students found helpful and supportive of their success at SCU. For example, the Scholars Program designed for incoming Black students which was the most regularly identified by study participants has been reimaged and is now named for the first Black graduate from SCU. This is the university's signature recruitment and retention program for Black students at SCU and was credited by the students in this study as key to their sense of community and belonging. Seven out of the eight students in this study participated in one or more aspects of the program which ranged from an admitted student event to the seminar course and peer mentoring program. Isaac described his experience in the seminar class as follows, "It was a class that sits all, most of the Black people, incoming students. It's just another way for us to get to know each other and recognize each other's faces. I think that's necessary for our school". Kendall, who was beginning to get worried at the beginning of her freshmen year because she couldn't immediately locate the Black community said, "I remember walking into that room and it was like 300 people. And I said 'this is where they are!'"

The Black Resource Center (BRC) was the next program most commonly identified by participants as a key component to their belonging and success. Because the BRC was new at SCU, many students in this study were involved in its inception and were invested in its success. Trina spoke of the relief she felt when she walked into the BRC, "where there's people who look

like me” after having been in classes where she was one in a class of 500. Her sense of connection was so strong that she began working at the BRC in order to help other students. Chase, who was one of the students very heavily involved in bringing the BRC to life, spoke about the incredible amount of hard work and dedication that went into its planning and implementation and wanted to be sure that students recognize it for the resource that it is. Morgan, who wasn’t as involved as she would have liked, had begun to spend time at the BRC during her last year and wished she had done that sooner.

While the Scholars Program and The BRC were the most commonly cited programs by the participants in this study, there were a couple of other university programs that students found impactful. Both Ailene and Morgan participated in study abroad programs that they felt expanded their perspective and enhanced their experience at SCU. Closer to home, both Trina and Isaac identified their freshman year residence hall as a key influence. Trina said, “that was the first time that I was experiencing different cultures around me. It just made me think about myself and how I come off to other people”. Isaac echoed this sentiment in his description of his own experience. He found it both rewarding and empowering to live in such a diverse environment. Lastly, Chase highly valued his experience at the Honors College and recalled the meaningful conversations he was able to engage in with other students in his dorm. He enjoyed being able to share his perspective and hear those of others in a respectful environment. He said,

The Honors College supported me tremendously and they supported me until the day I graduated because they challenged my ideas and my own perceptions on people. They made us have conversations that weren't the easiest ones to have. And they forced us to get out of our comfort zone.

The students in this study identified a small number of programs at SCU. Those programs did however, facilitate their sense of belonging and helped them build connections with both

their peers and the university. What follows is a brief discussion by the students on how they define and experience success.

Success

Because this study sought to understand the perceptions of successful students in higher education, understanding how success is defined is important. York, Gibson, and Rankin (2015) assert that success can be defined in a number of ways and will depend on the perspective of those defining it. The literature review of this study discusses how success is defined by researchers, students, and institutions in an attempt to come to a shared understanding of what it means for the purposes of this study. Because York et al., (2015) cautioned us to be mindful of participants' voice in defining success, students in this study were asked to share their own definitions and their perceptions on whether they felt they had achieved it.

As has been borne out by the literature, the students in this study defined success in a variety of ways that expanded beyond academic achievement. Both Chase and Isaac expressed that success is relative and that it is more about reaching your goals and achieving meaning. Ailene, Trina, and Isabel all felt that success is your ability to set goals for yourself, whether they are large or small, and achieve what you set out to do. Morgan asserted that success is satisfaction in what you have achieved both personally and professionally and Kendall equated success with the level of impact you have on others. She went on to say, "I'm not a successful person at anything I'm doing unless I'm impacting someone's life in some way". Miles echoed this sentiment in his assertion that success is "being able to make a difference". He also defined success as having done the best with what you were given.

While all the students in this study relayed definitions of success that were more based on experiences and perspective than outcomes, they all recognized that more quantitative definitions

had their place as well. When asked if they felt they have achieved success, they were able to affirm that they had thus far. They cited graduation, admittance into graduate school, and even reluctantly acknowledged that their grades were also an indicator of their success. Even so, they still talked about the success they had achieved thus far in terms of exceeding their own expectations, inspiring others, and leaving nothing unfinished. The students also recognized that their definitions of success may be different from those of the university. They felt that SCU in general was more limited and focused on graduation rates, grades, and salaries after graduation. These students' insights and assertions on the definition of success allows the space for an expanded understanding and offers an important lesson for both researchers and institutions.

The preceding experiences, stories, and reflections offered by the participants in this study give answers and insight into their perceptions of the factors that have contributed to their success in higher education. What follows is an explanation of those themes that give insight into their lived experiences at SCU.

What Is The Lived Experience of Successful Black Students?

Understanding the lived experience of successful Black college students is the next key component to understanding of their success. The remainder of this chapter highlights their expectations of their college experience, examines their first impressions, acknowledges the challenges they faced, and explores their day-to-day experiences with emphasis on their engagement, and the spaces they find meaningful. This chapter ends with a selection of entries from their photo journaling assignments that show their college experience through their own literal and figurative lenses.

Themes

Expectations

The participants in this study held a variety of expectations of their college experience.

Ailene, Isaac, and Isabel felt that it would be like what they've seen portrayed in popular culture.

Isaac said, "I just expected it to be fun", and Ailene "expected it to be slightly like the movies".

Similarly, Isabel said the following about her expectations:

I expected it to be a really nice school. I was so excited, because I kept watching YouTube videos of room tours and everything. I thought I was going to have a very fun freshman year with an amazing roommate. I thought maybe we'd become best friends. I definitely didn't see all the challenges I was going to have to face my freshman year instead.

Conversely, Kendall was nervous before coming to SCU. She said, "I was literally nervous because you never know how Black people are going to be and Black people on the East Coast are different from Black people on the West Coast". She had fear that her peers at SCU might not be accepting of her "bubbly" personality. Morgan, who is the only transfer student of the group, felt that SCU would be similar to the junior college she attended but just bigger. She also expected that she would be "more social and more involved in the campus". Miles who was planning to join the SCU marching band, expected to participate in "a vibrant campus life".

With regard to academic and career expectations, both Ailene and Isaac felt that SCU would position them to successfully pursue their career goals. Ailene said, "I thought that it was going to help me professionally...especially because they said that [SCU] has one of the best business programs". Similarly, Isaac said, "I just thought it was going to honestly, give me my degree and hopefully push me in the right direction". Additionally, students offered what they believed they would expect academically. Ailene said that she knew it was going to be hard

academically and compared it to her experience in her advanced courses in high school.

Likewise, Trina knew it would be more difficult as well and said the following:

I knew it was going to be harder, but I didn't know to what extent it was going to be hard. I think with the tools that my school district provided me with, I definitely struggled my first year because I didn't even know how to study, and I didn't know that there were different types of ways to study.

The students' expectations of their college experience lay the groundwork for the following discussion in which they share their actual first impressions and experiences.

First Impressions

As they reflected on their transition from high school to college, study participants voiced an overall acknowledgement of the difference between their expectations and the reality of the experience. Kendall had a moment of panic because the Black people were not visible to her when she arrived on the campus. She wanted to know "do they come out at night or something?" She went on to say "I didn't know anything and I went through a whole culture shock". Fortunately for Kendall, this culture shock was short-lived. It was not very long before she located the Black students at SCU:

When I came here literally the first thing I noticed was leadership. I just noticed a lot of sophomore or juniors or upperclassmen, students with all these different shirts and polos on with all these hi I'm this, this and I'm in this chair and this chair. This chair and I'm a part of this group and I'm... I'm like how'd you all do all that?

Interestingly, in contrast to Kendall, Ailene initially felt that there were more Black people than she expected upon arrival to the campus and was pleasantly surprised by this. But, while Kendall and Ailene sought out the Black community at SCU, Miles recalls his discomfort upon seeing other Black students and said the following:

That also was me for the first time with my own two eyes, seeing the Black community at [SCU]... I was not at all comfortable in the Black community. No. In fact, I would say I was on more pins and needles around the Black community than I was around other communities. Why? Because I felt like I had this expectation to be somebody that I just didn't grow up to be. And I think that that was more of like a misconception on my part without diving deeper.

With regard to the difficulty of the transition to college, Ailene, Trina, and Morgan recalled the difficulties they faced. Ailene had a first year that she described as “rough” and says the second semester was harder than the first. As the reality of the demands of managing school and home really set in, she found herself having difficulty. She also had a death in her family that year, which she realizes now, caused her to go into a depression. Likewise, Trina called her freshman year “hectic” and like Kendall, was experiencing culture shock. She recalled calling her mom and telling her she was ready to come home and credited her mom’s support and encouragement as the reason she held on during her freshman year. Morgan, who felt very out of place during her first months on campus recalled the following experience that took place during her first semester:

I can't remember if this was my first day of class or I don't know, but I remember this was my first semester. I walked onto campus and I did feel uncomfortable. I felt out of place a little bit because it was new. I just felt like everybody knew that I was a transfer student or something like that. I just had a big sign on my head. I remember no one greeted me or anything like that, but I was waiting for one of my classes and I sat on a bench with this girl. I remember her packing up her bags, just walking away. Part of me felt ... I thought, maybe looking too deeply into this, or maybe she didn't want to sit next to me. I don't know. So that was my first impression, so I was taken aback by that. Is this going to be my whole experience at [SCU]?

As these students began their journey at SCU, they relayed a mixture of first impressions in their first days and months. They felt a fear of isolation, conflicting needs and expectations of the Black community, and that the transition to the responsibilities of college life was challenging.

Overall Experiences

Living. Six out of the eight students in this study lived on campus their freshman year. The two students who did not live on campus, Ailene and Morgan, were both local students and commuted to campus every day. With regard to living on campus, the student experiences were filled with contrasts. For example, Chase, who relayed a positive recollection of his learning experience in the Honors College, still had frustration with the prejudiced behaviors of other students in his dorm:

It's hard walking on campus and you walk into your dorm and you hear people saying the N word... with no repercussion. And I know that my testimony is not the only one that sounds like this. This is a reality that we have to deal with consistently year after year after year. And we tell our university year after year after year we are struggling with this and there's no actions being taken and because it seems like they just don't care.

Similarly, Trina said, “I was like okay, I’m on this floor with 83 people who don’t look like me, who question everything I do, even down to me wearing my bonnet to the restroom”. Isaac, who lived in the same dorm as Trina relayed a similar feeling of isolation at being the only Black person on his floor but felt fortunate and relieved to have two White roommates that he described as “cool, good White boys”. Isaac also credited the connections made with other Black students through the group messaging as key because “we were all spread out” and having this connection enabled them to find each other more easily. Miles, who initially had fear and concern about his ability to connect with other Black students said, “luckily I actually lived my freshman year with other Black students and got really close to them, not necessarily on the basis of our color, at least not to me, but more so just who we were”. Isabel lived on campus as well, but recalled it being a very stressful time because she was not able to afford on-campus housing. She said the following:

I got a job two months after I got into college. So it was just hard with that, because it was off campus, so I could get as many hours as possible. So it's just hard working and being a student freshman year, and then also having to find a way to get to work. So I had a bike, and then my bike got stolen. Then I bought another bike. That bike got stolen.

While the participants' living situations often contributed to feelings of isolation and stress, their academic experiences were more widely varied.

Learning. While the study participants spent much more time speaking about their experiences outside the classroom, they did have a few things to say about academic engagement. Isaac credits the Africana Studies department and faculty with being a positive balance to the challenges he faced from other faculty and students. He speaks of an “energy” you can feel when you know that:

they don't think you're smart enough... or, even study groups and stuff, asking for people in my classroom, even if I want to study for a test and I know I'm going to study better in a group for the test, just knowing that they may be not wanting to, just seeing it in their eyes when I ask like they don't want to, really. So, I just don't and just study by myself or whatever, instead.

Conversely, Isabel chose not to study with her White peers for a very different reason and related the following:

Yeah, I don't try to connect with white people or anything unless I have to, because even when it comes to students in class, I just feel like I'm working the hardest, and if someone's going to ask me for help, I know it's because they're not working as hard as me. If they're struggling and they're actually trying hard, then I'm going to be like, "Okay, come on. Let's work together," but if they're not and they're like, "Oh, [Isabel] already did this? Okay, let me go over there and see what she's doing." I'm like, "No."

Isabel also recalled an experience in one of her classes where the curriculum itself was challenging to her. She said:

I remember my professor, she's an older white woman, and she wanted us to read a book about... It was a fictional book about this girl going to the Underground

Railroad or something. I was at a very fragile mental state at that time. I just could not read any more slave stories or watch any more slave movies. It was hard trying to convey that to her, because I'm coming from my perspective, and I'm like, "You don't understand, but please understand this," right?

Similarly, Trina recalled that she actually failed a class her freshman year because she did not know how to study. As she stated earlier, she did not feel she had been properly prepared by her high school and felt like she had a great deal of catching up to do. She said the following about her experience in a large lecture hall:

I was not having it in that class. Those were some of I don't want to say the most intimidating classes that I've taken, but definitely being in a lecture hall, I don't even feel comfortable asking questions. It even got to the point where I don't even want to stay after class to ask questions, I just want to get out of here because I've been feeling like I've been internally screaming for the last two hours and 40 minutes, or one hour and 15 minutes. I'm just trying to get out of there.

Lastly, Kendall related the following about how she felt she was perceived in the classroom:

I feel like, like most things in our lives are intersectional so I feel like, first it hits that I'm a woman. So they're like oh you've always been smarter obviously. You're a girl, probably already know it. Already know what's happening in class, I'm going to sit next to you because you're the girl. And then you get hit with the fact that I'm Black. And that goes out. It changes from oh, you're just a student or this is a girl, this is a woman, to you're a Black girl who. A black girl who speaks up a lot in class. Or I'm the Black girl who sits up in front in the class. Or I'm the black girl who's not saying enough in class. Or I'm the black girl who's too vocal and, it's I'm a Black girl and then what I do in class and what I do academically comes after.

The academic experiences these students shared show the complex nature of their academic connection to the university. They related their experiences that ranged from support and inclusion to bias and prejudice in the classroom. We will now move to their experiences with regard to campus engagement and involvement.

Engaging. With regard to their campus involvement, study participants overall, had an extremely high level of engagement with SCU. Their perceptions of these experiences range

from regrets about waiting too late to engage, to knowing that they got it all in. Isaac and Morgan, for example, both voiced regret that they did not immediately become involved. Both point to an encounter with the BRC and its staff as a turning point for their engagement at SCU. Isaac said, “I could have been involved in a lot more. I could have applied for a lot more things and took a lot more chances when I was in my first two years”. He did however, credit Dr. Ross at the BRC with exposing him to activities that facilitated his eventual connection to the university. Similarly, Morgan said, “I just kind of went to campus, I went to class, and then I came home. I wasn’t involved in any organizations and going to different events and stuff like that. That’s something that I do regret though.” It was not until her last year that Morgan began to really connect and engage on campus. She would sometimes go to ASU meetings and had decided to host an activity at the BRC. She said,

I reached out to [Dr. Ross] because I paint and I throw paint parties. So I wanted, before I left, I wanted to ... I guess this would be my gift to [SCU] to Black students. I was going to host a paint party at the Black Resource Center and have students express their creativity and stuff like that. So that's' something I was supposed to do. But since this happened, I won't be able to do that. But this is the semester that I was really trying to get involved with campus activities and stuff like that.

In contrast to the students who voiced regrets for being slow to engage, others in the study dove in and some have enjoyed the highest levels of leadership at SCU and beyond. Kendall, for example said that she initially,

just watched everything. I got to know a lot of people. I dove in. By October I was like ‘who else am I going to meet? Who else do I need to know? Who else?’ By January there wasn’t a person on that campus that was there that I didn’t know.

Kendall’s list of involvements at SCU was extensive, and she currently leads a large student organization at SCU. Similarly, Ailene has been in leadership position over the entire span of her

career at SCU and has also studied abroad. She said that she can see her growth from freshman year to now and “would never have expected to be a President of an organization ever”. She also felt that her leadership experience has helped her more than her actual courses have. Isabel dove in to her college experience in much the same way that Kendall did. She said that when she was not initially invited to join the Harambee Scholars Program, she reached out to the staff and invited herself. As a result, she became heavily involved with the BRC as well as ASU. She also became involved with the Pre-Law Society and had an internship that allowed her to take law classes and meet potential mentors in the legal field. Trina credited her involvement with the Black Student Science Organization with facilitating her connection to Dr. Morris who has been a great source of support and encouragement to her. She also worked at the BRC and felt fortunate to have such an amazing opportunity to be engaged and to help other students do the same. Lastly, both Chase and Miles occupied leadership positions that extended beyond their involvements in the Black community at SCU. Chase led the largest student-run organization at SCU and was engaged with students, faculty, staff, and the highest levels of administration in the course of his duties. Similarly, Miles was the leader of a state-wide student organization which allowed him to spend time in the State Capitol as well as advocate on behalf of all students in the system. He said this of his experience,

Taking the helm of the system taught me, taught me a lot, got me into rooms where I should've never been in or should have been in. Right. I think I've proved to a lot of people that you can be a student leader of color that is willing to fight for what you can fight for and do the dance with the big dogs.

The students’ descriptions of their lived experiences while at SCU show the multi-layered nature of their relationships to the university. They all showed a willingness to engage, and doing so required a much greater effort for some than for others.

Through the Students' Lens

While their interviews revealed powerful insights into the factors and experiences that contributed to their success, the participants also engaged in a photo journaling assignment that highlighted spaces on campus that were meaningful to them. What follows is a selection of those journal entries. The entries of Ailene, Isaac, Morgan Miles, and Trina are included below because they provide another lens through which to consider the ideas raised throughout this chapter.

Ailene



I know these are flowers, but they are what I find to be my favorite part of campus. These flowers are on [College] Walkway closer towards the library and the hibiscus flowers next to the administration building are my favorite to walk by. These flowers give me a sense of peace whenever they sprout. These plants are seen year-round, so when they are around, I make a point to go look at them and even sit by them, just to take a second to appreciate them.

This tells a big part of my experience because taking a second to just sit next to these flowers helped me decompress on days where I was just constantly on the move. This flower area was a place I passed by daily whether I wanted to or not. As the years passed, I appreciated it more because I even got to watch the evolution of the flowers and that's how I feel I changed over the years. On a seasonal basis I saw these flowers change colors, bloom or fall. During parts of the year there weren't any flowers and when there were flowers, I would take time out of a busy day to either walk through the grass to pass all of them, or I would actually sit on the bench and just take a minute or two to just breathe, reflect and refocus my energy or internal spirit. I would find the one that I loved and would just look at every aspect of it, the petals and it's colors. The more vibrant and prominent the colors, the more I lit up in my head about how pretty it was.

Doing this every now and then reminded me to just take a break sometimes and take in the beautiful things around me. So between the flowers and the sunset that gazes over [SCU] it made some long days a lot better and more manageable

Isaac



Li'l Africa

This setting is located outside one of our dining commons. These two tables are full of memories. There were crowds of 10, 20 and sometimes even 30 of us taking over this area ranging from about 10am- 4pm Monday - Friday. It was called Li'l Africa because this is where our Black and Brown students would gather to laugh, study, eat, etc. in between classes or if we were just on campus for the day.

Morgan



Once a home, The Black Resource Center (BRC) is a space where black students can come together to communicate, to celebrate and to build relationships with other students, staff and faculty members. The BRC still carries the feeling of

being a home. Home is where we feel like our most comfortable selves, and at times, it is the only space we feel safe.

I chose the BRC because I feel out of place on campus sometimes. Being a transfer student and being a black woman on campus has tremendously affected the way in which I view myself as a student at [SCU]. When I go to the BRC, I feel like I am part of a community, and I do not feel like such an outsider. Because I am a naturally introverted and shy person, I tend to keep to myself. Going to the BRC and interacting with other students was a huge step for me, and it is something that I wish I had acted on sooner now that I am graduating. I appreciate and admire the relationships that I have seen form between students. Relationships such as these are important as a student and enhance the college experience in many ways. When you find a space or spaces where you feel comfortable enough to be yourself, you are able to thrive.

I see the BRC as a childhood friend's home. When you go over to your friend's home for the first time, you may be somewhat reserved and not as comfortable. Your friend's parents are welcoming and warm. As time passes by, and you continue to visit your friend, you become more comfortable and begin to open up. By your third or fourth visit, you feel at home; in some ways your friend's family becomes a second family to you. Your second family begins to witness your growth academically, socially and professionally as you come of age, and they provide you with the additional support that is sometimes needed. To me, the BRC represents a childhood friend's home and that same family dynamic.

Miles



This is a photo of my office when I was VP External, in that room is where much of my strategy occurred and where I was able to do the bulk of my work and

studies during my Junior year. The year that I think was the peak of my college years. Also, it represents all the hard work that I went through to get to that point as I held one of the largest offices on campus. I would go there after and before meetings, I would study there until the wee hours of the night or arrive in the early mornings. I would hold intense meetings there or cool off steam from others.

Trina



Area in front of the Prospective Student Center

“This area is where I slowly but surely began to overcome my fear of public speaking. As an [SCU] Ambassador, I would give weekly tours to prospective students and their families. Growing up, I was always the shy child that would not leave my mother’s underarm while at birthday parties. In high school, I was a team player so the spotlight was never really on me for that long. Each time I made the short walk from New Student and Parent Programs to the area in front of the PCS, butterflies would fill my stomach. Once I turned my mic up and started off with “Welcome to [SCU], my name is [Trina]...,” those butterflies would cease.”

Conclusions

This chapter contains the findings from eight semi-structured interviews and photo journal submissions designed to elicit the participants’ perceptions of the factors contributing to their success as well as provide insight into their lived experiences. The process of narrative data analysis, informed by CRT and ADAF, sought to answer the questions posed by this study and to highlight the voices and experiences of study participants. The storytelling began with a

collaboration with each participant that allowed each of their stories to be featured as a counternarrative and balance to the existing discourse on their abilities and characteristics. The remainder of this chapter sought to answer the two research questions posed by this study. The data were coded manually, and codes were then organized into themes that were a combination of those that had been brought forward from the literature and those that arose as unique from the coding process. Lastly, the students' photo journal entries were included as the last insight into their experiences and perspectives.

Consistent with existing asset-based literature, the data supported a number of assertions that can be made about the perceptions and experiences of successful Black college students. These assertions fall into four major areas and are as follows: (a) Early positive influences set the foundation for college success, (b) What students are made of matters, (c) The company they keep is key, and (d) the lived experiences of successful Black students can inform a higher standard of care and support at the college level. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of these assertions as can be understood through lenses of CRT and ADAF as well as their implications for both research and practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This final chapter begins with a summary that includes a review of the study purpose, research questions, and methodology within the context of the theoretical frameworks. What follows is a discussion of the findings from chapter 4 within the context of the literature. The discussion of findings will be in the form of four assertions with implications and recommendations relevant to each assertion discussed within that section. Lastly, this chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations, areas for future research, and a conclusion.

Summary

The Story Thus Far

The study purpose and research questions were outlined in chapter 1, and the examination of Black students within the context of higher education is influenced by historical, economic, and racial inequalities that can both complicate and limit a meaningful understanding of their attributes, experiences, and perspectives in higher education. Further, in chapter 2, the literature asserts that a deficit minded approach to research and practice in higher education has excluded and marginalized Black students and has prevented their full story from being told (Anumba, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The literature shows that while the story of Black students in higher education looks bleak, it is actually incomplete. In fact, successful Black students possess a variety of skills and attributes that fit them for success and achievement in higher education and that they can and do achieve success (Anumba, 2015; Ellington & Fredrick, 2010; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Goings, 2016; Harper 2012; Harper 2015; McGee & Martin, 2011; Strayhorn, 2014) in spite of the challenges outlined in this study. It is also understood from the literature that critical race theory (CRT) and the anti-deficit achievement framework (ADAF) are

underused as contexts for understanding the Black student experience in higher education (Harper, 2012; Iverson, 2007; Perez et al., 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

As has been noted throughout this study and reinforced by the literature, there is a growing body of research that seeks to adjust the narrative and elevate the voices of Black students within the context of higher education (Anumba, 2015; Goings, 2016; Harper, 2012; Terenzini et al., 1994). With the theoretical lenses of CRT and ADAF as guideposts, the purpose of this study was to contribute to that existing body of asset-based research by exploring the experiences and attributes of successful Black college students and their perceptions of the contributors to their achievement. It is within the context outlined above that this study sought to examine the experiences and perceptions of Black students guided by the following research questions:

1. What do Black students perceive as the most important factors contributing to their success in higher education?
2. What is the lived experience of successful Black college students?

Methodology. The data contributing to the findings of this study were collected from semi-structured interviews and photo journal entries from eight successful Black college students at a predominately White university in Southern California. Participants were selected through a process of purposeful sampling designed to yield participants with a greater depth of knowledge relevant to the research purpose and questions. The participants, of whom five were female and three were male, had all been full-time undergraduates with strong GPAs and some level of engagement with the university. Of the eight participants, six graduated during the data analysis process and the remaining two were a junior and senior.

The data analysis process for this qualitative, narrative study was closely aligned with and informed by CRT and ADAF and began with the process of restorying. Interviews were transcribed and the students' stories were analyzed for key elements and re-written to follow a chronological sequence. The stories were then shared with study participants to ensure accuracy of details, clarity of the student voice, and enlist participants as partners in the research process. The final products of the story collaboration between researcher and participants were highlighted in chapter 4.

In alignment with the individual stories told by study participants is the story revealed through their collective voices and experiences. To this end, data were manually open-coded and subsequently coded for themes that provided insight and illumination into the experiences of participants in relation to the questions posed by this study. The main themes brought forth by the coding process were divided according to the research questions and are the basis for the findings of this study. Lastly, the photo journal entries were included at the end of chapter 4 as an additional insight into the themes of this chapter and the lived experiences of study participants.

Discussion of Findings

The data collected from this qualitative, narrative study yielded a depth and breadth of rich insight into the perceptions, experiences, and perspectives of successful Black college students. As has been supported by previous research, study participants showed both a willingness and ability to share their stories and were happy to be invited to collaborate as partners in the research process. It is from both their individual stories and collective story that the themes that gave rise to the assertions of this chapter emerged. While the themes have been divided according to the research questions in chapter 4, this chapter will combine those themes

into four major areas of findings reflected in the following assertions: (a) early positive influences set the foundation for college success, (b) what students are made of matters, (c) the company they keep is key to their success, and (d) the lived experiences of successful Black students can inform a higher standard of care and support at the college level. As a reminder, the frameworks of CRT and ADAF are the lenses through which this discussion is framed.

Specifically as they pertain to the amplification of the student voice, the recognition of the assets and abilities the students possess, and the framing of their success against the barriers presented by systemic racism and inequity.

Early Positive Influences Set the Foundation

As was noted in the findings of chapter 4, the importance of early influences arose as a consistent and powerful theme for the participants in this study and was the first factor they cited as a contributor to their success in higher education. They all began their discussion of their journey towards college with a recognition of the support provided by their parents and other family members. According to participants, it was a combination of unwavering support and high expectations that set the foundation for their aspirations to attend college. Also, parental support was consistent across socioeconomic levels as well as first-generation status. This finding aligns with Yan (1999) who asserted that parental support holds true across socioeconomic levels. This characterization of unwavering parental support is noted by Harper (2012) and described by the successful Black males in his study as “non-negotiable expectations that they would pursue postsecondary education” (p. 9). While parents were the most critical early influence, participants also credited extended family members with being positive influences and sources of support. There was also an understanding that the emotional support provided may have been all that their parents and families had to give because knowledge and

understanding of the college-going process was either unknown or no longer relevant. The findings in this study with regard to parental and family influence are consistent with those of Anumba (2015) and Harper (2012) who both cited the important role that family plays in keeping Black students motivated and focused on their college and achievement goals. Further, the Education Trust-West (2015) asserted that schools who recognize parents and family members as the assets they are will engage them as true partners in their efforts to positively impact learning outcomes. It was these early family supports and expectations that likely put these students in a position to benefit from the external supports that would keep them on the path towards college.

With family in place as the first layer of the foundation for their success, study participants next identified the role they felt teachers, counselors, and programs played in their early college aspirations. Their teachers played a vital role in either keeping them on their path, or helping them get back to it. Being seen, validated, and supported by teachers in their K-12 experience was important to their continued growth and development as scholars. They went even further to reflect on what it meant to have Black teachers, and the incredible influence they have as role models for Black students with college aspirations. It is important to note that the students who spoke of having Black teachers were greatly impacted by the first one they encountered, and for some students, this was late in their primary and secondary school experiences. Counselors were also an important early influence and were an important source of emotional support and academic access. What is interesting to note is that with the exception of Isaac, who spoke specifically about his counselor's help with the application process, participants did not receive the support they needed from their counselors with the actual process of applying to college. There was a sense among most of the participants that they were on their

own in this regard. Their families were in full support of their aspirations, but lacked the ability to assist them with the details of the process itself. While programs like AVID and Upward Bound appeared to be key to some in providing much-needed exposure and some preparation, it was not at the levels needed. This finding is in alignment with the gaps in access to quality curriculum and preparation identified by the Education Trust-West (2015). In spite of this and many other challenges faced by these participants, they were successful in leveraging all of the early supports and influences available to them to stay on the path to college and gain admission to the schools of their choice.

Implications

While it is a fact that the educational experience of Black students has been plagued by racism, inequality, and a lack of access, this study shows that in spite of that, Black families continue not only to place a high value on the pursuit of higher education but also instill this important value in their students. The participants in this study are the embodiment of that ethic and see it as the foundational key to their success. In spite of a lack of timely and relevant knowledge about the process, the emotional support provided by parents was a necessary component of their achievement. The additional supports from engaged teachers and counselors as well as the programs that exposed them to the college-going culture all appear to have combined to create a strong foundation for the students in this study in spite of the overall institutional racism and inequities that existed.

It is the moral imperative as educators to create access and opportunity for those who have been marginalized. It is therefore vital that researchers and practitioners create strong foundational support systems that mitigate barriers and set more students up for success. Educators need to think more broadly and reimagine what an ecosystem of early supports might

look like that would include parents, teachers, counselors, non-profit organizations, and university outreach programs. Increasing the number of potential positive influences for Black students at every stage in their development can close gaps in equity and access and increase the number of students able to tell us the story of their success. This will require executive directors of local non-profits, grantmakers at philanthropic organizations, school teachers, counselors, administrators, PTA presidents, university outreach and educational personnel, as well as other stakeholders to collaborate with intent and creativity to identify the gaps in knowledge and access that exist for Black students and their families. Through these collaborations, a stronger network of support will be created that includes early and ongoing parent education and mentoring, more consistent access to college enrichment programs and new ways of partnering with schools of education to attract, and train larger numbers of Black teachers, counselors, and more culturally aware practitioners overall.

What Students Are Made of Matters

In addition to early influences, study participants were all in agreement that their personal strengths and characteristics were key to their success in higher education. The qualities they felt important to their achievement fell into four main categories: (a) academic self-concept, (b) self-esteem, (c) sense of purpose and self-motivation, and (d) racial cohesion and stereotype management. These findings align closely with and support the assertions made by the literature on the relationships between inherent characteristics and college success.

Academic self-concept is defined by Bong & Skaalvik (2003) as the level of confidence a person has in their academic ability. As has been noted, the participants in this study consistently expressed high levels of confidence in their academic abilities. While researchers like Franklin, Debb and Colson (2017) caution that the intersection of Black identity and academic self-

concept merits further study, others like Strayhorn (2014) and Griffin (2006) positively correlate high academic self-concept with enhanced resilience, determination, and resourcefulness for successful Black students. Similarly, self-esteem, as well as a sense of purpose and motivation are supported by the literature as key components to Black student achievement (Anumba, 2015; Goings, 2016; Hope et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2014). The participants in this study all displayed high levels of self-confidence, although many recognized that their confidence and self-esteem had evolved and could be dependent on external factors. They were more consistent however, in their ability to express their high levels of purpose and motivation. According to Anumba (2015), a strong sense of self-motivation allows for greater focus and enhances a student's ability to avoid distractions. Data analysis reinforced this assertion by showing a focus on career and academic goals as well as a determination to honor families, be role models, and be impactful.

In addition to the personal characteristics described above, racial cohesion played a strong role in the success of these students. The research shows that a high level of identification and engagement with one's own ethnic group is positively correlated with Black student success and achievement (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015) and further, Williams and Chung (2013) asserted that an orientation to one's own culture is positively correlated with college engagement, retention and a positive academic self-concept. The stories revealed high levels of pride in Black identities and corresponding levels of engagement, retention, and academic identities support the assertions made by the literature. Closely related to their levels of racial cohesion is the students' ability to manage stereotype threat. Stereotype threat within the educational setting is defined by McGee and Martin (2011) as the actions, behaviors, and assumptions made based on limited knowledge about the characteristics and abilities of Black students. The students in this study showed an enhanced ability to resist and deflect this threat

and this is consistent with the assertion made by the literature that this is a skill positively correlated with student success both in and out of the classroom (Harper, 2012; Harper 2015; McGee & Martin, 2011).

Implications

While this study illustrates how adept Black students are in using the gifts they possess to leverage all supports available in a flawed society and educational system, the system does not display the same skill in recognizing and leveraging what these students are made of in order to better support their achievement. The literature supports the assertion that examinations of the Black students' relationship to higher education have been from a deficit perspective and this needs to change. It is with ADAF as a guide that researchers and practitioners can unlearn and reframe the discourse on the abilities and characteristics of Black students. What students are made of matters, and what matters even more is how the students themselves both perceive and tap into their inherent strengths. They are more successful when the adults along their path to higher education are not only able to see the strengths they possess, but also able to help them access and remain connected to those strengths as they navigate the dangerous road ahead. If it is the family that instills, nurtures, and supports the development of these gifts, and the early teachers, counselors, and program staff who see and continue to cultivate them, it is incumbent upon researchers and higher education practitioners to resist being fooled by the dominant narrative, enlist the tenets of CRT to see the whole story, and highlight the voices, experiences, and strengths of these students. It is essential that researchers and practitioners assume the existence of these strengths in research studies and higher education programs.

The Company They Keep Is Key

The importance of a quality and like-minded peer group was clearly a key to Black students' success both before and during college. As an early influence, participants pointed to their peer groups as sources of support and motivation to complete advanced coursework, submit college applications, and sometimes to just keep going in hostile educational environments. Having other Black students around them to both validate and support their college aspirations helped to mitigate the isolation they felt and served to narrow the gaps in access and support left by their families and schools.

In their college experience, study participants engaged with peers in a variety of ways to include sororities and fraternities, student organizations, and student government. The participants cited connections with both their same-age peers and older peers as key to the quality of their college experience and their overall success. Summer connections through social media set the tone for incoming freshman to establish networks and find each other once the school year began, and first-year transition programs facilitated greater connections and community-building as they navigated their first year of college.

While connecting with their same-age peers was important, the impact that older peers had on their sense of belonging and ability to persist was clearly articulated by the participants in this study. Study participants were heavily influenced and impressed by the older Black students they encountered who were leaders. They perceived these students to be firmly entrenched in the Black community as well as the overall campus community and participants were inspired to follow in their footsteps. It was these older, successful Black students who provided an inspiration to pursue leadership roles on their campus and who functioned as mentors both formally and informally. This finding aligns with the research that correlates same-race, older

student role models with higher levels of Black student success (Anumba, 2015; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Harper, 2012; Yearwood & Jones, 2012). Peer networks can be a source of validation, empowerment, intellectual stimulation, and connectedness for Black students (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Grier-Reed et al., 2008).

Implications

The participants in this study illustrated the benefit of having peer networks both before and during their college experience and the role they played in mitigating the isolation that they experienced. The question then is what can be done to facilitate and empower Black students' formation of these networks early in their development so that they will continue these behaviors throughout their college careers? The answer lies in the ecosystem of support described earlier in this chapter. Early parent education programs have the potential to bring families together who share the common goal of nurturing their students' inherent strengths, supporting their development, and cultivating their college-going aspirations. These parent networks can lead to the formation of early student networks that would validate and sustain their desires to pursue higher education.

Additionally, with regard to the networks established once in college, the participants in this study showed agency and initiative in establishing their own connections, but the university, through its overnight yield activities and summer orientation and bridge programs can actively support these efforts as well. Other areas of opportunity for the university lie in its support of various Black student organizations. For example, the majority of participants identified sorority and fraternity activities as key in their college experience. There are nine historically Black fraternities and sororities, but only four are currently on SCU's campus. Supporting the growth of these organizations on campus would help the university attract and retain Black students. The

participants in this study are not the only successful Black students at SCU. There are many others who continue to serve as mentors and role models. Putting resources behind the programs and organizations that connect them with each other creates a virtuous cycle of mentoring and support that will not only impact those achieving success, but also those who need more support in getting there.

The Lived Experiences of Successful Black Students Can Inform A Higher Standard Of Care And Support At The College Level

In their discussion of university supports and their experiences as college students, the participants in this study identified the engaged faculty, key staff, and programs they perceived to be most important to their achievement and success. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) asserted that the authentic voice of people of color is required if we are to actually learn anything meaningful about their experiences in education. This is a critical tenet of CRT that has been substantiated by the participants in this study. They were able to clearly articulate the very important role that faculty played in enriching their academic and non-academic experiences at the university. More importantly, the students identified the importance of having Black faculty as supporters, advocates, and role models as they navigated the academic and non-academic challenges of attending a PWI. The literature supports these findings and asserts that successful Black students attribute their success in navigating the college environment to relationships with engaged faculty who support them both in and out of the classroom (Adams, 2005; Anumba, 2015; Harper, 2012). The research further asserts that these interactions cultivate students who are collaborative and active learners who are able to take advantage of enhanced intellectual enrichments and environmental supports (Anumba, 2015; Yearwood, 2012).

Students also credited Black staff as well as Black and non-Black administrators who showed love, kindness, and support that they felt went above and beyond their prescribed roles or duties. They had great appreciation for both the faculty and other institutional agents who were willing to go beyond what was required in their efforts to support their well-being both in and out of the classroom. These findings align with the literature in its assertion that institutional agents contributing to Black student success are those who are able to establish common ground whether it is ethnically or academically (Museus & Neville, 2012), support the whole student (Museus & Neville, 2012; Wood and Newman, 2017), and demonstrate a personal investment in their belonging and success (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Wood & Newman, 2017). The lived experiences described in chapter 4 illustrate the impact that faculty, staff, and administrators as described above can have on their achievement and success.

While the relationships Black students engage in are important to their success, the programs and spaces that create a sense of belonging and community have an impact as well. All of the students in this study were in some way connected with the university's Black student recruitment, retention, and support program known formerly as the Scholars Program. They unanimously credited their connection with this program as a key factor in their academic and non-academic success at SCU. Whether it was through the overnight experience when they were still in high school or the seminar course and mentoring program once they arrived on campus, they all reported being positively impacted by this program during their freshman year.

Closely tied to participants' experience in the Scholars Program is their connection to the Black Resource Center (BRC). The BRC, opened in 2018, was described by the participants in this study as the hub of the Black community at SCU. It was described by study participants as the result of their own hard work and as a source of validation and safety. This aligns with the

literature that underscores the importance of Black cultural centers and programs that support cultural identification and cohesion as vital partners in nurturing an environment of belonging for Black students (Patton, 2006; Yancy, Sutton-Haywood, Hermitte, Dawkins, Rainey, & Parker, 2008; Yearwood & Jones, 2012). It is also important to note that these types of spaces can be informal as well. Half of the students in this study described an informal gathering place on campus in the East Commons they called *Li'l Africa*. This space was utilized by Black students as a place to gather, socialize, and build networks before the BRC was opened and it was clear that the students missed this space.

Implications

The successful Black students in this study openly and freely shared their experiences and perceptions of the people, programs, and spaces that contributed to their success at SCU and in their voices lie the key to both student and institutional success. Understanding their experiences as well as those of other successful students, can aid in the development of a holistic system of care that will meet the needs of students with a range of needs and experiences. The literature asserts that universities bear the responsibility for recognizing their own policies, behaviors, and assumptions that pose barriers to the success of Black students (Education Trust, 2017; Harper, Smith & Davis, 2016; Perez, Ashlee, Do, Karikari, & Sim, 2017). Given this responsibility, it is incumbent upon the University to use the best tools at its disposal in these efforts. While engaging in critical self-reflection as an institution as supported by Cruz and Haycock (2012) and Williams (2006) is vital, universities should also look to the students themselves, specifically those enjoying success, to find the answers they seek. Obtaining a deeper understanding of the lived experience of these students and engaging them as partners is how a university shows a recognition of the strengths and gifts they possess as well as the deep

impact those qualities can have on the institution. This is especially important because when study participants were asked about how they defined and experienced success, they spoke less about their accomplishments and more about the impact they had on those around them. Higher education practitioners need to examine data and develop programs informed by CRT and ADAF. This will ensure their ability to leverage and engage the insights offered by Black students and achieve greater success in addressing their needs (Goings, 2016; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Recommendations for Further Research

The goal of this study was to tell the individual and collective stories of successful Black students in higher education, gain a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the factors they perceive as contributors to their success, and gain greater insight into their lived experiences. It is therefore my first recommendation that studies like this one be replicated. There is much to learn about successful Black students within the context of higher education through the narrative research design. The study participants have shown themselves to be both willing and highly capable partners in the research process and should be enlisted in this endeavor more widely. More scholars should be seeking to add to the body of knowledge that highlights their voices and recognizes the gifts they bring to both their educational environments and the field of educational research. Also, researchers like Anumba (2015), Harper (2012), Goings (2016) are utilizing the frameworks of CRT and ADAF as lenses through which we can better understand the experiences of Black students on college campuses. This topic is multilayered and complex, so there is a need for more researchers willing to use these frameworks as aids in the construction of meaning around Black students' educational experience.

With regard to specific topics for future consideration, the participants in this study have provided a number of directions to pursue. One such topic was gender dynamics and romantic relationships between Black students. Further study is merited that would more closely examine students' perceptions of their potential to engage in relationships with other Black students at a PWI as well as the barriers and pitfalls that may exist in the formation of these relationships. Also, while the participants in this study represented a variety of majors, there was no representation from the STEM fields. A narrative study that examines the comparisons and contrasts between STEM and non-STEM majors could yield a greater depth of understanding of the Black student experience. Additionally, while the ways success can be defined was not the focus of this study, understanding the ways study participants defined and experienced it was instrumental in understanding their experiences. There is more to be learned about how Black students define success and how their definitions align with and diverge from scholarly and institutional definitions. Lastly, because the early influences emerged as such an important theme in this study, more questions should be asked about the lived experiences of the parents and guardians of successful Black students. Amplifying parent voices can provide an enriched context to the stories of their students as well inform the necessary components of the network of early influences needed to support student success.

Limitations

While it is highly recommended that this study be replicated, it is important to understand that due to its qualitative nature, the findings cannot be generalized. This narrative study included eight participants at one university in Southern California and thus attempts to generalize these findings to a larger population or to other universities would be ill-advised. The design of this study was narrative, because the goal was to highlight the unique stories of the

study participants as well as understand the larger story told by their collective experiences and perceptions. So, while generalization is not possible with a study of this type, the goal was to find deeper meaning and understanding in order to benefit research and practice as outlined in Creswell (2012). Also, as the design of this study took shape and the decision was made to include multiple participants, I was concerned that this approach may limit my ability to give voice to each participant equitably. This limitation was mitigated by the narrative process I followed which included member checking and a memoing process that allowed me to elevate myself out of the weeds of my study, see it from above, and adjust accordingly.

Researcher Positionality

I identify as a first-generation Black woman who attended a PWI in Southern California near the one that is the setting for this study. My desire to conduct research on this topic is a direct result of my own lived experience as both a Black woman and educational professional. As I navigated the process of data collection and analysis, I was able to see bits of my own story in those told by the study participants. I experienced many of the same accomplishments and challenges highlighted in their stories and felt both pride and comfort in that knowledge. I was able to use this common ground we shared to establish trust and build a rapport with participants that enhanced their comfort and supported their empowerment in the research process. Surprisingly, managing my subjectivity was easier than I expected because once I was aware of it, I was able to see more clearly where it would be useful and where it would get in the way. Ultimately, it was my position as a higher education professional at SCU with a vested interest in the well-being of these students and a passionate desire to see their stories told that allowed me to both trust and follow the narrative process with clarity and integrity.

Conclusion

An important truth that bears repeating is the fact that due to institutionalized racism and inequity, Black students have been marginalized, excluded, and at best, underserved by the educational system that is supposed to provide them support and access. This reality has had an overwhelming influence on scholarly inquiry and its approach to understanding Black students within the educational setting. Racism and bias should be seen as blinders that have impeded progress and allowed for only a partial version of their stories to be told. Researchers like Shaun Harper, Gloria Ladson- Billings and those who have been inspired by them have used the tools of CRT and ADAF to remove the blinders, listen to voices not previously heard, ask better questions, and use voices not previously heard to inform better research and practice. As a result, there is a new story emerging that is both beautiful and more comprehensive. This new story tells us that what's more important than the truth stated above is the fact that Black students can and do achieve success, have worthy and significant contributions to make in both educational research and practice, and are willing and able to share their knowledge and capital in spite of the barriers and challenges so extensively documented in the literature.

This qualitative study sought to add to the existing body of asset-based scholarship by examining the perceptions and experiences of successful Black students at a PWI. Other goals of this study included amplifying their voices and highlighting their achievements as a counternarrative to the prevailing discourse, and incorporating them as partners in the narrative research process. An additional goal was to engage in a discussion about the ways that their voices and stories can inform a higher standard of educational research and practice. The four major findings of this study affirmed the assertions made by the literature and reinforced both the need and importance of asset-based inquiry. As we begin to reach a critical mass of research that

leverages the stories of those achieving success in spite of their circumstances, this knowledge needs to be translated into timely, tangible, and relevant resources to be used by these students and all of the adults tasked with providing them the access, equity and opportunity they so richly deserve.

Appendix A: Consent To Participate In Study

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE:

Dear student,

My name is Mary Taylor, and I am the Director of the Compact for Success and Collaborative Programs department within the Division of Student Affairs at San Diego State University and a student in the Joint Doctoral Program at California State University San Marcos and the University of California San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study of successful Black students in higher education. I'm currently conducting a study on successful Black students in higher education. You were selected as a possible participant because you identify as Black/African American and are successfully matriculating at a local four-year university. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study.

KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY:

The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether to be a part of this study. Information that is more detailed is listed later on in this form.

The purpose of this study is to add to the growing body of research exploring the experiences of successful Black students in higher education and to examine their perceptions of the factors that contribute to their achievement. This is important because until recently, the research has focused almost exclusively on barriers and underachievement and the voice of Black students themselves is rarely heard. You will be asked to participate in a 60 to 90-minute interview and a follow-up interview. You will also be asked to submit 3 photos that illustrate aspects of your lived college experience. We expect that you will be in this research study for approximately 6 months from February through July 2020. The primary risk of your participation is that your story will not be told in the way that you wish to tell it. The main benefit is the opportunity to have your voice heard and be a partner in the research process.

STUDY PURPOSE:

There is a growing body of scholarship that recognizes the large gaps in access and equity for Black students, seeks to change the narrative, and elevates the voices of those previously marginalized and excluded from this dialogue. The purpose of this study is to add to the existing body of knowledge by exploring the experiences of successful Black students in higher education and examining their perceptions of the factors that contribute to their achievement. Further, this study will incorporate study participants as partners in the research process. Particular attention will be paid to both their perceptions of individual and inherent factors as well as the external institutional policies and behaviors they see as contributors to their success.

This study, using the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and anti-deficit achievement, will examine the experiences and highlight the stories of Black students achieving success at predominately White institutions in Southern California. It is within the contexts

outlined above that this study seeks to explore the experiences of successful Black students in higher education and the factors that contribute to their success. Examination of this topic will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What do Black students perceive as the most important factors contributing to their success in higher education?
2. What is the lived experience of successful Black college students?

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:

If you agree to participate, you will be one of 6-10 students who will be participating in this research.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following:

- Participate in an informal group meeting to build trust, familiarize you with the process and the role you will play as collaborators in this study, receive this consent form and receive instruction on your photo journaling assignment. Location will be determined based on convenience for study participants. (Late February, early March)
- Submit 3 photos of university spaces that illustrate aspects of your college experience. You will be asked to relay the meaning of the photos in a brief photo journaling assignment.
- Participate in a narrative interview that will take 60-90 minutes. Location will be determined based on convenience for both participant and researcher. (March/April) The interview (with participant consent) will be recorded using an audio-recorder.
- After the data from the interviews and photo journaling are transcribed and collected, participants will be scheduled for a second interview in order to ensure the accuracy of their account.

RISKS AND INCONVENIENCES:

There are minimal risks and inconveniences to participating in this study. These include:

1. You may experience discomfort discussing aspects of your lived experience.
2. The risk that there could be a breach of your confidentiality.
3. The inconvenience related to the time it takes to participate in this study.

SAFEGUARDS:

1. You will have the option to end your participation in this study at any time during the research process and may ask the investigator to turn off the audio recorder at any time during the interview. Also, referrals to appropriate resources will be offered if a strong emotional reaction is evoked during the interview and photo journaling process.
2. Any documents with signatures will be kept in a locked cabinet in the office of the of the faculty investigator on the CSUSM campus. All data will be destroyed upon successful dissertation defense by June 2022.
3. Participants will be fully advised of the time commitment associated with participation in this study and will be given 2 weeks to consider participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your responses in this study will be kept confidential. The results of this study will be used in research, reports and/or publications, but your name and other personal information will not be used.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with your university or any of its departments.

BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY:

The benefits of participating in this study include the opportunity for you to be a partner in a research study, have your voice heard, and story told. Also, your participation in the study will add an in-depth understanding of your unique experience and bring insight into the attributes that have encouraged and enabled you to successfully navigate your college experience.

PAYMENT OR INCENTIVE:

You will receive a \$25 gift card for taking part in this study. Participation in this study is voluntary and withdrawal from it is understandable. If withdrawal from the study occurs, receipt of the incentive will not be jeopardized, should not be concerned with any consequences.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

If you have questions about the study, you may direct them to the primary investigator, Mary Taylor at taylo232@cougars.csusm.edu or (858)405-3803, or the primary investigator’s Chair, Dr. Erika Daniels at edaniels@csusm.edu. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the IRB Office at irb@csusm.edu or (760) 750-4029.

PARTICIPANT’S CONSENT:

By signing below, you are giving consent to participate in the study. Please check the option that applies to you before signing:

- I give permission for my individual interview to be audiotaped.
- I do not give permission for my individual interview to be audiotaped.

Name of the participant (please print): _____

Signature of the participant: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Student Interview Protocol

Thank you so much for joining me. The purpose of this interview is to more clearly understand how you view your experience as a Black student at University X. Some further goals include highlighting your voice and illustrating your lived experience within this context, understanding how you define success and what factors (both inherent and external) you perceive to have contributed to your success. Please know that whatever you share with me will be kept confidential.

If it is okay with you, I will be recording our conversation. This will provide me the opportunity to more fully engage in our exchange and ensure that I capture your complete story. Again, all that you share with me will be kept completely confidential.

Let's begin...

Section 1

Demographic Questions

1. *You and Your Family*
 - a. What is your age?
 - b. What is your ethnicity/race?
 - c. What is the name of the high school you attended?
 - d. What was your family's socio-economic status?
 - e. What was your parents'/caregivers' highest level of education?
2. *Your Student Status*
 - a. What is your current major? Has it changed? If so, what was your previous major?
 - b. What is your current GPA? What was your high school GPA?
 - c. Do you live on campus? Off campus? With family?
 - d. Do you have a job? On campus? Off campus?
 - e. What is your planned date of graduation?

Section 2

Narrative Questions

1. *Please tell me a bit about your background and how you came to be a student at University X.*
 - a. What inspired you to pursue a college education?
 - b. Please describe how friends, family members, and others influenced your decision to come to University X?

- c. Can you identify people and/or circumstances that either supported or hindered your journey towards higher education?
 - d. What programs (if any) in high school offered you specific support in the college application and admission process? Were they helpful?
 - e. Please describe your goals and expectations for your college experience as you graduated high school.
 - f. In what ways did you believe University X would be able to help you achieve your (academic, personal, professional) goals?
2. *Now I'd like to talk a bit about success.*
- a. How do you define your success within the context of your experience in higher education?
 - b. In what ways do you feel you have achieved success at your school?
 - c. In what ways do you think your definition of success either aligns or differs from the university's definition?
3. *In what ways do you feel that your personal characteristics have contributed to your success?*
- a. To what extent do you believe that your self-esteem/confidence has contributed to your success?
 - b. How do you perceive your identity as a scholar?
 - c. How do you perceive your identity as a Black/African American individual? To what extent do you feel that perception has contributed to, or hindered your success in college?
 - d. To what extent has parental influence/support contributed to your success? In what ways?
 - e. Can you speak about any other personal characteristics that you feel have contributed to your success?
 - f. Please describe your level of campus engagement. Leadership, Research, On campus job, volunteering etc.
 - g. Please describe your level of academic engagement at your school. Relationships with professors, classroom engagement etc.
4. *Can you describe University X people, programs, and spaces that you feel have contributed to your success?*
- a. Engaged faculty?

- b. University X staff/departments?
 - c. Programs?
 - d. Spaces?
5. *Can you also describe any University X people, programs, and spaces that you feel have hindered your success?*
- a. Please describe any stereotypes or microaggressions you have experienced at University X. How did you respond to them?
6. *Can you describe what (if any) sense of Black community you feel exists at your school?*
- a. In what spaces/circumstances/settings do you experience a sense of Black community at your school?
 - b. Please describe any ways you feel that a sense of Black community at your school has contributed to your success.
 - c. Other spaces where you feel a sense of belonging?
7. *Are there any other aspects of your experience as a Black student at University X that you would like to share?*
- a. Please describe a day in your life at University X.

I'd like to thank you for your time and willingness to talk with me today. Sharing your story aids my efforts to highlight the voice of those not commonly heard. Are there any questions that you have for me before we conclude?

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