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“Healing a Part of My Soul”: A Qualitative Case Study Exploring Cultural Centers and Student Achievement in Higher Education

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by

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The dissertation of Jessica L. Nare is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

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EPIGRAPH

Diversity work is hard because it can involve doing within institutions what would not otherwise be done by them.

Sara Ahmed

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I am deeply indebted to my spouse, Timothy Briggs, for being so steady; my mom, Sarah Nare, for encouraging me; and my son, Albert, for being so loving. Finally, I am grateful to my late father, Mark Nare, for being my biggest champion, always.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Healing a Part of My Soul”: A Qualitative Case Study Exploring Cultural Centers and Student Achievement in Higher Education

by

Jessica L. Nare

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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The number of women, Students of Color, and LGBTQIA+ students enrolled in institutions of higher education have increased significantly over the past several decades (Hanson, 2021; National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Though gaps in higher education degree completion have improved in recent years, gains for Students of Color have not kept pace with their white peers (Pendakur, 2016). Minoritized students continue to face disparate

experiences and outcomes on college campuses (Bickford, 2019; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hussain & Jones, 2021; Johnson et al., 2007; Kelly & Torres, 2006; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017).

Recent literature has suggested universities need to assume greater responsibility in welcoming and supporting minoritized students (Dowd et al., 2011; Museus, 2014; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009). Focusing on sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hussain & Jones, 2021), employing equity models of student success (Harper, 2012; Museus, 2014; Tatum, 2007; Yosso, 2005), and encouraging diverse forms of epistemology are all key strategies to supporting minoritized students (Hill Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994; Tanaka, 2002).

This dissertation explored the ways in which campus cultural centers are spaces that support positive subcultures and can contribute meaningfully to closing gaps in graduation rates. Cultural centers are rare examples of "third-spaces" where students' academic and cocurricular experiences are bridged in ways that are culturally specific and affirming (Gutiérrez, 1995; Patton, 2011; Sanders, 2016; Shuford, 2011). This study used qualitative methods to understand the ways in which engagement in cultural centers supported student achievement at one specific institution of higher education. Data collected from semistructured interviews from juniors and seniors at California University (a pseudonym) and a focus group with professional staff explored the impact of cultural center spaces on student achievement.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Context and Nature of the Study

Postsecondary community centers, sometimes called cultural centers, identity centers, or cultural resource centers, are designed for the recruitment, retention, and advocacy of minoritized students (Patton, 2010). Campus community centers include race-specific centers such as (a) Asian, Pacific Islander, Desi American (APIDA) Centers; (b) Black Cultural Centers; (c) Latinx centers; (d) Native centers; (e) Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) centers; and (f) Undocumented Resource Centers. Some campuses also have Multicultural Centers; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) Centers; and Women's Centers. Although exact numbers of campus community centers are unknown, as of 2023, it is estimated that 275 LGBTQIA+ centers (Consortium of Higher Education LGBTQ Professionals, n.d.) and 264 women's centers exist in the United States (NWSA Women's Center Committee, n.d.). The Association of Black Cultural Centers (n.d.), which includes African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American centers, has engaged 177 universities in recent conferences and events, highlighting their prevalence on college campuses. Despite their prevalence, community centers tend to be understaffed, underfunded, and underutilized as an institutional strategy to support student success (Catalano & Tillapaugh, 2020; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2015; Harris & Patton, 2017). Little is known about the ways in which these sites contribute to student outcomes such as persistence and graduation rates.

Traditional student engagement and achievement models in higher education are often criticized by scholars and diversity practitioners for failing to consider how racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of institutionalized oppression impact student outcomes (Hurtado

& Carter, 1997; Museus, 2014; Rendón et al., 2002; Tierney, 1999). In part, these critiques have stemmed from an individualist focus on student success. Prevailing literature (Astin, 1999; Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 1987) has suggested student involvement has a strong correlation to student success. As such, achievement is placed solely on the shoulders of individual students and their ability to connect to campus cultures, without regard for the biases that campus cultures embody. Instead of placing the responsibility on individuals to acculturate to campus environments, more recent scholarship has called for campus leaders to invest in interventions that create a campus culture that is welcoming and supportive of all students (Dowd et al., 2011; Museus, 2014; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009). Campus leaders can work toward this goal by focusing on strategies that enhance students' sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hussain & Jones, 2021) and support counterspaces that allow students to develop their identities in community with others (Hill Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994; Tanaka, 2002). Although the evolving body of literature on student success has not often named community centers as a strategy for student achievement, outcomes such as sense of belonging, culturally relevant practices, and access to diverse faculty are frequently present in campus community centers (Liu et al., 2010; Lozano, 2010; Shotton et al., 2010). Campus community centers can operate as sites that embody these practices and support student achievement.

Statement of the Problem

Increasingly, U.S. institutions of higher learning educate a student body that is diverse in race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation (Espinosa et al., 2019; Pendakur, 2016; Williams et al., 2005). For example, the percentage of women enrolled in higher education has increased 34% since 1960. Similarly, the percentage of college students who identify as Latinx increased 441% from 1976 to 2021. Finally, Black student enrollment increased by nearly 40% between

1976–2021 (Hanson, 2021). Despite significant increases in representation, campus leaders still struggle to offer culturally relevant experiences to historically underrepresented students, contributing to gaps in degree completion. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019), the average rate for degree completion among all students is only 60.1%; yet, significant equity gaps exist for historically minoritized students. For example, according to national data, 65.5% of Asian students, 61% of white students, 47.5% of Latinx students, and 39% of Black students earn a bachelor's degree in 6 years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Notable findings have suggested although Students of Color have experienced increased academic success at all types of institutions, their gains have not kept pace with their white peers (Pendakur, 2016). Further, first-generation, low-income students, Students of Color, and LGBTQIA+ students have reported barriers to academic success not shared by their majority peers (Cress, 2008; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017; Pendakur, 2016).

In a campus climate where higher education has become increasingly diverse, campus leaders struggle to identify and change white and patriarchal norms to make universities more welcoming to historically minoritized students (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Gusa, 2010; Museus & Park, 2015). Community centers can serve as critical resources for universities to demonstrate institutional support to minoritized students, create culturally responsive spaces, and center the voices of Students of Color, women, and LGBTQIA+ students. Although campus community centers serve varied populations of students, they share similar goals of community building, identity development, academic success, and social justice (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Patton, 2010). For this research project, I collectively analyzed community centers at California University (a pseudonym). By doing so, I advocated for coalitional politics (Spade, 2011), rather

than identity specific activism, which "has segmented activism based on identity" (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014, p. 275).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which campus community centers support student success. For this project, *student success* was defined as undergraduate degree completion. Institutions of higher learning have continued to set goals and identify strategies to support degree completion for minoritized students (California State University, n.d.; McMillan, 2019). Community centers were historically established in response to the expressed needs of minoritized students and can play a role in supporting students to obtain their degree. This study aimed to understand the ways in which campus community centers operate as sites that support student achievement and, specifically, degree completion. The guiding research question for this study was:

- In what ways do campus community centers at California University support student success?

Methodology

This study used qualitative methods to explore the ways in which community centers support students' academic achievement. In this qualitative case study, data were collected from undergraduate students with junior and senior status who used a community center at California University. A total of 13 students participated in 45–60 minute semistructured interviews and described the ways engagement with the community centers contributed to their academic success. This study used graduation as an indicator of achievement. Juniors and seniors were selected as participants to help me understand the experiences of students who were close to earning their degrees, but were still in the postsecondary environment. Currently matriculated

students with upper-class status were accessible to recruit for this study because of their proximity to campus. Juniors and seniors were still physically on campus and engaged in the community centers in a way that changes immediately after graduation. A theoretical framework that connected students' identity development, access to equity minded practices, achievement, and holistic success of students (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014) guided the design and instruments used in the study. This project modified Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) HBCU-based educational approach for Black college student success to apply more broadly to sites that support community specific populations.

Significance of the Study

Since their origins, community centers have been important sites of activism and social change (Patton, 2010); yet, they continue to be contested spaces. As recently as 2022, the *New York Times* reported on a controversy related to the Multicultural Center at Arizona State University. After an interaction between two groups of students in the Multicultural Center went viral, it raised questions about what kind of students are welcome in Multicultural Center spaces. Women and nonbinary Students of Color, in this incident, were pitted against white men who were using the space. Everyone felt unsupported by the university as a result of the national attention that ensued following the recorded interaction (Viren, 2022). In the highly divisive political climate of 2023, minoritized students have continued to search for spaces on college campuses where their identities are supported and valued, whereas outsiders have increasingly viewed these spaces as "woke" representations of what is wrong at institutions of higher learning (American Federation of Teachers, 2023).

Overall, the impact of community centers is unknown. Some limited research has supported community centers' impact on student sense of belonging (Patton, 2006, 2011), but

little is known about how these spaces contribute to student academic achievement (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Sanders, 2016). For example, between 1971 and 2017, fewer than 20 articles were published on Black cultural centers and few, if any, were empirical (Sanders, 2016). Existing research has tended to focus on the history of community centers via small quantitative studies that are specific to one center (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Hypolite, 2020; Sanders, 2016). Although research that focuses on a specific type of community center (e.g., racial/ethnic centers, LGBTQIA+ centers, women's centers) can provide valuable information to scholars and practitioners, this study explored the impact of these centers on student achievement collectively. In this way, I advocated for coalitional politics (Spade, 2011), rather than identity specific activism. There is a significant gap in understanding how these collective spaces, grounded in student activism, contribute to student achievement outcomes such as persistence and graduation. As Marine and Nicolazzo (2014) stated, "More attention must be paid to the genesis and construction of these sites [community centers] as sites for liberatory practice" (p. 268). This study contributed to a body of literature that discusses the impact campus community centers can have on the degree completion of minoritized students through the lens of academic success.

Definitions of Terms

In this study, I used the term minoritized, coined by Harper (2013), in lieu of underrepresented or historically marginalized groups. Harper (2013) noted:

> "Minoritized" is used instead of "minority" . . . to signify the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities. Persons are not born into a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social milieu (e.g., their families, racially homogeneous friendship groups, or places of religious worship). Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of whiteness. (p. 207)

Though Harper (2013) originally used the term *minoritized* to describe Students of Color, the term has been adapted to include other socially oppressed identity groups such as LGBTQIA+ folks, disabled people, and low-income people. In this study, I used the term *minoritized* to refer to any student who self-identifies with a historically oppressed group (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017).

This dissertation used student achievement as a lens to understand the ways in which engagement in community centers contributes to success metrics. *Student achievement* is an incredibly broad term that can include student learning, course grades, persistence, retention, satisfaction in college, graduation, length of time to graduation, and success postgraduation (Kuh et al., 2006; York et al., 2015). York et al.'s (2015) systematic review of existing literature on academic success suggested grade point average (GPA) and course grades tend to be used overwhelmingly as indicators of achievement. Recent equity minded models on student success, however, have used persistence and degree completion as evidence of student achievement (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Harper, 2012; Museus, 2014). This study defined *student achievement* as degree completion. I chose this definition to bind the study to students who were in similar places in their postsecondary journeys and also to attempt to understand their experiences as learners before achieving this important milestone.

Throughout this document, I use the term *community center* to refer to student-centered spaces that are designed to serve a specific population. Some campuses refer to these spaces collectively as cultural centers or identity centers. *Culture* and *identity*, as terms, reflect some populations of students but may not be the most appropriate term for all. Undocumented students, LGBTQIA+ students, and women, for example, may share similar experiences in these respective groups, but represent diverse cultures from all over the world. Culture is often linked

to a shared ethnic identity, common traditions, and similar food, to provide a few examples. Undocumented students, women, and LGBTQIA+ students, however, come from many different cultures. As such, cultural centers may not be the most inclusive term to represent the breadth of spaces discussed in this study. The term *community center* was broad enough to represent a wide number of community specific spaces, but was still not perfect. As this dissertation explored, community center work is closely linked to the organizing and advocacy of Students of Color in particular. There may be concerns that swapping "cultural" for "community" sanitizes or dilutes the critical history of Students of Color activism. Though imperfect, community center was selected as a term to discuss these spaces broadly and collectively. Additionally, cultural center is generally the most common term used to describe these types of spaces; for example, a critical text on centers (see Patton, 2010) was entitled *Cultural Centers in Higher Education*. Further, an important convening body in California brings together center practitioners across the state and is called, "California Council of Cultural Centers in Higher Education" (CaCCCHE). I ultimately decided to use cultural center in the title of this dissertation and in the abstract to make it as searchable to other center practitioners and scholars as possible. Community centers, however, was the term used throughout the remainder of the study.

Language is critically important, highly imperfect, and incredibly dynamic (Nelson, 2015). The language used in this study may be outdated for future readers. I selected terms throughout this paper that are often seen as inclusive and used by students on campuses as of 2023. People describe themselves and their identities in myriad ways. When speaking about specific students or staff, I used the terms they used to describe themselves. When speaking more broadly about communities, I used language most commonly used by students and staff in their respective community centers. I acknowledge, due to the dynamism of language, these terms

may be outdated in just a few years. I hope the findings from this study can continue to be useful, even as language evolves over time.

Conclusion

The central question that guided this qualitative case study of California University's community centers was: In what ways do community centers at California University support student achievement? Due to relatively low postsecondary completion rates and disparate outcomes for minoritized students (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019), higher education scholars have questioned what institutional leaders can do to support degree completion. Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) theoretical framework grounded the literature review focused on strategies to support student achievement and the data collection and analysis of this study. Literature focused on institutional strategies to support student achievement demonstrated the ways community center work is aligned with equity minded practices (Harper, 2012, Museus, 2014; Tatum, 2007; Yosso, 2005), sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), and validation of student experiences (Rendón, 1994). In addition, the history of community centers was explored to explain how the creation of these spaces is tied to student activism and equity in education. Using historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as an example of community specific sites that support student achievement (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014), I explored the ways in which community specific spaces can support student achievement.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Much has been written on factors that contribute to the success of students in institutions of higher education. Significant literature has focused on individual inputs that support student success. These inputs include gender, high school grade point average (GPA), first-generation college status, and student involvement (Astin, 1999; Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 1987). This study was interested in the ways such focus can shift from the individual to the institutional (Espinosa et al., 2019; Tanaka, 2002; Tierney, 1999; Williams, 2005). Grounded by Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) model of an HBCU-based educational approach for Black student success, I reviewed and discussed literature in the domains of student achievement, identity development, equity models of success, and critical race theory in this chapter. A separate body of literature relating to community centers is also presented to frame the site of this particular study.

Theoretical Framework

This study modified Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) model on HBCU-based educational approach for Black college student success. Arroyo and Gasman designed this model (see Figure 1) to address gaps in outcomes for Black students and to frame this topic as an institutional problem rather than an individual issue. As this literature review explored, many discussions of student achievement have focused on individual student inputs versus educators' responsibility in creating safe and effective learning environments where all students can thrive. Arroyo and Gasman's model was grounded in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to differentiate this type of institution from Eurocentric institutions of higher education and to ground the theory in the strengths and characteristics present at HBCUs. According to Arroyo and Gasman (2014), HBCUs are an important and unique site of study because of their "common history and journey, general message of racial uplift, provision of social capital to traditionally

marginalized people, and an uncommon student experience that is particularly meaningful to Black students" (p. 63). Similar to HBCUs, community centers use culturally relevant programming, academic resources, and staff that can support student achievement.

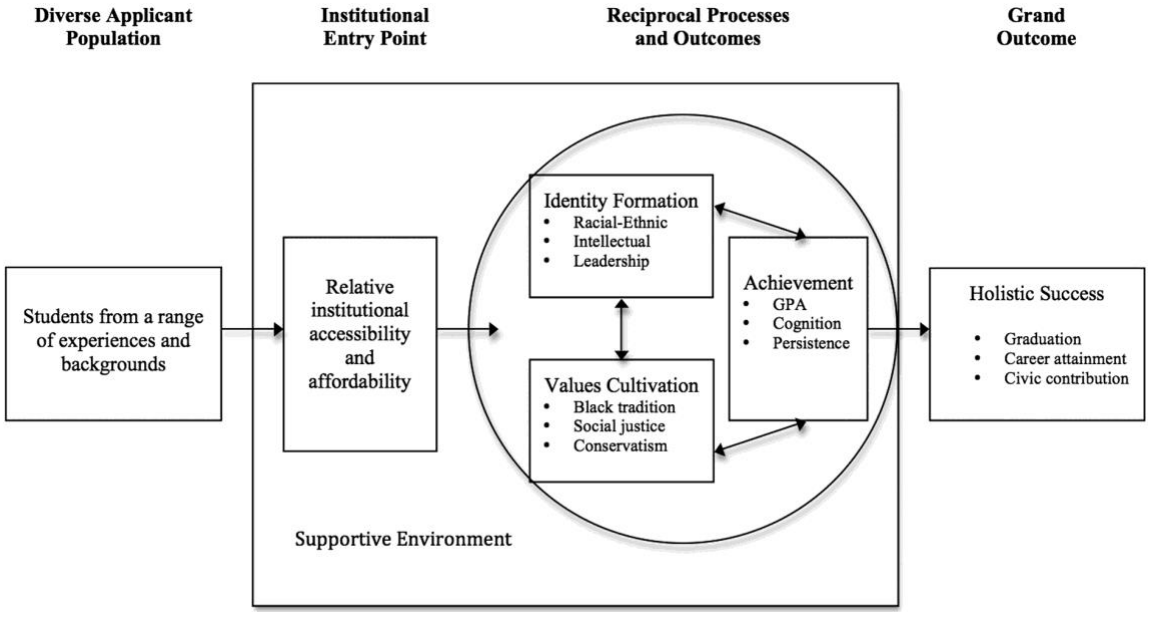

Figure 1. Arroyo and Gasman's HBCU-Based Educational Approach for Black College Student Success

Note. Reprinted from "An HBCU-Based Educational Approach for Black College Student Success: Toward a Framework with Implications for All Institutions" by A. T. Arroyo (M. Gasman, 2014. *American Journal of Education*, *121*(1), 57–85. (https://doi.org/10.1086/678112). Copyright 2014 by University of Chicago Press.

In Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) model, achievement, identity formation, and values cultivation are conceived as both individual components and interacting processes, moderated by the supportive environment (see Figure 1). The supportive environment is managed by an HBCU, in this case, and provides the opportunity for intervention. In Arroyo and Gasman's model, achievement is defined as GPA, cognition, and persistence. There is also a "grand outcome," which focuses on the holistic success of students including: graduation, career

attainment and civic contribution. Identity formation contributes to achievement by providing opportunities for students to explore their self-concept as it relates to their racial, intellectual and leadership identities (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). HBCUs expose Black students to faculty, staff, and administrators who share their racial/ethnic identities in ways faculty and staff at primarily white institutions (PWIs) consistently fall short (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). In grounding this research project, Arroyo and Gasman's model provided a road map for how community specific spaces—in this case, HBCUs—can create a supportive environment that ultimately contributes to student achievement. Scholars have also suggested HBCUs have a distinct environment from PWIs (Albritton, 2012; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Specifically, the historic mission of HBCUs is to educate Black men and women for whom racism derailed their ability to pursue the same opportunities as their white counterparts (Albritton, 2012). HBCUs provide academic support and economic development, and preserve the richness of Black culture and history. Faculty, administrators, and students all support this vision and acknowledge, and celebrate the history of Black people and their contributions to U.S. society (Ricard et al., 2008).

I was interested in understanding if, on a smaller scale, community centers located at PWIs may offer similar experiences. Like HBCUs, community centers offer culturally relevant programs and spaces, access to faculty and staff who share identities with the students, and supportive environments. Just as HBCUs benefit from a framework to inform their approaches to student success, I sought to explore whether this framework can help scholars understand the ways in which community centers support student achievement. Although this model is unique to supporting Black students at HBCUs, this project modified Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) framework to help understand the ways in which community specific spaces on a campus can contribute to student achievement.

In Figure 2, I modified Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) model to apply more broadly to other community specific spaces beyond HBCUs. I aimed to understand how community specific sites, like HBCUs, can also use a framework that supports the success of students through culturally relevant interventions. The revised model continues to use the inputs of diverse applicant pools and institutional accessibility and affordability. For community centers to exist, there must be a diverse student body to use the spaces. Access to the institution and affordability are key components in attracting diverse students to a campus.

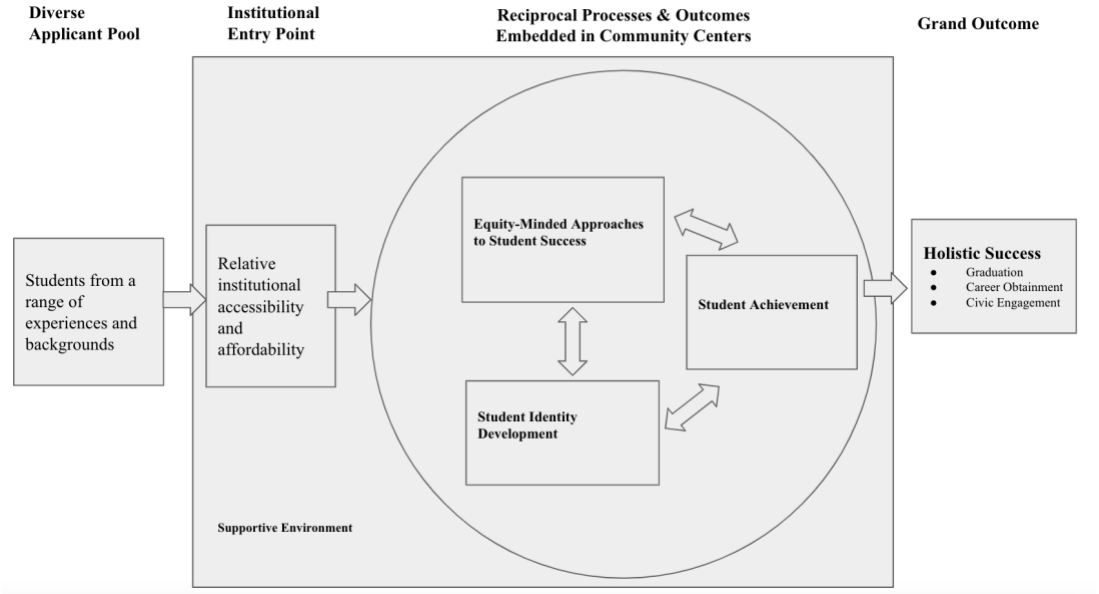

Figure 2. Adaptation of Arroyo and Gasman's HBCU-Based Educational Approach for Black College Student Success

Note. Adapted from "An HBCU-Based Educational Approach for Black College Student Success: Toward a Framework with Implications for All Institutions" by A. T. Arroyo (M. Gasman, 2014. *American Journal of Education*, *121*(1), 57–85. (https://doi.org/10.1086/678112). Copyright 2014 by University of Chicago Press.

In Figure 2, I modified the part of Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) model that focuses on reciprocal processes and outcomes to reflect the processes that are in place in community

centers. Their model originally identified values cultivation, identity formation, and achievement, which are specific to the development of Black students' identities and a commitment to Black excellence. These values have been adapted to represent more broad equity minded approaches to student success, which include the antideficit model (Harper, 2012), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), culturally engaging campus environments (Museus, 2014), validation theory (Noddings, 1984; Rendón, 1994) and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989). Based on my review of the literature on community centers and my own experiences working in community centers, I argue these equity minded approaches are present in community centers and this study has been designed to test this assumption. Next, this modified framework posits students have opportunities to explore and develop their identities in community-specific spaces that are affirming and use strength-based approaches. Finally, the adapted model suggests academic achievement in the form of GPA, retention, and persistence reciprocally supports equity minded interventions and opportunities for student identity development.

Institutional Strategies to Support Student Achievement

Foundational pieces of literature have discussed ways in which student engagement is tied to academic achievement (Astin, 1999; Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 1987) without considering the experiences of Students of Color and other minoritized student populations. In this body of research, involvement on campus (Astin, 1999; Kuh, 1995) and acculturation to the university community (Tinto, 1987) have been cited as important indicators of student success. Much of this literature has been critiqued for placing individual responsibility on students to navigate toxic campus cultures and failing to account for ways in which institutionalized racism, sexism, and homophobia create barriers for student success (Dowd et al., 2011; Tanaka, 2002; Tierney, 1999; Yosso, 2005). This literature review aimed to define student achievement, explore equity

minded approaches to student success, and situate community centers as sites for these interventions.

Defining Student Achievement

Student learning is at the heart of institutions of higher education; however, there is a significant amount of debate about how to define and assess student learning. In the literature, student success, academic achievement, student achievement, and student learning are often used interchangeably (York et al., 2015). A commissioned report for the National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success defined student success as "academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post college performance" (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 7). Subsequent studies have tried to break down these key terms more concretely. For example, student learning is associated with the attainment of learning outcomes of a given course or program. Persistence includes degree completion (from any institution) and retention (continuation at a single institution). Academic achievement describes performance in coursework as demonstrated by course grades and overall GPA. There are also additional measures, such as student satisfaction and postcareer success (York et al., 2015), length of time to graduation, scores on graduate school entrance exams, and credits earned in consecutive terms (Kuh et al., 2006).

Although student learning is the goal, students and educators need other quantifiable measures of academic success. A systematic review of the literature on academic success showed that GPA and course grades tend to overwhelmingly be used as indicators of achievement (York et al., 2015). Yet, GPA and course grades certainly are not the only ways to describe student achievement. Recent equity minded models on student success have used persistence and degree

completion as evidence of student achievement (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Harper, 2012; Museus, 2014). Researchers have also suggested college graduates earn between $600,000 and $900,000 more during the course of their careers than high school graduates (Tamborini et al., 2015). The national 6-year degree completion rate continues to hover around 62%, meaning a significant number of students who enter institutions of higher education do not complete their degree. Students of Color are disproportionately represented in the students who stop out of their college or university (National Clearing House, 2022). Degree completion is an important equity topic for institutions of higher education because there is a significant investment in time and financial resources to obtain and college degree, and degree completion often translates into increased earnings over the course of a person's career.

It is worth noting the benefits of a college degree transcend potential earnings. Students' learning outcomes and their personal growth are additional holistic benefits for degree earners. Some scholars have suggested GPA, course grades, and degree completion promote a dominant narrative of student success and fail to capture the nuance of the challenges students overcome and the victories they achieve in pursuit of higher education. Offering a critique of the neoliberalism of higher education, Ramos and Sifuentez (2021) suggested student success is more community oriented than the benefits often associated with individual degree completion (e.g., higher wages and upward social mobility). Further, neoliberalism and precarity in higher education promote conditions under which individual students struggle to achieve success in competition with others (Museus & LePeau, 2020). Thus, in addition to traditional measures of student achievement, the challenges overcome by students and the successes that communities experience when a student earns a degree should also be part of this conversation. Recent scholarship has offered insight into alternative ways of understanding student achievement; for

example, in addition to equity in degree completion, campus leaders can track and measure liberatory outcomes that include racial–ethnic identity development, critical consciousness, social agency, political activism, community engagement, mental health outcomes, and overall freedom and joy (Garcia, 2022). Future researchers can focus both on closing equity gaps and supporting students to achieve liberatory outcomes.

Identity Development and Student Achievement

Identity helps individuals to answer the question, "Who am I?" The study of identity is a vast and interdisciplinary field. The focus of this section of the literature review explored identity development theories as they related to student achievement in institutions of higher learning. Several different levels of identity exist, including individual, relational, and collective (Erikson, 1968; Schwartz et al., 2011). The individual identity reflects a person's agency in influencing the circumstances of their experiences and can reflect goals, values, and beliefs. Relational identity orients people to one another (e.g., siblings, friends, parents). Relational identities cannot be established by an individual person on their own; these identities play a role in a larger context. Finally, collective identities reflect a person's identification with a group or social category. People can hold a multiplicity of identities, and identities evolve throughout time (Schwartz et al., 2011). Student development theory helps practitioners of higher education understand how identities evolve throughout students' experiences in higher education. Though identity development is a singular process, the development and/or affirmation of students' collective identities during their experiences in higher education has the ability to support their student success (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021).

Identity development is a lifelong process (Erikson, 1968) beginning in infancy with an emphasis on the development that takes place in adolescence. In postindustrial societies, the

adolescence period extends through college and into young adulthood. Colleges are unique settings that provide rare opportunities for students to be exposed to diverse people and ideas. These opportunities allow students to rethink and explore their identities in new ways. As emerging adults work toward a coherent sense of self, finding ways to integrate their layered identities becomes an important part of self-actualization. Opportunities for students to participate in spaces that affirm and allow for exploration of oneself can help with the identity negotiation of this developmental period (Azmitia, 2008).

Social identities contextualize educational trajectories and career placement decisions (Azmitia, 2008). Both a sense of collective belonging and sense of clarity around self and purpose in life play a role in academic success and persistence. For example, Bakari (1997) posited, "A positive racial identity helps create a positive attitude and confidence in one's ability, therefore, a positive racial identity is critical for the academic success and personal development of African American students" (p. 1). One significant longitudinal study of 606 Black high school seniors found Black youths' beliefs about self and race related to their educational and social development through their attitudes and self-evaluations around education (Chavous et al., 2003). Chavous et al. (2003) assessed Black students' centrality, the degree to which their Black identity was central to their self-definition of (a) private regard, their feelings about belonging to the Black community; and (b) public regard, students' feelings about how others view Black students. The findings significantly indicated Black students with high centrality, private, and public regard also had stronger academic beliefs, suggesting identity development is correlated with academic success measures. Additionally, a study by Whaley (2009) suggested racial identity and socialization can protect students from prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping. In fact, many high-achieving high school students connect their racial identity with resilience of

their communities. This evidence demonstrates the development of collective identities can serve as a protective element in facilitating student success and achievement at institutions of higher education.

Though the reasons for student departure from institutions of higher learning are complex, scholars have identified a portion of student addiction to identity development challenges among students. As such, campus leaders can benefit from investing in sites where student identities can be developed and expressed (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). According to Tatum (1997):

> Having a place to be rejuvenated and to feel anchored in one's cultural community increases the possibility that one will have the energy to achieve academically as well as participate in the cross-group dialogue and interaction that many colleges want to encourage. (p. 80)

Student organizations, community centers, and academic departments such as Africana Studies, Chicano/a Studies, and LGBTQ Studies all have the potential to support student identity development and thus academic achievement.

Shifting Focus From the Individual to the Institutional

Whereas previous models of student success have focused on individual student inputs such as GPA, acculturation, and college readiness, the onus should shift to leaders at colleges and universities to ensure systems are in place to allow all students to thrive (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Several precollege indicators (e.g., high school GPA, SAT scores, socioeconomic class) have historically been used to predict persistence and degree completion (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009). Precollege indicators rely on assumptions that (a) students have the resources needed to afford college, (b) are individually focused and motivated, (c) and are able to assimilate into the norms and expectations of a primarily white institution (PWI; Tierney, 1999). Though important, these factors do not capture the impact of campus climate on

retention, persistence, and completion rates of underrepresented students. At times, the emphasis on precollege indicators leads administrators to hyper focus on the availability of financial aid and college preparedness skills in students. Although these resources are certainly important, students have reported other elements like campus climate (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), connectivity to home communities (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008), and sense of belonging (Hussain & Jones, 2021) as critical dynamics impacting their ability to be successful.

Campus Climate and Student Achievement

Campus climate is an important element that contributes to student achievement. Researchers have consistently found Students of Color and their white peers who attend the same institution often view campus racial climates differently (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Patton, 2006). Harper and Hurtado (2007) assessed studies on campus climate between 1992 and 2007 and determined the literature focused on three main areas: differential perceptions of campus climate by race, prejudicial treatment of Students of Color, and the importance of cross-cultural interactions. Only one of the studies included in Harper and Hurtado's review, however, focused on multiple universities, and Asian and Native students were consistently underrepresented in the research. Other studies have confirmed Students of Color report regular encounters with racism during their academic and cocurricular experience (Jackson et al., 2003; Museus, 2014; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Not only do white students avoid the racial bias their peers encounter, but they also tend to underestimate the racial bias Students of Color experience (Hurtado et al., 2008). Prevailing literature (Astin, 1999; Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 1987) has suggested student involvement has a strong correlation to student success, but the degree to which Students of Color can invest in college culture is shaped by racial discrimination, bias on campus, and structural inequality. Museus (2008) found Asian American students found their PWIs

unwelcoming and decided to disengage from student government and mainstream activities. Many students interviewed sought Asian American-specific groups to find community and to feel welcome on campus. As such, racial bias and institutional efforts aimed at addressing these dynamics must be assessed on campuses in addition to, or instead of, traditional measures of engagement. Campuses are not neutral spaces; rather, they are spaces embedded with forms of oppression, privilege, and power. The biases minoritized students navigate take a significant amount of energy, which can impact their engagement with the campus community (Dowd et al., 2011).

One tactic routinely suggested for improving campus climate is increasing the representation of diverse faculty and staff on campus (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Despite the increased numbers of diverse students enrolled in higher education, faculty members remain strikingly homogeneous. In 2018, 75% of full-time faculty were white, 12% were Asian, 6% were Black, and 6% were Latinx (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Increasing the number of faculty and Staff of Color can increase students' sense of belonging and create a more welcoming campus culture. Improving campus climate means universities need to ensure students have equitable environments where they feel safe to explore, learn, and interact with others (Hurtado et al., 2008). Diverse faculty and staff can serve as institutional agents who use their social capital to enact institutional change, which results in increased support for minoritized students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Institutional agents (e.g., faculty or administrators) connect with students over shared personal experiences in the college environment where Students of Color, women, and LGBTQIA+ students may otherwise feel out of place. Institutional agents support students by being transparent about their own struggles in academia and use their insider knowledge of other faculty members when students encounter bias in the

classroom (Bensimon et al., 2019). Community centers can connect students with diverse faculty and staff to make inroads to improving campus climate.

To address campus climate, organizational leaders need to attend to their institution's history of exclusion and address them through action-oriented policy change. The creation and widespread promotion of explicitly inclusive campus policies has a positive impact on student success. Students are more likely to report positive outcomes when they feel as if their organization is invested in their success (Hurtado et al., 2008). Even when policies are aspirational and fall short of their goals, their presence demonstrates to students the university cares about their well-being. Pitcher et al. (2018) surveyed over 900 LGBTQIA+ students and completed 60 interviews to assess factors that support LGBTQIA+ students during their time in college. LGBTQIA+ centers, student organizations, and inclusive policies were cited as critical interventions that demonstrated institutional support to students. Policies shape institutional language and priorities, which can, in turn, have a lasting impact on campus cultures (Pitcher et al., 2018). Multilayered approaches are needed to create inclusive communities and policy change can be a critical step in this endeavor.

As campuses diversify, so must models that help educators understand factors that support academic success. There is no universal standard, but several specific indicators relate to the success of particular racial and ethnic groups (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus, 2012; Parades-Collins, 2012). For example, Latinx students' increased academic performance has been correlated with academic self-confidence, interactions with supportive individuals, perceptions of campus climate, and spirituality (Parades-Collins, 2012). For Latinx students, spirituality and connection to home have also been specifically tied to success measures (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007). These findings countered previous scholarship that emphasized

severing ties to home to acculturate to the college campus (Tinto, 1987). For Asian students, a sense of community has emerged in some studies as the most important factor contributing to student success (Museus, 2012; Paredes-Collins, 2012). Finally, Paredes-Collins (2012) found campus involvement was an important predictor of academic success for white students, but not for Students of Color. Furthermore, Black men demonstrate increased success metrics when engaging with supportive institutional agents, receiving active engagement from the institution, and participating in ethnic-specific organizations and activities (Harper, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Museus, 2012).

In summary, many precollege inputs are individually focused and not sufficient for understanding student success in diverse student populations. As campuses increasingly serve diverse students, models for understanding student success also need to evolve. Campus leaders must assume greater responsibility for the success of all students by assessing their campus climates (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), increasing the compositional diversity of faculty and staff (Hurtado et al., 2008), and employing equity minded models to close gaps in outcomes (Museus, 2014).

Equity Minded Approaches to Student Success

To better support Students of Color, LGBTQIA+ students, and women, institutional leaders need to assume responsibility for creating more inclusive and equitable environments (Bauman et al., 2005). Such a shift requires these leaders to focus on changing campus culture and dedicating real resources and energy to ensuring students do not have to acculturate to a white, heterosexual, male normative learning environment to be academically successful. Several notable theories exist to help administrators consider ways in which students navigate this topic, and scholars have proposed equity minded models to better understand and assess student

success (Harper, 2012; Museus, 2014; Tatum, 2007; Yosso, 2005). For example, Museus's (2014) culturally engaging campus climates (CECE) model measured ways in which precollege inputs, external influences, individual student influence (e.g., sense of belonging), academic dispositions and performance, culturally engaging campus environments (e.g., campus climate), and holistic support all interacted to produce success outcomes. The theory of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and the antideficit achievement framework (Harper, 2012) counter previous deficient models of viewing student success. Using critical race theory, these two frameworks demonstrate that Students of Color bring community cultural wealth to the institution, which has not been traditionally valued (Harper, 2012; Yosso, 2005). As such, educators should recognize and foster the knowledge, skills, and abilities minoritized students bring with them to college. These models provide strength-based questions to assess precollege socialization and readiness, along with students' experiences with peers, faculty, and staff. Finally, Tatum (2007) suggested educators need to think about educational settings in terms of ABC: A, affirming identity; B, building community; and C, cultivating leadership. According to Tatum, systems of education need to be explicit about recognizing students' identities both in the curriculum and in cocurricular activities. All students have a right to feel connected to the place of learning and belong in a meaningful way.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is an important theoretical framework that captures the degree to which students perceive their cohesion in the broader community. Historically, colleges have been designed with Eurocentric principles that favor competition over collaboration and use passive learning tactics (Guiffrida, 2003; Rendón, 1994). These teaching strategies do not constitute effective teaching practices for all student learners and can contribute to the alienation

of minoritized students on college campuses. What contributes to the success of white students may not contribute to success for Students of Color (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Muesus, 2014; Rendón et al., 2002). Hurtado and Carter (1997) explored the kinds of engagement that benefit Latinx students on college campuses and questioned how universities can account for the sense of belonging when some students do not feel their culture belongs. For a student to diminish one's own ethnic and cultural identity to integrate to the mainstream campus is a potentially harmful practice for Students of Color. Rather than disengage with home life, as previous models suggested (Tinto, 1987), Latinx students are best served by enhancing connectivity to family and community. Students' perceptions of campus climate are tied to their ability to feel connected to a larger community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Hurtado and Carter's study only focused on Latinx students, but other scholars have consistently found Students of Color have a lower sense of belonging than white students. For example, Johnson et al. (2007) examined data from 2,967 1st-year students who participated in the National Study of Living-Learning Programs. Johnson et al. found 1st-year Students of Color—specifically Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, Desi American (APIDA), and Latinx students—felt less of a sense of belonging to their campus community than their white peers. To better serve minoritized students, institutional leaders can employ strategies such as validation theory and mattering/marginality to increase students' connectedness to campus.

Validation Theory

Validation theory promotes student sense of belonging during their transition to campus. When faculty and staff can validate student work, acknowledge their presence on campus, and encourage their involvement in activities, students report higher levels of motivation and demonstrate higher levels of persistence (Rendón et al., 2002). Validation theory is based on

women's experiences in higher education and the ways women were traditionally dismissed and unheard in educational settings. External validation can help women tap feel more confident in their academic contributions (Noddings, 1984). Similarly, low-income students experience a shift when they feel more confidence, which often occurs as a result of validation from faculty and staff. As students endure the realities of oppression on college campuses, genuine encouragement from faculty and staff can serve as protective factors. Validation should happen in and outside of the classroom, students' identities should be affirmed, and student knowledge should be a validated source of learning.

Validation can also take place in the form of faculty who demonstrate genuine concern and care for students, provide meaningful feedback, and work individually with students who need additional support (Rendón, 1994). Critical race validation pedagogy (CRP) takes validation theory one step further to offer validation to students in a culturally responsive way. CRP grounds educational experiences with an explicit focus on systemic racism and recognition of the importance of power dynamics that are prevalent in the United States, and encourages forms of participatory education (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015). Similarly, the theory of caring posits validation is one of the most important tools an educator can use to see a student, confirm them, and encourage them to continue striving (Noddings, 1984). Ethics of care can also hold space for individual expressiveness, expression of emotion, and capacity for empathy. Forms of connected knowing are not often embedded in primarily white institutions. Other community specific organizations like Black churches offer examples of how all participants can demonstrate ethics of care (Hill Collins, 2009).

Marginality and Mattering

Finally, students' sense of belonging is also impacted by their feelings of marginality and mattering on campus. Schlossberg (1989) discussed *marginality* as a state that is especially pronounced during periods of transition. *Mattering* is the feeling that others are interested in a student and care about their well-being (Schlossberg, 1989). When students feel like they matter, their sense of marginality dissipates. Students transitioning to a new environment—particularly students who may experience marginality in other forms of their identity like race, gender, and sexual orientation—have a heightened sense of invisibility and disconnect during this transition period (Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering enhances connectedness to institutions of higher learning, particularly as students transition to the institution. Colorblind and race neutral discourse reinforces marginality and fails to disrupt white systems of privilege on college campuses (Gusa, 2010).

Critical Race Theory in Student Services

As students, faculty, and staff attempt to shift campus cultures to be more inclusive, centering varied forms of epistemology is possible. Alternative forms of knowledge are critical to shifting campus cultures and creating spaces that emphasize storytelling, break down traditional norms, and amplify voices from minoritized groups (Tanaka, 2002). Traditional forms of education use a banking model where information is deposited from teachers who are positioned as holding all the power and the knowledge into students. Conversely, liberatory education truly engages students in investigating the world so it can be transformed (Freire, 1970).

Feminist thinkers, queer theorists, and critical race scholars have laid the foundation of developing spaces informed by subjugated knowledge. Critical race theory (CRT) highlights how majoritarian narratives obscure how white supremacy operates in the United States. Further,

CRT draws from multiple disciplines to challenge dominant ideologies (e.g., meritocracy), which suggest educational institutions are neutral systems that function in the same ways for all students (Huber, 2010). Counter-narratives deconstruct majoritarian narratives and provide lived examples of how current forms of oppression and marginalization impact students' lives. It is important to recognize, "A story isn't just a story. A story is a way to make sense of the world. A story is a way to explain, perceive, and understand the phenomena of life. We live in a storied world" (Zamudio et al., 2011, p. 124). In educational settings, it is critical for students to name their own realities and tell their own stories about their lives. This process contributes to critical thinking; consciousness raising; and ultimately, social change.

The use of counter stories and storytelling is also a strategy long used by Black feminist scholars as a form of knowledge production. Storytelling is deeply rooted in Black traditions to share wisdom, to educate, and to analyze life (Amoah, 1997). Alternative forms of epistemology, including storytelling, have the potential to challenge the status quo of white heteropatriarchal institutions. Black women scholars have struggled for recognition in the academy when expressing alternatives to white male ways of knowing (Hill Collins, 2009). Emphasizing knowledge production grounded in lived experiences is a critical strategy to deconstruct power. As feminist activists have long emphasized, the personal is political (Hanisch, 2006). Engaged pedagogy—the practice of connecting learning in the classroom to life experiences and an emphasis on the connections between body, mind, and spirit—can transform education for student learners (hooks, 1994). Counterspaces, including community centers, have the potential to "decolonize ways of knowing and liberating knowledge from the chokehold of white-supremacist interpretation and thought" (hooks, 2004, p. 3). Campus community centers reflect

"third spaces" where students can connect their lived experiences to their academic journeys (Gutiérrez, 1995; Patton, 2011; Sanders, 2016; Shuford, 2011).

To truly serve diverse students on college campuses, educational leaders must look beyond traditional models of retention and persistence (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). It is incumbent upon campus leaders to make a demonstrated commitment to institutionally oppressed students, take an equity minded approach to student success, and support strategies that enhance students' sense of belonging and enhance counterspaces on campus that validate students' cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Campus community centers are entities that embody these characteristics and contribute meaningfully to minoritized student success.

Student Activism and Campus Community Centers

The creation of campus community centers emerged in response to racism, sexism, and other forms of marginalization underserved students experience on campuses. The establishment of these centers often coincided with the rise of the Black power movement, women's movement, LGBT movement, and Chicano/a movement. Minoritized students at PWIs were mobilized to organize for additional rights and support mechanisms on campuses. The proliferation of feminist studies, CRT, and queer theory also contributed to the growing need for campuses to create counterspaces for students, faculty, and staff to better support more racially and gender diverse populations in higher education (Butler & Schmitz, 1992; Patton, 2006).

Campus community centers have been important sites of activism and social change since their inception. Some limited research has supported community centers' impact on students' sense of belonging, but little is known about how these spaces contribute to student academic achievement (Sanders, 2016). Existing research has focused largely on the history of campus community centers via small quantitative studies that were specific to one institution (Cisneros &

Valdivia, 2020; Hypolite, 2020; Sanders, 2016). There remains a significant gap in understanding how these critical spaces, grounded in student activism, contribute to student achievement outcomes like persistence and graduation.

Women's Centers

The very first women's center was founded in 1948 at the University of Minnesota. Early women's centers were focused on supporting the educational goals of married women who returned to campuses to complete their degrees (Opitz, 1999; Willinger, 2002). Women's centers were some of the first support spaces in higher education after more women entered colleges and universities during the second women's movement (Kasper, 2004). Women's centers, which were established after the mid-1960s, tended to emerge from women's activism and directly responded to concerns raised by the women's movement. These centers sought to institutionalize programs and events to support the evolving role and status of women (Willinger, 2002).

As of 2023, women out-earn men in the number of degrees at every level; yet, increased degree completion does not necessarily lead to equity in education. Women enter college with lower levels of academic self-confidence, higher levels of self-reported stress, and lower ratings of their physical and emotional health than those of their male counterparts (Sax & Harper, 2005). Women also graduate from college with more debt than their male counterparts; for example, in the United States, women hold two thirds of all student loan debt, amounting to 1.4 trillion dollars (American Association of American Women, 2018). The unequal distribution of debt, coupled with women's inequitable earnings in the workforce, disproportionately impacts their ability to be successful economically after college. Inequitable gendered experiences on campus, lower incomes, and higher debt have a significant impact on women, even though they outpace men in degree attainment. Women's centers currently focus on issues of sexual violence,

support for all gender minoritized students, and reproductive justice advocacy, with an emphasis on the importance of using an intersectional and social justice lens (Bickford, 2019).

Race and Ethnic-Specific Centers

The creation of race and ethnic-specific centers has a unique history that corresponds with the civil rights movement, when student activists played a critical role in advocating for change on and off college campuses (Patton & Hannon, 2008). During the civil rights movement, students were integrally involved in the sit-in at Woolworth's Lunch Counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, and were responsible for organizing the Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee (Patton & Hannon, 2008). Social unrest was present in the larger society and across college campuses during this period; the introduction of federal legislation (e.g., Higher Education Act of 1965, the Civil Rights Act, the GI Bill) gave Black students more access to PWIs and increased the numbers of Black students on campuses significantly. As a result of these critical pieces of legislation, the enrollment of Black students increased from 227,000 in 1960 to 1.1 million students in 1977 (Shuford, 2011).

Although the number of Black students on college campuses increased across the nation, their enrollment on individual campuses remained low. Students advocated for Black studies and Black cultural centers to serve as sites of connection, support, and community. Although no records exist documenting the establishment of the first Black cultural center, some early examples include the J.D. O'Bryant African American Institution at Northeastern in 1969, and the Nyumburu House at the University of Maryland, College Park in 1971. By the mid-1970s, other groups of students, including Latinx, Asian American Pacific Islander, and Native students, organized around similar concerns (Mena, 2010; Patton & Hannon, 2008).

Race- and ethnic-specific centers were established to meet the needs of historically underserved groups of students, and their establishment varied by geographic location. For example, in the South, many centers targeted Black students; in the West, universities served Latinx and Native students. Most campus community centers were developed in collaboration with student activists (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020). Early centers helped students navigate financial aid issues, develop academic readiness, and mediate between the students and the institution (Mena, 2010; Shuford, 2011). Students of Color sometimes encountered challenges adjusting to college, academic performance, financial resources, feelings of loneliness and isolation, racial/ethnic identity development, racial hostility, issues of entitlement, and a lack of connection to the college environment. Campus community centers were developed as a strategy to address these barriers (Shuford, 2011).

Race-specific cultural centers provide important resources to students including support from institutional agents, who tend to be underrepresented in faculty and staff positions. Trusted staff can help connect students with campus resources and services (Hypolite, 2020). Campus community centers can also introduce students to faculty on campus who share their identities, provide students opportunities to build community in a culturally affirming environment, pursue leadership opportunities, and create space to feel pride in their cultures (Hypolite, 2020; Lozano, 2010; Patton, 2006).

LGBTQIA+ Centers

Not long after the establishment of women's centers and Black resource centers, LGBTQIA+ centers emerged on college campuses. In 1967, Society for the Homophile League (SHL) was started at Columbia University as a student organization. Their activities included organizing lectures, integrating school-sponsored dances, and offering counseling to students

who struggled with their sexuality (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). The SHL worked closely with Black student organizers to protest Columbia's administration and their treatment of marginalized students. The oldest gay and lesbian student center on record, the Queer Student Cultural Center (previously named "fight repression of erotic expression," or FREE), was founded in May 1969 at the University of Minnesota, nearly 2 months before the Stonewall riots in New York City. This space, although symbolic, was not staffed with full-time professional employees and lacked financial investment from the campus. The University of Michigan was the first campus to dedicate financial and people resources to LGBTQIA+ centers with their Lesbian Gay Male Programs Office, founded in 1971 (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). The allocation of physical space, financial, and other material resources, and, in many cases, the presence of professional leadership, enabled the campus LGBTQIA+ centers to become a prominent fixture on hundreds of college and university campuses across the country (Marine, 2011).

Major policy changes and high-profile judicial cases have increased the legal rights available to LGBTQIA+ people in the United States. Despite these successes, LGBTQIA+ individuals continue to experience violence and marginalization (Lange et al., 2019; Rankin et al., 2019). College campuses often offer services for queer and transgender students, including nondiscrimination policies, gender inclusive housing, and LGBTQIA+ specific programs like pride centers and lavender graduations (Marine, 2011). Still, "It is not evident that the changes happening in collegiate settings have resulted in positive outcomes for queer- and trans-spectrum individuals" (Rankin et al., 2019, p. 436). In fact, most of the best practices proposed by administrators are not supported by empirical evidence (Lange et al., 2019).

A major barrier to serving LGBTQIA+ students is a lack of data (Rankin et al., 2019). Unlike other centers that serve populations of students with trackable demographics, institutions of higher education do not have reliable information on LGBTQIA+ students via admissions departments or federal data. In 2008, the National College Health assessment was the first national survey to include demographics on sexual orientation and gender identity (Lange et al., 2019). LGBTQIA+ centers serve a broad group of students with a number of gender identities and sexual orientations. The broader LGBTQIA+ movement and LGBTQIA+ centers, specifically, have been critiqued for marginalizing transgender people and bisexual people in their movements and spaces (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Tavarez, 2022). Overall, the services provided by LGBTQIA+ centers tend to fall into three main areas: counseling, education, and advocacy (Marine, 2011).

There is some disagreement about the state of LGBTQIA+ scholarship. One recent student found four top-tier journals in the field of higher education either did not publish any research, or published only one article on LGBTQIA+ people between 2009 and 2018 (Duran et al., 2022). In contrast, another recent publication found scholarship on LGBTQIA+ students has blossomed (Kilgo, 2020). Kilgo (2020) reviewed literature since 2010 and identified the following categories in the literature: visibility, campus climate, identity studies and experiences, outcomes for LGBTQIA+ students and LGBTQIA+ programs and experiences. Nevertheless, LGBTQIA+ centers are increasingly supported on college campuses. Consortium of Higher Education LGBTQ Professionals (n.d.) estimated in 2022, 275 campuses had professionally staffed and institutionally resourced centers. Further, professional organizations, such as the Consortium of Higher Education LGBTQ Professionals, NASPA – National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, and ACPA – Association of College Student Educators

International all offer resources and professional learning for LGBTQIA+ Centers, indicating their growing presence in the field.

Multicultural Centers

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, values of multiculturalism became more apparent in institutions of higher education. The Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life (1988) issued a report, *One Third of a Nation: A Report of the Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life*, calling for a reimagining of education systems to create campus cultures, which nourish and support the diversity of minority students. The proliferation of Black Studies, Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies Departments also further institutionalized diversity initiatives on campus and advocated for spaces like multicultural centers to serve and support minoritized students (Patton & Hannon, 2008). Often, early centers were called offices of minority affairs or minority student services. As language began to change in the following decades, these spaces evolved to be called cross-cultural or multicultural centers. During the 1980s and 1990s, these offices shifted their focus to serve more students, including LGBTQIA+ students and students from religious minority groups (Shuford, 2011).

Distinct from race and ethnic-specific centers, most multicultural centers are not connected to specific communities. Multicultural centers were often opened after race-specific centers, and some critique of their establishment exists. The central question is whether campuses should embrace multicultural centers or invest in monocultural centers for every sizable racial group on their campus (Hefner, 2002). Advocates for race-specific centers have argued that streamlining multiple groups in one space has the potential to invalidate the experiences of some minoritized groups, raise difficulties to ensure representational staffing, and

erases the rich history of race-specific contributions to college campuses (Patton, 2006). Others, however, have supported multicultural centers and believe these spaces promote exploration of intersectionality and foster intergroup dialogue (Sanders, 2016).

Significance of Campus Community Centers

Community specific interventions like community centers and cultural/ethnic student organizations are critically important counterspaces for traditionally underserved students. Although college campuses have continued to diversify, the unwelcoming and hostile campus cultures facing minoritized students create barriers that make it challenging for these students to succeed. Students of Color and LGBTQIA+ students have different experiences on campus than their white and straight peers. Students of Color report lower levels of sense of belonging (Hussain & Jones, 2021; Johnson et al., 2007), higher levels of racial conflict, and higher levels of dissatisfaction with the campus climate than white students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hussain & Jones, 2021). Queer and transgender students report higher levels of unwelcoming environments and hostility in residence halls, Greek organizations, and sports teams than straight students (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). Similarly, women report hostile campus climates regardless of their race, are interrupted in class more than their male counterparts, and experience higher levels of sexual harassment and violence than men (Bickford, 2019; Kelly & Torres, 2006).

Community centers are spaces that promote and foster subcultures and can contribute meaningfully to closing gaps in outcomes. These centers are rare examples of locations on campuses that bridge students' academic and cocurricular experiences in ways that are culturally specific and affirming (Patton, 2010; Sanders, 2016; Shuford, 2011). According to Patton (2010), the students in their study reported, "the Black cultural center is where they can go and feel a

sense of comfort and relief. For Black students in a predominantly white environment, the Black cultural center indicates that it "is okay to be Black" (p. 7). Campus subcultures, which consist of specific values, norms, beliefs, and assumptions that differ from dominant culture, can be powerful vehicles for student success. Subculture spaces can foster student connections between students and their institution, and ultimately, their success. Aspects of subcultures (e.g., physical spaces, culturally validating curricula, and programs) encourage students to engage in cultural community connections (Museus et al., 2012).

Finally, community centers provide students with an opportunity to connect with faculty members who share their identities, experiences, and backgrounds (Guiffrida, 2003). Interactions with faculty outside of the classroom can be predictors of student success for some students (Astin, 1999). As previously discussed, for Students of Color, these interactions are not always positive, and can have a detrimental impact on student experiences (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson, 2013). Students can connect with faculty and staff who share their identities in campus community centers. Similarly, because minoritized students are likely to face different challenges in acculturating to college campuses because of cultural norms based on patriarchy, whiteness, and class privilege, students need spaces within which they feel comfortable, familiar, and affirmed of their culture and identity (Guiffrida, 2003; Museus, 2014).

Despite the benefits evident in campus community centers, they remain spaces that are under researched and underfunded in higher education (Catalano & Tillapaugh, 2020; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2015; Harris & Patton, 2017). Conservatives frequently criticize community centers for segregating students and failing to fully engage majority students in their activities (Biagini, 2022; Viren, 2022). Campus community centers are almost always open to the entire campus, but center the experiences and voices of

students they are named to serve (Patton, 2011). The existence of centers sometimes relieves other offices from the responsibility of justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion work. In other words, the burden continues to fall on campus community centers and the underrepresented staff who work in those spaces to provide interventions to address inequities (Ahmed, 2012).

Critiques of Community Centers

Community centers have become increasingly targeted with accusations of self-segregation and sites for in-group discrimination (Renn, 2011). For example, in Fall 2022, the University of California San Diego came under scrutiny for offering orientations for Black, Latinx, and Native students, hosted by community centers. Reporting from conservative news outlet, *Campus Reform*, suggested community specific orientations are akin to racial segregation (Biagini, 2022). Similarly, the Multicultural Center at Arizona State University was profiled in the *New York Times* in Fall 2022 for a video that went viral of an interaction between queer Students of Color in the center and white male students. The interaction was framed as representing the divisiveness that community specific spaces create on college campuses (Viren, 2022). Majority group students may feel excluded, confused, or resentful that minority students have their own center or programmatic initiatives; there are not, for example, white student centers or new white student orientations. Tatum (2007) pointed out in the context of race, students who live with unearned privilege are not always prepared to understand why others might want or need a space of their own, away from real or perceived scrutiny.

These critiques of community centers can be summarized into several themes. First, community centers do not collaborate with other campus departments. Next, the presence of centers encourages minoritized students to depend on one another as opposed to general campus services, effectively segregating them from the rest of campus. Finally, centers discourage

students from expanding beyond their group and into other groups thus limiting their development and the development of others (Renn, 2011). D'Souza (1991) took this argument one step further by suggesting pluralistic spaces, like community centers, contribute to segregation, division, and balkanization between students. This critique is particularly problematic, as it suggested the presence of minoritized students is important in higher education because it contributes to the learning and development of white students (Patton, 2011).

Another common refrain about community centers is that they exist solely as "window dressing" for colleges and universities (Hefner, 2002). In other words, these spaces allow universities to check a box to demonstrate a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion without meaningfully addressing campus climate, institutional policies, or other systemic barriers that create oppressive learning environments (Marine & Nicolazo, 2014). When campus leaders fail to invest meaningfully in community centers, the lack of staff, financial resources, and ties to student learning can result in social spaces that lack the capacity and support to seriously address inequities (Hefner, 2002; Marine & Nicolazo, 2014).

Conclusion

If college and university leaders are serious about embracing traditionally underrepresented students and creating campus climates that are more welcoming and inclusive of all students, campus community centers can be an effective strategy to employ. It is worth noting, as Ahmed (2012) stated:

> To be made welcome by an explicit act of address works to reveal what is implicit; that those who are already given a place are the ones who are welcoming, rather than welcomed, the ones who are in the structural positions of hosts . . . to be welcomed is to be positioned as the one who is not at home. (pp. 42–23)

Yet, cultural spaces can play a critical role in the recruitment, retention, and support metrics for Students of Color, women, and LGBTQIA+ students (Tatum, 2007). Although early scholarship focused on individual students' separation from communities at home to transition and integrate to college (Tinto, 1987) it is clear college campuses need to shift their culture so students can be their holistic selves to thrive socially and academically in institutions of higher learning. Campus community centers are spaces that demonstrate institutional support for institutionally oppressed students; connect students with culturally specific high impact practices; allow students the opportunity to interact with relatable faculty and staff; are familiar, validating, and affirming of students' identities; and allow students spaces to challenge dominant narratives to create their own ways of knowing.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative methods at one site to understand the ways in which engagement in the community centers at California University (a pseudonym) contributed to student achievement. Through qualitative methods, participants provided their experiences from their perspective regarding community centers. The purpose of narrative research was to "convey experiences as they are expressed in the lived and told stories of individuals" (Mertler, 2019, p. 81). Storytelling, an important aspect of feminism, critical race theory (CRT), and other movements associated with social change (Amoah, 1997; Hill Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994; Zamudio et al., 2011), was used to understand the rich experiences of students from one institution who participated in the campus's community centers. This study aimed to use a feminist ear to "hear who is not heard, how we are not heard" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 4). As Ahmed (2021) poignantly described:

> If we are taught to tune some people out, then a feminist ear is an achievement. We become attuned to those who are turned out and we can be those, which means becoming attuned to ourselves can also be an achievement. We learn from who is not heard about who is deemed important or who is doing "important work." (p. 4)

The use of storytelling and a feminist ear created possibilities to allow research participants to name and share their experiences to envision strategies for resistance, resilience, and survival (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010). Further, narrative research "provides the theoretical and methodological space for traditionally silenced and marginalized groups to critique social institutions that perpetuate inequality" (Pratt-Clarke, 2012, p. 84). Finally, qualitative techniques are most effective for answering how, what, and why questions (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Because the study focused on a singular site, the research design involved a case study. Case studies are commonly found in many social science disciplines and in practicing

professions and allow the researchers to focus in-depth on a "case" while retaining a holistic and real-world perspective (Yin, 2018). Case studies use a bounded system, a unit around which there are boundaries so the researcher can fence in what is being studied. Case studies provide an in-depth analysis of single, restricted entries (Mertler, 2019) and are often selected as the approach to studying a phenomenon because they possess unique or exceptional qualities that could promote increased understanding or practice (Mertler, 2019; Yin, 2018).

Debate exists around whether case study research is a true methodology. Some researchers have treated it as such, whereas others have viewed case studies as more of a question of what to study (Mertler, 2019). The methodological design of a qualitative study at a specific site aligned with my overarching research question: How has engagement in a community centers at California University contributed to student achievement? The focus on one site in this study allowed for a deep and rich exploration of the community centers at California University and controlled for factors that may vary from campus to campus, such as university climates, differing community center structures, and disparate investments of financial and human resources.

This study collected data from two different sources: (a) semistructured interviews with undergraduate students and (b) a focus group with staff who lead community centers at California University. The multiple data sources allowed for a rich argument for the ways in which California University's community centers support student achievement.

Theoretical Framework

A modified version of Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) HBCU-based educational approach for Black college student success model grounded the literature review as discussed in Figure 2, the interview protocol (see Appendix A), and data collection for this study. Using community

centers as the site of a supportive environment posed by Arroyo and Gasman, I collected data related to the themes of identity development, equity minded strategies to support student success, and student achievement measures. Arroyo and Gasman suggested the three domains they identified as part of a supportive environment influence one another to ultimately support positive student success outcomes. This study explored these themes with students at California University who engage in community centers (i.e., supportive sites) to explore the ways in which their participation contributed to their degree completion.

Setting and Context

This project was conducted at a large public university in southern California using the pseudonym California University. The site is part of a statewide system and is designated as both a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American, Native American and Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPSI). According to California University's Institutional Research Department, 59.1% of students enrolled in Fall 2022 were Students of Color (not including international students and students who selected "other"). The largest racial/ethnic group on campus was Latinx students who comprised 34.6% of the undergraduate student population during this timeframe. In addition, 34.2 identified as white, 7.9% of students were Asian, 6.9% were multiracial, 5.4% were Filipinx, 3.9% were Black, and 0.2% were Native American.

California University has a long history of activism, resulting in the establishment of early Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies departments during the 1970s. The campus's Multicultural Center was established in the late 1990s as a result of student activism. Many years later, an LGBTQIA Center, Women's Center, and Black Cultural Center followed. Eventually, an administrative-led student fee increased and created an avenue for funding for a Native

Cultural Center, Asian Pacific Islander (API) Center, Latinx Cultural Center, and Dreamer Center. These community centers had a similar staffing and funding model, with a director, assistant director, coordinator, and an affiliated faculty scholar. Finally, all centers had a robust programming budget. The community centers aimed to engage students in identity development, social justice education and advocacy, community building, and academic success initiatives. Each center had a physical space on campus. Some of the spaces were located in the student union, library, academic buildings, or small converted homes in the college area adjacent to campus. All had office space and space for students to convene for programming, study, or connecting with others.

California University is a unique case in that there were eight well-funded community centers that had a similar programmatic and staffing model and were organized in a consistent way in the university. Many campuses have community centers, but they are often scattered across the organization due to differing funding sources, politics, and different histories of activism associated with each space (Mena, 2010). As a site, California University provided an opportunity to understand collectively the ways in which engagement in community center spaces impacts student achievement.

Participants

This study recruited 13 currently matriculated undergraduate student participants who held junior or senior status, as established by the number of credits they had earned, and who participated in California University's community centers. I aimed to recruit one to two students from each of the eight community centers to understand the similarities and differences that exist for students across spaces. I was successful in recruiting participants from all eight centers, but not all centers were represented equally in the study. I interviewed three students who used the

Multicultural Center; two students who utilized the Black Cultural Center, Latinx Cultural Center, and Women's Center; and one student from the API Center, Dreamer Center and Native Cultural Center and LGBTQIA+ Center. I sought to interview the participants who had the deepest involvement in each center to provide detailed information about this case (Moore et al., 2012). When recruiting participants, I prioritized students who were closest to graduation and those who participated in substantive ongoing programs (e.g., first-year experience programs, mentoring programs, and student employment in the center). All students who were interested in participating in this study were interviewed, except for one prospective participant who was invited to participate but did not respond affirmatively until the data collection was completed.

The study was bounded by collecting data from upper-class students. Students with junior and senior status are on track to earning their undergraduate degrees, a significant marker of student achievement (Garcia 2022; Museus, 2014). Because this project sought to understand the ways in which participation in community centers supported student achievement, students with junior and senior status were well-positioned to speak to this topic.

Participation in community centers was defined widely; I targeted participants who worked in one of the community centers, participated in mentorship programs, attended programs and events, or used the physical space. Minimally, I looked to interview students who visited at least one of the community centers approximately 10 times during their time at California University. Students, however, may have spent time at multiple community centers. I connected with the director of each community center to share the goals of this project and to ask for recommendations on specific students who might be interested in participating. The directors of each center made recommendations to me regarding prospective undergraduate student

participants. Participants were also recruited through personal networks and relationships with me.

Sampling

In collaboration with colleagues at California University, I use nonprobability sampling techniques to intentionally identify participants who best explained and described the phenomenon. This purposeful sampling for intensity approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) relied on my ability to select participants who could share valuable information about their experiences of California University's community centers. Using the criteria for the study, I selected participants who were believed to represent users of community centers (Mertler, 2019). I aimed to identify participants who were typical to outsiders who may be new to learning about this subject. This purposeful sample for intensity approach is particularly helpful in a case study to identify participants who are information rich sources and can provide detailed information related to the case (Moore et al., 2012; Patton, 2002). As the project unfolded, I also asked identified participants if they knew of other students who may be interested in participating in the study. This snowballing technique used existing networks between students to enhance the data collected (Mertler, 2019). Using the snowball technique helped me tap into student networks and recruit minoritized participants who may have been sensitive, hidden, or hard to reach (Woodley & Lockard, 2016). Snowball sampling provided a more accessible research environment for subjects precisely because it "directly addresses the fears and mistrust . . . and increases the likelihood of trusting the researcher by introduction through a trusted social network" (Cohen & Arieli, 2011, p. 423). Ultimately, only one additional student was identified and interviewed as a result of snowball sampling.

Data Collection

I initially reached out to individual participants through email to share the goals of the study and ask if they were interested in participating in an interview (see Appendix B). Once each student confirmed their interest and scheduled an interview time with me, I sent them a consent form through Adobe Acrobat Sign, a secure electronic platform for signature collection used by California University. After receiving their completed consent form, I asked each participant to complete a brief online questionnaire (see Appendix A), which provided some basic demographic information including gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, centers the students used, and the center most used during their time at California University. The survey also asked each student what pseudonym they would like to be used in the project.

Similarly, I emailed staff members at California University who had direct leadership role in and involvement with the campus community centers to see if they were interested in participating in a 90-minute focus group about their observations of community centers and student achievement (see Appendix C). After staff confirmed their interest in the focus group and their availability to participate, a consent form was sent to them via Adobe Acrobat Sign.

To collect the narrative data, I scheduled 60-minute Zoom interviews with student participants. I selected Zoom as the modality for the interviews because of the accessibility and convenience of the platform for participants. Zoom was the official virtual meeting space of California University; thus, students were generally comfortable and experienced with the modality. Further, as the COVID-19 global pandemic continued to present unknown challenges, Zoom interviews provided increased safety during an uncertain period of time. Zoom also allowed for maximum flexibility for student participation as student leaders with busy schedules. The interview format was semistructured. This format allowed me to ask consistent base questions of each participant, but to have the flexibility to follow up to further explore themes

and collect data. The interview protocol for the individual student emails is available in Appendix D. A semistructured approach permits the collection of data necessary to understand the phenomenon under investigation, while providing flexibility to address unexpected emerging themes (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Each interview was audio recorded via the Zoom platform and with a digital audio recorder that I used as a backup device. I also printed out the interview protocol and jotted notes and observations by hand during each interview. Later, these notes were transcribed and organized as memos for each interview.

The interview protocol (see Appendix D) focused on exploring the ways in which participation in California University's community centers had contributed to each student's academic achievement. The instrument was self-designed, and the questions were grounded in the Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) modified theoretical framework of *an HBCU-Based Educational Approach for Black College Student Success* and focused on student identity development, equity minded intervention, and how community centers contributed to students' achievement through these elements. Participants were also asked to share their own perceptions about academic achievement, their experiences in the community centers, and the ways in which engagement in community centers contributed (if at all) to their holistic success.

The protocol for the staff focus group is available in Appendix E. The questions aimed to explore the institution's approach to structuring and supporting community centers. As mentioned previously, California University has a unique structure and model for their community centers. Each center follows a similar staffing and funding model. As such, this site was appropriate to illuminate the ways in which community centers contribute to student achievement. In addition to the individual student interviews, insights from staff in the centers helped to clarify the goals, interventions, and impact of the centers at California University.

A field test of the instrument was deployed to participants to assess and refine the instrument to ensure the data collected helped to answer the research question posed by this study. In the field test, participants were eager to share about the experiences in the community centers and how they contributed to their holistic success. It was harder, however, for participants to answer how their participation contributed to their degree completion. The instrument was edited to better collect these data. The complete interview protocol for student participants is available in Appendix D, and the protocol for the staff focus group is available in Appendix E.

Data Analysis

Within 24 hours of each interview, I transcribed the notes I made during the interview. I also completed a memo highlighting any reflections and themes I observed from my interview with the participants. Guiding questions for the memo included, "What did I learn today? How does this advance my thinking? How does this information fit with the studies I have read?" (Lareau, 2021, p. 180). In addition, memos included a list of items to look for in future visits. Memos provide an opportunity for the researcher to engage in reflection after collecting data and begin to explore ways to connect data to the literature. Memos help direct the inquirer toward new sources of data, shape which ideas to develop further, and prevent paralysis from mountains of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Next, I had the interview data transcribed via a third-party vendor, Rev.com. Upon receiving completed transcriptions, I reviewed and edited each transcription for accuracy and understanding. Then, I sent each transcript to each participant for review. If necessary, I made edits based on feedback from participants. Only one student asked that an additional example be added to their transcript to elaborate their point. Next, I completed an open and focused-coding

process on the entire data set (memos and transcriptions). Following Parsons and Browns's (2022) model for inductive analysis, I used an iterative process throughout the data collection stage to organize, describe, and interpret the data with the goal of presenting the findings in a way that facilitates understanding of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

As I read through the interview data, I created a coding scheme to organize and categorize information collected. Words, phrases, patterns, and themes were identified, described, and then interpreted. Through the data analysis process, I looked for any information that contradicted or conflicted with the patterns that emerged over time to ensure the accuracy and nuance of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study aimed to provide readers with a "vicarious experience" (Stake, 1995) of being present to understand the perspectives of the participants. The use of thick data that were rich with description and detail was important so that readers can determine the extent to which data might be generalized from the case study to other contexts (Moore et al., 2012).

Issues of Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness of Data

When assessing the finding of this and any study, validity was a key component. According to Maxwell (2013), "Validity is generally acknowledged to be a key issue in research design . . . and should be explicitly addressed" (p. 121). A key concept related to validity is validity threat. Scholars can explore the ways findings might be wrong, thereby allowing the reader to assess those possibilities. To address the validity of this study, I collected rich data and triangulated findings through both participant interviews and a staff focus group. I also engaged my colleagues who worked in the community centers at California University at the time of data collection in stakeholder checking. These staff worked in the centers and with the programs and students at hand. The directors of each center had a specific interest in the study and were

knowledgeable about the information being shared. I invited each director to review the summary of the interviews and initial data interpretations and findings (Thomas, 2003). Finally, I shared my findings with participants and asked for their reactions to the results of the study. I emailed each participant a unique link to the results chapter of my dissertation with all references to their pseudonyms highlighted for ease of reference. Five of the 13 students responded to my email and affirmed my interpretations of their quotes and the general findings of the study. This form of member checking provided an opportunity for participants to be actively engaged in the research process and to ensure the accuracy of the findings (Mertler, 2019).

Ethical Issues and Role of Researcher (Positionality)

It was important to acknowledge my positionality in relation to the subject matter explored in this project. I considered myself to be an insider at this research site, but an outsider to many of the communities served by the eight centers. Generally speaking, the *insider* perspective suggests the experience of having grown up in a community, having a shared racial or ethnic membership, or having some other kind of shared experience increases the quality, legitimacy, and value of a research project (Laureau, 2021). I have worked at California University for over 12 years and one of my first administrative roles on campus was managing the Women's Center. At the time of this study, I provided leadership to eight of the nine community centers on campus.

My positionality as an insider provided me detailed insight into the organization and relationships with key stakeholders at the site. My positionality also granted direct connection to students who were potential participants. This positionality also, however, may have garnered bias in selecting pieces of data that confirmed my own experiences and perceptions of the role of community centers. As a result of my engagement in community centers for the past 7 years, I

believed campus community centers have the potential to transform student experiences in postsecondary educational settings. My career in institutions of higher learning has been focused on acquiring resources, growing, and supporting the development of community centers.

This project sought to test my belief that community centers support student achievement. It is possible this belief may have caused me to interpret data that confirmed my own attitudes. Further, as a result of my insider status, I was known to all the staff who work in the centers and some (but not all) of the students and held a position of power on campus. Although I was several layers removed from students who used the community centers, students may have seen me on campus in a leadership role, speaking at events, or serving as a representative of the university. I held power as a campus administrator who was able to allocate resources and make decisions that impacted campus departments. It is possible that because of my positionality, participants may not have seen me as someone who could be trusted with their stories and experiences.

My interest in understanding the ways in which engagement in community centers for successful students who are highly involved mitigated some of this risk. Students who agreed to participate in the study likely found value in the community centers and were interested in sharing the ways in which the centers contributed to their success. The goal of this study was to understand what was working for a group of students who had clearly found meaning in these spaces. Students who did not find value in the centers or who had negative experiences in the spaces were not likely to participate given the design of this study. Finally, my recruitment plan for participants relied on my ability to receive recommendations from colleagues who worked at the centers. Community center leaders were instrumental in providing me with suggestions and even in some cases, introductions to students who fit the parameters of the study.

Despite my insider status as a staff member at California University, I am an outsider to many communities whose identities are represented in the community centers. As a white, cisgender woman, my positionality and the ways in which I experience the world, differ from many of the students who participated in this project. In this way, I was an outsider looking in from afar during this study. There were racial and power dynamics in place to which I tried to remain sensitive in attending. As a person in a position of power on campus who also held majority status identities, I may not have been viewed as someone with whom participants could share their vulnerable reflections.

In naming my positionality and relationship to this site, I sought to make visible potential biases and insights that are available to me because of this relationship. As Peshkin (1993) encouraged:

> [When] researchers are informed about the qualities that have emerged during their research, they can at least disclose to their readers where self and subject became joined. They can at best be enabled to write unshackled from orientations that they did not realize were intervening in their research process. (p. 17)

Social justice research is relational; therefore, respectfully connecting with participants was an important part of this process. Working closely in my own network with insider leaders at California University built trust with potential participants and reduced the possible risk that participants felt exploited (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). Engaging participants in member checking and "requesting their own perspectives on the data can contribute to the quality and trustworthiness of the analysis and can bring the participants into an empowered position as they take ownership of the results" (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013, p. 81). Further, I shared my tentative findings with the directors of the community centers at California University to ask for their feedback and reactions to my interpretation of the results. As Fassinger and Morrow (2013) stated:

> Research can be used either to perpetuate or to disrupt the social status quo, to oppress or to empower marginalized groups, to provide an experience that blames people for their victimization or seeks to liberate them and transform their lives. It is not the method alone that determines the outcome, but rather the intention behind and the use of that method to support social justice aims. (p. 70)

My intention was to add to scholarly literature that explains the impact community centers can have on student achievement. I hope this research helps to amplify the important work taking place in campus community centers that often have been historically at the margins of institutions of higher learning.

Limitations of the Study

My goal for this project was to focus deeply on one case where significant human, financial, and physical resources had been devoted to support community centers as spaces for student success. As such, the data collection for this project was limited to one site. Because of this research design, the study faced challenges producing findings that are generalizable to other campuses. Although case studies are generalizable to theoretical propositions, the findings cannot be specifically applied to other populations or universes (Yin, 2018). There were unique circumstances surrounding the creation, funding, and modeling of the community centers at California University; though the findings from the study produced interesting and compelling perspectives on centers and student success, the case itself was specific and bounded (Yin, 2018).

Another potential limitation to this study is participant sampling from all the community centers at California University. I sought to recruit participants from all eight centers, but not all centers were represented equally in the study. I was able to interview three students who utilized the Multicultural Center; two students who utilized the Black Cultural Center, Latinx Cultural Center, and Women's Center; and one student from the API Center, Dreamer Center, Native

Cultural Center, and LGBTQIA+. It is possible that uneven representation may be a limitation in my findings. Additionally, of the students interviewed for the project, 12 of the 13 had been employed in a community center. Student employment ultimately represented the deepest level of involvement and commitment to a space. Student employees were familiar with acting as ambassadors of the centers and sharing their successes and positive attributes. Because of this, it is possible that the data collected from these participants reflected one experience—that of students employed in the centers. However, if employment was also one of the ways in which students are most deeply engaged in the centers, then this perspective is useful to understand the impact that spaces have on student achievement.

Finally, because I relied on purposeful sampling for intensity, the participants were highly involved and motivated to share their experiences. It is likely that students who were less engaged in these spaces or had unsatisfactory experiences would have shared different perspectives than those in this study; those perspectives were not included in this project, nor were the perspectives of students who chose not to use California University's community centers.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which campus community centers support student achievement. Educational leaders have continued to set goals and identify strategies to support degree completion for minoritized students (McMillan, 2019). Community centers have historically been created in response to the expressed needs of minoritized students and play a role in supporting students to obtain their degree. This study aimed to understand the ways in which campus community centers operate as sites that supported student success and,

specifically, degree completion. The guiding research question for this study was: in what ways do the campus community centers at California University support student achievement?

This dissertation used qualitative methods to explore the ways in which community centers supported students' academic success at one specific site: California University. I recruited 13 matriculated undergraduate students who met two specific criteria: they held junior or senior status, as established by the number of credits they had earned, and who participated meaningfully in California University's community centers. When recruiting participants, this study prioritized students who were closest to graduation and those who participated in substantive ongoing programs (e.g., first-year experience programs, mentoring programs, or student employment in the center). Prospective participants were recommended by the directors of each community center and were also recruited through my personal networks and relationships.

After completing interviews with participants and transcribing the findings, I completed an open- and focused-coding process on the entire data set (memos and transcriptions). Following Parsons and Browns's (2022) model for inductive analysis, I used an iterative process throughout the data collection stage to organize, describe, and interpret the data with the goal of presenting the findings in a way that facilitates understanding of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

California University was a unique case in that there were eight well-funded community centers with similar programmatic and staffing models and consistent organization within the university. Many campuses have community centers, but they are often scattered across the organization due to differing funding sources, politics, and different histories of activism associated with each space (Mena, 2010). As a site, California University provided an

opportunity to understand collectively the ways in which engagement in community center spaces impacts student achievement.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The project aimed to understand the ways in which engagement in California University's community centers support student achievement. Using a modified version of Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) HBCU-based educational approach for Black college student success model, this study analyzed how community centers created a supportive environment for students through cultural-specific interventions and contribute to student achievement. Data for this project were collected from 13 semistructured interviews with students who held junior and senior status and a focus group with seven staff members who worked in the community centers.

Approach to Data Analysis

Following Parsons and Browns's (2022) model for inductive analysis, I used an iterative process throughout the data collection stage to organize, describe, and interpret the data with the goal of presenting the findings in a way that facilitates understanding of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Following each semistructured interview and focus group, I created a memo highlighting major themes and key insights from the conversation. Audio recordings were transcribed by Rev.com and then reviewed immediately by me for accuracy. After reviewing and editing each transcript, I sent them to participants for review and feedback. Only one participant provided an edit, which consisted of an additional example he wanted to be included in one of his answers. The transcript of that participant was edited to include the additional example.

After all transcripts were reviewed by participants, I completed an initial set of coding in MAXQDA. Using the theoretical framework and my interview protocol as a guide, I identified major themes from the interviews, my memos, by freely coding each document in the MAXQDA software. After this initial round of coding, I organized the recurring ideas and information into key themes and subthemes (Parsons & Browns, 2022). I then recoded each transcript using an

organized codebook. Finally, I checked each assigned code against the other codes to ensure I had the best categorization of information. Table 1 highlights my research question, the six main themes identified through data analysis, and the subthemes associated with each theme.

Table 1. Findings Themes and Subthemes

Research question	Themes identified by theoretical framework	Subthemes
In what ways do California University's community centers support student achievement?	Institutional entry point: Decision to attend California University	Affordability Campus climate
	Supportive environment: Navigating primarily white institution	
	Reciprocal processes and outcomes: Identity development	Social justice conversations Connecting with students who share similar experiences and backgrounds Learning about the diversity of others Community cultural wealth
	Reciprocal processes and outcomes: Equity minded approaches to student achievement	Peer mentoring Institutional agents Holistic well-being Mattering and belonging Physical Space
	Reciprocal processes and outcomes: Student achievement	Motivation Opportunities
	*Impact of COVID-19	

Note. *Impact of COVID-19 was not initially identified as a major theme at the onset of the study, but emerged from the participants as a significant finding and thus is included here.

Revised Theoretical Model

In this project, used Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) HBCU-based educational approach for Black college student success to ground the study. From their original model (see Figure 1), I first made modifications to broaden the focus to other minoritized student groups. The "reciprocal processes and outcomes" embedded in community centers were adjusted from an HBCU-specific focus to be relevant to the populations served by specific community centers (see Figure 2). Following the data collection and analysis for this project, I added details to the revised theoretical framework to reflect the findings identified in the study, such as specific examples of equity minded practices, identity development, and student achievement. The major themes and subthemes are reflected in the revised theoretical framework (see Figure 3).

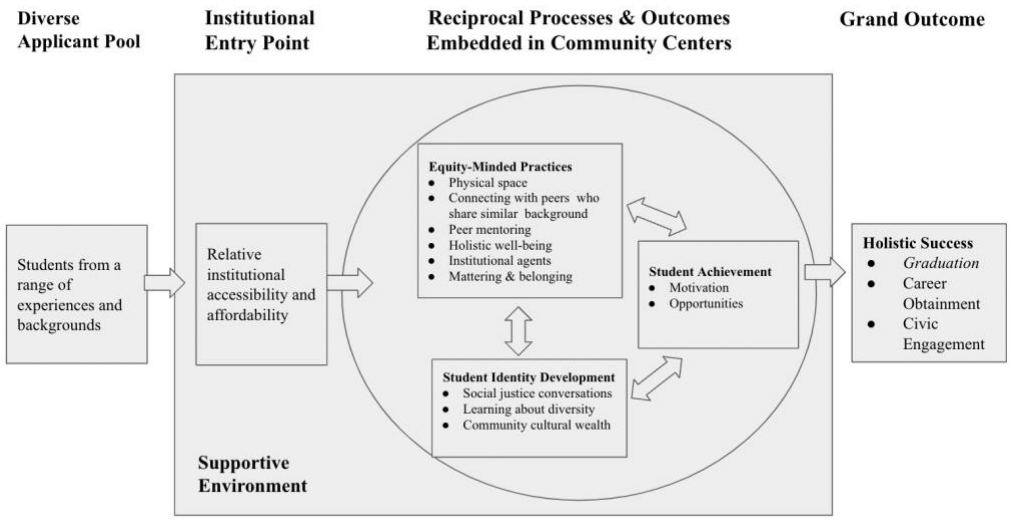

Figure 3. Revised Theoretical Framework

Note. Adapted from "An HBCU-Based Educational Approach for Black College Student Success: Toward a Framework with Implications for All Institutions" by A. T. Arroyo (M. Gasman, 2014. *American Journal of Education*, *121*(1), 57–85. (https://doi.org/10.1086/678112). Copyright 2014 by University of Chicago Press.

Profile of Participants

Participants in this study were recruited from California University's site. Two primary forms of data collection were used: 13 individual semistructured interviews with student users of the community centers and a focus group with seven career staff members who experienced leading the community centers at this site. Participants were selected for their knowledge of, and involvement in, California University's community centers. Additional information on the student and staff participants is highlighted next.

Student Participants

According to institutional data, the student body at California University was composed of approximately 31,000 undergraduate students as of Fall 2022. California University also holds AANAPISI (Asian Pacific Islander, Native American, Pacific Islander Serving Institution and HSI (Hispanic Serving Institution) designation. According to California University's Institutional Research department, 59.1% of students enrolled in Fall 2022 were Students of Color (not including international students and students who selected "other") and the largest racial/ethnic group on campus was Latinx students, who comprised 34.6% of the undergraduate student population. In addition, 34.2% identified as white, 7.9% of students were Asian, 6.9% were multiracial, 5.4% were Filipinx, 3.9% were Black, and 0.2% were Native American during this time frame. A total of 13 undergraduate students participated in 45–60-minute semistructured interviews for this project. I received referrals from campus leaders and leveraged existing relationships to invite students to participate in the project.

All student participants held junior or senior status in making progress toward their degree completion. At least one student was interviewed from each community center including the Asian Pacific Islander (API) center, Black Cultural Center, Dreamer Center, Latinx Cultural

Center, LGBTQIA+ Center, Multicultural Center, Native Cultural Center, and Women's Center. In some cases, more than one student was interviewed from a particular center. Some students used more than one community center at California University, but all of the student participants had a primary center where they spent the most time. The participants represented diverse courses of study, including 12 different majors, held in four colleges (see Table 2).

Table 2. Student Participant Overview

Student	Primary center utilized	Class standing	Major
Ana	Native Cultural Center	Senior	Sociology
Denise	Latinx Cultural Center	Senior	Sociology
Elizabeth	LGBTQIA+ Center	Senior	Africana Studies
Junior	Dreamer Center	Senior	Liberal Studies (Math)
Kaitlin	Women's Center	Junior	Health Communication
Kayla	Multicultural Center	Junior	Dance
Maria	Multicultural Center	Senior	TV, Film, and New Media
Mariam	Women's Center	Senior	Psychology
Matt	Multicultural Center	Senior	Microbiology
Michelle	Black Cultural Center	Junior	Communications
Myla	Latinx Cultural Center	Senior	Psychology
Odell	Black Cultural Center	Senior	Interdisciplinary
Rei	API Center	Senior	Business Administration

Student participants were diverse in gender, sexual orientation, and race. The characteristics and demographics of the participants were separated into two tables to protect

participants' confidentiality. Table 3 provides an overview of student participants' self-reported gender, race, sexual orientation, and first-generation college student status. Three men, eight women, and two nonbinary students participated in the study. Nine students identified as heterosexual, two were queer or LGBTQIA+, and two students shared that they were questioning their sexual orientation. Four students identified as Latinx, three students identified as Black, three as multiracial, two as Middle Eastern, and one as East Asian. Participants were disproportionately first-generation college students, with nine students identifying as first-generation college students (see Table 3). Of the 13 participants, 11 were currently or previously employed by one of the community centers, demonstrating that students who have been deeply impacted by these spaces often do so through employment. Finally, participants were also involved through student government, leadership positions in student organizations, peer mentors, and involved in advocacy efforts on campus.

Table 3. Student Participant Demographics

Demographic	Number of Participants
Gender	
Man	3
Woman	8
Nonbinary	2
Race/Ethnicity	
Black or African American	3
Latino/a/e/x	4
Multiracial	3 Black and white; Black and Filipinx; Native American, American Indian or Alaskan Native; and Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian
Middle Eastern/North African/SWANA	2
East Asian	1
Sexual Orientation:	
Heterosexual/Straight	9
Queer	2
Questioning	2
First-generation college student:	
Yes	9
No	4

Staff Participants

Seven full-time career staff members participated in a focus group for this research project. All current directors of California University community centers were invited to participate, along with several staff members who previously held leadership positions in centers

who now work in adjacent roles on campus. The staff participants were highly knowledgeable about the community centers and worked closely with students in each of the respective areas. At least one staff member had been working professionally with students in higher education at California University for over 20 years. The most recently hired staff leader in the centers started at California University less than 1 year before the focus group. The staff participants represented a deep and wide body of knowledge about minoritized student success. Table 4 provides an overview of staff participants and their center affiliations.

Table 4. Staff Focus Group Participant Overview

Career staff member name	Role on campus
Claudia	Dreamer Center Director
Carmen	Women's Center Director
Desiree	Multicultural Center Associate Director
Frank	Black Cultural Center Director
Jennifer	Diversity Officer
Kal	LGBTQIA+ Director
Nick	Native Cultural Center Director
Renato	Latinx Cultural Center Director

Organization of Findings

Table 1 highlights my research question along with the six main themes I identified during data analysis. The main themes explored were grounded by the revised theoretical framework (see Figure 3), based on Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) *HBCU-Based Educational Approach for Black College Student Success*. First, as the main input, Arroyo and Gasman

highlighted the importance of a campus' diverse applicant pool, affordability, and accessibility to create a supportive environment for minoritized students. Next, the model provides strategies that campuses can use to create a supportive environment through student identity formation and equity minded approaches to student success. In this supportive environment, there is a reciprocal relationship between supportive interventions for students and student achievement. In other words, when students receive community specific support, it contributes to their achievement.

The findings for this study were organized in the order of Table 1. This order follows Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) revised theoretical framework. There were six main themes discovered in the findings. First, I discuss why participants in this study chose to attend California University. Next, I explore the challenges that students describe navigating the campus climate. This theme highlights the needs for community specific programs and interventions available in the centers. Then, I explore the supportive strategies employed by the centers to support students. These strategies focus on identity development with the subthemes of social justice conversations, learning about diversity, and community cultural wealth that were present in the community centers. Afterward, I explore the equity minded practices that took place in the centers, which included the physical space of each center, connecting with students who share similar experiences, peer mentoring, access to institutional agents, holistic well-being, and mastering and belonging. Then, the ways in which the centers support student achievement are discussed through the subthemes of motivation and opportunities. Finally, I discuss the impact that COVID-19 had on their curricular and cocurricular experience.

Decision to Attend California University

The main input of Arroyo and Gasman's (2014)) HBCU-based educational approach for Black college student success model is recruiting students from a range of experiences and backgrounds to attend a given institution. One of the keyways to recruit diverse students is to ensure campus has an accessible admissions process and is affordable in the context of higher education. California University is part of the largest system of 4-year higher education in the United States and has only raised tuition once in the past 11 years. In 2022, Money Magazine ranked California University 55 out of 620 colleges for quality, affordability, and outcomes. Students interviewed for this project recognized that the affordable tuition was a significant factor in their decision to attend California University. In addition, students mentioned the presence of diversity related programs and initiatives were also significant in their decision to enroll in this institution.

Affordability

Affordability was an important decision-making factor for several of the students who participated in the study. Five students explicitly named the cost of tuition, housing, and fees when deciding which institution to attend for their postsecondary degree. Interestingly, cost was important for both in state, local area, and out of state students. For example, Kaitlin, a student who worked in the Women's Center, said about her decision to attend California University:

> First, I'm from the area, so it's the cheapest option to go to California University. Since it was so close to home, I didn't have to pay for a dorm, while I lived at home with my family. I knew about CU before even applying, so it was one of my top schools. My familiarity with the school and because it was the cheapest option, were the reasons I decided to attend CU.

For Maria, an out-of-state student who was involved with the Multicultural Center, affordability was a particularly important factor. She said, "CU was also a lot more affordable just coming from out of state. There was a lot more aid offered, making it a pretty clean fit for me. So, I

decided pretty early on to go to California University." Funding was just one factor that was considered, in addition to others, when deciding to attend California University. For example, Matt, an immigrant from Iraq, was intentional about wanting to find a community of Middle Eastern students in university life. When making a final decision, Matt noted:

> In addition to the community, I was looking for, there were also the financial reasons. I did the math, and the price of California University was half of what I'd be spending at the other institution I was considering. So, at the end of the day, it turned out to be really good. And until this day, I have never regretted my decision. Even though I'm a science major, a lot of people say that I should have selected another undergraduate institution known for their STEM programs, but I have really found my path here at California University.

Attracting and enrolling a diverse body of students is an important factor in creating a supportive environment for minoritized students. Affordability is one strategy that is important in ensuring that students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds have access to higher education. As indicated in the data, students often considered affordability in conjunction with other factors, such as campus climate, when deciding to attend this campus.

Campus Climate

The climate of California University emerged as a limited factor that influenced students' decision to attend California University. Three participants explicitly named campus climate as an important contributing factor in their decision to attend the university. Mariam, a Middle Eastern student who worked in the Women's Center said, "I definitely wanted to go to a school that was more diverse and had programs and stuff available for non-white students and California University seemed pretty diverse. That was a major contributing factor in my decision to attend." Elizabeth ultimately decided to attend California University because the other campus they were considering did not have a vibrant student life for Queer or Black students, aspects that were important to their identity. Because of their observations on this other campus, Elizabeth

decided to attend California University, which they found to be more diverse and supportive. Matt, a science student who utilized the Multicultural Center, shared:

> The main reason I honestly chose California University is because I really asked myself "where am I going to feel a sense of belonging?" I wanted to be where I could find a community and I knew a lot of Middle Easterners who went to California University.

In addition to the cost of attendance, some prospective students assessed California University's campus climate before deciding to commit. The presence of a diverse student body and community specific programs and spaces were important indicators to prospective students that California University was a place they could be successful. Thus, affordability and campus climate were both significant factors influencing some students' intent to enroll at this campus.

Although students were drawn to the diverse appearance of California University, many students discussed that the campus felt less diverse and more homogenous upon arrival. The next section explores how students navigate a campus that feels like a primarily white institution (PWI). The theoretical framework for this study was grounded in the idea that a supportive environment is critical to the success of minoritized students. Arroyo and Gasman (2014) discussed how elements connected to a supportive environment are explored to facilitate the academic and personal success of Black students at HBCUs. The adapted version of Arroyo and Gasman's theoretical model (see Figure 3) calls for the same supportive environmental factors on a campus to support diverse minoritized communities. Yet, there are some elements of campus climate that may not feel supportive for students, thereby emphasizing the need for community specific spaces. The students in this study discussed at length the ways in which they faced challenges navigating a primarily white institution. Their involvement in community center(s) served as a protective factor against the overwhelming whiteness of the campus.

Navigating a PWI

Despite the diverse numbers of students at California University, the Students of Color who participated in this study discussed at length the challenges they experienced navigating a primarily white institution. Interestingly, the student body at California University is composed of a majority of Students of Color. Over 58% of undergraduate students enrolled in the 2022–2023 academic year were Students of Color, 35.1% of students identified as white, and 6.5% of students identified as "other," or international. Despite a significant amount of racial diversity among students, faculty demographics remain overwhelmingly homogenous. During the same 2022–2023 academic year, California University's Institutional Research department reported faculty of color composed 36% of the instructional body. In addition to the lack of compositional diversity among faculty at California University, institutions of higher learning have long histories of exclusion (Mena, 2010; Patton & Hannon, 2008; Shuford, 2011). Campus climate is an important element that contributes to student achievement. Researchers have consistently found Students of Color and their white peers who attended the same institution often viewed campus racial climates differently (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Patton, 2006). The long history of racism in higher education and the present-day reality of life on a college campus presented the students who participated in this project with challenges, and they navigated whiteness and lack of racial/ethnic representation at California University.

The Students of Color who participated in the study reported their isolation in the classroom because they were one of the few, or only, members of their racial or ethnic group. This experience frequently served as the catalyst for them to connect with one of the community centers. The centers offered a reprieve from the micro and macroaggressions students experienced elsewhere on campus. Denise, a Latinx student who was involved in the Latinx Student Union and the Latinx Cultural Center, noted:

> I thought the school was going to be diverse, but it wasn't that diverse. So, I wasn't sure where to go. When I walk on campus, I see 90% white people and not a lot of Latinx students. I was really shocked when I was first on campus, because I'm from a mainly Mexican neighborhood and my high school was 90% Mexican or Hispanic. I was so shocked when I got here.

Denise described the shock of encountering a campus that felt so white after coming from a high school with students who shared her racial identity. She was not sure where to go to feel comfortable and to connect with students with shared cultural, racial, and/or ethnic backgrounds. This discomfort on campus is what led her to the Latinx Resource Center. Mariam, a Middle Eastern student in the Women's Center, decided to attend California University because of the diverse student body and initiatives present on campus. Yet, when she arrived, the experience of the campus climate was different from when she expected. Mariam stated:

> I will say that since coming to campus I, like a lot of other people, have shared that even though the diversity statistics say one thing, we do still feel like it is a predominantly white institution and it can be a little bit tricky to find your place on campus . . . I feel like in a lot of my classes, I'm the only of the few Students of Color and especially one of the few Middle Eastern or South-Central Asian people in the class. That really sticks out to me. Greek life is also a really, really big thing at California University, and unfortunately, Greek life is predominantly white, and it feels like me and my friends of color are excluded.

Denise and Mariam both expected California University to be more diverse than it felt upon arrival. Both students described being overwhelmed by the whiteness of campus and as a result, struggled to find a place where they fit in, were welcomed, and where they belonged. Moreover, Mariam described other systems on campus, like Greek life, that did not feel inclusive to Students of Color or other minoritized students. To navigate campus, some spaces and systems (e.g., Greek life) felt overwhelmingly white, which increased the need for counter spaces to serve the needs of diverse students.

Other students who participated in this study described the ways in which they felt like their racial identity made it harder for them to connect with their peers on campus. Kyla, a Black

student who works in the Multicultural Center and Matt, a Middle Eastern college student who uses the Multicultural Center, shared that many students felt out of place on campus and struggled to find a community they connected with. Kyla explained, she knew "a lot of people who feel left out. California University is a predominantly white institution, and some students struggle to find their community." Similarly, Matt echoed:

> At such a large university, sometimes it is hard to be an immigrant and a first-generation college student who doesn't fully know the other culture of the other students. To be able to go in a 500-student class and talk to the person next to you, is a little bit hard for us.

It was difficult for Kyla and Matt and their peers to find spaces where they felt comfortable. The barriers due to race, nationality, and first-generation college status were difficult to overcome.

For students in this study, California University's community centers provided counterspaces (Yosso & Lopez, 2010). where their identities and experiences could be centered. In this way, the centers were an important reprieve from the constant and overwhelming culture of whiteness of the campus. For example, Michelle, a student who worked in the Black Cultural Center, noted she spends time in the Black Cultural Center to counter her experience of being one of the few Black students in a classroom. She emphasized:

> I'll go to class, and I might be the only Black student in the classroom. I'll come here to the BCC, and I'm surrounded by Black students who are pursuing great majors and pursuing great degrees. It's super inspirational just because there's a stigma that Black students don't work as hard or there is pressure to always be happy. There are a lot of stereotypes that we face.

Odell, a Black student who works in the Black Cultural Center, described how being connected to the Black Cultural Center has made him feel more connected and supported. Odell encountered the lack of Black people as he walked through campus. Spending time at the Black Cultural Center, however, helped him feel more at home. Odell noted:

> Before I was immersed in the BCC, I constantly felt like a statistic. I could tell that Black student only made up 3% of the population cause I'd go out in classes, walk around the campus and feel like I was one in a million. By being in the BCC and being here often, I see mostly Black people throughout my day because of the Black Cultural Center a lot. It has made me feel more like I'm supposed to be here more than before I started spending time in the space. That makes it a little easier to want to go to school every day.

Michelle and Odell found reprieve in the Black Cultural Center after being the only Black students in many of the spaces through which they traveled on campus during the day. Odell was acutely aware of how few Black students were enrolled at California University and felt the lack of representation of Black people on campus as he moved throughout his day. The Black Cultural Center, however, provided an important refuge.

The student participants in this study clearly encountered obstacles to feeling represented on campus in the student body, the faculty, and the physical space of the campus. For several students, they were "shocked" by the whiteness of the campus when they arrived. For others, the campus' demographic diversity did not reflect what it felt to walk on campus and be in classes. This dynamic left students feeling out of place, unwelcome, and like they didn't belong. In contrast, community centers were spaces where students saw their identities reflected and were able to connect with students who shared similar identities and experiences. These spaces helped provide some protection from the negative racialized experiences students had navigating other areas of campus.

The community center staff also emphasized the importance of community centers amid the whiteness and homogeneity of the campus. According to Jennifer, students sought information about the centers during the first few days of classes. She encountered students who approached staff to ask about the centers because they noticed California University was a "predominately white institution and they are seeking an environment that may feel more like

their hometown or high school. Students want to find other students who share similarities in cultural values right away." Nick, the Director of the Native Cultural Center, explained students sought out the centers after feeling a sense of isolation in the classroom due to their identity, stating:

> In their classrooms, students are often the only one from their background and they want to find spaces where they don't feel like that. To have a center that brings students together to focus on their backgrounds and their histories helps them navigate that. At a large, predominantly white serving institution, students don't see others who identify with their own background. They may not even see other People of Color in their classes. It's very isolating and I think the centers provide an alternative.

Navigating the campus climate is a critical piece of creating a supportive environment for students (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). Students from California University who participated in this study experienced the campus as a PWI, despite the demographic diversity present in the student body. As a result, students sought community centers where they could explore their identities and feel connected with others who shared their background and experiences. The reprieve of a community center created space for students to navigate the landscape of higher education.

Identity Development

Though identity development is a lifelong process (Erikson, 1968), higher education is a critical time where many students hone a singular and collective sense of self (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Colleges are unique settings that provide rare opportunities for students to be exposed to diverse people and ideas. It is often the first-time students are away from their family, friends, and communities. Students learn how to navigate a new environment and develop a community for themselves from home. These opportunities allow students to rethink and explore their identities in new ways. As emerging adults work toward a coherent sense of self, finding ways to integrate their layered identities becomes an important part of self-

actualization. Opportunities for students to participate in spaces that affirm and allow for exploration of oneself can help with the identity negotiation of this developmental period (Azmitia, 2008).

Participants in this study described the ways in which engagement in California University's community centers contributed to their own personal growth and development. The ability to connect with students who shared aspects of their identity affirmed their ability to persist at the institution and achieve their goals. Though there is an assumption that community centers only promote homogeneity (Renn, 2011), students discussed learning about the diversity of others through the centers. In identity groups, there is rich diversity in experience and perspective, which was a valuable benefit of engagement in the centers. Students also shared that the centers were spaces where conversations about social justice topics regularly occurred and were thoughtfully facilitated. Participants reported that conversations about race, politics, gender, and sexual orientation were often "watered down" or not present at all in their coursework and class discussion. Thus, space to discuss critical social issues presented opportunities for learning outside of the classroom. Finally, students discussed how these opportunities validated their identities and fostered pride in who they are. Engagement in these centers facilitated community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) in ways that supported students holistically and academically.

In the previous section, I discussed the ways in which students navigated a PWI. Student participants shared they were often in "shock" with how California University felt upon arrival to campus. Staff, however, said that other students may come have from an overwhelmingly white high school and were encountering groups of students who share their identities for the first time. Frank, the director of the Black Cultural Center, described the ways in which Black identity development was discussed in the Black Cultural Center:

> Black identity development is also something that we talk about in the BCC. It is even built into our handbook for student assistants. Students may have gone to a high school where they were the only Black student. They may also have gone to the high school where it's all Black, but now here they are the only one in their class or dorm. They may have not had any of those experiences and they may be of a different ethnicity, but now they want to have this conversation. Some students might even be further along than our mentors and they might challenge and push our mentors, but that's ok, that's a part of it. Everybody's supposed to be at some place different in this process. But it's all put through this deep lens because they've dug deep into their own identity and they're able to have that conversation. For some students, this is all new to them, they have never heard anything like this. And then there are students who are taking deep African Studies Courses on psychology and trauma of Black people.

Frank illustrated the degree to which identity development was emphasized and built into the work of the community centers. In some cases, like at the Black Cultural Center, students were trained on identity development to be able to best support the students who used the center, and in some cases, the students they mentored. Desire, the Associate Director of the Multicultural Center, pointed out that as students moved through an identity development process, they could experience anger and frustration, but then, they could also "come to peace with who they are and can see the similarities in other struggles and I can show up in solidarity."

As described earlier, student identity development is a process by which they explore the question, "who am I?" Though identity development is a singular process, the development and/or affirmation of a students' collective identity during their experience in higher education can support their student success (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Students who participated in the California University's community centers explored their own identities and engaged in conversations about social justice topics like race, gender, sexual orientation, power, and marginalization, which helped students learn about others and develop collective identities in relation to one another.

Social Justice Conversations

Students in this study shared that the community centers provided space for them to have meaningful conversations about social justice. These conversations helped them to learn about topics related to their identity and in turn, helped them to learn about themselves and their own perspectives of important issues. Notably, students felt like these critical dialogues were not taking place in their academic coursework. Because issues related to identity including race, gender, sexual orientation, and current events were directly tied to the ways in which students saw themselves, this absence from the formal curriculum was disappointing. Community centers, however, served as trusted spaces where students did feel comfortable engaging in these topics. Respondents felt like the students and staff in the centers created an environment that was conducive for social justice conversations through their programming offered and the general respect held by users of the respective spaces. For example, Michelle, a Black student who works in the Black cultural center, shared:

> I feel like the Black community goes through a lot, and sometimes it can get overshadowed. I am really impressed that students can be open with one another on topics from transgenerational trauma to the things that we go through on campus. In another setting, sometimes people might shut down. But because of the community that we build here in the BCC, you're able to open. That is what I really, really like. I'm proud of the students, as well as myself, for being open with one another and able to talk about issues.

In other words, the Black Cultural Center provided a venue for conversations that may have been difficult for Black students in other settings. The community, safety, and comfortability of the Black Cultural Center allowed students to be able to "open up" and process difficult events related to anti-Black racism. Mariam, a Middle Eastern queer student in the Women's Center, shared:

> My favorite thing about the Women's Center is being in community with like-minded individuals and either laughing or talking about stuff and it's a very no judgment space. I feel like being at a primarily white institution a lot of times you'll hear stuff or even unfortunately professors will say stuff and it kind of

> grates on you. And having a space to talk about it and relating to other students is important.

For Mariam, having a space to process events that took place on campus and conversations in the classroom was useful. Students, particularly, Students of Color who were likely underrepresented in the classroom benefitted from a place to debrief incidents and conversations that occurred in the classroom. Another student from the Women's Center, Kaitlin, shared:

> I wouldn't say California University's social climate is the worst, but I feel like having a space like the Women's Center where you can have conversations about important issues is important. Knowing that there are people here who are knowledgeable about difficult topics and who are open to talking about them helps with my experience on campus. In general, I feel like topics about race, class and gender get sugar coated a little bit and some faculty dodge the topics whenever they come up to avoid offending anyone, so then they don't really get talked about. It kind of gets breezed over. The only class I've ever experienced people talk about social justice issues is maybe my WAGE class. through the Women's Center or one of my sociology classes, and that's about it.

Interestingly, Kaitlin, a sociology major, did not feel like difficult topics related to identity were discussed in her academic coursework. Rather, the one-unit seminar tied to her 1st-year experience program in the Women's Center was the place where she remembered conversations about social justice occurring. Kaitlin described one example, noting, "After the *Roe v. Wade* decision, a lot of us were really going through it. Being surrounded by women who were also coping was empowering. We really came together to work through the emotions we were having during that time." Thus, spaces like the Women's Center were important and filled an important need when students navigated a university's campus climate and current events that impacted students' well-being.

Mariam, in the Multicultural center, felt like conversations about social justice topics were both encouraged, safe, and supportive. She described:

> I think just having open conversations is something that we all share despite it not always being something that we were brought up with. We all share this desire to

> talk about things and share commentary on things that happen in the world or things that we see happening on campus and it's nice to have that open discussion and just know that no one is being judged and their thoughts aren't being shared out anywhere else.

The community centers, then, both offered a reprieve from harmful environments on campus and the community where students may have experienced micro and macroaggressions and served as trusted spaces where difficult conversations could take place. One student who worked in the LGBTQIA+ Center, Elizabeth, shared the tenor of the conversations in the LGBTQIA+ Center was particularly significant. Elizabeth noted:

> Something I've talked to a lot of other students and my peers about is, how do you have serious conversations but not stay serious all the time? I think this is something that the LGBTQIA Center does really well. We are having important and serious conversations all the time, and yet there's a lot of silliness too. I don't know exactly what that says about queer resilience, but probably a lot. But I think that's the center. We do that really well in the center.

Elizabeth's comment drove home an important point. There was some degree of comfort level in discussing difficult topics with trusted and familiar people. This comfort allowed for some relaxation of the setting and complexity and nuance in what was being discussed. For example, there may have been some humor in discussing a painful and controversial decision issued by the U.S. Supreme Court. Or there could have been some silly commentary or reenactment of an incident that took place in the classroom. Also, centers could make space for students to share their feedback, preferences, or experience in a way that is also funny or loving. Difficult identity based discussions don't always have to be serious. In spaces where students felt comfortable, these conversations could be layered with other emotions as well.

Connecting With Students Who Share Similar Experiences

An important piece of identity development and the ability to have conversations about important topics was driven by spaces where students could connect with those who shared

similar experiences and values. As such, institutions of higher learning can benefit from investing in sites where students can where student identities can be developed and expressed (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Ramos et al., 2022; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Researchers have suggested practitioners should support racial identity development among college students because it is a significant predictor of social change behavior (Yi & Todd, 2022). Further, according to Tatum (1997):

> Having a place to be rejuvenated and to feel anchored in one's cultural community increases the possibility that one will have the energy to achieve academically as well as participate in the cross-group dialogue and interaction that many colleges want to encourage. (p. 80)

Students benefit from access to space where they can simply exist without worrying about the impact of a hegemonic gaze (Williams et al., 2022). Community centers, student organizations, and other spaces where students can connect with peers who share their identities and experiences help to support their transition to and success in institutions of higher learning.

Nine of the 13 students interviewed for this project described the ways in which connecting with peers who shared similar experiences was an important resource available to them through California University's community centers. For example, Michelle, who works in the Black Cultural Center, shared, "There is a sense of home at the BCC. It gives me that sense of being around my people. They can also understand a lot of things about me that somebody else may not be able to understand." For Maria, the Multicultural Center was important because it allowed her to connect with peers who she identified as having similar values. She noted, "It's been difficult for me to find other people that share the same upbringing. Being in a space where everyone just really values the same things and where we can also learn from each other, is something I really appreciate." Similarly, Myla at the Latinx resource center, remembered, "We always joke about cultural things during our all-staff meetings, and it feels good to know that

people can relate to the same things. It just hits different when you know that people have exactly experienced things as you." Maria, Michelle, and Myla described their feelings of being understood in the community centers. The students described the centers as places where they did not have to explain their culture or their identity. They could relax, be at home, and be themselves. This ability to be seen was incredibly important for the students who participated in the study.

For Mariam in the Women's Center, spending time in a community center really helped her connect with people whom she felt safe sharing her perspectives and ideas. Mariam noted:

> It can be hard to find spaces like that where you can share your identity, especially if you don't really live on campus anymore. California University classrooms are so big that there isn't really an opportunity to socialize. It's been super, super impactful to be able to use the Women's Center for this. It makes you feel less alone being in community with others who share aspects of your identity. There isn't very much visibility for a lot of marginalized identities on campus and there's a sense of safety and being able to say what you want to say and having them understand it because they also share that point of view from that shared understanding. I feel like if I didn't have that space where I'm able to do that, my college experience would be very different.

Mariam reiterated this feeling that minoritized students could really be themselves or felt totally comfortable in many places on campus. Having spaces to recharge and connect with others who are trusted was an invaluable resource that reinvigorated students for their studies and for their experiences in campus life. For Odell, returning to the Black Cultural Center for support and processing was an important resource. He described:

> It has been important for me to have daily access to a space to come in whenever you need to. That is the Number 1 thing about the BCC. I'm an extrovert, so I like talking to people. That's kind of my healing. If I'm having a bad day, I can just literally drop whatever I'm doing, go to the BRC and there's bound to be 20 people that could cheer me up and they don't even have to know you're going through anything, but everyone's just so fun and loving that it'll have a positive impact on you. So just the ability to just have a home away from home whenever you want is probably its biggest resource.

Odell used important language that was explored further, a “home away from home” to describe the Black Cultural Center. Invoking “home” was a common phrase that suggested the degree to which students felt comfortable, understood, seen, and supported by the community centers. Matt, who frequently used the Multicultural Center, described the ways in which it is easier to connect with peers when there is commonality or shared experience. He described:

> It might be harder if you’re part of a different community, and let’s say you just go in general, sit in public or sit in a library, it might be hard to connect or talk to people, but when I was in the Multicultural Center I already knew that they shared a similarity to them. So, it was easier to start a conversation, and become friends. You can just go to the Multicultural Center and meet somebody you’ve never met before. Say hi, you give each other handshakes, and stuff. And so, it just creates a community when you aren’t even trying to start a conversation. And everything just starts out of just because you both feel like you share the same experience.

For Matt, students in the Multicultural Center had some shared values or interests, just by virtue of choosing to spend time in the Multicultural Center. This made it easier to connect with someone new. Finally, an undocumented student, Junior, highlighted the ways in which developing a community added to his experience at California University. He highlighted:

> Being able to find people that really looked like me, had similar stories to me and had similar visions for the future as me, really made an impact on who I was and what I thought my journey at California University would be. It was no longer just trying to come in and get my homework done, go home, get some rest, come back the next day, do more homework. It was now more about making connections and making impactful and really being intentional everything that I did at California University. And I’m really, proud of being able to do that.

As discussed previously, students at California University reported feeling alone and underrepresented in spaces on campus when they were with peers who did not share aspects of their identity. Community centers uniquely served as spaces where the students felt understood and accepted. When students have opportunities to be affirmed in their own experiences, they have more energy and capacity to learn about others and engage in multicultural dialogues and program (Tatum, 2007).

Learning About Diversity of Others

In addition to learning about oneself and having conversations about social justice topics, another aspect of identity development was learning about others. As we learn about others, we continue to learn more about ourselves. The students who participated in this study described the meaning and joy they got from learning about their peers. In many instances, students were learning about experiences in their identity group of which they were not familiar. Community centers are often critiqued for encouraging homogeneity and separation from other groups of students (Patton, 2011; Renn, 2011; Tatum, 2007). This critique, however, can only be true if identity is understood in a simple one-dimensional way. Students in the study highlighted the ways in which they participated in rich learning about others that strengthened their relationship to campus and to their sense of self. For students, the presence of the community centers enriched their experience. Rei described how the API Center, which was new at California University, provided cultural education for students, which was different from the social focus that student organizations typically had. In the Dreamer Center, Junior, who was undocumented but has DACA, spent time learning from students who did not have DACA protections. This new knowledge inspired and motivated him on his educational journey to be able to advocate for his peers and their families who did not process DACA, and as a result have significantly fewer educational and employment opportunities.

Students who came from a more homogeneous high school or community, really appreciated the learning opportunities within the community centers. Maria, who worked in the Multicultural Center shared, “I liked being in a place that’s actually diverse where I really can learn from other people. I learn the most when I’m around people who are not like me because it makes me really reflect.” Another student who worked in the Multicultural Center, Kyla, shared,

"It's really cool to learn about different cultures here. And I've learned so much working here at the Multicultural Center that it has made me appreciate other cultures more than I did before." Myla, a student who worked in the Latinx Cultural Center and identified as Latinx, described the power of meeting diverse Latinx students. Because the site for this research project was located in southern California, many students on campus were Chicano/a/e/x. Students, however, who utilized the Latinx Cultural Center were from locations throughout North America. Myla met and learned from Dominican students, Salvadorian students, and Puerto Rican students in the Latinx Cultural Center, which had an important impact on her experience. Students who spent time in the community centers reported that important learning took place in these spaces related to their own identities, the experiences of others, and critically important conversations about social justice that were not available in other settings.

For students who participated in this study, the opportunity to engage in social justice conversations about race, gender, sexual orientation, and other salient forms of identity; the ability to connect with other students who shared aspects of their identity; and venues to learn about the diversity of others helped to enhance students' understanding of themselves. In turn, learning contributed to students' positive sense of self and strengthened ties and pride to their communities. When campus leaders view culture as an asset and a strength minoritized students possess, it facilitates a culture of holistic success and enables students to thrive (Harper, 2012; Yosso, 2005).

Community Cultural Wealth

Students and staff discussed the ways in which the community centers supported students to have a more positive, strengths-based understanding of themselves and their culture(s). As a result of the social justice conversations taking place in the centers, students were able to draw

on the wealth of their cultural identity to support their goal of obtaining a postsecondary degree. Yosso (2005) used critical race theory (CRT) to understand how capital in higher education has been framed in white, middle-class values. Students of Color, however, often bring significant wealth to their education in the form of cultural, aspirational, linguistic, resistant, navigational, social, and familial capital. A CRT lens helps educators to understand wealth with a specific focus on Students of Color. Community cultural wealth is an important theory that helps to reframe the ways in which students are successful on the site of a primarily white institution.

Notably, many students discussed the ways in which engagement in California University's community centers facilitated pride in their culture and their identity. In the higher education environment, which tends to be data driven and focused on deficient frameworks (Harper; 2012; Yosso, 2005), students valued being able to explore their identities and deepen their connection to their cultural and ethnic background. In turn, students' identity development, facilitated by their engagement in the centers, supported their connection to the university and their ability to succeed in their academic goals. Students arrive at college campuses in different places on their learning journey as it relates to their salient identities. Engagement in community centers helped to affirm, validate, and support further development and exploration of their sense of self, who they are, and where they come from. For students, this process was critically important. It helped them to "embrace their identity," "be authentically themselves," and "discover themselves."

Rei, a Japanese American student who worked in the API center, grew up in a city where there were few Asian students in her K–12 education. Coming to college, Rei also felt like there weren't as many Asian students on campus as she expected. But after working at the API Center, she "became more of an advocate for the Asian-American experience" and learned how much

the Asian American identity meant to her. For Myla, a Latinx student who worked in the Latinx Cultural Center, the impact of being in a space with other Latinx students was powerful. She described:

> When I started getting involved with the LCC, it was like "boom!," don't be afraid to be authentic. Don't be afraid to speak Spanish. Don't be afraid to dress in a way that represents yourself. One of my favorite things about working in the LCC is seeing my coworkers, the director, the coordinator, and all my supervisors show up as their authentic selves, because it rubs off on me. It teaches me, first of all, how there's so much to our culture, and second of all, it teaches me to be unafraid and just be authentically myself.

Ana, a mixed Native American and Pacific Islander student, had only met a few Native people in her life before attending the Native Cultural Center. She said:

> I never really felt as understood until I started going to the Native Resource Center because it just opened so many other doors. I started minoring in American Indian Studies and then took all these amazing classes and met these amazing professors and read all this great American Indian literature. And yeah, it really helped me to discover myself.

Odell, a Black student who worked as a mentor at the Black Cultural Center, felt out of place at times growing up in an immigrant family, which felt different from the Black American community in Oakland. As a result, Odell noted:

> I always felt kind of uncomfortable, but at the Black Cultural Center, I was forced out of my comfort zone and immersed myself with other different Black communities. Being at the BCC at California University was probably my first time when I intentionally put myself in that situation, and it helped me to feel proud of who I am, even though I'm different. Everyone was really nice and accepting of me here and it taught me a lot about myself and healed a lot of insecurities I had growing up. Being involved in the BCC has had a positive impact on my ethnic identity and other parts of myself I might have questioned about myself growing up.

Like Frank, the director of the Black Cultural Center, previously discussed, some students transition into college and experience culture shock and feel minoritized for the first time. For others, however, college life is an opportunity for students to immerse themselves into a part of

their identity that they have not previously been able to explore. As part of an immigrant family, Odell did not feel connected to the Black community in Oakland. At California University, Odell had the opportunity to explore and develop roots with the Black community through the Black Cultural Center. Finally, for Matt, an Iraqi immigrant student leader, who was involved in the Multicultural Center, described one of the most significant changes he experienced during college was learning how to place more value on his culture. Matt noted:

> When you're in a big university where everybody around you might feel like they're different, I started to value my culture more because the people around me did too. That made me feel more connected and feel more of a sense of belonging. In a big university, it might be hard to talk to people who are different from you. When you start by connecting with people in your own culture it helps you to have more confidence and expand from there.

Not all students fully valued, embraced, or explored their identity prior to arriving at California University. Some students were sharing space with peers who shared their experiences or identities for the first time. For several of those students in this study, their participation in the community centers strengthened their cultural identities, which connected them to a community of peers, faculty, and staff who supported and inspired their educational journey. Regardless of where students were on their identity development learning journey, they communicated that California University's community centers provided a space where they could see positive role models, be affirmed in their identity, learn about themselves, and explore in a supportive environment. As a result of the students' ability to explore and connect with their own identities, they reported feeling safe, connected, and supported on campus during their educational journeys.

Equity Minded Practices

Scholars and student activists have called for institutions to implement strategies that better support minoritized students (Bauman et al., 2005; Harper, 2012; Museus, 2014; Tatum,

2007; Yosso, 2005). These strategies require institution leaders to focus on changing campus culture and dedicating real resources and energy to ensure students do not have to acculturate to a white, heterosexual, male normative learning environment to be academically successful. As discussed previously, several significant theories exist to help campus leaders think about ways in which they navigate this topic and recent equity minded models have been proposed to better understand and assess student success (Harper, 2012; Museus, 2014; Tatum, 2007; Yosso, 2005). These models provide strength-based questions, metrics, and proposed interventions to assess precollege socialization and readiness, and improve student experiences with peers, faculty, and staff. In addition, spaces like community centers can help to serve as important recruitment and retention intervention strategies for students.

This following section explores the equity minded practices present in California University's community centers. For example, students and staff discussed the ways in which the centers' physical spaces were important tangible resources for students, which also communicated the campus' commitment to minoritized communities. Peer mentoring was a very specific program offered in all the centers, which provided students with specific resources to navigate the university settings. The community centers also provided access to institutional agents– supportive faculty and staff members–who advocated and helped students on their academic journey. Finally, participants in this study described how the community centers supported students' holistic well-being and their sense of belonging on campus, two equity minded practices that support student achievement (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendón, 1994; Schlossberg, 1989).

Physical Space

Campus geography communicates important messages to students. The spaces and places that support minoritized students matter in higher education. Dedicated spaces are significant, and their locations and placement also matter. Both communicate important messages to students about how the "institution prioritizes and values the needs of racially and ethnically minoritized students" (Alcantar et al., 2022, p. 190). All 13 students who participated in the study mentioned the significance of the physical spaces associated with the community centers. Each community center had their own physical spaces that were in different locations across campus. The Women's Center, LBGTQIA+ Center, and Black Cultural Center had stand-alone single-family cottages that were converted from homes to student-facing spaces. The cottages were clustered on a corner that used to be on the outskirts of campus, but as California University grew, they were more central to residential living buildings and campus eateries. The API Center and Multicultural Center were both located in the student union, which was a central location on campus. The Native Cultural Center was located on the west side of campus in a space that was redesigned to meet the needs of the students. The Latinx Cultural Center was in the library, which was very well traveled and utilized, though students needed to navigate into the heart of the library to access their space. Finally, the Dreamer Center was in an academic building and was converted from an administrative suite into a student-facing space.

Students shared perspectives on the physical space of the centers. First, they discussed the ways in which the decor and the furniture contributed to the warm environment of each space, which made it comfortable to access. Students describe the spaces as "cozy," "warm," "comfortable" and "homey." Many students referred to the artwork on the walls in the spaces as elements that made them feel welcomed into the space. For example, Junior described the first

time he walked into the Dreamer Center, noting, “The first thing I saw were posters that had to do with resilience the history of Education Without Borders.” For other students, the layout of the center provided conference rooms, meeting rooms, or mind/body/spirit spaces that served as resources. For the students who utilized the Women’s Center, LGBTQIA+ Center, and Black Cultural Center, they liked that the building was previously a single-family home. The structure of the building added to the feeling that because the center is in a house, “It kind of just feels like a second home.” Kaitlin in the Women’s Center described, “Our space is very welcoming. It’s not too rigid or academic, and we have a soft little rug, pillows, and plants.” The layout, decorations, and features of the community centers contributed to the welcome environment described by the students.

The students also described the need for more space in the centers. Michelle, in the Black Cultural Center, said that if she could change one thing about the Black Cultural Center it would be its size. She noted:

> Sometimes it can get very overwhelming in the BCC because there’s a lot of people in here or there’s a lot of events that we want to happen. There are so many different organizations who want to have events here and there’s just not enough room.

Myla, in the Latinx Cultural Center, shared, “I feel like we can never have enough space. If we could have a bigger space, that’d be amazing.” When Elizabeth dreamt about the future of the LGBTQIA Center, they imagined a physically bigger space where students could really spread out. Similarly, according to Mariam in the Women’s Center, as the programs, events, and resources continued to expand in the Women’s Center they need access to more space to be more effective. Rei in the API Center appreciated that their space was located in the Student Union, but wished that other centers could be more centrally located to have increased visibility and accessibility for students. Two students expressed dissatisfaction with their center’s spaces.

Denise lamented that she wished the Latinx Cultural Center had their own stand-alone building outside of the library. She stated:

> I wish we had our own actual space, like the other resource centers. Because it feels like they were just like, "Fine, we'll give you a space," and then they put us in the library. I know people fought for a space and we were able to get a space, but I also wish that it was an actual space.

Junior also expressed concerns about the location of the Dreamer Center. He noted that the location of the Dreamer Center in an academic building, not centrally located, communicated a message to the students who identified as undocumented and used the space. Junior noted:

> We are far away from the student services buildings, and we are even farther away from the student union. I think having that central location is really a huge necessity, especially for students who identify as undocumented. Some students have already felt like they are on the outskirts of society and are outsiders.

Building location communicated something important to students; it represented the campus' investment and prioritization of their community. Sometimes, the physical space of the centers reinforced to students the marginalization of their identities. The locations of the centers and the campus investment in the spaces communicated important messages about who is important, valued, and visible. Regardless of location, the physical spaces were a critical resource to students. Nick, the Director of the Native Cultural Center, corroborated this perspective and emphasized:

> The physical spaces of the centers allow these folks to just be. That as a resource has been extremely powerful. You can organize folks and move them into a space across campus temporarily or in a room in the American Studies Department or an EOP, but that's not theirs. To have a space labeled and designated as yours; something that's for you.

The physical spaces of the community centers functioned as an equity minded practice that provided a tangible place where students could connect with one another, learn about others, and see their identity and experiences reflected on the university campus. Though the activities

affiliated with the centers were important and outlined in detail, the physical spaces alone operated as an equity minded practice. The power and significance of the programs and events affiliated with the centers was only amplified because these activities took place in a physical location that was recognizable and accessible to students.

Peer Mentoring

In the physical spaces of the community centers, students described specific programs and resources that were significant to them. During the interviews, all by one participant discussed the community centers' First Year Experience (FYE) programs. Peer mentoring was like some of the other components highlighted thus far in that it allowed students to connect with peers who shared similar experiences, backgrounds, and identities. Peer mentors, however, were students further along on their course of study with wisdom and knowledge of California University. Not only did peer mentors provide social and cultural connection to students, but they also provided academic support to new students who were just learning to navigate the university. In this way, peer mentors served as a bridge and a connection point between 1st year students and the campus.

Each community center at California University offered a program for 1st-year students that included the opportunity to live on a themed floor, take a one-unit university seminar course, and connect with a peer mentor. These programs gave students a way to get connected to resources on campus, transition into the university, and engage in specific curricular and cocurricular content related to race, gender, and sexual orientation. Three of the Centers, API Center, Latinx Cultural Center, and Multicultural Centers started their 1st-year experience programs after the students who were interviewed for this study had transitioned out of their 1st year. Two of these students, however, named the API and Latinx FYE program as an important

resource and one that they wished they had been able to take advantage of as 1st-year students. Many of the students interviewed for this project participated in the FYE program as a 1st-year student and went on to become mentors themselves in subsequent years. The FYE programs also were a way for students to get connected with the community centers early in their time at California University. Many students reported they first became aware of, or were connected to, a community center through one of the FYE programs. Thus, this intervention proved important in connecting students with community specific resources as students entered the university.

Though mentoring is just one component of the FYE programs, it was the aspect of the initiative that was cited most often by participants as the element that was critical to their success. Students described the importance of someone who they could go to for support, wisdom, and help when navigating a large, complex and multilayered university campus. Students discussed the ways in which mentors supported them with technical pieces of higher education, like how to register for classes, how to study, and how to utilize different resources, if needed. They also discussed the importance of having a trusted peer to support them, check in on them, and encourage them during the semester. Michelle, a student who participated in the Black Cultural Center's FYE for both her 1st and 2nd years, was a mentor herself. She described the importance of having a mentor:

> I'm able to come to my mentors free of judgment and talk to them about anything. Their job title is academic mentor, but they are so much more to me. They do help me a lot with my academics and schedule prep. But on top of that, if I needed to talk to them, if I'm just going through something, they're always there for me. That's always a plus because I know college sometimes can be lonely, especially if you're away from your family. It was really good to have somebody in your corner who's always vouching for you and always wants you to succeed.

For Maria, a mentor in the Multicultural Center, the regular check ins provided by mentors have been important for students' success. Maria also was able to see the students in the Multicultural Center program building community and relationships with one another. Maria noted:

> I've been able to see my mentees progress from the first class to now almost at the end of the semester. I feel glad that I was able to be there for them. Having someone who is not necessarily your friend, but who is checking in on you and offering you personal support can really help students. I also love seeing how the students in the FYE community get along with each other. They're really supportive and they're always going to events together. All of that has been really cool to see as a mentor.

For Mariam, the mentorship opportunities available were particularly important for first-generation college students who benefited from the institutional wisdom offered by upper class mentors. According to Mariam:

> Mentorship is so powerful and so important and a lot of students are first generation students and they don't know how to navigate college, the tools to choose your class, how to choose your major, how to change your major, and how to build a 4-year plan. I feel like [mentorship] really gives students a nice foundation, especially if they're missing that information. There are a lot of tips and tricks that nobody teaches you, you just have to figure out. I've been able to help students choose their classes and choose their major, change their major, and figure out what clubs are available. Unfortunately, I've also had to help mentees navigate Title IX and other more serious issues and being a support person for them was really meaningful to me.

Mariam also described helping students navigate difficult issues like Title IX, which provides supportive interventions to students who have experienced sexual and/or domestic violence. At California University, student mentors were responsible employees and were required to report instances of sexual and domestic violence to the university so that a designated official could provide support and assistance directly to victims/survivors. Yet, the support available from a peer could be critically important for students who were trying to navigate a large campus after experiencing an intimate crime.

For students who entered the University during the 2020–2021 academic year, mentoring was particularly helpful as they adjusted to university life during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Kaitlin, a 1st-year student who participated in the Women's Center program, noted:

> Mentoring was huge for me, especially when my classes were in a virtual format. Because of COVID, I didn't really get that 1st-year experience. Being connected to someone who was an upperclassman on the campus was really helpful when it came to classes and just figuring out what to do because we are both navigating an online environment at the same time. Neither of us has ever done that before and it was brand new to us. I received a lot of guidance from my mentor, and I felt like there was someone who was always there for me.

Finally, mentoring and FYE programs were pathways to connect students with other resources. This opportunity created safe spaces for students to explore and witness different communities on campus. For example, Elizabeth, a Black Queer student, was involved in the Black Cultural Center's mentorship program. Through that program, they met another Black Queer student who introduced them to a support group at the LGBTQIA+ Center for Black Queer Students called BlacQ@CU. Elizabeth describes how "they found the LGBTQIA+ Center through the Black Cultural Center because Shawn [fellow student] used both spaces."

Students who worked at the community centers were often highly knowledgeable and involved. In this instance, a student at the Black Cultural Center helped Elizabeth find other spaces on campus that could benefit them. These introductions were facilitated, in part, by the students' engagement in the mentorship programs, which served as a pathway to further resources.

Frank, the Director of the Black Cultural Center, provided specific examples of how peer mentors provide important support to incoming students, noting:

> The Black Cultural Center's First Year Experience Program offers direct mentoring to help with just basic things like, "How do I get into California University's webpage to find X, Y and Z?" Or "How do I navigate the campus learning management system, and get in and then access my class materials.

> What's a syllabus?" Mentors provide that direct level of support. But it's also about having a mentor who they can rely on to talk to about that. Sometimes, students even have issues with professors saying racist things in classes and then the students don't know what to do. They might be freshmen, and they don't know how to begin. But they will talk directly to their mentee or their mentor and then that mentor will take it to the next level because they're better at understanding the academic parts of the system and they're willing to have dialogue.

Peer mentors provided important support to students and eased their transition into the university. Peer mentors played a dual role in the experience of first- and second-year students. They were both peers with whom students could connect with regarding shared experiences and identities and they were institutional agents, who could help students better understand and navigate the complicated systems of higher education. Having peer mentoring resources housed in community center spaces were an important resource that aided students' transition to the California University and their connection and comfortability on campus.

Institutional Agents

In addition to peer mentors who served as support systems to students, full-time professional staff were also important tangible resources. Participants described how faculty and staff in the centers provided information to help them navigate the university. Whereas "gatekeepers" are people who maintain the status quo in institutions of higher learning, institutional agents work to make sure that students have access, opportunities, and resources to be successful (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018). Institutional agents are "individuals who have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly or negotiate the transmission of institutional resources and opportunities" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 6). Institutional agents support students by being transparent about their own struggles in academia and use their insider knowledge of other faculty members when students encounter bias in the classroom (Bensimon et al., 2019; Garcia & Ramirez, 2018). Access to institutional agents supports student achievement by

connecting students with knowledgeable staff who understand the way the campus operates and who also believe in the capabilities of the students they work with (Castrellón, 2022; Sanchez & Morgan, 2022).

Community centers at California University were typically staffed with full-time directors (managers), assistant directors (staff member), coordinators (staff member), faculty scholars (student services faculty who are academically related), graduate student assistants, and undergraduate student assistants. Student assistants served in both mentor roles and in programmatic/operations roles where they supported programs in the centers and the day-to-day operations of each physical space. The full-time professional staff members had experience and expertise in serving the communities of their center and often shared some identities held by students.

Study participants described several ways getting support from center staff was helpful. For some students, like Denise, who utilized the Latinx Cultural Center, Eddie, one of the center staff proactively checked in on Denise's student organization to offer information and resources. According to Denise, Eddie "let us know that the Latinx Cultural Center was a resource to help students. The way he made himself available was very impactful because we are on such a big campus and not all faculty are as nice as he is." Other students, like Maria in the Multicultural Center, echoed the importance of staff support, saying, "Having the Multicultural Center has been really important to the success I've had. I have supervisors that I can go to whenever I need something, I think that's really important. I feel like I can really talk to them."

Staff in the community centers were seen as trusted resources who really cared about students. This meant students felt like they could "really talk" to these institutional agents, that they were more accessible than other leaders on campus, and that they followed through to meet

student needs. According to Ana, “If you have a question and the NCC staff don’t know the answer, they’re going to help you find it. They’ll email you the resources or whatever you need. I really like that they’re all about their students.” Junior, a Chicano/Latinx male student, felt comfortable seeking help at the Dreamer Center, despite the stigmatization of help seeking for men of color:

> Honestly, without the support of the Dreamer Center I wouldn’t be where I am at the moment. There is always someone I can ask for help. As a Chicano male, a Hispanic male, asking for help is really stigmatized. People think that you should do everything on your own and that you don’t need to ask for help. If you ask for help, you’re weak and you’re not going to be anything. Having the Dreamer Center really allowed me to be vulnerable and be able to ask for that help without feeling judged, without feeling belittled. My first few semesters were really rough because I am the head of my household. If the Dreamer Center did not know the answer to a question that I may have asked, they really go the extra mile to find that answer or find and connect me with folks that may be able to support me.

The presence of the Dreamer Center provided Junior with important community specific resources and a space where he felt supported by staff to be able to ask for help to navigate the University.

For other students, institutional agents provided professional guidance to students on their journey through higher education. Staff often spent a significant amount of time with students in the center and were intentional about helping students to think about their future post California University. For students, this relational guidance was welcome and structured into student interactions with staff. Myla described the ways in which staff in the Latinx Cultural Center had supported her, noting:

> During my time at the Latinx Cultural Center, I’ve made connections that make this experience of being at a university fuller. That has helped me to reach out to people for help with picking classes, asking for help about graduate school, help with grad applications, reviewing my resume and revising my personal statements. You have a family right there and if this person can’t help you, this other person will. That support is setting me up for success, because I’m trying to

> get to the next chapter in my life and they've been there to help me put the puzzle pieces together.

Mariam, who worked in both the Women's Center and LGBTQIA+ Center, was studying psychology, an impacted major with large classes. She described difficulty connecting with faculty in this setting, stating:

> After working in the Women's Center and the LGBTQIA+ Center over the summer, I was able to make meaningful relationships with faculty and coworkers. I've had my supervisors at the Women's Center and the LGBTQIA+ Center write me really good letters of recommendation and give me really awesome career advice that I unfortunately wasn't able to get with faculty members because of the program I'm in.

Similarly, Odell, in the Black Center, received important career development support from staff in the space. He described before being involved in the Black Cultural Center:

> I actually didn't even know what a degree in Marriage, Family Therapist was. I didn't know what the acronym meant. I knew what the career was, but I just didn't know what it was called. One of the pro staff was actually a psychologist, so I learned a lot about the psych field through him. Online, graduate programs give a lot of information, of course, but being able to talk to someone one-on-one and have them answer the questions right there for you without you having to go deep into more research is just very convenient for me.

Professional development from trusted resources was an asset that supplemented resources that were available to students from other spaces. Students discussed the ways in which they sought support from community center staff because staff were familiar and trusted resources compared to other spaces on campus, which could have been helpful, but were unknown. Students also described the microaggressions they encountered in other offices, which made them leery, at times, of seeking support.

For three participants, the community specific knowledge of staff in the Black Cultural Center and LGBTQIA+ Center were lifelines to them. Odell, a student mentor in the Black

Cultural Center, described the importance of being able to get support from Black staff members, noting:

> There's nothing like getting help from another Black person because there are a lot of microaggressions and undertones from other people, and I don't really want to have to worry about that. The Black Cultural Center has everything I need, literally everything, so I just don't need to go anywhere else.

In the Latinx Cultural Center, Myla described that it can be exhausting to explain yourself and your identity on campus to administrators and staff who might not share your identity. There was value in seeking support from a space where students did not have to explain the parts of themselves that were important to them. According to Myla:

> Sometimes when you navigate spaces that aren't filled with people who look like you, it can get a little bit fatiguing to constantly be answering the same questions. "Well, why do you think like this? Or why do you do this and that?" And it's just like, "Well, because of who I am."

For Queer and Trans students, the LGBTQIA+ Center provided tangible recommendations and resources that may not have been easily accessible elsewhere. Elizabeth described receiving referrals and recommendations from other people who had used similar resources was important. They described, "Some folks will recommend things to you that they've never even tried before. So it's like, 'This could work, this could not work. Godspeed.'" But being able to talk to other queer students and staff about their experience using hormone therapies or other items associated with transiting in the LGBTQIA+ Center was vital. According to Elizabeth, "Talking with someone who has actually gone through something similar is super helpful. It makes me feel like I'm not alone and that there are people I can go to for help."

Staff in the community centers also named the importance of institutional agents as a resource to support student success. Claudia, the Director of the Dreamer Center, mentioned:

> I feel that with our students, we go above and beyond. I know that they have counselors and other folks that they connect to, but they spend limited time with

> them, and they probably won't see them again. But staff in the centers are persistent and we're following up with them, we're nonjudgmental. We understand that they go through things and we really, I think, bend over backwards to try to support them. They feel that somebody really cares and they're willing to now put in their efforts to succeed. I have a student who bombed this last semester because her parents are divorcing and making her go to work now. The student was ready to give up and I said, "Oh no, no, no, we're just getting started." I feel that when students hear that there is someone in their corner who's willing to go above and beyond, they rise to the challenge. And that is a factor that you really can't put a price tag on or you can't really see when it comes to academics and GPA.

Claudia described the personalized attention and care that students received in the community centers. When someone, particularly a faculty or staff member, was invested in a student's success, students had the support they needed to thrive. Notably, Claudia described the ways in which staff knew students and proactively reached out to them to check in or follow up. In a large institution, where there are tens of thousands of other students, personalized care was hard to find. Staff in the community centers saw students regularly in their physical spaces, instructed students in FYE programs, supervised them in paid student employment roles, and led their participation in cocurricular activities. These touch points provide critical opportunities for students to receive advice and support.

Institutional agents in the community centers provided specific and personalized support to students, which may have been more available at smaller campuses with fewer students. Centers, however, had the capacity to look after students with community specific support. In addition to community specific resources and professional development, students reported that staff in the community centers saw their full humanity. In these spaces, they were more than just students, numbers, or people part of an initiative; they were full people who had strengths and needs both in and outside of the classroom. Staff situated in the centers were often the

representatives in the institution who recognized students' holistic well-being and provided support mechanisms to foster all the parts of students to thrive.

Holistic Well-Being

Another equity minded practice employed by the community centers was to see students holistically and provide supportive resources to the whole student. Students in institutions of higher education spend time on a college campus during an important transition period of their lives. They are also under a significant amount of pressure to succeed with large financial stakes. University life provides unique opportunities and significant challenges for which students need to adapt. Navigating these forces can be difficult for students. Students' academic success is not detached from their ability to be successful in other realms of university life (Schreiner, 2010). Many students, including commuter students, spend a significant portion of their lives on campus. In addition to coursework, students: eat, study, pray, exercise, socialize, work and sometimes live on campus. The resources and services students utilize are also located on campus. Holistic care for students has the potential to increase students' opportunities for persistence and retention. Though this holistic care sometimes operates outside of traditional services provided in higher education, it is critical to student achievement (Cisneros et al., 2022). Students receive health care, mental health support, advising, academic accommodations, legal services and more. Students described the ways in which community centers at California University attended to their whole person.

Students who participated in this study reported they felt supported in many facets of their lives in the community centers. These were not just spaces that cared about their academic success, though they reported that they did. These were spaces where students' well-being really

mattered. For some students, a focus on wellness and mental health was important because it encouraged them to create space in their lives for breaks. Kyla, for example, said:

> [I] struggle a lot with taking breaks and taking that self-care time that I need because I'm always go, go, go. Working in the Multicultural Center has really helped me remind myself it's okay to slow down and take the time that I need and be patient with myself.

Repeatedly, students reported having mental health resources housed in the community centers was incredibly important to them. For some students, it was easier for them to physically access these resources in the centers because they knew how and where to find them. For one student, it was difficult to find the counseling department and she felt embarrassed to ask people for directions in the building. She knew, however, exactly where to find the mental health group housed in the Latinx Cultural Center. Another student in the Latinx Cultural Center, Myla, said these support groups were important because of the stigma attached to seeking emotional support:

> In our Latinx community, we don't talk about mental health. There's a huge taboo around it. I have personal experience with this in my own family. I wonder what could have been different if my dad had got help sooner? There's just so many things that aren't being talked about in our communities, and it's shunned upon, like, "Oh, you're going to go see a therapist?" And obviously, I think that that's changing, but the LCC being part of that, especially being able to gather college students who are probably some of the most vulnerable in our mental state, we're just going through so much transformation, and so much change, and so much pressure, I feel like the mental health support has been super powerful.

Elizabeth, in the LGBTQIA+ Center, described the importance of the Black Queer support group in her everyday campus life, noting:

> How am I going to go to class when I'm super depressed? I'm not. And I'll still be sad, with the support of my community, but at least I can have someone to talk to. Blaque Out has been a huge part of it, because that's where I've met some of my closest friends. That's where I've met some of the folks that I go to first in an emergency. They might not be able to help, but I could cry to them about it. Without the LGBTQIA+ Center, I wouldn't have gotten access to that.

Embedded counselors and mental health support housed in the community centers were clearly important resources for students. The centers were seen as a comfortable and familiar space to see resources that may have stigma associated with them in other settings. Nick, the Director of the Native Cultural Center, emphasized that community centers were uniquely situated to provide support to students above and beyond their academic success. He said:

> We also look at someone beyond their performance in the classroom. We also support their basic needs. We see them at their best and we also see them maybe at their not so best. And if they're struggling with financial aid, if they're struggling to feed themselves and their families or they are unhoused, suddenly, we're also connecting them to those resources that help them be a student.

Not surprising, students struggled to succeed when they had difficulty meeting their basic needs. Housing, food security, access to broadband internet, physical and mental health care were all foundational to student achievement. When students spent significant time sharing physical spaces with staff in the community centers, these basic needs challenges sometimes became apparent. Students could receive critically important resources to support their basic needs and mental health from their relationship to the centers.

Staff in the community centers provided important support outside of the classroom. Desire, in the Center for Intercultural Relations, explained that staff "validate students' emotions so they know that what they experienced was a microaggression or a direct blatant racism. It helps them feel supported." Desire also added that community centers provided "small institution level of support at a large institution. This adds a whole different level of value to our spaces. Students who attend a large campus and are affiliated with the community centers get a whole different experience." Desire spoke again to the refuge that centers provided to students when they experienced micro and macroaggressions on campus. Academic freedom and first amendment rights, important cornerstones of university life, also exposed students to challenging

experiences in and outside of the classroom. Community centers, however, were spaces where students could process these experiences with trusted peers and mentors. Denise noted:

> I hear students say that everyone who works in the community centers just very firmly and truly cares. And they say that they don't get that experience in other offices on campus or from the faculty. So, I think that the fact that they know that they can come to our spaces and be received with a smile from a holistic mindset, from an asset point of view, like a community wealth model, I think that is for them, very powerful. It breaks my heart when I hear that that's not how they feel in other spaces. What I hear from students is that at least they're guaranteed to have someone care for them in the community centers.

Holistic support for students, specifically mental health support, was cited as an important service provided in the community centers, which helped students feel like they were cared for and had culturally relevant resources they needed to be able to thrive and be successful on campus. For many minoritized communities, there was stigma attached to mental health support. Many students never sought mental health support prior to enrolling in higher education. Having embedded counselors in community centers with trusted institutional agents, provided an important pathway for resources that support students' well-being during college and beyond.

Mattering and Belonging

Mattering and belonging is a significant predictor of success for minoritized students on college campuses. Student perceptions of campus climate are tied to their ability to feel connected to a larger community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Students' sense of belonging is also impacted by their feelings of marginality and mattering on campus. Schlossberg (1989) discussed marginality as a state that is especially pronounced during periods of transition. Mattering is the feeling that others are interested in a student and care about their well-being. When students feel like they matter, their sense of marginality is dissipated. Students transitioning to a new environment, particularly students who may experience marginality in other forms of their identity like race, gender, and sexual orientation have a heightened sense of

invisibility and disconnect during this transition period (Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering enhances connectedness to institutions of higher learning particularly as students transition to the institution. Colorblind and race-neutral discourses reinforce marginality and fail to disrupt white systems of privilege on college campuses (Gusa, 2010). Thus, community specific spaces that recognize and validate students' identities are an important form of support in higher education.

The most significant finding from the interviews with students was that their involvement in California University's community centers made them feel like they mattered and belonged on campus. Every single student mentioned mattering and belonging in their conversations about the centers. Many students described the centers as a "home away from home" as a "safe space," as a space where they felt "welcomed" or where they "belonged." For Kyla, the Multicultural Center was one of her homes in addition to her apartment near California University, her family's home, and her home in the dance studio where she spent countless hours. In her opinion, the Multicultural Center was "the best space on campus because it truly feels like home." Ana, a Native American and Pacific Islander student, described that she wasn't doing well before she connected with the Native Cultural Center. Ana remembered:

> I wasn't showing up to my classes. I had no motivation to show up, I would just lay in bed and stare at the ceiling and cry all day. I called my mom one day and I was like, "Mom, I think I'm going to drop out." And she's like, "No, give it some time. You should go visit some of the resource centers on campus." I visited the Native Cultural Center and it was just so warm and welcoming. The space really made me feel like I belonged and gave me the space where I can be myself. I never really felt understood until I started going to the Native Resource Center. It just really helped me discover myself.

In this case, connection to the Native Cultural Center was a protective factor that helped Ana continue to persist toward her degree. Before finding the space, she was at risk of dropping out or doing poorly academically, but finding a space that reflected her identity where she should be herself was critically important to her academic success. Another student, Denise, described how

the Latinx Cultural Center provided an environment different from the success-oriented environment she faced on campus. According to Denise, "Western society is very individualistic, so I often felt really alienated on campus." In contrast, community is an important part of Latinx culture, and she was able to find community through the Latinx Cultural Center and Latinx student organizations. Michelle shared the Black Cultural Center's motto is "welcome home." When Michelle walked into the space, she noted everyone was "super welcoming. It was good to come into this space and build a home . . . it made me feel safe and made me want to come back." Myla, in the Latinx Cultural Center, remembered feeling "welcomed here. I feel loved. I feel appreciated. That's why I kept going. I just felt like I belonged." Myla described one event that stood out in her mind. The Latinx Cultural Center hosted a campus wide *Pachanga* to close Latinx Heritage Month. The event took place in the middle of the campus in a highly visible location. Participating in the Pachanga for Myla, as she noted:

> Was definitely a core memory for me. I remember taking a step back and looking, and being like, "Wow, this is really happening. There's *folklorico* dancers here, there's people dancing." It was so beautiful to be able to be like, "Wow, this is finally happening at our university, and people are walking by and noticing that our presence is here, and they were able to appreciate it too." I don't know how to explain it into words, but it just really healed a part of my soul that was missing here. There's not always a full connection here at the school, and I feel like the *Pachanga* was a really big event that healed me.

Highly visible events hosted by community centers helped students to feel like their identities were reflected on the campus and were valued.

Other students shared the community centers offered space that could stand in for families during their time at California University. For students in the LGBTQIA+, family meant something especially unique because LGBTQIA+ students, in some cases, have strained relationships with their family as a result of their sexual orientation and gender identity. The LGBTQIA+ Center was a space where students could connect with peers and staff who shared

aspects of their identity and could serve as a chosen family. Elizabeth from the LGBTQIA+ Center described:

> Any student who goes into a space is looking for a community, and they're looking for family. But I think students [in the LGBTQIA+ Center] actually mean that. The LGBTQIA+ Center has really allowed for those deep connections in a way that I haven't seen before. I think maybe queer community handles the community differently, because a lot of folks aren't super close with their families and aren't super close with some of the folks that you'd hope to be close with.

Students in the LGBTQIA+ Center used their access to peers and staff to create community and family in a way that was empowering and supportive to them. For queer and transgender students, this extra layer of support was influential in their connection to campus and their ability to feel a sense of community. For first generation college students, connecting to faculty and staff who shared their identities and experiences was likened by Matt as "getting advice from their parents because they share the same culture and experience." This guidance was another way in which resources in the center acted as a proxy family or support network for students.

Finally, the ability to find space to relate to other students who shared similar experiences was influential in students' sense of belonging on campus. Matt, a senior who frequented the Multicultural Center, shared that the center helped him feel "like he belonged on campus, which removed the burden of thinking about fitting in. Because of that, I was able to focus on my academic success." The Multicultural Center provided a pathway to social and community connections, which removed some of the pressure on Matt and allowed him to focus and thrive academically. Mattering means that a student is important. All the students who participated in this study felt like their involvement in a community center helped them feel like they mattered and that they belonged on California University's campus.

Staff in the community centers had another important observation in relationship to mattering and belonging. Staff participants viewed the community centers as an important

indicator of support from California University. The commitment to invest in the centers communicated that the campus valued the presence of minoritized students. Though the staff recognized the centers offered robust resources, programs, and opportunities for students, even their existence was significant. Carmen, the Director of the Women's Center, described:

> I think our presence signals a sense of belonging to students through our names. Even if students don't come in with an understanding of what sense of belonging means. I think especially in institutions as big as ours, it can really offer this space of feeling seen and feeling like the Black Cultural Center or Women's Center, can help me navigate through the noise of coming into this place. Especially for 1st-year students who are trying to figure out what all the offices and resources on campus are.

Carmen recognized that centers could serve as an anchoring point for new students, in particular, to be able to identify a resource and how it could support students. Other offices on campus like advising, ombudsman, housing administration, student rights & responsibilities had vague and ambiguous purposes. The Women's Center, Black Cultural Center, for example, were explicitly clear in their support for women and Black students.

Other staff participants observed that the presence of community centers were important for parents and families to feel like their students had a space dedicated to their success. For families, dropping their children off at a large institution can be daunting. Staff recalled that families of admitted and matriculated students felt the presence of the centers communicated a commitment from the campus to their students. Kal, the Director of the LGBTQIA+ Center, described they have "talked to parents or guardians who just feel better sending their LGBTQIA+ child to California University just because there is an LGBTQIA+ Center." Kal described that even if that student "Never comes to the LGBTQIA+ Center, there is a sense of safety, community, and belonging. I hear all the time from families, 'Oh, I'm so glad that my child has you or has a center.'" Claudia, the Director of the Dreamer Center agreed and shared:

> During our admitted student reception, we were expecting eight or so folks and we ended up having a full room with families that were also curious to see what the university is doing to support their child. They felt more comfortable after hearing from us. They felt a lot more trust like, "My child is in good hands." And the students felt safer, too.

The presence of community centers demonstrated to students and families that they were welcome at California University and that they belonged. Although programs, resources, and services in the centers were critically important, their physical spaces and their mere existence in and of itself communicated inclusion and celebration of diverse student identities.

Finally, when students have access to a community of people who care whether they are peer mentors or full-time career staff, they become part of a larger network working toward a common goal of holistic student achievement. Renato, the Director of the Latinx Cultural Center, described this phenomenon:

> For Latino and Latinx students, there is also a sense of network. If you look at different migration theories as to how the community is getting here, it's through networks. Some undocumented folks get access to resources because of networks and word of mouth. The centers also create networks. In speaking to students at the Latinx Cultural Center, they see those networks as places they can go to express whatever concerns or doubts, they have. They can express them to their peers or people that look like them in our space. So, the Latinx Cultural Center becomes a safe space for networks and for them to then advance in some way within this systemic institution.

Without question, mattering and belonging was the most significant topic described by participants in this study. Time and again, students and staff described the ways in which community centers contributed meaningfully to students' ability to feel seen and appreciated at California University. When students were connected to a community, or a network on campus, they felt like they could more likely succeed and reach their goals.

Equity minded practices used by community center leaders created conditions under which students were able to thrive academically. Participants named (a) access to physical

spaces, (b) peer mentors, (c) dedicated institutional agents, (d) holistic care, and (e) a community where students felt like they belonged as critical elements to their collegiate experience. Community centers provided these cocurricular support networks that ultimately translated into academic success for the students nearing degree completion that were interviewed for this study.

Student Achievement

Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) revised model, *HBCU-Based Educational Approach for Black College Student Success*, examined the inputs needed to support minoritized student success. The model produces two main outputs. The first is student achievement, which includes GPA, cognition, and persistence. The final output is the grand outcome, which includes graduation, career attainment and civic engagement. Though informed by Arroyo and Gasman's model, this study focused on the ways in which community centers supported the academic achievement (degree completion) of minoritized students. Students and staff were both asked questions to offer insight about how community centers supported student achievement Two main themes emerged from the data. The first focused on motivation. Through their engagement in the community centers, students were exposed to highly involved students who were also high achievers. Students were eager to encourage one another and share resources for how they were able to achieve their goals. Secondly, students had access to valuable academic, personal, and professional opportunities. Exposure to highly involved, high-achieving students and opportunities for personal and professional growth contributed both to students' academic achievement and their holistic success.

Students who participated in the study identified several personal goals they had upon entry to California University. Twelve of the thirteen students interviewed for this project

described the goals they had at the institution in terms of receiving good grades and completing their degrees. Some students witnessed their peers struggle and stop out of college and aspired to persist to earn their degree, inspired to overcome the challenges faced by their friends. For first-generation college students, being the first in their family to earn a degree was a major motivating goal and a source of pride and anticipation. Others described their focus on academics during the COVID-19 global pandemic when many classes transitioned to a virtual format. Because cocurricular programming was limited during that time, some students channeled their energy toward their academic success. Finally, five students discussed holistic goals that they had for themselves, which included making friends, identifying an internal sense of happiness, and for one undocumented student, achieving the American dream. Several students also discussed their interest and commitment to being able to "learn more about myself and who I want to be." As such, though degree completion was overwhelmingly named as an important indicator of success for students in the study, their holistic well-being was also an important consideration as they moved through their time in higher education.

During the interviews with students, students shared several main themes about how their involvement in the community centers contributed to their academic success. The most important theme related to academic success was identifying a space to study. For students, the opportunity to study with peers though designated study sessions was an important resource available in the centers. Not only did this contribute to their academic success, but they were able to connect with friends and build community at the same time. For other students, a designated place where you could study was identified as an important element associated with centers. One student said she was able to study outside the Latinx Cultural Center "comfortably without feeling out of place." Similarly, the lounge style of the centers allowed students to spend a significant amount

of time in the space without feeling uncomfortable. The furniture, availability of food and snacks, and kitchenettes in the centers made students want to stay on campus to complete their homework because, as Matt shared, "It makes me feel like I'm at home sitting on my own couch doing homework." Another student named infamous all-night midterms and finals study sessions in the Black Cultural Centers where students could receive support and motivation to continue studying for exams; still, the students could also take a break and let off some steam in the process. Again, the physical space connected to the community centers was identified by students as a key contributor to success metrics, this time as a vehicle for study.

Motivation

Students who spent significant time in the community centers were surrounded by peers who, in many cases, shared aspects of their identities, and were involved and motivated to achieve their goals. Layered with access to professional staff and resources and services offered by the centers, students reported the environment of the centers was both motivating and inspiring for their success and development. Kyla in the Multicultural Center noted the space "helps remind students that they are capable of doing things that they may not think they can." Michelle, in the Black Cultural Center, described how everyone in the space was "excelling in their major and on campus. You don't want to be the only one slacking. It pushes you to go above and beyond." For Odell, another student involved in the Black Cultural Center, working at the Black Cultural Center meant:

> I'm in an environment where everyone is very academically driven. I'm a natural competitor because I grew up playing sports my whole life, and the BCCs environment has made me want to do better for myself. I see everyone else be academically successful and do big things around campus that make an impact. There are people that I used to see in the BCC when I was a freshman who is now the Student Body President. It is super empowering and motivating. This environment has helped me be a better student, better overall man too.

Students who used the centers were exposed to ample leadership opportunities, had access to resources, and perhaps most importantly, they had access to peers who were highly involved, motivated, and successful on campus who could inspire them and provide guidance and wisdom on how they were able to earn their achievements. Frank, the Director of the Black Cultural Center, described how successful and involved students helped motivate others:

> We have a lot of student leaders that come out of the Black Cultural Center, including our current student body president. In fact, we've had a couple of presidents come out of programs related to the BCC. The current president and vice president of student government participated in the BCC's First Year Experience Program. So those connections are really about, I think the three core pieces of our mission. Community building which came out of student activism and faculty and staff activism. And then once you have the community building, whether you're building boards, well, graduation and academic achievement, and then the latter part being engaged citizens, but career pathway and student leadership. And I think those two go together, the student leadership and career pathway, we try to be very intentional about those pieces.

Students in the BCC, in this example, had connections to incredibly accomplished student leaders at the highest levels of California University. These relationships built a leadership well for future classes as leadership skills, institutional knowledge, and capacity building were passed on between students through the Black Cultural Center.

Opportunities

A final indicator of student achievement was access to opportunities and professional development in the centers. Students described the practical leadership experience they received from their involvement in the spaces and other opportunities that became available because of their connections to the centers. For many students, working in the community centers was one of their first jobs. They learned how to navigate workspace in a way that was culturally relevant and informed by a social justice lens. For one student, working in the Women's Center "was a really cool experience because it redefined professionalism and the workplace and all that

because it's such a community based space." Another student, Michelle from the Black Cultural Center, described how she picked up a hospitality minor because of an event at the Black Cultural Center where she was able to interact with a Black professor who inspired her to pursue additional coursework in that discipline. Frank, the Director of the Black Cultural Center, described some of the other opportunities available through the centers. Through their engagement in the community centers, students contributed to the institution by posting questions about the curriculum and learning outcomes and contributing to a body of knowledge about their own experiences in higher education. Every year, the Black Cultural Center presented the Black Research Symposium, highlighting scholarship on Black people from California University. Faculty and staff invited students to share their ideas at the symposium and mentored them through the process of submitting and presenting on a particular proposal. Through the Black Cultural Center and other community centers, students could also explore internships that helped to bridge their curricular experiences with the real world and their professional next steps.

The ability to use a comfortable space for studying, motivation from peers, and access to opportunities were all resources available in the community centers that helped students achieve their personal, professional, and academic goals. Though degree completion is the metric of achievement used in this study, students named a variety of goals they hoped to achieve at California University. An equity minded practice is viewing students as whole people and supporting their success outside of traditional metrics like GPA, graduation, and course completion (Museus, 2014). The students who participated in this study faced one particular and unexpected challenge: the novel coronavirus. Student participants for this study were nearly degree completions and held either junior or senior status. Because data collection took place in Fall 2022, enrolled juniors and seniors were either 1st- or 2nd-year students in Spring 2019 when

the COVID-19 global pandemic radically altered the way that students live and learn. COVID-19 impacted the ways in which students engaged in the community centers and is discussed next in the following section.

COVID-19 Global Pandemic

This study was not particularly focused on the COVID-19 global pandemic; yet, students interviewed for this project were clearly impacted by the virus as they were matriculated 1st- or 2nd-year students when COVID-19 forced many colleges and universities, including California University, to offer courses and cocurricular programs virtually for an extended period. For the juniors and seniors who participated in this study, the changes in modality to academic coursework and student life had a profound impact on their experience in higher education. Though the interview instrument did not include any questions specifically about COVID-19, nine out of 13 participants shared examples of how COVID-19 influenced them over the past 3–4 years. The pandemic impacted the students differently and all the students who discussed COVID-19 navigated the shift to remote learning and activities differently. Some students struggled to make meaningful connections through a virtual format and held off on joining clubs or getting involved on campus until things returned to in person modalities. For example, Denise shared, "[I decided to] use my first semester to focus on school, and then I'll join any clubs. But then COVID happened, so I didn't join any clubs until my junior year." Similarly, Michelle was a part of the BCC's 1st-year experience program, but it did not feel as useful to her because it was always in a breakout room over Zoom; then, however, Michelle noted, "I'd never talk to the person ever again. I wasn't really getting to know people one on one. I may follow people on Instagram, but it was never like we were having a conversation." For students who were less involved during remote learning, they were anxious to get back on campus, get involved, and

find community. Mariam was also involved in the Women's Center's FYE program, but then took a break from her involvement during the pandemic. When students, however, returned to campus, Mariam resumed involvement in the Women's Center.

For other students, the virtual modality of COVID-19 provided an opportunity to get involved with activities that had lower stakes and easier to access. For Maria in the Multicultural Center:

> Getting involved in the Multicultural Center during COVID was beneficial for me because I am more introverted. So starting off with low stakes, you're meeting everyone through Zoom. It wasn't like there were these high expectations yet. It really helped me to find the things that I liked.

Similarly, for Myla in the Latinx Cultural Center, during COVID, she thought:

> Okay, I can't go out, I can't do anything.' What can I do to make my experience of being in my room a little bit better?" And I saw on, I think, Instagram or something that they were holding one of their programs, *En Confianza*, and that's very aligned with what I want to do, my passion, and talking about mental health, so I was like, 'Let me go check it out.

Similarly, Kailyn, in the Women's Center, felt like many of her goals were derailed by COVID. As a result, she noted:

> During COVID, I tried to make as many virtual connections as possible, so I reached out to people through GroupMe, Instagram, stuff like that, really using social media as a tool since we couldn't really see each other in person.

The Women's Center and other community centers offered programs and support groups in virtual modalities to help support students in this way. Finally, Elizabeth, in the LGBTQIA+ Center, experienced the Black Queer support group during their first year. Then, she noted about that time, "We went into the pandemic. And I felt super, super lucky to have been able to have that space and that grounding opportunity, so that in the pandemic I wasn't feeling super isolated or lonely."

For juniors and seniors, student engagement in California University's community centers was influenced by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Some students heavily relied on the community centers during this time for support. Other students were anxious to get involved when they returned to in-person activities on campus because they were not deeply involved during remote and virtual programming. Though this theme is specific to students during this moment in time, the COVID-19 global pandemic did contribute to the ways in which students developed community, connected with resources on campus, and used community centers.

Conclusion

As a result of my data collection, six main themes were identified during data analysis. The findings section discussed students' decisions to attend California University, their challenges navigating a primarily white institution, identity development, equity minded practices, academic and professional success, and the COVID-19 global pandemic. In answering my research question: in what ways do California University's community centers support student achievement, two specific interventions were identified. These interventions focused on identity development and equity minded practices, which helped students feel supported so they could thrive academically. Identity development included conversing about social justice, connecting with students who share similar experiences, learning about the diversity of others, and developing community cultural wealth. The equity minded practices used in the centers included the physical space of the centers, access to peer mentoring and institutional agents, support for students' holistic well-being, and the ability to feel a sense of mattering and belonging. Finally, though not a focus of this research project, the COVID-19 global pandemic significantly impacted student's experiences, their involvement in California University's

community centers, and their achievement academically. Renato, the Director of the Latinx Cultural Center, summed up the impact of community centers:

> The community centers provide academic assistance as a space that was created in an institution that was not meant for people like us. I think the way the institutions measure success is often through graduation, retention, persistence rates. We fail to look in between the lines at nonacademic factors, which includes a sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Oftentimes we explain how we attribute Center work to student success. Before a student can even take a test, they must feel confident that they can pass that test. The centers give students the confidence and self-advocacy skills to not only to feel like they can take a test, but at the same time, that they belong to campus. Those are the measurables that we look at. Before we can get our students to pass that class, they must be able to get up and say I can do it. community centers ultimately contribute to students' confidence and sense of belonging, which ultimately increases their retention, persistence overtime and behavioral changes.

Leaders at institutions higher learning overwhelmingly focus on GPA, course completion, and graduation rates as metrics of success. For students to succeed academically, however, they need the confidence and the tools to do so. The findings in this study demonstrated that community centers at California University provided students with important protective factors against the whiteness and homogeneity of campus and foundational access to identity development, sense of belonging, and holistic well-being. In this way, community centers support contributed meaningfully to student achievement.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Community centers provide critical resources to support student achievement on college campuses. This dissertation explored the ways in which community centers at one specific site, California University, supported student achievement. In this study, *student achievement* was defined as degree attainment, which is the major success metric pursued by colleges across the United States (Kuh et al., 2006). Student and staff participants in this project highlighted the ways in which access to spaces for community specific identity development and equity minded practices created conditions for students to feel like they matter positively impact their academic achievement. This chapter summarizes the purpose of the study, research questions, and methodology; the major findings and assertions, along with implications for practice; and recommendations for future research.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which campus community centers support student achievement. For this project, student success was defined as undergraduate degree completion. Institutions of higher learning continue to set goals and identify strategies to support degree completion for minoritized students (California State University, n.d.; McMillan, 2019). Community centers have historically been created in response to the expressed needs of minoritized students and play a role in supporting students to obtain their degree. This study aimed to understand the ways in which campus community centers operate as sites that support student success and, specifically, degree completion. The guiding research question for this study was: in what ways do California University's community centers support student achievement?

Methodology

This study used qualitative methods to explore the ways in which community centers supported student's academic success at one specific site: California University (a pseudonym). This study recruited 13 matriculated undergraduate student participants who met two specific criteria: they held junior or senior status, as established by the number of credits they have earned and who participated meaningfully in California University's community centers. When recruiting participants, I prioritized students who were closest to graduation and those who participated in substantive ongoing programs like first-year experience programs, mentoring programs and student employment in the center. Prospective participants were recommended by the director of each community center and were also recruited through my personal networks and relationships.

After completing interviews with participants and transcribing the findings, I completed an open and focused-coding process on the entire data set (memos and transcriptions). Following Parsons and Browns's (2002) model for inductive analysis, I used an iterative process throughout the data collection stage to organize, describe, and interpret the data with the goal of presenting the findings in a way that facilitates understanding of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study aimed to provide the reader with a "vicarious experience" (Stake, 1995) of being present to understand the perspectives of the participants. The use of thick data that are rich with description and detail is important so that readers can determine the extent to which data might be generalized from the case study to other contexts (Moore et al., 2012).

California University was a unique case in that there were eight well-funded community centers that had similar programmatic and staffing models and were organized in a consistent way in the University. Many campuses have community centers, but they are often scattered

across the organization due to differing funding sources, politics, and different histories of activism associated with each space (Mena, 2010). As a site, California University provided an opportunity to understand collectively the ways in which engagement in community center spaces impacted student achievement. This research project was conducted at a large public university in Southern California called, "California University." The site is part of a state-wide system and is designated as both a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American, Native American and Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPSI). According to California University's Institutional Research department, 59.1% of students enrolled in fall of 2022 were Students of Color (not including international students and students who selected "other"). The largest racial/ethnic group on campus is Latinx students who comprise 34.6% of the undergraduate student population. In addition, 34.2% identify as white, 7.9% of students are Asian, 6.9% are multiracial, 5.4% are Filipinx, 3.9% are Black, and 0.2% are Native American.

Modified Theoretical Framework

The design of this study and the instruments used were guided by a theoretical framework that connected students' identity development, access to equity minded practices, and achievement, to the holistic success of students (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). I modified Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) model of an *HBCU-Based Educational Approach for Black College Student Success* to apply more broadly to sites that support community specific populations (see Figure 3). In Arroyo and Gasman's model (see Figure 1), achievement is defined as GPA, cognition and persistence. Identity formation contributes to achievement by providing opportunities for students to explore their self-concept as it relates to their racial, intellectual and leadership identities. HBCUs expose Black students to faculty, staff, and administrators who share their racial/ethnic identity in ways in which primarily white institutions consistently fall

short (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). The revised model continues to utilize the inputs of diverse applicant pools and institutional accessibility and affordability. For community centers to exist, there must be a diverse student body to utilize the spaces. The part of Arroyo and Gasman's model that focuses on reciprocal processes and outcomes has been modified to reflect the processes that are in place in community centers. Their model originally identified values cultivation, identity formation, and achievement, which are specific to the development of students' Black identities and a commitment to Black excellence. These have been adapted to represent more broad equity minded approaches to student success, which include identity development and equity minded approaches to student success.

In the context of this study, the following practices were discussed by participants: social justice conversations, the ability to connect with peers who shared similar experiences, learning about the diversity of others, developing community cultural wealth, access to physical space, peer mentoring, support from institutional agents, holistic well-being, and a sense of mattering and belonging. This framework posits that students have opportunities to explore and develop their identities in community specific spaces that are affirming and utilize strength-based approaches. Finally, the model suggests that academic achievement in the form of GPA, retention and persistence reciprocally supports equity minded interventions and opportunities for student identity development.

Limitations

The goal for this project was to focus deeply on one case where significant human, financial and physical resources have been devoted to support community centers as spaces for student achievement. As such, the data collection for this project was limited to one site. Because of this, the findings are not generalizable to other campuses. Although case studies are

generalizable to theoretical propositions, the findings cannot be specifically applied to other populations or universes. There are unique circumstances surrounding the creation, funding, and modeling of the community centers at California University and though the findings from the study may produce interesting and compelling perspectives on centers and student achievement, the case itself is specific and bounded (Yin, 2018).

Another potential limitation to this study was the participant sampling from all the community centers at California University. I was successful in recruiting participants from all eight centers, but not all centers were represented equally in the study. I interviewed three students who utilized the Multicultural Center; two students who utilized the Black Cultural Center, Latinx Cultural Center, and Women's Center; and one student from the API Center, Dreamer Center and Native Cultural Center and LGBTQIA+ Center. It is possible that uneven representation may be a limitation in my findings. Of the students interviewed for the project, 12 of the 13 were employed in a community center. Student employees were used to operating as ambassadors of the centers and sharing their successes and positive attributes. Because of this, it is possible that the data collected from these participants reflect one experience; that of students employed in the centers. If, however, employment is also one of the ways in which students are deeply engaged in the centers, then this perspective is useful to understand the impact that spaces have on student achievement. Finally, because I relied on purposeful sampling for intensity, the participants I interviewed were highly involved and motivated to share their experiences. It is likely that students who are less engaged in these spaces or have unsatisfactory experiences will have different perspectives than those shared in this study; those perspectives are not included in this project, nor are the perspectives of students who choose not to utilize California University's community centers.

Major Findings: Assertions With Recommendations for Practice

The next section highlights the major findings from this study along with recommendations for practice. Table 5 outlines my research question and the major themes identified as a result of the data analysis. In addition, my assertions are spotlighted as a result of the findings associated with each major theme. Each assertion is discussed along with their implications for practice. It is my hope that this section highlights the importance of community center work on college campuses and provide practitioners with best practices and suggested resources to offer in their spaces.

Table 5. Research Question, Major Themes, and Assertions

Research question	Major theme	Assertion
In what ways do California University's community centers support student achievement?	Navigating a primarily white institution	Community centers can serve as an institutional commitment to minoritized students
	Identity development and equity minded approaches to student achievement	Students need culturally enhancing experiences to succeed holistically
	Student achievement	Campuses should seek to achieve liberatory outcomes for students in additional to normative outcomes

Assertion 1: Community Centers Serve as an Institutional Commitment to Minoritized Students

Community centers can serve as a visible and tangible institutional commitment to minoritized students. Higher education was not originally designed for students of color, women, and queer and transgender students (Turner, 1994). Colleges historically have been designed

with Eurocentric principles, which favor competition over collaboration and use passive learning tactics (Guiffrida, 2003; Rendón, 1994). Accordingly, participants, both students and staff, in this study described California University as a primarily white institution. Students at California University reported their "shock" at arriving on campus and encountering "90% white people" all day. They shared that they and their friends who are Students of Color "often felt excluded" from campus activities, namely Greek Life. Several of the students shared they were often the only member of their racial/ethnic group in their academic coursework, and they felt "like a statistic" as they walked around campus. According to Ahmed (2012), "When we describe universities as being white, we point to how institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others: white bodies gather and create the impression of coherence" (p. 35). The students in this study experienced the proximity of some bodies over others. Thus, navigating the campus climate is a critical piece of creating a supportive environment for students (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014).

Institutional belonging is a critical component of academic self-efficacy, class-related emotions, and subjective well-being (Sotardi et al., 2022). The students who participated in this study experienced the campus as a primarily white institution, despite the demographic diversity present in the student body. The composition of the faculty at California University—only 36% are faculty members of color—the history of the campus, and the disproportionate role that Greek life plays in student life influenced student's experience of the campus climate. As a result, students sought community centers where they could explore their identities and feel connected with others who shared their background and experiences.

Most conversations about educational outcomes and inequities for minoritized students have remained at the individual student level, with little attention to the racialized organizations

that enroll them. It is not appropriate for campuses to continue to operate from a race neutral perspective (Garcia, 2019). Although institutions were not designed for minoritized students, there are strategies that can be used to disrupt the historical legacy of exclusion and move toward a more decolonial institution (Garcia, 2018a). Even though California University enrolled large numbers of minoritized students, the campus culture still felt white to students and staff. Representation through the enrollment of diverse students has not made the campus feel more inviting to Students of Color, women, and queer and transgender students. Enrollment of diverse students is not the same as a campus presence of minoritized students as highlighted by the experience of some of the participants in this study. All campuses, regardless of their student demographics, need to ensure that minoritized students feel welcome on their campuses. Race neutral approaches are not sufficient. Students must feel as if their racial and ethnic identities, their gender identities, and their sexual orientations are respected and valued. Community centers can serve as one tool and strategy to communicate to students that they belong at the institution (Cisneros et al., 2022).

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Community centers can offer a reprieve from a campus that felt overwhelmingly white and homogenous to students. Campuses should have highly visible community center spaces that communicate belongingness to minoritized students. Campuses with significant racial and ethnic diversity, like California University, need to take steps beyond enrolling diverse students to truly provide meaningful support to historically minoritized students. Diverse student enrollment is not sufficient to adequately support the success and achievement of students of color, women, and queer and transgender students. Culturally enhancing programs and experiences are critical to ensure that students can connect with others who share similar backgrounds.

Campuses can signal the validity of student identities by providing thoughtful physical spaces to community centers. Students and staff described the importance of the centers' physical spaces as resources in and of themselves. All 13 student participants mentioned the significance of the physical spaces. When students were asked what they would change about the centers, if anything, they mentioned wanting "more space," a "bigger space," or a "more centrally located space." All the community center spaces at California University were relatively large, spacious, and had been recently remodeled with student input. Despite this, some students still felt frustrated and disappointed about the space provided. Students, at times, felt like the size and location of their space reflected their value in the institution. The Latinx Cultural Center, for example, was housed in the library. As one student put it, the campus responded to a request for a center by "just putting us in the library . . . I wish we could have an actual space." Similarly, students in the Dreamer Center utilized a space in an academic building on the perimeter of campus. To Juan, undocumented students already "feel like they are on the outskirts of society and are outsiders." The location of their center reinforced this feeling. Though many campuses face space limitations, campus leaders should consider the physical resources they provide to community centers. The size, location, and furnishings of the spaces signal to students the ways in which their identities are, and aren't, valued by the institution.

Finally, campuses should carefully highlight community centers as key resources for the campus community. Centers should have dedicated full-time staff who can serve as institutional agents for students, and an appropriate budget to provide culturally enhancing programming (Catalano & Tillapaugh, 2020). Centers should be utilized in the recruitment of students to campus and in their retention through mentorship programs, faculty supported research, and other high-impact practices. Administrators should be careful that community centers do not

become as Anzaldua (2010) described, “A superficial overlay that [do] not disrupt any comfort zones” (p. 205) where they are symbolic rather than meaningful “third spaces” that can contribute to the learning and holistic achievement of students (Gutiérrez, 1995).

Finally, campus leaders can use community centers as one tool to shift the burden on student achievement from the individual to the institutional level. As discussed in the literature review, much of the scholarship on student achievement has focused on individual inputs from students (York et al., 2015). In other words, individual students are responsible for their own success in institutions of higher learning. Recent scholarship, however, has challenged campus leaders to become more focused on interventions to support student achievement, particularly the success of minoritized students (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Harper, 2012; Museus, 2014). Increasing the profile of community centers and the resources allocated to these spaces can serve as a tangible signal to students that their specific communities are important on campuses.

Assertion 2: Students Need Culturally Enhancing Experiences to Succeed Holistically

The most significant finding of this study is that California University’s community centers helped students to feel like they belonged and mattered on campus. Every single student participant discussed this during their semistructured interview and staff corroborated this point in the focus group. One student reported that the centers were “the best space[s] on campus because [they] truly feel like home.” Another said, they felt “welcomed here. I feel loved. I feel appreciated. That’s why I kept going. I just felt like I belonged.” One other student shared:

> I don’t know how to explain it into words, but the [Latinx Cultural Center] Pachanga just really healed a part of my soul that was missing here. There’s not always a full connection here at the school, and I feel like the Pachanga was a really big event that healed me.

Students reported the centers increased their pride in their identities and helped them to learn about others. Students reported that the centers “helped me to feel proud of who I am” and

"helped me to discover myself." One student even shared, being involved in a center "taught me a lot about myself and healed a lot of insecurities I had . . . [it] had a positive impact on my ethnic identity and other parts of myself I might have questioned about myself growing up." The community centers at California University had a profound impact on students and their connection to the campus.

Community centers provide culturally affirming support to students in a way that supports their holistic success. As noted by Anzaldúa (1987), "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (p. 81). Identity development and pride in oneself is an important part of learning. Literature has shown that achievement gaps may be due, in part, to minoritized students' difficulty in acculturating to cultures and subcultures of primarily white institutions (Kuh,1995; Tinto, 1987). Thus, community centers serve as a space where students can embrace themselves and can serve as a bridge to the wider campus, lessening the need for acculturation to the norm. As Renato, from the Latinx Cultural Center, shared:

> Before a student can even take a test, they have to feel confident that they can pass that test. The centers give students the confidence and self-advocacy skills to not only feel like they can take a test, but at the same time, that they belong to campus.

Campus community centers provide the foundational culturally specific identity development tools that enable students to be successful academically. Scholarship from Museus (2014) and Garcia and Ramirez (2018) suggested culturally affirming and culturally specific work is integrally important to the success of minoritized students. community centers are vital spaces that support these interventions on college campuses.

In addition to classroom and cocurricular spaces, community centers offer a unique alternative space that supports student achievement. The third space on college campus is "the

social space in which counter-hegemonic activity or contestation of dominant discourses can occur for both students and teachers," where the "how of both social and critical theory can be implemented" (Gutiérrez et al., 1995, p. 451). According to participants, significant learning opportunities took place in the centers where students learned about themselves, others, and the world around them. According to one student participant, "the only class I've ever experienced people talk about social justice issues is maybe my WAGE [Women's Center] class." Another student shared, "I liked being in a place that's actually diverse where I really can learn from other people. I learn the most when I'm around people who are not like me because it makes me really reflect." Though one-unit courses were taught in the community centers, they were primarily sites for cocurricular activities. Though they operated outside of the academic classroom space, they were still sites of important personal and collective learning experiences. As such, they were spaces that support the holistic success and achievement of students.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Campuses would do well to offer culturally affirming practices in their centers which enhance student experience. Though many examples were shared by participants during this study, I will highlight three specific recommendations. First, community centers should consider the ways in which they can facilitate cocurricular learning around important social justice topics. Second, campuses should fully utilize community center's positionality to connect students with institutional agents. Finally, centers should consider how they might embed holistic well-being services that are community specific in community center spaces.

Community centers should ensure they are offering intersectional programs that feature learning about race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, immigration status, and other forms of salient identity. Campuses should also think about the ways in which they bring diverse

students together for dialogue and learning through conversations about student experiences and/or relevant social justice dialogues. Students benefit when they can learn about their own identities and the experiences of others. Dedicated spaces to speak openly and honestly about social justice topics was an important offering of California University's community centers.

In this study, students described the importance of peers and staff who served as institutional agents. These institutional agents shared wisdom, supported them personally, and provided individualized tools to help them navigate the campus. Campus leaders should consider funding mentorship programs that offer culturally affirming support to students through community centers. These initiatives provide academic support to students and a sense of community. Students reported institutional agents played an important role in supporting their success both in the classroom and with their postgraduation plans. Campuses should highlight staff in community center spaces as resources to students and value their critical presence.

Finally, students discussed the importance of embedded counseling to support their mental health. For some, there was stigma associated with mental health services in their communities. It was overwhelming and daunting to seek these services in an unknown office. Having support groups in centers and counselors available in a familiar space was a valued resource. Administrators should explore how counseling centers can work with community centers to offer embedded mental health services in centers. Campus leaders can also leverage community centers to offer holistic resources that are not available elsewhere on campuses. For example, participants described California University's legal immigration services through a partnership with a local nonprofit in the Dreamer Center and the gender affirming clothing closet in the LGBTQIA+ Center. These offerings provided students with unique services that affirmed their identities and were important highly utilized services.

Assertion 3: Campuses Should Seek to Achieve Liberatory Outcomes for Students in Addition to Equity in Graduation Rates

Student achievement is a broad category that can include course completion, GPA, persistence, retention, proficiency of learning outcomes, length of time to graduate, scores on graduate entrance exams and post college job placement (Kuh et al., 2006; York et al., 2015). This study, however, defined student achievement as degree completion. Several equity minded models on student success use degree completion as evidence of student achievement (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Harper, 2012; Museus, 2014). Moreover, research suggests college graduates earn between $600,000 and $900,000 more during the course of their careers than high school graduates (Tamborini et al., 2015). The national 6-year degree completion rate continues to hover around 62%, meaning that a significant number of students who enter institutions of higher education do not complete their degree. Students of Color are disproportionately represented in the students who stopped out of their college or university (National Clearing House, 2022). As such, degree completion is an important equity topic for institutions of higher education as there is a significant investment in time and financial resources to obtain and college degree and degree completion does often translate into increased earnings over the course of a student's career. Community centers can play critical roles in addressing equity gaps for minoritized students.

Twelve of the 13 students interviewed for this study described their academic goals as earning good grades and obtaining a degree. When probed further, however, students described wide-ranging goals for their time in higher education that included more holistic goals. Students described "making friends," "identifying an internal sense of happiness," and for an undocumented student, "achieving the American Dream" as important outcomes of their

attendance at California University. Several students also discussed their commitment to being able to "learn more about myself and who I want to be." These holistic goals are notable and vary from the mission of California University which provides "students with the opportunity to participate in an academic curriculum distinguished by direct contact with faculty and an international emphasis that prepares them for a global future." For students in this study, earning a degree was just one event, albeit a significant one, in their future. Their experience at California University builds a foundation of what is to come. As such, degree completion cannot be the sole focus of institutions of higher learning. Students overcome many obstacles and achieve many victories along the path to their degree that can' be captured in that one metric (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Campuses should strive to support student achievement beyond degree completion.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Many colleges and university systems have ambitious goals to close gaps in outcomes on their campuses (California State University, n.d.; McMillan, 2019). These goals are important and necessary. Notable findings suggested although Students of Color have experienced increased academic success in all types of institutions, their gains have not kept pace with their white peers (Pendakur, 2016). Further, first-generation, low-income students, Students of Color, and LGBTQ students reported barriers to academic success not shared by their majority peers (Cress, 2008; Pendakur, 2016; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). In a political climate where higher education is increasingly diverse, campus leaders struggle to identify and change white and patriarchal norms to make universities more welcoming to historically minoritized students (Gusa, 2010; Museus & Park, 2015). Administrators should begin by seeking to close gaps in experiences to reduce gaps in outcomes. The equity minded strategies identified in this study

provide examples of how educators can invest in interventions that close gaps in experiences and support holistic student success through the mechanism of community centers. Campuses, however, should not stop there.

As campuses are successful in closing normative outcomes, they should commit themselves to pursuing liberatory outcomes for their student populations. Common measures of normative outcomes include equitable graduation rates, post baccalaureate degree enrollment and job placement (Garcia, 2017). In addition, campus leaders should track and measure liberatory outcomes that include racial–ethnic identity development, critical consciousness, social agency, political activism, community engagement, mental health outcomes, and overall freedom and joy (Garcia, 2022). As described by the participants in this study, students hold holistic goals that transcend academic achievement. As Frank, the Director of the Black Cultural center, shared:

> We know what the retention rate is or isn't and people want to encourage and applaud those things. But also, it's an opportunity for us to give thanks and I see a lot of that . . . . What I see is that people in these spaces are being affirmed. People think that DEI work is about complaining, if you have a particular lens, that's all you're seeing. But really what is it that we are building? We're building a space where people could be affirmed, and I appreciate it.

Frank emphasized that retention rates were important, but they were not the only metric of success. Students found pride in themselves and their communities through their engagement in community centers. These experiences had the potential to be liberatory. Student learning is at the heart of higher education and degree completion is just one metric of success. Campus leaders should strive to create transformative and liberatory learning spaces where students can develop themselves and the lens they will use to see the world. Community centers are important sites for learning and liberation that can contribute meaningfully to an institution's goals of developing engaged citizens and thinkers.

Assertions Conclusion

These three assertions, along with their implications for practice, suggested students need culturally affirming interventions to support holistic student success. Further, campus leaders can leverage community centers to make a visible and tangible institutional commitment to minoritized students. Finally, though closing gaps in degree completion is an important goal, campuses should strive to do more. It is not enough to only ensure equity in outcomes. Educators should consider how they can transform education so that students leave their campuses engaged learners, thinkers, and citizens ready to thrive in an ever-dynamic world. Community centers are often underutilized by institutions as tools to achieve these goals related to student achievement. Campuses would do well to consider how they can invest in, and leverage, community centers to support both student achievement and liberation.

Suggested Revisions to Theoretical Model

This study used a revised version of Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) HBCU-based educational approach to Black college student success model as the theoretical framework. Modifications were made to make the model apply more broadly to reflect community specific interventions that are offered in campus community centers (see Figure 3). Arroyo and Gasman's model was specific to Black student success and the modified version accommodated culturally specific interventions based on race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, disability and other salient forms of identity. After data were collected and analyzed, specific details were added to the "reciprocal outcomes and processes" section of the model to reflect the practices occurring in centers, as identified in this study. I recommend several additional modifications to this model for future research (see Figure 4). First, participants in this study discussed the campus' climate at length and the ways in which the campus climate was a catalyst for student engagement in the community centers. Future research should take campus climate

into serious consideration as a factor that influences a students' perception of a supportive environment. I recommend a distinct element on campus climate be added to the model to assess the environment in which students are learning. Finally, Arroyo and Gasman (2014) proposed holistic outcomes for students that transcend degree completion. They frame career attainment and civic engagement as other important outcomes to consider. I recommend campuses consider even more progressive forms of outputs, as suggested by Garcia's (2022) liberatory outcomes. Garcia (2022) suggested:

> Liberatory experiences allow Students of Color to feel respected and valued as people and thinkers in college, which includes a need to be seen as people of color; they encourage Students of Color to explore their race, ethnicity, culture, history, and unique contributions to society. Liberatory outcomes include racial-ethnic identity development, critical consciousness, social agency, political activism, community engagement, mental health outcomes, and overall freedom and joy. (p. 1)

As discussed earlier, campuses must ensure that minoritized students do not experience gaps in outcomes in higher education. Students of Color, women, queer, and trans students should have equitable rates of degree completion and time to degree as their peers. Yet, campuses can do even more to ensure that minoritized students have an equitable education; they can address gaps in experiences and seek to foster liberatory forms of education for all students. Figure 4 outlines additional modifications to Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) model to include campus climate as an important element of the framework.

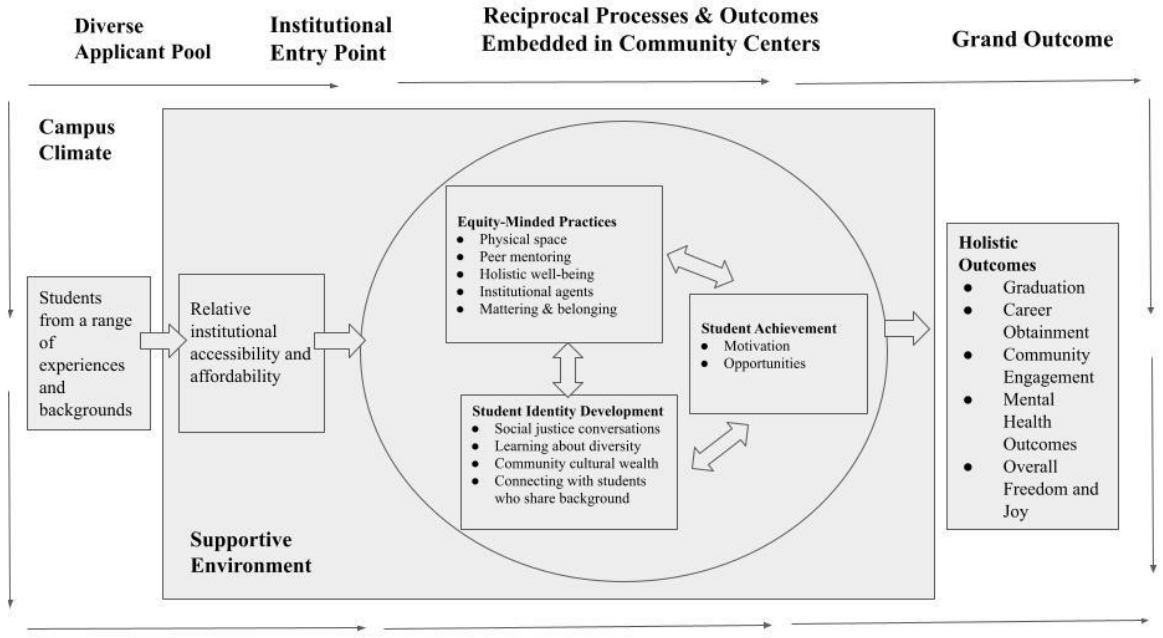

Figure 4. Suggestions for Future Modifications to Arroyo and Gasman's HBCU-Based Approach to Black College Student Success

Note. Adapted from "An HBCU-Based Educational Approach for Black College Student Success: Toward a Framework with Implications for All Institutions" by A. T. Arroyo (M. Gasman, 2014. *American Journal of Education*, *121*(1), 57–85. (https://doi.org/10.1086/678112). Copyright 2014 by University of Chicago Press.

Future Research

As discussed previously, few empirical studies exist on community centers in institutions of higher education. Overall, the impact of community centers is unknown. Some limited research supports community centers' impact on students' sense of belonging (Patton, 2006; Patton, 2011) but little is known about how these spaces contribute to student academic achievement (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Sanders, 2016). For example, between 1971 and 2017, fewer than 20 articles were published on Black Cultural Centers and few, if any, were empirical (Sanders, 2016). Existing research tends to focus on the history of campus community centers and small studies that are specific to one center (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020; Hypolite, 2020;

Sanders, 2016). There is a significant gap in understanding how these critical spaces, grounded in student activism, contribute to student achievement outcomes like persistence and graduation. As Marine and Nicolazzo (2014) stated, "More attention must be paid to the genesis and construction of these sites [community centers] as sites for liberatory practice" (p. 268).

As discussed, this project was an in-depth exploration of one campus' community centers. California University invested significant financial, human, and physical resources in eight centers on campus. There were unique circumstances surrounding the creation, funding, and modeling of the community centers at California University and though the findings from the study may produce interesting and compelling perspectives on centers and student success, the case itself is specific and bounded (Yin, 2018). This study aimed to understand how community centers with a similar structure, funding model, and reporting lines collectively support student success. Future research can expand upon this study to explore how centers support student achievement across several campuses.

This study used qualitative research methods to collect data on student engagement with community centers. Very few, if any, quantitative studies have been completed on community centers and student achievement. Quantitative data are not often available to help campuses understand how community centers do, in fact, contribute to student achievement. This is an area that can be explored in future research and would contribute meaningfully to this field. Future studies may consider how quantitative data can help to tell the story of how centers support students. For example, scholars could assess how engagement in centers contributes to student retention rates or GPAs. Alternatively, an instrument that assesses student well-being could be administered to students who use centers and compared against the larger student population.

There is much that scholars don't know about community centers and how they impact student success. The body of research focusing on outcomes associated with community centers is small and limited to a few scholars (Patton, 2006; Patton, 2011). Little is known about how these spaces contribute to student academic achievement (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Sanders, 2016). As campuses face pressure to increase the visibility of their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work, community centers have the potential to communicate commitment to students and deliver outcomes. Further research, however, is needed to tell the story of how centers are transformative for student experiences.

Conclusion

Community centers have always stood in opposition to the status quo (Patton, 2010). Originally designed to support students who were not traditionally included in higher education, centers continue the legacy work of promoting social justice on college campuses. Campus leaders struggle to include fully Students of Color, queer and trans students, and other historically minoritized students, as evidenced by gaps in outcomes and experiences (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017; Cress, 2008; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019; Pendakur, 2016). Recent debates about critical race theory (CRT) in K–12 education (Sawchuck, 2021) and ethnic studies in higher education (Pawell, 2021) point to a cultural climate that resists the centering of People of Color in the ways our culture understands U.S. history. An upcoming decision from the Supreme Court on race-based admissions will also impact the ways in which college campuses across the nation select and admit students (Nadworny, 2022). If the Supreme Court rules that considering race in admissions is not constitutional, campuses will need to identify different strategies to admit Students of Color who historically have been prohibited or prevented from higher education. At the legislative level, in

just the first few months of 2023, lawmakers in nineteen states have taken up laws that could limit or prohibit university diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. The proposed legislation includes laws that would prohibit colleges and universities from having diversity, equity, and inclusion staff; ban mandatory diversity trainings; prohibit universities from using diversity statements in hiring and promotion and prohibit colleges from using race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in admissions or employment (Lu et al., 2023). The state of California already prohibits preferential treatment based on race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin, in public education as a result of Proposition 209, passed in 1996 (Carey, 2020). Community center leaders in the state of California must program to support minoritized students without excluding other groups of students. This delicate dance is one that other campuses may face in the future as a result of the Supreme Court ruling and proposed legislation. Anti-diversity, equity, inclusion legislation threatens the existence of community centers all together in states where these bills are considered.

Community centers already occupy a precarious place of supporting minoritized students, but not at the exclusion of other students in the programs and services they provide. Increasingly, community centers have been targeted with accusations of self-segregation and sites for in-group discrimination (Renn, 2011). For example, in Fall 2022, the University of California San Diego came under scrutiny for offering orientations for Black, Latinx, and Native students, hosted by community centers. Reporting from conservative news outlet, Campus Reform, suggested that community specific orientations are akin to racial segregation (Biagini, 2022). Similarly, the Multicultural Center at Arizona State University was profiled in the *New York Times* in Fall 2022 for a video that went viral of an interaction between queer Students of Color in the center and white male students. The interaction was framed as representing the divisiveness that community

specific spaces create on college campuses (Viren, 2022). Majority group students may feel excluded, confused, or resentful that minority students have their own center or programmatic initiatives; there are not, for example, white student centers or new white student orientations. Tatum (2007) pointed out in the context of race, students who live with unearned privilege are not always prepared to understand why others might want or need a space of their own, away from real or perceived scrutiny.

The stakes are high for colleges and universities to embed meaningfully equity and inclusion into all that they do. Increasingly in the United States, institutions of higher learning educate a student body that is diverse in race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation (Espinosa et al., 2019; Pendakur, 2016; Williams et al., 2005. Campuses are increasingly called on to ensure that women, Students of Color, and queer and trans students are supported. Heightened calls for social justice are ever present on college campuses and campus leaders must take action. One tangible and highlight visible opportunity is to invest in campus community centers. These spaces can address students' sense of belonging on campus and connect minoritized students to valuable resources. Community centers also symbolically signal to the campus that the institution values Students of Color, women, LGBTQIA+ students, and other minoritized groups. In a period with increased scrutiny of admissions policies and coursework, third spaces on campus are sites where critical cocurricular learning can take place. Community centers were founded with the purpose of disrupting the racist, white, male, straight hegemonic campus. Still to this day, community centers operate as sites of resistance, but also liberation, support, and joy.

APPENDIX A: STUDENT PARTICIPANT INTEREST SURVEY

Jessica Nare is currently a doctoral student in the UCSD/CSUSM program in Educational Leadership. She is interested in understanding how participation in community-specific centers contributes to student success and is requesting that juniors and seniors who participate in University X's community centers voluntarily complete this survey. All responses are confidential.

By clicking NEXT, you are acknowledging that you are 18 years or older and consenting to participate in this survey.

Demographic Questions:

1. What is your name (first/last)?
2. What pronouns do you use?
3. How do you identify your ethnicity/race? Please select all that apply:
    - Asian or Asian American
    - Black or African American
    - Far East Asian (examples include: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.)
    - Filipino/a/x
    - Latino/a/e/x
    - Multiracial
    - Native American, American Indian, Alaskan Native
    - Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian
    - South Asian/ Desi (examples include: Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani)
    - Southeast Asian (examples include: Cambodian, Hmong, Vietnamese)
    - Southwest Asian/ North African (examples include: Armenian, Iranian, Tunisian)
    - White
    - Prefer not to answer
    - Identity not listed (please specify)
4. What is your gender identity? Please select all that apply:
    - Genderqueer
    - Man
    - Nonbinary
    - Transgender
    - Woman
    - Prefer not to answer
    - Identity not listed here (please specify)
5. How do you define your sexual orientation? Please select all that apply:
    - Asexual
    - Bisexual
    - Gay
    - Fluid
    - Heterosexual

- Lesbian
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Questioning
- Prefer not the answer
- Identity not listed (please specify)

6. Which of the following community centers do you participate in at University X (select all that apply)?
    - API Center
    - Black Cultural Center
    - Dreamer Center
    - Latinx Cultural Center
    - Multicultural Center
    - Native Cultural Center
    - LGBTQIA+ Center
    - Women's Center
7. Which of the following community centers do you participate in the most (select one)?
    - API Center
    - Black Cultural Center
    - Dreamer Center
    - Latinx Cultural Center
    - Multicultural Center
    - Native Cultural Center
    - LGBTQIA+ Center
    - Women's Center
8. Which of the following activities do you participate in at the center (check all that apply)?
    - Advising
    - Study
    - Hangout with friends
    - Work in the center as a student assistant
    - Participate in a mentoring program
    - Participate in an allyship program
    - Volunteer/intern in the center
    - Support groups
    - Attend events (speakers/programs)
    - Student organization meetings
9. No real names will be used in findings of this study. What pseudonym or fictitious name would you like me to use for you?

    Confirmation message: Thank you so much for completing this interest survey! I will follow up with you soon with additional details and next steps for participation in this study. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please feel free to email me at: xxxxx@cougars.csusm.edu

APPENDIX B: STUDENT EMAIL INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN SURVEY

Dear Participant,

My name is Jessica Nare and I'm currently a doctoral student in the UCSD/CSUSM Program in Educational Leadership. I am researching the ways in which participation in University X's community centers contributes to student success. I wanted to reach out to ask for your assistance with my dissertation study. You came recommended to me by _____ as a student who might have valuable information to share about this phenomenon.

I'm planning to conduct individual interviews with students who are juniors or seniors at University X and have participated in one of University X's community centers. All data collected are confidential and no real names will be used in the publication of my dissertation study. If you are interested in participating, please let me know and I will provide more information and next steps:

As a token of gratitude, participants who complete an individual interview with me will be gifted a $25 gift card to the bookstore. I appreciate your consideration and support!

Thank you,

Jessica Nare
Email: xxxxx@cougars.csusm.edu
Phone number: (XXX) XXX-XXXX
Doctoral Student
Joint Doctoral Program - Educational Leadership
University of California, San Diego
California State University, San Marcos

APPENDIX C: STAFF INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A FOCUS GROUP

Dear Participant,

My name is Jessica Nare and I'm currently a doctoral student in the UCSD/CSUSM Program in Educational Leadership. I am researching the ways in which participation in university X's cultural centers contribute to student success. I wanted to reach out to ask for your assistance with my dissertation study.

I'm specifically planning to conduct a focus group with directors of University X's community centers to understand your perspective on the ways in which the centers support student achievement. In addition to the focus group, I am conducting individual semi-structured interviews with students who are juniors or seniors at University X and have participated in one of University X's community centers. All data collected are confidential and no real names will be used in the publication of my dissertation study. If you are interested in participating, please let me know and I will provide more information and next steps:

As a token of gratitude, participants of the focus group will be treated to lunch during the scheduled date and time of the conversation. I appreciate your consideration and support!

Thank you,
Jessica Nare

Email: xxxx@cougars.csusm.edu
Phone number: (XXX) XXX-XXXX
Doctoral Student

Joint Doctoral Program - Educational Leadership
University of California, San Diego
California State University, San Marcos

California State University
SAN MARCOS

APPENDIX D: STUDENT PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you so much for being willing to participate in this conversation. The purpose of this interview is to understand the ways in which your engagement in University X's community centers contributed to your success. Some additional goals include:

- Highlighting your student experience
- Discussing the ways in which participation in a community center connected you to Community
- Understanding how you define success
- Exploring the ways in which participation in community centers have supported or hindered success

What you share with me today will be kept confidential. I will be recording our conversation this afternoon to allow me to fully capture the insights that you share with me. Do you agree to have our conversation recorded? Do you have any questions before we begin?

Student Success:

- Please tell me a bit about how you decided to attend X?
- What does success mean to you within the context of your experience in higher education?
- What does academic success mean to you?
- What does holistic success mean to you?
- What are you most proud of achieving or accomplishing during your time at X University?
  What was your biggest challenge in achieving your goals?
  Who/what helped you to persevere through that challenge?
  What are some of the people/ programs/resources that supported your success on campus?

Engagement in Cultural Centers:

- How did you first become aware of University X's community centers?
- Can you tell me about the first time you visited ___ center?
- What made you want to keep coming back?
- What is your favorite thing about the ____ center?
- Have you spent time in any other cultural centers on campus?
- What were those experiences like?
- Do you see the centers working together or collaborating on any programs and events?
- Do you think the centers work together why or why not?
- What are some of the similarities and differences that exist between centers?
- Do you think that the presence of University X's community centers support students in any way?

Identity Development:

- How has the ____ Center contributed to your success at University X?

- What has been most meaningful about your experiences at the center (or "in the space")?
- Can you tell me about your favorite memory in the _____ space? Why did this specific event have any impact on you?
- How has your participation in ____ center contributed to the way that you see yourself/ your own identity?
- What have you learned about yourself/ your community from your participation in the center?
- In what ways was sharing space with other _____ students important to you?

Equity-minded practices:

- What are your favorite activities/ programs at the ____ space?
- Why might you spend time/ seek support from the ____ Center versus another space or resource on campus?

  In conclusion:
- What if, anything, would you change or improve about the _____ Center?
- What would you share with a student who is not connected to or involved in a community center, but would like to get involved?

That was my final question for you today. Is there anything you would like to add or anything that you've been thinking about that I didn't ask?

APPENDIX E: STAFF FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Thank you so much for joining me today. I really appreciate your time and energy. My research question is: how does engagement with University X's community centers support student achievement. I'm defining student achievement for this study as degree completion. The data collection for this project includes a focus group with staff and individual semi structured interviews with students. We have about 90 minutes together today and I have roughly 8 questions with some follow ups. I am recording our conversation today. Are there any questions before we get started?

Why do you think students utilize University X's community centers?
What do you think the presence of the community centers communicates to students?
What do you think are the most important programs and/or resources you offer in the centers?
How (if at all) do you think the centers support students to complete their degrees?
What structure is needed from the campus in order to support centers to be successful in their goals?
What do you think the similarities and differences are between the centers?
What equity-minded practices do you utilize in the centers?
What theories and conceptual frameworks do you use to guide your work?

Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about this topic?

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