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Systemically Marginalized Student Engagement with Holistic Support Programs and their Perceptions of College Success at a Four-Year Research University

By

JULIAN LEDESMA
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

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in the

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DAVIS

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2024

Abstract

Systemically Marginalized Student Engagement with Holistic Support Programs and their Perceptions of College Success at a Four-Year Research University

Disparities in academic performance and degree attainment continue to affect systemically marginalized (SM) college students. Amidst these persistent inequities, this qualitative study aimed to better understand how SM students at a competitive university navigated their choice to engage with support and how they conceptualized success. The study focused on UC Berkeley's Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3), a hub of multiple holistic programs tailored for communities of SM students. Based on semi-structured interviews with ten undergraduates, the study applied inductive analysis to uncover factors influencing their engagement and perceptions of support as well as the varied ways in which they defined success. A conceptual framework built from Stephen's Cultural Mismatch Theory (2012) and Hurtado's Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE, 2012) was applied to best understand the multiple factors and contexts that impact SM students in higher education. Three themes were identified: systemic challenges that fueled feelings of mistrust and disconnection; the high value of the empathetic, understanding, and practical support from CE3 programs; and inclusive definitions of success in college beyond academic terms. Findings highlight the necessity for universities to broaden their definitions of success and recalibrate support services to better align with the diverse needs of SM students. Implications call for institutions to adopt more inclusive policies and practices that genuinely reflect the unique backgrounds, cultural wealth, and values of these students by providing and expanding spaces for holistic support, identity affirmation, and community building.

Dedication

For my wife Dionicia, and my sons Andres and Matias, as thanks for your sacrifice in allowing me to pursue my doctorate degree. I love you! I dedicate this to my parents, siblings, and all the amazing and wise higher education professionals that I have had the privilege of learning from. This work is also dedicated to the generations of brilliant immigrants, people of color, and systemically impoverished communities who were not afforded access to and support in higher education. Many of the most intelligent people that I have had the privilege of knowing were shut out from access to higher education and an opportunity for them to academically thrive. I dedicate this work to them as well along with a special recognition to all those non-academic educators and role models who, as peers, elders, colleagues, and friends, taught me invaluable lessons along the journey of my life as well. Finally, my journey is rooted in Oakland, so I have to recognize the Town that helped forge my identity and commitment to equity and justice.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my wife, two boys, and other members of my family who endured the impact on my time these last few years. Similarly, thank you to my friends and work colleagues for understanding the constraints on my time given the commitment to this study. To my employer and supervisor, I am grateful for the flexibility afforded to me so I could complete my degree. I appreciate the support and understanding you all have provided so generously to me.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have Professors Elizabeth Montaño, Marcela Cuellar, and Michal Kurlaendar serve as my dissertation committee. Professor Montaño, thank you for your encouragement and guidance throughout my entire CANDEL journey. You helped me regain confidence and grow my competencies in qualitative study and provided invaluable input that helped strengthen my research. Professor Cuellar, thank you for always modeling centering the experience of students in your work and encouraging us to bring visibility to our stories. Professor Kurlaendar, I am ever grateful for how you set the tone for me and the rest of Cohort 17 in our first summer. From day one, you skillfully conveyed the importance of us simultaneously holding the identities of scholars, practitioners, and leaders. Thank you all for making my CANDEL experience one of the most fulfilling of my life.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the involvement of ten brilliant undergraduates. You have inspired me with your wisdom and resilience and provided me with a reminder of why this work is so critically important. Thank you for trusting me with your stories.

Finally, special thanks to the best cohort ever, Quarantine 17! I never expected that my CANDEL experience would include so many phenomenal people and leaders. Thanks for willing to struggle and laugh together while always keeping our greater aspirations in mind. Knowing I shared a cohort with you all makes the completion of my doctorate degree even sweeter.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Disparities in academic performance and degree attainment among systemically marginalized[1] (SM) college students (Mai, 2016), particularly students who are first-generation, come from low-income backgrounds, and/or are people of color, continue to persist (Ahlman & Cochrane, 2019). Economic challenges and responsibilities, the lack of access to competitive four-year institutions, and a concentration of SM students in under-resourced K-12 schools are some of the primary factors that are believed to contribute to such disparities (Cahalan et al., 2022). While SM students have made steady gains in college enrollment and degree attainment over the past few decades, there remain large gaps in college attendance and academic outcomes when they are compared to students overall (Cahalan et al., 2022). Disparities in educational attainment and college success of SM students also limit their relative earning power and wages and, as the nation becomes more demographically diverse, these gaps threaten to widen a growing racialized class divide (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2024).

More recent challenges have added to the number of long standing inequities and disparities that hinder the ability of SM students to be successful in college. Across the country, the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the academic trajectories of high need students by up-ending living situations, changing the ways in which students experience learning and academic support, and pulling them further back into familial and community responsibilities (Molock & Parchem, 2022). Additionally, the pandemic experience resulted in poorer mental

[1] *"Systemically Marginalized" represents the institutional and system-based process where persons are intentionally removed, denied, and isolated from economic, sociopolitical, and cultural participation based on race, immigrant status, income, ability, or other differences (Mai, 2016). In education, this applies to first-generation students, low-income students, BIPOC students, undocumented students, formerly incarcerated students, and others.*

health and personal wellness among college students, particular for those with “risk factors” such as being from a low-income background (Copeland et al., 2021; Elharake et al., 2022; Molock & Parchem, 2022). At UC Berkeley, 2020 and 2021 survey responses[2] identified heightened levels of depression (44% of undergraduates, 29% of graduate students) and generalized anxiety (50% of undergraduates, 41% of graduate students) related to the pandemic. Responses to this campus survey also found that 28% of transfer students and 8% of frosh entry undergraduates reported that the pandemic had increased their time to degree.

The rising prohibitive expense of a college degree may be one reason for the downward trend in college enrollments that began prior to the pandemic (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). With tuition rates ballooning across American colleges and universities leading to larger college loan debt (Goldrick-Rab & Steinbaum, 2020), increasing time to degree can be particularly injurious to SM students. As Jimenez and Glater (2020) state, "For students of color, who are disproportionately likely to lack financial resources, the burden of debt undermines opportunity, deters some from pursuing higher education entirely, and punishes those who pursue it,” (p. 132). Given the many existing and emerging challenges that SM students continue to face, the availability and engagement of robust support resources becomes even more critical for their success.

To address higher education inequities and the needs of SM students, colleges and universities have provided various types of support services to supplement those offered to their student body as a whole (Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022). Support may include interventions that target high need students such as holistic advising, cultural centers, scholarships, and equity conscious curricula (Means & Pyne, 2017). At my institution, the University of California at

[2] *In late Spring 2020, institutional research analysts in Berkeley’s Division of Undergraduate Education launched periodic “pulse surveys” intended to track the impact of the pandemic. These surveys have continued to be administered since they initially launched in 2020.*

Berkeley, the Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3) provide multi-tier, holistic, and comprehensive support to various communities of SM students intended to help facilitate their overall success. While CE3 has demonstrated a commitment to continuously improve its programs, this study was driven in large part by the need to dive deeper into understanding the new and evolving challenges faced by the students CE3 is charged to serve. CE3's response to the pandemic is one example of how the "new normal" experienced by SM students has accelerated the need for student support practitioners to think and operate differently. The cluster now offers multiple modalities of support (i.e., both in-person and online individual appointments, course offerings, and group programming/workshops) and provides similar flexibility, in the way of hybrid work schedules, to its highly diverse workforce.

Often, resources aimed at supporting SM students are structured as generic "one size fits all" models of traditional advising based support and may not be able to adequately consider the intersectional complexities of student identities (Nunez, 2014; Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022) thereby limiting their effectiveness and ability to be responsive to current and emerging needs. Additionally, while campus general advising and student supports available to all members of the student body are considered an essential support service, efforts targeted to high need student communities, even when applying the same strategies for students as a whole, may be considered non-essential or redundant (Yazedjian et al., 2008). Institutions that do offer equity-centered comprehensive support are often assessed along traditional measures such as grade point averages and retention rates to justify their existence and return on investment (Mu & Fosnacht, 2019). In doing so, the ability of holistic programs to impact other important measures relevant to marginalized students, such as sense of belonging and academic confidence, may be undervalued or invisibilized (Bruce-Sanford, et al., 2015). Complicating matters even further,

there is a limited amount of research that explores how multiple support characteristics intersect to impact systemically marginalized students on college campuses (Museus & Ravello, 2021). By providing a better understanding of the factors that drive engagement with support resources, and the perceived value of the support received, this research was intended to add to the limited evidence in this area.

Purpose and Motivation for the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how SM students perceive success and experience targeted holistic support at a large tier one public research university. By conducting a series of qualitative interviews with student participants of UC Berkeley's CE3, I was able to learn more about students' engagement with holistic support, the impact of this support, and how these services may facilitate the success of SM students at UCB. This study also explored how students themselves define success in college and how it may be different from how the university traditionally defines achievement. The aim was to help enhance the understanding and practice of impactful holistic support of high need students, both in closing historical academic performance gaps and in enabling attainment of students' own definitions of success.

In my years as a practitioner, I have learned the importance of engaging and listening to students and their critical perspectives. During my time as Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) director at UC Berkeley, the unit was in high demand compiling thousands of student support interventions/contacts per year. EOP student "peer academic counselor" jobs were also in high demand but were limited by funding constraints that allowed the unit to hire only ten to twelve of the over 100 students that would typically apply every year. When conducting informal assessment interviews and focus groups with program participants, EOP learned that students valued the holistic support they received as well as the opportunity to experience the strong sense

of collective community the program facilitated. We also learned that working as a peer academic counselor came to be seen as a leadership development opportunity by students. These were critical findings for EOP. Instead of simply seeing ourselves as a program focused on individualized holistic support of EOP students that just happened to create community and develop leadership skills of those we served, we instead pivoted to embrace community and leadership development as intentional components of EOP. Soon after, we rebranded and began to feature community and leadership development as core benefits to students and outcomes of our work. Today, in addition to providing holistic and comprehensive counseling to individual students, EOP strategically administers events designed to cultivate a sense of belonging and community, while the peer academic counseling program has added a pre-training internship component so that more students have access to an increasingly robust leadership development experience. These areas of program growth provide a more comprehensive set of support resources for students and would not have been possible without their critical direct input.

This study sought to learn from students' own perceptions and constructs of success in order to enable colleges and universities to better support their ability to succeed. Institutions that exclusively feature traditional modes and models of support to high need students risk doing more harm than good by reinforcing exclusionary practices that adversely impact students' sense of belonging (Means & Pyne, 2017). Existing academic and social supports may undermine their own effectiveness if they do not acknowledge and work to address the historical invisibility and exclusion of the SM students they seek to serve. Marginalized groups may remain invisibilized without specialized strategies such as targeted communications and marketing that visibly feature Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), low-income, and first-generation students with welcoming invitations to engage in resources designed specifically for them (Means & Pyne,

2017). SM students may perceive success for themselves in non-academic accomplishments or when they are able to make their institutions better for fellow students (Ramos et al., 2021). SM students also often define college success as a communal versus individual achievement (Ramos et al., 2021; Yazedjian et al., 2008). By including their voices in academic content and framing success in non-traditional ways, higher education professionals can help enhance the achievement of SM students (Cuellar, 2015; Goegan et al., 2021; Lynam et al., 2022). Current research (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019; Goegan et al., 2021; Lynam et al., 2022; Ramos, 2021; Yazedjian et al., 2008) is limited in how institutions take students' own definitions of college success and translate them into actionable support practices. The findings of this study contribute new knowledge to help shape strategies to address this gap.

Research Questions

This study and research questions were built around three overall themes: factors that impact help-seeking from co-curricular support resources; students' perception of the value of this support; and students' self-authored definitions of success in college. I explored these themes through qualitative study with three central research questions:

- What factors influence UC Berkeley students' engagement with Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3) support programs?
- What are systemically marginalized students' perceptions of the value of CE3 programs and services?
- In what ways do systemically marginalized students at UC Berkeley define success in college for themselves?

Definitions

The term “systemically marginalized” or “SM” students is used throughout this study. Sourced from Jens-Erik Mai’s (2016) work on marginalization and exclusion, SM students are those who experience “institutional and system-based processes where persons are intentionally removed, denied, and isolated from economic, sociopolitical, and cultural participation based on race, immigrant status, income, ability, or other differences” (Mai, 2016). For this study, the term “SM students” is utilized as a unifying term encompassing the various student communities CE3 programs are designed to serve. These include BIPOC students, low-income students, first-generation college students, formerly incarcerated or carceral system impacted students, re-entry (i.e., students aged 25 or over who have experienced a break in their pursuit of a college degree) students, student parents, students that are part of or have experienced foster care, student veterans, and undocumented students. For this study, LGBTQ+ students or students who identify as neurodiverse were not acknowledged as systemically marginalized groups of students. While these student communities do experience marginalization, UC Berkeley has specific programs in place outside of CE3, including the Gender Equity Resource Center and the Disabled Students Program, that provide specialized support to LGBTQ+ and neurodiverse students thereby they were not included within the scope of this research.

For the largest groups of SM students at UC Berkeley, first-generation college students and students that are considered low-income, the operational definitions used by CE3’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) were applied. EOP defines a first-generation student as any non-international student (i.e., a student that is not studying at Berkeley on a travel visa) with family backgrounds where neither parent has earned a four-year college degree in the United States. Students who are eligible for federal Pell grants or California Dream Aid are considered low-income.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

For this study, it was necessary to review the literature on factors that influence the help-seeking behavior of systemically marginalized (SM, Mai, 2016) students including the types of needs that may drive engagement with support services, and studies that explore non-traditional and student self-authored definitions of success in college. Thus, after starting with a brief context of higher education, the literature review is thematically organized around these categories with special emphasis on empirical studies that feature systemically marginalized (SM) students at four-year institutions specifically.

Multiple studies have explored how the wide spectrum of students' needs may be associated with their support-seeking choices (Bassett, 2021; Chang et al., 2020; Mansson, 2016; Winograd & Rust, 2014; Won et al., 2021). Extant work identifies a traditional model where institutions construct support mechanisms to address needs in specific ways such as offering tutoring to help enhance academic achievement (Bassett, 2021; Mansson, 2016). This traditional model aligns services with perceived needs, defined by the institution, and expects students to be intrinsically motivated (Mansson, 2016) to engage in available resources. However, my review revealed that there is limited research that considers various intersectional components of SM student identity (i.e., race, gender, generational status, gender identity) in analyzing help-seeking behavior, particularly for students attending four-year research universities such as UC Berkeley. To inform this study, the literature review explores this gap. To better understand help seeking of SM students, this research also sought to better understand conceptualizations of success in college as defined by students themselves.

The larger, long-term aim of this study is to inform practice and practitioners committed to holistically supporting SM students at 4-year universities. Recognizing that SM students may benefit from models of holistic support, this study was shaped by the notion that constructs and measures of their success must also be holistic. New insights and knowledge were sought by directly asking SM students at UC Berkeley to share how they define college success, building on the limited existing empirical literature in this area.

State of Higher Education and University of California Initiatives as Context

While systemic inequities among access, retention, and academic performance in higher education for SM students continue to persist (Ahlman & Cochrane, 2019), contemporary context adds new urgency to ways we think about addressing them. The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the educational journeys of SM students and impacted how they experience learning and support resources (Molock & Parchem, 2022). Across the country, the increasing cost of attending college has also increased student debt (Goldrick-Rab & Steinbaum, 2020) with the sticker shock deterring many students from low-income backgrounds from pursuing college at all (Jimenez & Glater, 2020). These, along with other factors, may be chief contributors to the continuing trend of decreasing enrollment of students in American universities (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022).

The landscape of higher education, particularly for public institutions, is also impacted by the current conservative majority supreme court. In striking down affirmative action (*Students for Fair Admissions, Inc, v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, (2023); *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc, v. University of North Carolina*, (2023) and thwarting college debt forgiveness *(Biden, President of the United States, et al., v. Nebraska, et al.,* 2023), the Trump court has effectively made higher education more exclusionary, exacerbating access and belonging

inequities for SM students. Additionally, the actions of the nation's highest court have also fueled a resurgence of anti-DEI sentiment across all of education (Cliburn, 2023). At colleges and universities, equity-centered programs and initiatives, such as those of the Division of Equity and Inclusion at UC Berkeley, now find themselves in the crosshairs of right-leaning activists, leaders, and politicians (Cliburn, 2023). While institutions have spent the last decade and a half developing equity strategies, installing diversity officers, and launching programs intended to address systemic disparities (Pihakis, et al., 2019), the threat to these efforts from the current political climate (Kelderman, 2023) makes it more necessary to identify expanded measures, data, and scholarship that documents the value and "return on investment" of such efforts.

In California, overall state demographics and population of students continue to become increasingly Latinx. Already, there are more Latinx high school graduates than any other group in the state (Excelencia in Education, 2022) and Latinx students make up 43% of California undergraduates (Reddy & Siqueiros, 2021). While the pace of this demographic shift has slowed post-pandemic (Excelencia in Education, 2022), the growth of the Latinx population will increasingly shape education in California. As Reddy and Siqueiros (2021) note, "In a state where Latinx residents are the largest ethnic group, and where 48 percent of 18-to-24-year-old residents are Latinx, an undergraduate population that contains at least 25 percent Latinx students at every campus should be the norm" (p. 36). Already having established five of its nine undergraduate campuses as Hispanic Serving Institutions, the University of California continues its priority initiative of transforming the entire system into an HSI (UC Hispanic-Serving Institutions Initiative, 2018). While California's demographic trends suggest this is an inevitability (Reddy & Siqueiros, 2021), simply being a "Latinx Enrolling" (Garcia, et al., 2019) institution that maintains a population of 25% of more Latinx students does not automatically

transform colleges into spaces where these students feel engaged and supported to achieve their success (Garcia, et al., 2019).

Garcia et al. (2019) defines "Latinx Serving" institutions as those that enroll 25% or more of Latinx students and that also develop structures that address systemic inequities to enable significant positive academic and non-academic outcomes for Latinx students. Anticipating California's near future demographic realities, it is imperative for the state's institutions of higher education to improve their understanding of Latinx students and the structures and approaches (with an emphasis on co-curricular offerings) that help address the challenges and inequities that impact them (Cuellar, 2015). Developing and implementing holistic and multi-faceted supports to better serve the growing demographic of Latinx students in California also has positive benefits for other communities of SM students by being crafted in the framework of the Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE, Hurtado et al., 2012). The MMDLE (Hurtado et al., 2012) places the student at the center of the university experience and acknowledges multiple forces that impact their ability to navigate and be successful in college such as campus climate, socio-historical context, institutional context, and community context/commitments. As Hurtado et al. (2012) asserts, "The essence of a diverse learning environment is one that integrates inclusive practices, and is also intentional about purpose and knowledgeable about whom they educate (student identities)" (p. 104). Initially for the UC Berkeley campus that served as its study setting, this research contributes practitioner-centered scholarship that can ultimately help shape intentional and inclusive holistic support for SM students at other four-year research universities.

Needs of Systemically Marginalized College Students

College Readiness and Academic Needs

Students begin their journeys in college at different places and the "college readiness" (defined by a combination of high school GPA, standardized test scores, and highest level of math completed) of minoritized college students such as first-generation students has traditionally lagged behind that of non-first-generation students (Strayhorn, 2007). Applying multivariate statistics and hierarchical linear regression techniques to US Department of Education's Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) data, Strayhorn (2007) found statistically significant negative differences in the college readiness of first-generation students compared to continuing generation students. This analysis suggests that some SM students, in this case first-generation students, "Tend to enter college without the requisite skills and knowledge necessary for success," (Strayhorn, 2007, p. 988). Corrigan (2003) also used US Department of Education data to explore academic challenges of minoritized students. The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) administered a series of qualitative interviews over several weeks with nearly 500 first time college students from low-income backgrounds. Analyzing the resulting data set, Corrigan (2003) found that students with high financial need tend to possess more academic risk factors than their affluent counterparts. Completing less rigorous courses prior to attending college and having less time to study because of work and/or family care responsibilities were identified as risk factors that challenged the academic success and persistence of students from low-income backgrounds (Corrigan, 2003). Additional studies further illuminate differences in college readiness of SM students attending four-year universities.

Unverferth et al. (2012) analyzed pre- and post- survey data of 107 first-generation students from Northwestern Ohio. Stratified random assignment was used to ensure gender representation reflected school district proportions because the students from the schools

surveyed were mostly male (67%). Again, researchers found that SM students, in this case first-generation students, “Enter the postsecondary experience with lower reading, mathematics, and critical thinking skills," (Unverferth, et al., 2012, p. 240). While the results of this study are consistent with others measuring academic readiness of SM students, it must be noted that there are limits in its generalizability due to its small and very specific type of student sample (participants were students from vocational schools). In a much more robust and larger scale study of 58,000 first-generation students across six research universities, Stebleton and Soria (2013) utilized UC Berkeley's Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey to analyze differences between first-generation and non-first-generation students’ obstacles to academic success. Their study identified multiple compounding factors that together impede the ability of many first-generation students to be successful in college. Among the challenges surfaced by their study, Stebleton and Soria (2013) identified weak English language skills, poor math skills, and inadequate study skills as academic needs of first-generation students at four-year research universities. While the researchers acknowledge the limitations of studying only one type of institution, their focus on top tier research universities aligns their research and findings to the specific setting utilized in this study.

Non-Academic Needs

SM students may experience various non-academic challenges in college. Soria et al. (2014) analyzed responses from nearly 32,000 students from low-income backgrounds to the University of California's Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey. Their analysis identified persistent economic challenges experienced by students with high financial need that impacted their ability to persist and succeed academically (Soria et al., 2014). Applying multiple regression analysis with low-income status as the primary independent variable, the

study found "a variety of actions/behaviors that will likely have significant and negative immediate and long-term implications" (Soria et al., 2014, p.11). Among them, the Soria et al. (2014) study identified that students with high financial need frequently skipped meals, accumulated debt, worked more hours, and frequently asked Financial Aid Offices to reevaluate their aid packages. The study acknowledges the limitations of researching only one type of institution, yet the study's focus on tier one research universities added relevance that informed this study.

As another category of non-academic concerns, some researchers have explored the health of SM students in college. Overall mental health and wellness also presents itself as a challenge for SM students. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model (SEM), Kreniske et al. (2022) studied a random sample of 18- to 29-year-old students across three four-year universities. Analysis of the 1649 respondents indicated that first-generation students from low-income backgrounds experienced higher rates of depression and anxiety (including suicidality) and poorer health overall as compared to their non-first-generation and non-low-income fellow students (Kreniske et al., 2022). The study did not consider other intersectional factors beyond first-generation and financial need that may contribute to diminished wellness and health.

Considered together, the college readiness, academic needs, and non-academic needs of SM students have implications for how (or if) they seek engagement of support resources in college. Yet, SM students experience their tangible academic and non-academic needs that impact help seeking within a larger context. How well a student feels they belong at a particular institution, among fellow students, and in the classroom also are factors that impact the degree of their engagement with support resources.

Sense of Belonging

In his 2012 book, *College Students' Sense of Belong*, Terrell Strayhorn offers a definition of Sense of Belonging that cemented it as a critical concept that has reverberated across higher education,

> In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

Strayhorn (2021) expands on his sense of belonging work in a more recent qualitative study of 35 ethnic minority students at a predominantly white institution (PWI) that participated in a Summer Bridge program. As they started their university careers, study participants reported feeling challenged, isolated, and unfamiliar with college even among peers they identified as having similar backgrounds (Strayhorn, 2021). This lack of sense of belonging in their initial time in college also resulted in increased worry and anxiety among students with some even turning to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism (Strayhorn, 2021). Additionally, the study found that participants' early experiences in feeling out of place fueled academic self-doubt that further diminished their overall sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2021). Strayhorn also discovered that simple interventions designed to build familiarity with college and belonging, in this case a brief video, can be used effectively stating that it, "Helped first year students of color reframe and overcome negative experiences such as feeling homesick, being the only (member of their race) in class, worrying about school-related finances, and failing to make friends" (Strayhorn, 2021, p. 52). Cultivating a positive sense of belonging drives engagement with college resources, allows students to feel more comfortable establishing relationships, and helps mitigate doubts

about academic capability (Bassett, 2021; Strayhorn, 2021; Winograd & Rust, 2014). Strayhorn's (2021) findings provide promising evidence that simple yet thoughtful interventions can be applied in a manner that has significant positive impact on students in college. The findings of this study intend to inform and improve support interventions designed for SM students. Strayhorn's studies suggest that building interventions and support with regard to cultivating a sense of belonging can help facilitate the success of such students.

Gopalan and Brady (2020) were interested in identifying if students felt a sense of belonging in the spring of their first year as compared to two years later into their college careers. They were also interested to learn of any differences in feelings of sense of belonging among underrepresented minority and first-generation students and if first year belonging predicted subsequent persistence, use of campus services, and mental health. To explore their research interests, Gopalan and Brady (2020) applied regression analysis to a national Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study sample of 23,500 4-year and 2-year college student survey respondents. Their analysis revealed that belonging was positively associated with persistence, use of campus services, and mental health. Weaker sense of belonging, found to be common among underrepresented minority and first-generation students, was associated with less persistence and "underscores the importance of further understanding students' experiences of belonging on campus and the structural or institutional qualities that lead students, especially URM and FG students, to experience higher or lower levels of belonging" (Gopalan and Brady, 2020, p. 136). As a large sample longitudinal study, Gopalan and Brady's (2020) findings, particularly that of the relationship between degree of sense of belonging and the extent to which students utilized campus support services, have direct and significant relevance to this study. Gopalan and Brady also suggest that further study is necessary in this area. By looking more

closely at programs specifically designed to support SM students and the factors that influence their degree of engagement with such support, this study sought to build on Gopalan and Brady's work.

Another study directly relevant to this research is Means and Pyne (2017) case studies of ten low-income, first-generation students out of a college access program and through their first year at a medium-sized private university in the Southeast. Their research examined how college support structures may impact levels of sense of belonging among their student communities. By initiating their qualitative research with an exploration of students' experiences in a college access program, the research design uncovered the identification of a critical finding "that perceptions of sense of belonging began prior to matriculation into higher education" (Means & Pyne, 2017, p. 912). While their study was limited in its number of participants and setting (i.e., private college in the Southwest), Means and Pyne's (2017) work informed this study in relevant ways. Their findings suggest that students arrive at the university already possessing existing notions of sense of belonging and, as this study sought to uncover the best ways to engage and support students, it was critical to acknowledge this starting point in constructing and implementing support. Additionally, Means and Pyne's qualitative design yielded rich narratives of first-generation students that were instrumental in helping shape their findings. These researchers' alignment with my research interests and qualitative design served to affirm the methods I identified for this study. Scholars exploring sense of belonging in higher education have documented the ways in which the degree of sense of belonging experienced by students is shaped by how well the norms and values of SM students are reflected by the colleges they choose to attend (Chang et al., 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Means & Pyne, 2017; Strayhorn, 2017).

Holistic Support of Systemically Marginalized Students

To address the needs of SM students, many institutions direct their more traditional forms of support, things like advising and tutoring, to their communities of systemically marginalized students. Many times, these resources are structured as generic models of support that are limited in considering the intersectional complexities of student identities thereby limiting their effectiveness (Nunez, 2014; Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022) and ability to address emerging needs. Holistic models differ from traditional support services in that they extend beyond an academic lens to consider the needs of the student as a whole person (Bunnell, 2022). In acknowledging the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW, Yosso, 2005) and varied needs SM students bring with them to college, holistic models aim to address multiple dimensions of students as whole people that consider academic preparation, physical health, mental wellness, basic needs, belonging, and leadership (Bunnell, 2022; Museus & Ravello, 2021). To address these various dimensions, a review of the literature suggests an inclusive definition of "holistic support" built on the availability of multiple activities or resources that may include: tutoring; first semester or first year seminars; financial aid guidance; supplemental financial aid support (e.g., scholarships); mentoring; cultural or identity based events; leadership development; career preparation; peer-to-peer mentorship or advising; mental health counseling and/or programming; and various types of professional campus-based academic advising (Bunnell, 2022; Means & Pyne, 2017; Museus & Ravello, 2021).

Some colleges and universities apply a holistic and equity centered approach to supporting SM students by establishing targeted efforts that include resources such as an Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), First-Generation Student Resource Center, or Identity Based Cultural Center (Means & Pyne, 2017; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021; Roberts & Lucas,

2022). Challenging earlier models of student integration (Tinto, 1993), some studies have emphasized the need to validate and center students' identity and culture as a means to ease their transition to college and drive their engagement with support resources (Brooms, 2022; Means & Pyne, 2017; Museus & Qualye, 2009; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Holistic practitioners, as cultural agents, "serve as translators, mediators, and models and provide racial/ethnic minority students with knowledge about how to navigate their respective campus cultural milieus" (Museus & Qualye, 2009, p. 84). Given the complex multi-faceted needs of SM students, extant research affirms that holistic and comprehensive support, whether offered by individual programs or across multiple spaces at the university, is more effective than traditional and solely academic focused resources in supporting communities of marginalized students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Cuellar, 2015; Means & Pyne, 2017; Museus & Ravello, 2021; Nunez, 2014; Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022).

Help-Seeking Behavior of Systemically Marginalized Students

Faced with multiple challenges and, for first-generation college students, the unfamiliarity of college, SM students must make choices in seeking available assistance and help. Mansson (2016) developed an Academic Concern Scale in exploring the help-seeking behavior of 244 undergraduates at a large public university who responded to qualitative questionnaires. The study found a positive but weak association between engaging in advising and academic performance measured by grades. Yet, in rooting academic concerns and help-seeking to student's intrinsic motivation, this study also conforms to traditional institutional values of independence and resilience without exploring the institution's role regarding engagement with support (Chang et al., 2020). Mansson's study is also limited in that it did not consider factors such as race, socioeconomic, or generational status. Other studies have

approached academic help-seeking as a self-regulatory strategy related to motivation and self-efficacy (Won et al., 2021). Won et al. (2021) conducted and analyzed two online surveys of 305 students at a large public university and found low sense of belonging and self-efficacy for self-regulated learning levels among transfer and minoritized students - two factors they identified as most positively impacting help-seeking. While the study helps explain how non-academic factors may influence help-seeking behaviors among SM students, its focus on self-efficacy and self-regulation also seems to affirm institutional values of independence and resilience that are prevalent among American universities (Chang et al., 2020). These institutional norms collide with alternate values reflected in communities of SM students resulting in a "cultural mismatch" as indicated in other studies (Chang et al., 2020).

Chang et al. (2020) applied qualitative methods to interview (individually and in focus groups) 68 first-generation college students to explore how cultural norms affect their coping and help seeking at a four-year university. First-generation participants expressed independence values that mirror those of their parents and family but that are different and at odds with values of student independence and self-efficacy espoused by the university (Chang et al., 2020). The study found that the tension between institutional versus SM student values and norms created a "cultural mismatch" that, along with concerns about burdening others for help and anticipated negative perceptions about engaging in support, stifled help seeking of first-generation college students (Chang et al., 2020; Winograd & Rust, 2014). Compounding factors prevalent among first-generation college students (i.e., limited financial resources, less academic preparation, poorer quality interactions with faculty, and concerns about belongingness on campus) further negatively impacted help-seeking (Chang et al., 2020). In their articulation of implications and recommendations, Chang et al. (2020) also encourages institutions to design culturally tailored

supports for SM students. Approaching support more holistically provides an opportunity to enhance the sense of belonging of SM college students, thereby making support feel more accessible to them (Chang et al., 2020; Winograd & Rust, 2014).

Through a qualitative research study of 95 underrepresented students at a four-year university, Winograd and Rust (2014) analyzed the roles that sense of belonging, stereotype threat, and awareness of resources have on academic help-seeking. The study found that the more SM students feel like they belong, they tend to be more aware of support resources and are less hesitant to engage with them. Conversely, if students feel a weak sense of belonging, if they experience stereotype threat, and/or are not familiar with resources, they tend to not seek help. Students experiencing low sense of belonging also frequently associate stigma with pursuing help fearing that "the risk of confirming stereotypes contributes to reluctance for academic help-seeking" (Winograd & Rust, 2014, p. 32). Other research has also explored how the ways in which SM students experience and perceive their respective colleges impact their engagement with support. Bassett (2021) conducted a longitudinal qualitative study of eight first-generation students with high financial need. While the study was limited in only including eight female participants, it provided valuable insights regarding how student perceptions and relationships impact their help-seeking behavior. Through multiple in-depth semi-structured interviews, Bassett (2021) found that having negative or positive perceptions of support and familiarity with resources were key determinants in seeking or not seeking help. Additionally, the study found that, "When it came to seeking help, study participants prioritized relationships over roles" (Bassett, B. S., 2021, p. 34). The ways in which non-academic and identity/cultural factors shape the help-seeking of SM students argue for a re-envisioning of how institutions and practitioners

think about and measure success in college. It is imperative that universities also inquire about the relational and cultural factors that support students' success in college.

Definitions of Success in College

Traditional Definitions and Measures of Success in College

Historically, institutions of higher education have defined college success by utilizing various measures of academic achievement (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021) with an emphasis on grades earned by students (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019; Goegan et al., 2021; Lynam et al., 2022; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021; Yazedjian et al., 2008). Even definitions that look beyond grades still maintain a focus on academic performance-based measures. As York et al. (2015) writes in summarizing their comprehensive literature review of this area, "We define academic success as inclusive of academic achievement, attainment of learning objectives, acquisition of desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and postcollege performance" (2015, p. 5). These long-standing common institutional definitions of college success serve to amplify deficit narratives of SM students (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Furthermore, while many institutions offer programs that affirm and attempt to enable the fulfillment of historical (i.e., academic) and alternate (i.e., co-curricular and/or student- defined) definitions of success, non-academic interpretations of success are typically seen as less important by the institution and by many students themselves (Yazedjian et al., 2008).

When institutions frame success along the dominant concepts of retention, degree completion, grades, and employability, SM students' self-authored notions of success become invisible (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019; Lynam et al., 2022; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). As a result, SM students may have a more difficult time seeing themselves as capable of succeeding in

college when their alternate definitions of success are not reflected in the language of the colleges they attend (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019).

Student Authored Definitions of College Success

College students' own definitions of success, particularly those from members of minoritized groups, vary widely and are often highly individualized (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Ramos and Sifuentez (2021) found that SM students may perceive success for themselves in various types of non-academic accomplishments such as navigating financial hardships, expanding their support network, or when they are able to make their institutions better for fellow students through leadership roles they may hold and/or by becoming involved in higher education admissions and access work. SM students also often define college success as a communal versus individual achievement, employing alternate measures such as degrees of social integration of marginalized student groups or how well they feel their institution honors or reflects their respective funds of knowledge (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021; Yazedjian et al., 2008). Goegan et al. (2021) use an Expectancy Value Theory lens to explore self-definitions of student success, finding that higher education educators and practitioners can "set up students for success" by including their voices in academic content and framing success in non-traditional ways (Goegan et al., 2021; Lynam et al., 2022). Making space for students' self-authored definitions of their success in college also helps practitioners identify and acknowledge other non-traditional measures of achievement of critical importance to SM students such a growth in the sense of empowerment they feel and changes in their academic self-concept (Cuellar, 2015).

Current research (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019; Goegan et al., 2021; Lynam et al., 2022; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021; Yazedjian et al., 2008) is limited in that there is little exploration of how institutions take students' own definitions of college success and utilize them to shape

actionable strategies, support practices, and interventions. Additionally, new research provides an opportunity to focus on subgroups of SM students such as high achieving students who attend competitive four-year tier one universities. To explore these gaps, recent research in this area (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019; Goegan et al., 2021; Lynam et al., 2022; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021; Yazedjian et al., 2008) argues for the use of qualitative methods in further study to facilitate the inclusion of student voice and their more inclusive definitions of college success.

In aiming to help improve and increase the ways SM students engage with support resources that can help them achieve success in college, it was imperative that this study acknowledge the complexity and richness of experience and identities SM students bring as individual people and members of marginalized groups. By learning about the meaning students' make regarding their college experiences, the focal onus of this research is on the institution and the support programs/interventions they make available to students.

Theoretical Frameworks

The dynamic interplay between the experiences of individual SM students and the colleges they attend can be understood by three theoretical frameworks that undergird my research. Community Cultural Wealth (CCW, Yosso, 2005) is essential in capturing the many strengths, values, and capital SM students bring with them to college while Cultural Mismatch Theory (Stephens et al., 2012) helps elucidate how the collision between the individual and the institution shapes student experience and success. As a container for both Community Cultural Wealth and Cultural Mismatch Theory, the Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE, Hurtado, et. al., 2012) is a comprehensive framework that enables us to better understand the educational experiences and outcomes for non-traditional and diverse college students as shaped by multiple, dynamic contexts. While it is imperative to understand

SM students and how they experience college, my aim was to challenge universities and programs to improve the ways in which they support students while increasing their engagement of SM students in critical support resources. Instead of narrowly focusing on the resilience and self-efficacy of students that they leverage to facilitate their success, the results and findings of my study call on colleges and universities to develop and improve the ways they intentionally engage and support communities of SM students.

Community Cultural Wealth

In her seminal piece "Who's Culture Has Capital," Tara Yosso (2005) offers a conceptualization of Community Cultural Wealth to challenge traditional notions of cultural capital. Intended to debunk deficit-based articulations of minoritized and students of color from a Critical Race Theory lens, Community Cultural Wealth is defined as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Yosso (2005) outlines six forms of capital (i.e., aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital) that serve as assets to help students of color navigate and succeed in college, even though they have historically rarely been acknowledged or recognized by higher education institutions.

Acevedo and Solorzano (2021) reviewed existing research on Community Cultural Wealth to understand how it is activated and mobilized during the college experience. They were also interested in identifying and learning more about types of capital not included in Yosso's conceptualization of Community Cultural Wealth. In their review, they "illustrate the potential to use CCW as a protective factor from the everyday risk factors of interpersonal and structural racism and marginalization" (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021, p. 12) and acknowledge that more study is needed to better understand how Community Cultural Wealth assists marginalized

students in navigating environments of microaggressions and structural racism. Adsitt (2017) explored Community Cultural Wealth with regard to how race, gender and socio-economic status intersects with first-generation status in navigating a PWI. Adsitt employed a qualitative study involving interviews of 19 first-generation college students from three colleges across the Northeast. The study was limited in the type of institution and the high number of female participants included in the study. Adsitt initially sought to uncover more about how gender may impact first-generation experiences yet 15 of the 19 participants were female and none were reported to represent any other gender identity. Yet, through the rich narrative responses offered by participants, Adsitt documents the emotional toll and dynamic associated with employing multiple aspects of Community Cultural Wealth. In asserting that "This study documents the emotion work that first-generation college students took on as they negotiated their social mobility and its impact on their relationships with family and community members" (Adsitt, 2017, p. 211), Adsitt proposes that the Community Cultural Wealth model could be expanded to include "resilient capital" as another form of capital that acknowledges the dynamics of the emotional work first-generation students experience as they navigate college. This existing research significantly contributes to this study's areas of interest in proposing that we can reconsider and reshape how we think about students' Community Cultural Wealth (Adsitt, 2017; Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021) and by acknowledging that students' college journeys are both academic and emotional experiences (Adsitt, 2017).

Luna and Martinez (2013) found that the Community Cultural Wealth that Latinx students brought to their college experiences was not widely valued by the institution yet still functioned as a support resource and motivator for the participants of the study. Similarly, by conducting semi-structured interviews with 34 Latinx and Asian American first-generation

students, Covarrubias et al. (2018) found that students enact either soft (e.g., self-expression) or hard (e.g., self-reliance) forms of independence as they experience college. These various forms of independence are sources of strength for first-generation students yet, when they are not recognized, “universities may be reinforcing deficit narratives of FG students, such as misconstruing self-reliant behavior as a lack of motivation to seek help” (Covarrubias et al., 2018, p. 403). Extant research also affirms how students’ Community Cultural Wealth cultivates values of equity and a strong desire to make things better for their communities. As one example, Luna and Martinez share that "Latino college students used Community Cultural Wealth as a tool to move toward social justice through educational achievement" (2013, p. 11). Luna and Martinez (2013) and other scholars have documented how SM students leverage their Community Cultural Wealth as a source of strength, motivation, and resilience (Adsitt, 2017; Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Covarrubias et al., 2018; Cuellar, 2015; Yosso, 2005).

In seeking to better understand help-seeking behavior and self-concepts of success of SM students, this study was interested in how the Community Cultural Wealth that SM students bring to their college experience may clash with existing institutional norms or be minimized by colleges and their student support structures. This “cultural mismatch” may impede the ability for SM students to cultivate a strong sense of belonging in college and attain personal and institutional concepts of success.

Cultural Mismatch Theory

In defining a proposed Cultural Mismatch Theory, Stephens et al., (2012) suggests three claims that undergird the concept:

1. The theory claims that American university culture reflects the middle-class norms of independence that are foundational to American society.

2. The theory claims that the effect of the university culture's focus on independence depends on the implicit cultural frameworks or models of self that individual students bring with them to college.
3. The theory claims that a cultural match or mismatch affects students' performance by influencing students' perception of the setting and construal of tasks required of them in that setting.

To test this theory, Stephens et al., (2012) conducted multiple studies as part of their research, including analysis of surveys, longitudinal data, and experiments. Participants included a large group of school administrators (n=380) from across the top 50 national universities and the top 25 liberal arts colleges in the country and over 1,500 undergraduates from a private university. The responses of administrators revealed that universities predominantly prioritize the value of independence over interdependence as a deeply rooted institutional norm - a finding further affirmed by later studies (Chang et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020; Won et al., 2021). By analyzing data resulting from three quantitative surveys of 1893 total students from two four-year universities, including two longitudinal surveys administered three years apart, Phillips et al. (2020) documented the enduring nature of how the culture of independence embraced by institutions of higher education clashes with interdependent values and norms represented by communities of SM students stating that the, "Initial cultural mismatch sets students up on divergent trajectories that may become self-reinforcing over time, perhaps through daily cognitions, experiences, and interactions" (Phillips et al., 2020, p. 1125). Taken together, existing research is strongly aligned in suggesting that a harmful cultural mismatch between the values and norms of the institution versus those of SM students prevails across American colleges and universities (Chang et al., 2020; Covarrubias et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2020; Winograd & Rust,

2014; Won et al., 2021). Considering together the multiple aspects of SM student identities such as race and generational status adds additional dimensions of complexity to cultural mismatch.

Nguyen and Nguyen (2020) explored the dimension of race and its relation to cultural mismatch by applying a social constructivist approach in conducting semi-structured 60-minute interviews of nine Cambodian students from a four-year research university. In their analysis, Nguyen and Nguyen (2020) suggest that each component of an individual student's identity may serve as a point of misalignment with the institution thereby magnifying feelings of isolation and lack of belonging. While their study was limited to only nine participants from one ethnic group, their findings suggest future study should pay close attention to the intersectionality of student identities and the role it plays in cultural mismatch and their overall college experiences. To address and minimize the impact of cultural mismatch, Nguyen and Nguyen (2020) also suggest that institutions can encourage participation in student organizations, support an interdependent culture among students, and find other ways to empower students to shape their college experiences and success. In this way, the cultural norms, values, and capital SM students bring to the university may be reframed, in contrast to the traditional institutional perspective, as assets - a vast cultural wealth that may serve as a source of strength and affirmation (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Adsitt, 2017; Covarrubias et al., 2018; Cuellar, 2015; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020; Yosso, 2005).

Not all existing research that has explored the values and norms of students and universities regards the institution's strong emphasis on values of independence as harmful. In a complex study of 798 undergraduates at a large public midwestern university, Tibbets et al. (2016) builds on an earlier study (Harackiewicz, et al., 2014) of value affirmation and its influence on first-generation college students. Their three-tiered study included regression

analysis of survey responses and thematic coding of participant writing. Tibbets et al. (2016) explored how a value affirming intervention may impact feelings of belonging and cultural fit among first-generation students. While acknowledging other studies that have identified universities' focus on values of independence and resilience as contributing to the othering and lower sense of belonging felt among communities of marginalized students, the researchers found that "By reflecting on the personal importance of independence, FG students may counteract the effects of cultural mismatch by activating an identity that is more congruent with the university culture, resulting in increased motivation, stronger perceptions of academic fit, and ultimately, better academic performance" (Tibbets et al., 2016, p. 11). Tibbets et al.'s work, while diverging from widely established finding that a deeply embedded culture of independence creates a mismatch that is harmful to SM students (Chang et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020; Winograd & Rust, 2014; Won et al., 2021), makes an important contribution to this study. Their work suggests that feelings of cultural mismatch can dissipate over time (Tibbets et al., 2016) and provides further evidence that intentional and simple support interventions have the ability to help SM students identify where their values and norms align with those of the institution in a manner that bolsters sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2017; Tibbets et al., 2016).

Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments

The Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE, Hurtado et al., 2012) is a comprehensive framework designed to enhance understanding and facilitate the improvement of educational outcomes in colleges and universities, particularly focusing on non-traditional and diverse student populations. The model integrates several theories and frameworks:

1. **Social Identity Theory** (Tajfel, 1974) undergirds the MMDLE by focusing on the centrality of diverse students' identities, emphasizing how these identities interact within the educational environment. It suggests that acknowledging and supporting these identities in educational settings can improve educational outcomes.
2. **Ecological Systems Theory** (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) helps articulate how various environmental systems (e.g., microsystems like classrooms, mesosystems involving interactions of different microsystems, and macrosystems like broader socio-political contexts) interact and influence student identity and development.
3. **Critical Race Theory** (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and related social justice frameworks are instrumental in the MMDLE for addressing the dynamics of power, privilege, and inequality within educational institutions. They provide a basis for examining how institutional practices can perpetuate disparities and what changes are needed to foster belonging and equitable outcomes.

Informed by these theories, the MMDLE emphasizes the importance of multiple contexts (i.e., socio-historical; policy, institutional; campus climate; and community context and external commitments) that collectively impact student experiences and learning. These include immediate learning environments, such as classrooms and student groups, as well as broader societal and policy influences that shape educational practices and philosophies. The MMDLE is multifaceted, centering the student in aiming to provide a deep and nuanced understanding of how various elements of the educational environment interact to influence student sense of belonging, learning, and development.

The MMDLE illustrates the complexity of "an institution's role in producing social transformation or the reproduction of inequality," (Hurtado et. al., 2012). Specifically, the model

addresses the need for institutions and its various actors (e.g., administrators, faculty, and student support staff) to consider the diverse identities of students—such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and more - in creating educational strategies that promote inclusivity and equity. By doing so, it seeks to foster a supportive campus climate that enhances both academic and social outcomes for all students. The model advocates for curricular and co-curricular practices that are sensitive to and affirming of these identities, thereby helping to instill a sense of belonging among students. This approach not only aids in retention and academic success but also prepares students to operate effectively in a multicultural world. Ultimately, the MMDLE serves as a dynamic tool for institutions aiming to adapt to and reflect the diversity of their students while promoting educational equity and transformative learning experiences.

Conceptual Framework

The visual depicted in Figure 1 connects the relevant and interconnected theoretical frameworks that inform this study. SM students bring their unique identities, values, and CCW (Yosso, 2005) to their college journeys, including existing feelings of belonging or not belonging that existed prior to attending college (Means & Pyne, 2017). In the university setting, alignment of students' individual values with institutional norms and inclusive ways of defining success increase sense of belonging, familiarity with resources, and engagement with support services, which in turn enhance the ability for students to attain success (Chang et al., 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Means & Pyne, 2017; Strayhorn, 2017). Conversely, when students' norms and values clash with those of the university, or when their expanded concepts of success are not reflected or affirmed by the institution, feelings of cultural mismatch negatively impact their help-seeking behavior and sense of belonging (Chang et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020; Winograd & Rust, 2014; Won et al., 2021). Reflecting the Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning

Environments (Hurtado et al., 2012), this conceptual framework also acknowledges the multiple contexts and forces that impact the help-seeking behavior and success of SM students. The conceptual model constructed for this study captures multiple dynamic frameworks as they operate concurrently while students navigate resources and campuses that may or may not feel welcoming to them. Rooted in this conceptual model, this study contributes to existing understanding, documented by recent studies (Strayhorn, 2021; Tibbets et al., 2016), regarding how intentional interventions and support can ameliorate feelings of cultural mismatch, align values of the self with those of the institution, and help students feel successful in different ways.

Figure 1

Conceptualized Model of Engagement with Support and Success in College (Ledesma, 2024)

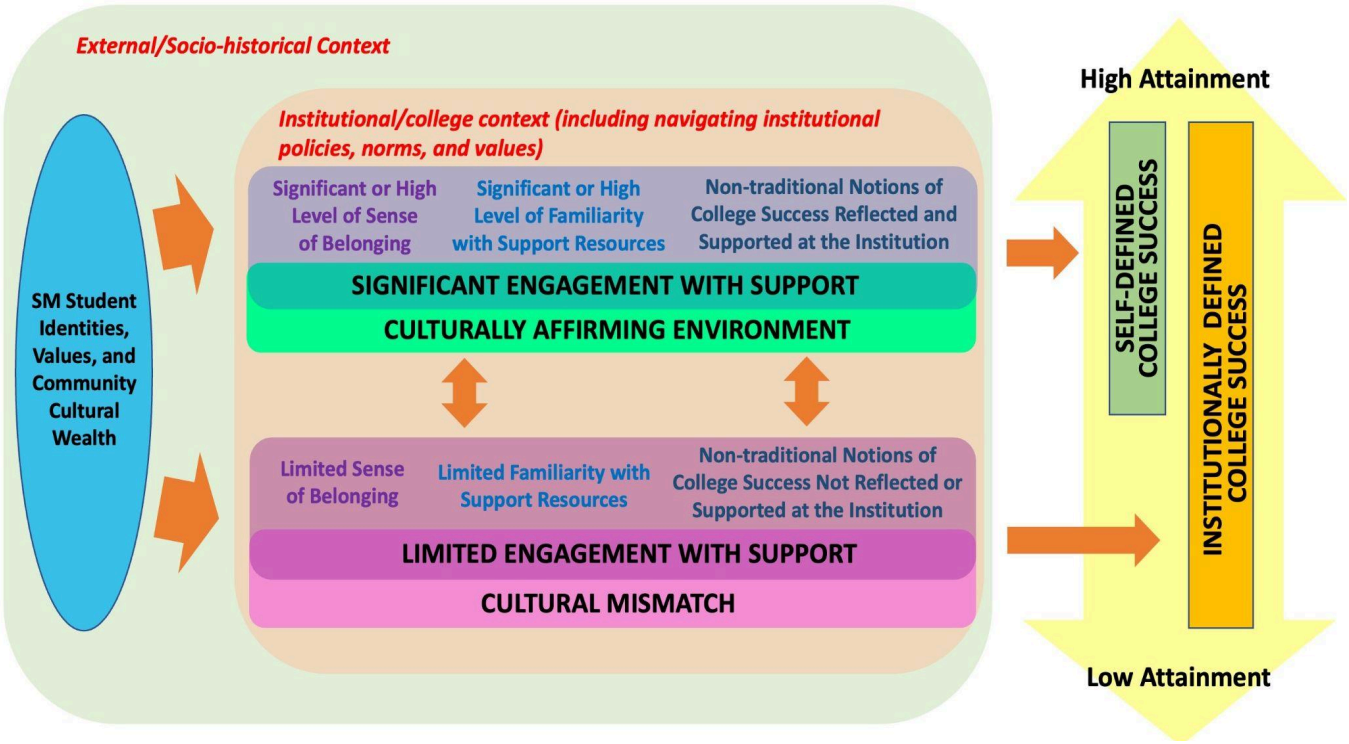

Figure 1 depicts a *Conceptualized Model of Engagement with Support and Success in College* (Ledesma, 2024) that illustrates the relationship between student engagement with institutional support and its theorized impact on attainment of success in college for SM students.

Framed by three key theories, Community Cultural Wealth (CCW, Yosso, 2005), Cultural Mismatch Theory (Stephens et. al., 2012), and the Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE, Hurtado et. al., 2012), the framework integrates the influences from the external socio-historical context, which includes the varied identities, values, and community cultural wealth students bring into the college setting. The external layer influences how students perceive and interact within the institutional context, which is defined by the college's policies, norms, values, and available support resources.

The framework outlines a spectrum of the college experience that is shaped by the level of student engagement with institutional resources and support. On one end, environments where there is significant engagement with support, the model identifies a culturally affirming atmosphere where students feel a strong sense of belonging, are familiar with available support resources, and where non-traditional notions of success are recognized and supported by the institution. This scenario leads to high attainment of success in college as students are able to align their personal definitions of success with those recognized institutionally. On the other end of the spectrum, the model depicts a cultural mismatch scenario characterized by limited engagement with support. In such environments, students experience a reduced sense of belonging and have limited familiarity with support resources. Additionally, their personal and community-derived notions of success are not supported by institutional structures. This lack of support and recognition impedes students' ability to experience success in college, as the alignment between student values and institutional norms is minimal.

This conceptual framework summarizes the dynamic interplay between individual student experiences and institutional environments. It underscores the importance of institutions developing supportive, inclusive environments that recognize and leverage the diverse cultural

capital that students bring to their educational journeys. This approach can facilitate better alignment between student expectations and institutional offerings, leading to increased engagement with support resources and success in college for marginalized students.

Conclusion

The landscape of higher education in the United States, particularly for SM students, is marked by persistent inequities in access, retention, and academic achievement (Ahlman & Cochrane, 2019; Cahalan et al., 2022). These disparities have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Molock & Parchem, 2022), rising college costs (Goldrick-Rab & Steinbaum, 2020; Jimenez & Glater, 2020), and an anti-DEI political climate (Cliburn, 2023) that has hindered diversity and equity efforts (Kelderman, 2023). The conservative shift in the Supreme Court has resulted in setbacks to affirmative action and college debt forgiveness (*Biden, President of the United States, et al., v. Nebraska, et al.,* 2023; *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc, v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*; *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc, v. University of North Carolina*, 2023), creating an even more exclusionary environment for SM students. In California, the increasing Latinx population has helped universities like UC Berkeley make strides in becoming Hispanic Serving Institutions (Excelencia in Education, 2022; Reddy & Siqueiros, 2021; UC Hispanic-Serving Institutions Initiative, 2018), underscoring the importance of creating comprehensive and targeted support resources for SM students as their presence in colleges continues to grow (Cuellar, 2015; Garcia, et al., 2019).

SM students typically experience multiple and different challenges in college that may impede their ability to engage with support resources (Chang et al., 2020; Winograd & Rust, 2014). Multiple studies have identified the importance of sense of belonging in promoting help-seeking and other positive behavior among SM students (Bassett, 2021; Strayhorn, 2021;

Winograd & Rust, 2014). Additionally, four-year universities such as UC Berkeley often value and expect students to exhibit independence and resilience (Chang et al., 2020). These traditional institutional values collide with collective/communal notions of success often represented by populations of SM students. The resulting "cultural mismatch" may serve to establish a hesitancy or stigma associated with seeking help and engaging with support services (Bassett, 2021; Chang et al., 2020) and makes it difficult for institutions to expand and re-conceptualize definitions of college success. Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), Cultural Mismatch Theory (Stephens et al., 2012), and the Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE, Hurtado et al., 2012) serve as insightful and effective frameworks to help better understand the experiences of SM students in higher education including how they choose to engage support resources, feel most supported, and define success in college for themselves.

My study explored the clash between the cultural wealth and values of SM students and traditional individualistic values of the University (Chang et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020; Winograd & Rust, 2014) and its impact on seeking support, engaging with resources, and the recognition of and ability to attain expanded inclusive definitions of success in college for SM students. Study findings should be used to help practitioners improve the ways they cultivate sense of belonging that drives engagement with resources and enables success in the many ways it is perceived by SM students.

Chapter 3

METHODS

Research Design

This study applied a qualitative approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013) to explore the factors that influence the engagement of systemically marginalized students with support services offered by the Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3) at UC Berkeley. These qualitative methods also helped explore SM student perceptions of the value of support and the ways in which they define success in college for themselves. A qualitative approach was selected to best capture important themes, issues, or findings relevant to the study that may have not been initially considered (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Semi-structured interviews were utilized for data collection as they allow the researcher to pivot towards emerging issues or themes uncovered in the course of completing interviews (Bhattacharya, 2017). Inductive analysis via thematic coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013) was applied to yield several overall themes and findings.

This study focused on student users of the programs available as part of Berkeley's Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3). This research sought to better understand help seeking behavior among high performing SM students at top tier universities, their perceptions of the value of support, and to identify more inclusive concepts of student success in college. This study was built on three central research questions: What factors influence UC Berkeley students' engagement with Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3) support programs? What are systemically marginalized students' perceptions of the value of CE3 programs and services? In what ways do systemically marginalized students at UC Berkeley define success in college for themselves?

To address the specific research questions, continuing UC Berkeley students who identified as being part of one or more SM communities and had participated in at least one CE3 program were included in the study. These criteria sought to identify students who could: 1) Speak to the experience of being a Berkeley student, in this case for at least a year, and 2) Share their thought process regarding their decisions to seek support from a CE3 program and their perceived value of the help they received. Non-SM and non-participants of CE3 programs were not included in interviews. Collecting data via semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to capture the unique student narratives and individual voices (Bhattacharya, 2017; Maxwell, 2012) of CE3 students - both essential elements in articulating help-seeking habits, perceptions of the value of support received, and their self-definitions of success.

Setting

UC Berkeley (UCB) is one of ten campuses within the University of California system. UCB offers over 350 degree programs across multiple colleges and schools. As a large research university, UCB enrolls over 40,000 students yearly (31,814 undergraduates and 13,243 graduate students in 2021/2022) with significant percentages of ethnic minority, high financial need, and transfer students. At UCB, 23% of undergraduates are considered ethnic minorities, 26% of undergraduates qualify for federal Pell Grants, and 26% of new undergraduates are transfer students. As the flagship campus of the University of California public university system, admission to UCB is highly competitive with a 13.3% undergraduate admission acceptance rate in 2022.

Student participants that had engaged with support provided by UCB's Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3) were invited to participate in this study. Comprising multiple distinct programs, CE3 offers a holistic array of college guidance programs,

supplemental aid, comprehensive counseling, and scholarships to support former foster youth, veterans, student parents, undocumented students, and transfer students of all ages and life experiences. CE3 aims to ensure that the most vulnerable students achieve their potential at the number one public university in the world. They connect SM students in need with critical resources — from holistic academic guidance, scholarships, mentoring, and career preparation to nutrition and childcare support. The CE3 umbrella of programs include Berkeley Hope Scholars; the Cal Veteran Services Center; the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP); the Miller Scholars Program; Re-Entry Student Program; the Student Parent Center; Student Support Services (TRIO SSS); Student Support Services STEM (SSS STEM); the Transfer Student Center; and the Undocumented Student Program.

Participants

Participants were defined as an EOP student (first-generation, low-income, and historically underrepresented) that had completed at least one year at Berkeley and who had engaged in at least one CE3 program in the 2022/2023 academic year. EOP is the largest program in CE3 and has the most eligible students. Additionally, beyond identifying as first-generation, low-income, or historically underrepresented, many EOP students commonly meet the criteria of other CE3 programs (e.g. EOP transfer students with the Transfer Student Center, EOP student parents with the Student Parent Center, etc.). Focusing on EOP students provided a robust pool of students that was representative of the various identities and characteristics among systemically marginalized students and CE3 participants at UCB. Since this study was focused on students' experiences at UC Berkeley, the sample included students who had completed at least one year at the institution (including both frosh entry and transfer students).

A total of 987 currently enrolled students[3] had completed at least one year at Berkeley and were served by at least one CE3 program in 2022/2023. Of this total, 52% utilized services one or two times in the past academic year (defined as low frequency users) with the remaining 48% having engaged in support three or more times (defined as moderate to high frequency users) during that year. I randomly identified 50 students from each group (i.e., a. low frequency users and b. moderate and high frequency users) and emailed those total 100 students with an invite to complete a demographic survey that signaled their interest in participating in the study. From the email respondents, twenty students completed the survey and ten were purposely selected (Maxwell, 2012) to ensure representation across student characteristics such as race, age, gender identity, and frequency of engagement with services. This purposeful sampling strategy intended to represent the diversity of the student population and allow for the ability to uncover any similarities or differences expressed by low frequency users versus moderate/high frequency users of support services. As an incentive, participants were offered a $40 electronic gift card for completing an interview.

Data Collection

I conducted individual one-hour semi-structured interviews (Bhattacharya, 2017) with ten identified participants. One-on-one interviews provide a great deal of data that helps the researcher better understand what is being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and the individual experiences of participants. Applying the semi-structured interview method was best suited for this research in that it allowed me to maintain a flexible structure where I was able to probe deeper into the insights that students shared in the course of interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed me as a researcher to pivot towards significant themes uncovered by student participants (Bhattacharya, 2017) as my study unfolded. The initial set of questions focused on

[3] *"Currently enrolled" defined as being enrolled in the Spring 2024 semester.*

three general areas: 1) Asking participants about how and why they decide to engage with CE3 support services; 2) Asking participants about their perceptions of the value of CE3 support; and 3) Asking students how they define success in college for themselves. All but one of the interviews were completed and recorded via Zoom. One in-person interview was captured via audio recorder.

The interview protocol began with a statement to confirm participants' understanding of the research intentions, how their contributions would be utilized, and to affirm confidentiality and anonymity. The list of questions included 15 interview questions that explored each research area. Since the expectations of CE3 participants and their experiences with its programs are as wide and varied as the CE3 community itself, the methods I applied aligned with my research questions in allowing flexibility during the course of conducting this study. I anticipated that my study had the potential to develop in a number of directions depending on the responses of interview participants. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were well suited for this anticipated adaptability (Maxwell, 2012).

Analysis

After transcribing each completed interview, I engaged in inductive analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017) with a first pass of coding, utilizing the Atlas.ti platform, to identify categories. I also completed analytic memos (Bhattacharya, 2017) to collect my thoughts and reflections regarding each interview after each concluded. The codes, categories, and memos that arose from my completed interviews were used to inform adaptations to subsequent interviews with participants. After completing the transcriptions and initial open coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) of all interviews, I placed all coded data onto a table to enable the next stage of analysis, preliminarily mapping emerging themes. From here, I conducted a second pass of

coding by theoretical frameworks relevant to my study and a third coding pass by research questions. The final analysis consisted of axial coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to identify final themes and overall findings. I also conducted member checks (Maxwell, 2012) with interview participants. The study includes rich narrative quotes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) that highlight overarching themes and findings.

Positionality

Centered in racial and cultural awareness, Milner's (2007) articulation of seen, unseen, and unforeseen dangers for researchers serves as my foundational understanding of my positionality as I myself experienced UC Berkeley as a SM student. Today, in serving as the executive director of the Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3) at Berkeley, I bring my age, social justice values, identity as a Chicano cis gender male, experiences in the American education system, and other components of my identity to my everyday work. These same components, along with an intentional practice of locating self, are the basis of my positionality as a researcher. I understand my positionality to be an asset to my professional work, research, and leadership (Milner, 2007).

Most of the programs under the CE3 umbrella were created or significantly developed during my career. Additionally, given my experience as both a Berkeley student and student peer advisor in EOP, I have experienced every level of our programs (from student participant, to student employee, to executive director). This familiarity with the inner workings of holistic equity centered support and the experiences of systemically marginalized college students serve as an advantage for me as a researcher. Yet, as the executive director of CE3, I did think significantly about reflexivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I worried about how my status as the lead administrator of the programs I am studying would impact the research setting and

participants. I also knew that, because my role is several tiers removed from front line student support, students would likely not know who I was, what I do, or that I was connected with the individual programs they most identified with. I emphasized to participants that my role in the study was as an internal researcher who was focused on learning about participants' genuine experiences. The experience I possess at every level of our organization strengthened my work as a researcher. I have also seen the many ways students succeed in college and how these various types of success are not captured by traditional metrics and data. While I typically acknowledge my positionality as an asset, the issues, work, and communities of students I am interested in researching are deeply personal to me. As such, I was very intentional in integrating processes and protocols that ensured the trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) of this study.

Trustworthiness

To mitigate bias and promote trustworthiness, I relied on respondent validation (Maxwell, 2012) via member checks. After each interview concluded, I shared transcripts with participants to ensure they aligned to what they intended to share (interviewees were given two weeks to respond). I incorporated corrections and feedback into my ongoing data collection. Additionally, I engaged in peer review (Burnard et al., 2008) with a seasoned higher education equity leader/practitioner at UCB. I shared analytic memos, notes, and first pass coding with this colleague.

Limitations

My study focused on a small group of students from one large and very selective four-year research institution. The participants may have possessed aspects of identity (i.e., gender, ableness, and neurodiversity as a few examples) that have also been systemically marginalized in higher education. These components of identity were not included within the

scope of this study yet they may factor into the help-seeking behavior of students and the ways they think about success in college. This limits the transferability of my research. Additionally, having students self-select into participation may have introduced some degree of bias. Those students who agreed to participate may disproportionately represent positive experiences with CE3 while those who did not express interest in being interviewed may have had negative experiences or perceptions of the organization. Finally, while it is acknowledged that the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted and changed the ways in which students experience college, including shaping the experiences of participants, this study did not explicitly dive deeply into questions about how the onset of the pandemic had influenced support seeking of SM students and their self-definitions of college success.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS

This chapter presents key findings from the data collected via semi-structured interviews with ten systemically marginalized (SM) students pursuing undergraduate degrees at UC Berkeley. This study attempted to better understand the experiences and engagement of SM students with campus-based support resources, their perceptions of the impact of the support received, and the various ways they define success in college through three research questions:

1. What factors influence UC Berkeley students' engagement with Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3) support programs?
2. What are systemically marginalized students' perceptions of the value of CE3 programs and services?
3. In what ways do systemically marginalized students at UC Berkeley define success in college for themselves?

This chapter presents an overview of the interview participants and study findings, including emergent themes, derived from student interview responses.

Interview Participants

The ten interview participants represented unique life experiences, identities, and paths to Berkeley. All identified as first-generation, low-income, and Latinx undergraduates. The interview participants represented a mix of low and high frequency users of Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3) programs and services. While their degree of usage was a factor considered in purposefully sampling this group, being a low or high frequency user of CE3 support programs did not surface significantly in my analysis of the data.

Student Interview Participant Summaries (by pseudonym)

Luz is a 23 year old transfer student English major in her senior year at Berkeley. She identifies as a Latina, first-generation college, low-income student. Originally from East Los Angeles, Luz describes herself as cynical and says she does not trust UC Berkeley. She believes all support programs, regardless of their intentions, are just an extension of the university. She volunteers at the East Bay Covenant, which is a nonprofit sanctuary that provides free legal service to refugees and immigrants. Luz explains that the East Bay Covenant is the space where she has felt most affirmed and fulfilled during her time at Berkeley.

Flor is a 19 year old sophomore from an immigrant community in Santa Maria, California. She identifies as a Latina, first-generation college, low-income student. The eldest of five, she was raised primarily by her mother after the traumatic split of her parents when she was in elementary school. She describes this time as the toughest period of her life and her pursuit of a college degree is motivated by her commitment to never experience something like that again. Pursuing a Political Science major, Flor is involved with student government and aims to be a role model for her younger siblings.

Cesar is a 38 year old transfer student who immigrated to San Francisco from Guatemala in the 1980's. A first-generation, low-income, undocumented student, Cesar worked as a manager at several bars before pursuing a college degree. While he believes universities were built for white people, he also acknowledges that he has always wanted to attend UC Berkeley. Cesar is in his senior year and aspires to earn a master's degree or possibly attend law school after graduating from Berkeley.

Juana is a 20 year old Spanish and Global Studies double major who entered UC Berkeley from high school. Born and raised in Bakersfield, Juana is the daughter of undocumented Mexican immigrants. She identifies as a Latina, first-generation college,

low-income student and credits a migrant outreach program with helping get her to Berkeley. Being able to leave Southern California was a big reason she chose UC Berkeley. Juana is actively involved in Latinx based student organizations, primarily Hermanas Unidas and OaxaCal.

Cristian is a 24 year old transfer student in his senior year majoring in Integrative Biology who immigrated to the United States from Mexico at the age of two. With his family relocating multiple times to follow his father's various jobs as a roofer, laborer, and field worker, Cristian has lived across several areas in California starting with San Ysidro, then Oceanside, and then the Central Coast. He identifies as a Latino, first-generation college, low-income, undocumented student. Cristian aspires to attend dental school.

Martin is a 55 year old transfer student from Los Angeles pursuing a Sociology major. He identifies as a Latino, first-generation college, low-income, former addict, formerly incarcerated, and alumni of foster care students. After spending 13 years in prison, Martin worked for several years working as an unlicensed mechanic. He initially enrolled in community college to pursue automotive technology certifications. He credits the support programs and counselors at his community college with helping him navigate his initial experiences with higher education and nudging him to complete an associate's degree and a transfer to a four year university. Martin was admitted into four UCs and cites moving closer to his estranged 81 year old father (who lives in East Palo Alto) as one factor for choosing Berkeley.

Camila is a 21 year old senior who was admitted to UC Berkeley from high school who describes herself as an introvert. She is pursuing a degree in Mechanical Engineering and describes the academic culture at Berkeley as being "cutthroat." The eldest of three sisters from Mexican Immigrant parents, she grew up near Merced and was pressured by her parents to attend

UC Merced instead of Berkeley. She identifies as a Latina, first-generation college, low-income student and reports that she frequently experiences significant anxiety that impacts her well-being.

Marisol is a 23 year old transfer student in her senior year completing an undergraduate degree in Business Administration. The eldest of four siblings, Marisol was born in Mexico but grew up in Pacoima. Raised by a single mother, Marisol identifies as a Latina, first-generation college, low-income student. Before attending UC Berkeley, she reports having a job in business where she was the only Latina and had to routinely work 80 hours a week. She calls this the most stressful period of her life.

Berenice is a 20 year old senior who was admitted to UC Berkeley from high school and is now completing her undergraduate degree in Bioengineering. She applied to Berkeley as her "reach" school and, prior to being admitted, says she did not know where the city of Berkeley was and had never visited Northern California. As a toddler, remembers spending early life on a ranch in Mexico before moving to Compton where she lived until her family settled in Inglewood. Berenice identifies as a Latina, first-generation college, low-income student. She reports that her high school was very small and this made it challenging to transition to the large and complex institution that is UC Berkeley.

Nicolas is a 22 year old senior who was admitted to UC Berkeley from high school and is now completing his Legal Studies major. He identifies as a Latino, first-generation college, low-income, undocumented, and transgender student. Nicolas grew up in Compton after his family immigrated to the United States from Mexico when he was four. In pursuing college, he says he was looking for an institution that provided robust support for undocumented and transgender students. This, and the fact that he wanted to put as much distance between himself

and his family after coming out as trans, are the primary factors that led him to choose Berkeley. Nicolas began his physical transition during his time at Berkeley and has noticed how some have treated him differently because of it.

Overview of Themes

Initial coding of interview transcripts yielded 57 different code categories. Final analysis of the interviews revealed several key overarching themes that described how students navigate and engage support resources, their perceptions of the value of this support (particularly as it relates to feelings of belonging), and the various ways they define success in college for themselves. Overarching themes coalesced into three areas:

1. Challenges and systemic barriers.
2. Need for and value of support.
3. Success and belonging.

Theme one, challenges and systemic barriers, highlights students perceived inadequacy of institutional support from the university, student feelings of not belonging, and socioeconomic challenges as significant obstacles to student success. The second theme, need for and value of support, emphasized the importance of identity-representative spaces offering emotional support and understanding, a critique of UCB's lack of representation and impersonal advising, and the high value SM students place on CE3 programs for their empathy and effective, comprehensive guidance. Theme three, success and belonging, articulates how success and belonging stem from community support, identity affirmation, inclusive resources, and empowering guidance that recognizes student's unique backgrounds as strengths. The third theme reflects expanding definitions of success in college in non-academic terms (as opposed to definitions aligned to academic measures) as most prominent among interview participants. Overall, the three themes

reflected the significance students placed on community-centered support, the importance of inclusive representation, the need for access to dedicated resources, opportunities for engagement and empowerment, and the value of students' cultural wisdom in navigating institutional challenges and financial struggles.

Theme One: Challenges and Systemic Barriers

In many of the interviews, students described multiple challenges and systemic barriers, including an inadequacy of institutional support within the university, skepticism towards the university's commitment to diversity and genuine support for marginalized groups. Their critiques identify a disparity between the institution's publicized values of student activism and diversity, and the actual implementation of policies and systems that affect marginalized groups. They also described how these challenges often lead to them feeling othered or out of place at the institution. Students also acknowledged socioeconomic factors, like the need for robust financial aid and struggles to address their basic needs, as major challenges to their success in college. For most interview participants, the challenges and systemic barriers they faced at Berkeley contributed to their decisions to seek support from CE3 and other resources. In naming the challenges and systemic barriers they faced at Berkeley and how they contributed to them seeking support from CE3, students directly addressed the study's first research question.

Theme 1.1: Institutional Experiences and Challenges

Students described frustration and disillusionment with the institutional challenges they faced at UC Berkeley. They described a dissonance between the university's public commitments to diversity, inclusion, and student support and their actual experiences. As a student involved in social justice activism, Nicolas described experiencing UCB very differently from an institution that purports to support values-based organizing and activism. He shared:

> Like you're (UCB) rooted around student organizing, and a lot of the representation that you guys have put out and advertised has been around this activism. But when it happens, there's a response that is completely different from the policies and things that you say you're about. So, I think that has been like a really big shift to me in the way I have seen things come to life and especially being involved in the workspace that I am. People that I know, I've seen how much they're ridiculed and attacked from a system that's not meant for them. I think that has been important in shaping the way I see the values that are mine versus a value set of the institution whose job is to protect the institution first.

Nicolas wasn't alone in suggesting UCB is perhaps hypocritical in not fulfilling its self-ascribed reputation of being liberal and progressive. Some students felt so much so that they described a sense of distrust and skepticism towards the institution's ability to genuinely support and understand the unique challenges faced by its diverse student body. Juana bluntly described her feelings, strongly suggesting that UCB's perceived commitment to educational equity is simply performative. She stated:

> Okay, they (UCB) are full of shit, to be honest. I think it's really all a facade. They really do not care about us, especially how they love to be, "Oh, we want to be a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). We want to do this for our students. We want to create like, something about diversity and inclusion," *y sepa su madre*. But they really don't do shit. They really do not accommodate what students need.

Juana's comments highlighted the disappointment many students expressed in the university's (lack of) genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion and the support resources that students believe actually help them.

The historical and structural foundations of the university were also scrutinized for perpetuating elitism and Eurocentric norms, making students of color feel alienated and underserved. Cesar, a 38 year old transfer and undocumented student in his senior year, believes that UCB has roots in racial oppression and was never meant as a space for students of color. He also feels like the university was founded on an elitism that remains today. He stated:

> How these universities were built, you know, obviously, it was from (the knowledge that I have of) the enslavement of Africans. So, I just know how Eurocentric and how white focused universities are, how they were built. They were built for white people. You know? So, I definitely am aware that it doesn't make it easier even though Berkeley does say that it's a liberal university. But you definitely still see aspects of elitism.

Like Cesar, every interview participant described UCB as a foreign place. This was true whether or not they also described eventually finding community or a strong sense of belonging for themselves. While some respondents were able to overcome these feelings of Cultural Mismatch (Stephens et. al., 2012), for others these feelings fueled a degree of resentment towards the institution.

One of the more striking revelations from the interviews was how keenly aware students were about funding and institutional limitations on available support resources. Despite the efforts of specialized programs to address the needs of SM students, respondents seemed to buffer their expectations of available support, feeling like programs limited by broader institutional constraints (including finite funding) could only do so much. Marisol, a transfer student in her senior year who identifies as Latinx, explained that she is aware that the impact of CE3 programs is limited by constraints on funding and realizes they could do more with appropriate resources. She shared:

> I also see that there is a lack of resources or a lack of funds that are given to the programs, so I can't put too much weight on saying they're doing enough. I think they do an incredible job and I know that they will do more if they had more.

Luz, a 23 year old Latinx transfer student, went further, suggesting that programs are limited not just because they are insufficiently resourced, but also because they are compromised as agents of the institution operating in its interests. This gave Luz pause about engaging with CE3 support. She had several thoughts about this and initially shared:

> One of my biggest hesitations around CE3 programs, they try to put a band-aid over these bigger, larger structure problems. So yeah, I think there's always gonna be hesitation around them. I believe in the core goals of these programs, but you know, that there's only so much you can do. Unless the whole thing changes, there's always going to be hesitation around wanting to visit those programs, or at least on my end, it has been the case that I've grown very cynical about anything that comes from this institution. And I've kind of grown to see these programs as sort of trying to fix something that is beyond their scope, beyond the scope of their ability.

As a low frequency user of CE3 programs (with only one contact with them in the entire academic year), Luz further articulated her hesitation about engaging with support programs, stating they are a part of and aligned with a university she does not trust. She added:

> I'm very against the Berkeley institution. And even though these programs exist, they're still part of the institution, and they follow certain regulations. And there's a limit to their ability to help. And I don't know if that's because of their alignment with Berkeley as a whole. Or if it's like a two-way sort of relationship, or it's simply because they're very

> limited by Berkeley. So that's just me. I don't trust Berkeley. So, I sometimes don't trust these smaller subsets of Berkeley.

Interview responses reveal persistent institutional challenges and a pervasive distrust among SM students towards the university, highlighting systemic issues such as underfunding, understaffing, and a perceived disconnect between the institution's public commitments to diversity and inclusion versus its actual practices. For many students, this distrust was reflective of students' belief that UCB is rooted in American racial norms that clashed with their own, resulting in a Cultural Mismatch (Stephens et. al., 2012) that impeded their ability to feel engaged and successful in college.

Theme 1.2: Cultural Mismatch

Students described the challenges of navigating an educational system that felt foreign and hostile for communities of SM students. Interviews revealed a collective sense that the university does not sufficiently understand or value the unique life experiences these students bring to the university, leading to feelings of exclusion and a struggle for inclusion and equitable treatment. Marisol talked about wanting to find ways to further engage her family in her college experience while at the same time feeling like UCB invisibilized SM students. She shared:

> I wish that there was a way in which I can integrate in my family more or demonstrate to them that I'm getting some kind of support from the school to do those things, other than Latinx graduation where I get to bring people on stage and walk across with them, which I'm really excited about. But I almost feel as though there's a pressure for our school to look like there aren't the students, that they don't exist. Or that we're not a campus that has CE3 students.

Similar to Marisol's sentiments, other students described experiencing an "us versus them" dynamic that pitted SM students against UCB, making it difficult for them to feel successful or like they belong. Nicolas elaborated about his clash with a system of support that lacked adequate understanding and representation. He added:

> I feel like everyone always says this but having more actual resources that do help you and especially having people come from the same background, who can honestly understand you. Because it's ridiculous for me to go to like those mental health services at the Tang Center and I'm not going to go cry. I'm not going to go vent to a white woman who has absolutely no idea what I'm going through, you know what I mean? I guess representation matters, especially like in higher ed.

Interview responses highlighted a Cultural Mismatch (Stephens et. al., 2012) between SM students and UCB, where the university's publicized commitments to activism and inclusion were not represented in its actions, resulting in a clash with the actual experiences and needs of its diverse students. This disparity fostered a sense of alienation and underscored the need for representation and resources that resonate with and adequately support the unique cultural backgrounds of SM students. Additionally, the collision of SM student values and with an institution they perceived was not built for them (and that actively othered and excluded them) resulted in a harmful Cultural Mismatch (Stephens et. al., 2012). This dynamic described by SM students was consistent with existing research (Chang et al., 2020; Covarrubias et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2020; Winograd & Rust, 2014; Won et al., 2021) that suggests that many SM students experience a harmful Cultural Mismatch that negatively impacts their ability to find success and validation in college.

Theme 1.3: Negative Self-Concept and Emotional Well-being

Systemically marginalized students described feelings of intimidation, inadequacy, and fear of not belonging, often exacerbated by encounters with systemic biases and exclusionary practices. These experiences contributed to imposter phenomenon, where students doubt their abilities and are made to feel like frauds. Camila talked about how feelings of imposter phenomenon were triggered by not doing as well academically as she did in high school. She stated:

> Being humbled and getting below average on an exam when I used to be the one setting the high curb, definitely just made me feel like, are other people struggling like me? Or am I the only one not understanding this? What's going on? You know, definitely that moment was one of imposter syndrome.

Interviews revealed a common struggle to find a positive academic identity with some students internalizing feelings of being less than. Students collectively shared instances of feeling othered and not emotionally well. Others spoke about experiencing fear and feeling like they needed to hide themselves or aspects of their identities. Cristian detailed the emotional toll of navigating life and the university as an undocumented person, and how it led to him feeling like he had to hide that aspect of this identity. He stated:

> We're scared when we are undocumented. We come with that. We were basically like turtles in our shells. We didn't want to be exposed about not having papers, coming from a different land. Especially, you know, early in my years of community college, it was just something I didn't want to talk about if the conversation ever arose and it was something that I always avoided just because I really didn't want nobody to know and I always felt like it was a threat to my peace. And I feel like if somebody knew that it was like, Oh, they're going to come for me, and, you know, I really felt like, just had to hide

> myself. I had to protect myself. In order to do so I felt like I needed to avoid telling my personal story.

In a similar manner, several students highlighted struggles with mental health and the importance of acknowledging and addressing vulnerable moments. Camila described the importance of mental health and the benefits of normalizing that the college experience, and life in general, is filled with ups and downs. She added:

> I just want to put heavy emphasis on mental health in general. That's something to definitely be considered. Like I said, the whole success thing, you know, going to lecture in general, I think is pretty successful to me at least and being able to just acknowledge that these things happen. And there are ways to be able to deal with it instead of just having that toxic positivity. You know, just being able to understand that people have vulnerable moments. Just putting a lot of emphasis on that I think is really important at least in terms of getting to know a person because if you show that you're willing to be there for them and the good and the bad times, that's all you really need.

Overall, interview responses poignantly reflected feelings of negative self-concept (such as imposter phenomenon) and challenges to emotional well-being among students at Berkeley. SM described students experiencing feelings of intimidation and exclusion, which were exacerbated by a lack of understanding from the institution.

Theme 1.4: Socioeconomic Factors

Challenges due to financial related constraints was a consistent theme across interview responses. Students described financial difficulties faced by their families and the hard work endured by their parents as both challenges and a source of motivation for them to seek a better future through education. Financial aid and scholarships were crucial in making college

education accessible, but the stress of managing finances and the pressure to succeed in college remained constant. Citing affordability as one of the major factors that influenced her choice of college, Juana described how UCB's financial aid offer compelled her to choose Berkeley:

> I feel like I did receive a good financial aid package. I also received, I don't remember it's from the Cal Alumni Association, it's like the tap Award, which gives $6000. That completed like paying for everything. For like tuition and college and books and everything. So yeah, this (UCB) was the best choice for me economically, for financial reasons.

Students also described a strong desire to overcome socioeconomic obstacles, achieve financial stability, and give back to their communities, all while navigating the complexities of higher education and the personal growth that comes with the college experience. Flor, a 19 year old second year Latinx student, described witnessing the struggles of her single mother and how this fueled her need to achieve financial stability and desire to give back. She shared:

> I think coming from a low socioeconomic background, I saw how difficult it was for my mom to, you know, have the means to rent out a home for us to go through all these things, like through a period where she didn't even have a job. And so, I think coming from that, it's just, you don't ever want to go through that again. You want to make sure that it just doesn't happen. So, I think, for me, that is one of my main goals, just to make sure that, you know, I am financially stable and eventually have the means to give back. To my family and my community as well, because I think that my community is a really big reason why I'm here.

Like Flor, multiple respondents described a commitment to giving back to family and community based on a lived understanding of financial insecurity in and out of college.

Interview responses illustrated the profound socioeconomic challenges faced by SM students. Students acknowledged the need for and value of comprehensive financial aid and support programs that recognized and addressed the unique pressures they faced, from the basic survival needs of housing and food to the psychological burden of navigating higher education without the safety net that non-SM students might possess.

Theme Two: Need for and Value of Support

Students' spoke about needing comprehensive guidance and support in order to navigate UCB successfully, particularly as first-generation college goers. CE3 programs were valued and praised for their understanding, empathy, and practical assistance, which contrasted with experiences of feeling marginalized or not adequately supported by the university at large. Interviews surfaced the significance of having spaces that are staffed by people that represent the identities and experiences of SM students and that provide emotional support and understanding of their struggles. Respondents expressed a desire for more personal and relatable advising, as opposed to impersonal or judgmental interactions. Students also cited the lack of representation and feeling misunderstood by the broader university as a significant concern.

Theme 2.1: Support and Guidance

Students acknowledged the value of and appreciation for the financial, academic, and emotional support provided by CE3 programs (including the Educational Opportunity Program, NavCal, and the Undocumented Student Program) as well as other equity centered programs such as the Multicultural Community Center (MCC), which were described as helping them navigate a wide array of challenges. Martin talked about the access to individual support he experienced from a high level staff member in CE3 and how it helped him secure critical supplemental financial aid. He shared:

> He goes, “you want my phone number?” I was like, you don't mind? I ended up calling him. Because of NavCal, we have to apply for at least two scholarships as one of our assignments. I ended up winning $30,000 in scholarships. What I didn't know was you had to have room in your financial aid to receive this money and when they started releasing money, I wasn't getting it. Fabrizio goes, you gotta do a COAAR (Cost of Attendance Adjustment Request). I go like, “What the hell is that?” And he sat me down. He's like, look, this is just what we got to do. He goes, “I know somebody in financial aid. I'm gonna get at her. You guys need to sit down. She's the expert on this.” And he plugged me in with somebody in financial aid. We sat down, we talked, we went over everything. I ended up getting a fat check because of Fabrizio! Because of him taking the time to go to NavCal to speak, to explain about what the CE3 programs are and how to look for help.

Martin and others cited experiences of growing their navigational capital with the aid of CE3 staff. He went on to share more about how staff members like Fabrizio would share knowledge that would help him navigate Berkeley - knowledge he was frustrated was not shared by other spaces. He and other students described experiencing what they referred to as “gatekeeping” of information regarding academic policies and requirements - something they only experienced outside of CE3. Interview respondents also noted the personalized and empathetic approach of CE3 and equity centered programs as contrasted with experiences of feeling judged or misunderstood in other university spaces. For example, Marisol described being made to feel academically inadequate by a departmental major advisor, something she felt would never happen in CE3. She shared:

> I think it's the people there and the people running the programs (CE3) that make a really big difference. The first time I failed an exam at Berkeley, it was a macroeconomics exam. I went to my counselor at Haas (School of Business) and I told her I think maybe I should drop this class because I want to get an MBA. She asked me, "What school do you want to go to?" And I told her, "I want to go to Stanford." And she told me that transfers don't really get into Stanford. I don't think anyone from any of the CE3 programs would have ever told me that.

In speaking about CE3 programs, many students acknowledged the emotional intelligence and multicultural competencies possessed by CE3 counselors and how these contributed to a holistic understanding of SM students. Students felt that this understanding made CE3 more effective in supporting SM students. Cristian talked in more detail about how CE3 programs understood his struggles at an emotional level and were able to provide tangible strategies to address his challenges. He added:

> I feel like that's what CE3 and USP have to offer. They understand things emotionally. Maybe I'm getting help from my undergraduate major advisor and they may be exposed to, you know, the struggles, but he doesn't have advice as to what or how I can fix them. Or what I can do to find solutions for those. I feel like that's where the USP or CE3 services are needed. Because they can understand at the emotional level and they can give you answers.

Collectively, interview respondents highlighted the need for and profound impact of CE3 support programs at UCB, particularly for SM students facing unique challenges. CE3 programs (including Berkeley Hope Scholars, the Educational Opportunity Program, NavCal, the Transfer Student Center, and the Undocumented Student Program) not only provided holistic guidance

and financial support but also fostered a sense of belonging and validation for SM students. By offering individualized advice, emotional support, and practical solutions that align with students' individual needs and circumstances, CE3 programs empowered students to navigate their time at UCB effectively in a manner that enhanced their college experience and outcomes.

Theme 2.2: Identity and Representation

Students described the importance of having advisors and fellow students who share similar backgrounds and experiences as respondents believed that this fostered a sense of belonging and made navigating UCB more manageable. Marisol talked about being disappointed in her perceived lack of representation at UCB, and her desire to see more people like her at the university,

> I feel as though our university isn't really a place where, or has accomplished, to the full extent, what it means to be a place where I feel included or understood… encouraged. I think there's a lot more work that needs to be done, and not only just in terms of resources. I don't think I'm represented enough in any of these spaces, and I just find myself wishing that more people from my background also attended this school.

Like Marisol, many other students talked about the importance of representation. Several respondents explained that diversity was valuable not just because it provided some degree of representation of the various communities and identities reflected by students, but also because it enriched their learning overall. Cesar talked in more detail about the power of representation in the classroom by sharing his experience in one of the courses in his major that was full of students of color. He stated:

> I walked into that room and it was all people of color. Like literally all people of color, and there were maybe a couple of white people in there. But seeing so many faces that I

> can relate to. The professor is absolutely amazing. I mean, she is phenomenal. But the first time that we broke into groups, and finally having conversation with people that think the same way about the carceral system, and everything that was discussed, really made me feel good. Like I honestly walked into that class every single day happy and excited to be there. Because I knew that I was going to share similar thoughts and ways of thinking with people that look like me.

Students spoke to how valuable and affirming it was to see themselves reflected by support staff, fellow students, and in spaces and places accessible to them. They also noted that adequate representation was too rare, and they hoped for growth in the community of SM students and the support programs (such as CE3) designed to support them.

Students described a dire need for representation (across multiple components of their identity) and acknowledgment within institutional structures. Their responses illustrated the challenges faced by SM students who often found themselves marginalized or misunderstood due to a lack of representation and inclusive practices. Students appreciated empathetic and culturally aware resources that genuinely reflected and supported their unique identities and expressed a desire to see these resources expanded.

Theme Three: Success and Belonging

Collectively, success was conceptualized in a wide variety of ways with respondents articulating inclusive definitions of success primarily in non-academic terms. Students described finding success and belonging through community-centered support, the affirmation of their identities, inclusive representation, access to dedicated resources, and opportunities for engagement that lead to personal and professional growth. Additionally, they shared the

importance of guidance and the empowerment that arose from having their experiences and backgrounds viewed as a source of strength.

Theme 3.1: Success in College

While acknowledging success can be experienced in different ways, students overwhelmingly described success in college in non-academic terms, counting contributing to the community, giving back, learning and appreciating diversity and different perspectives, and applying learned skills and knowledge in meaningful ways. Berenice, a 20 year old Latinx senior, offered a definition of success not reflected in her grades. Berenice described placing value on expanding her set of "tools" and feeling successful in the ways she engaged others:

> Success doesn't mean the letter grades I get. It doesn't mean how many hours I spent into every single class stuffing my brain with information. For me, it's what I choose to do with that information and how I choose to involve myself with others. For me, it's collecting tools, whether it be social, technical, analytical, just emotional, whatever it might be. Collecting tools, getting new perspectives and opening my mind just knowing what's possible. I think you don't know until you know, so people introduce you to the things that are possible in the world like opportunities, lifestyles, careers, research topics, interest and the like.

Students articulated a broad definition of success that encompassed personal growth, appreciation of diversity, and the ability to make a positive impact. Juana spoke more about finding a feeling of success in college by developing her maturity and deepening her personal connections in various ways. Juana shared:

> Success in college to me means, honestly, means having maturity, also having connections with your professors or your GSIs, while also being involved in on campus.

> Whether that be with a student org for example, or just other volunteering. I know there's like a lot of different volunteering opportunities on campus. But I think just being involved with your community.

Camila, a Latinx student in her senior year, described feeling success in simple activities and accomplishments that come with being a young adult in college living on their own for the first time. She stated:

> Success could be just getting up in the morning and getting dressed to go to lecture. Success could be cooking yourself something instead of just Door Dashing or Uber eating. And the whole meaning of success just came to me when I started becoming more empathetic with other people or with other things, because I realized that there are multiple perspectives. There are multiple choices to kind of like put yourself in and not everyone's going it's like, when you save someone's intelligence. There's not one right way to save someone who's intelligent because they could be book smart, but they might not be street smart. Or they might not be charismatic. They might not be creative. You know, there's different ways of defining smart. So that's what I also think of with success.

Interviews revealed that, for SM students, success in college transcended academic achievements and emphasized the importance of personal growth, community engagement, and the development of individual relations and support networks. Students' notions of success in college were influenced by their individual life journeys which many times included overcoming personal challenges and a commitment to contributing to their communities in meaningful ways.

Theme 3.2: Community and Belonging

One of the most common themes that emerged from the interviews was the importance of community-centered support and the affirmation of students' complex identities. Students

described finding acceptance, understanding, and community in various spaces and programs that honor their identities and experiences. These inclusive environments, whether in the form of on-campus organizations, classes that reflect their communities, or culturally resonant events, provided not only academic support but also contributed significantly to their personal well-being. In their responses, students addressed the study's third research question by articulating how these inclusive spaces helped them define and feel success in college. Nicolas, a senior student who identifies as Latinx and transgender, talked about how one program provided support in various ways, allowed him to feel part of a community, and introduced him to other resources that aligned with his identity:

> The MCC (Multicultural Community Center) introduced me to the transgender student wellness initiative, which I now work with and help lead. But at the time, it was my introduction to it, and they were giving money for gender affirming supplies. And they were feeding students every like two weeks for free. And they were doing all these events with food and community building, and I think that was really foundational in helping structure me finding friends of color and then finding friends that shared a lot of the lived experiences I had. I think that set the foundation for success. Because I think there's still struggle being a person of color, but I think it helped a lot in finding this community where I'm like, "Okay, I'm not alone."

The importance of connecting with peers with shared backgrounds and struggles, whether through on-campus organizations, classes that reflect their communities, or events that resonate with their heritage, were described as being essential to not only academic success but also to personal well-being and establishing a sense of belonging. Cristian, an undocumented immigrant transfer student in his senior year, talked about how an email invitation led him to engage with

the Undocumented Student Program (USP) and the Transfer Student Center, spaces where he came to find tranquility, support, and community. Cristian stated:

> I remember being exposed to it in an email and it was talking about the Undocumented Student Program (USP). And I was looking through it and I was reading on the services page about the resources, and it was just something that I wanted to become a part of. After my transfer, I contacted the Transfer Student Center and the USP center and I just fell in love with the spots. I've gone there a couple times to engage with the counselors there, to get some food, to go there and study, and it just made me feel at peace. You know, it brought me inner peace. And it's just somewhere I know that I can go and be with the people that I share the same experience and backgrounds with, and I don't feel like an outcast.

Students also noted the value of culturally affirming spaces. Juana, a 20 year old Latinx student in her third year, talked about building community through cultural affirmation in a student club for students whose families were from or identified in some way with Oaxaca, Mexico:

> I honestly think when I joined *OaxaCal*, that was the first time I felt like belonging. And I feel like I started becoming more active. I went to like three general meetings freshman year, but I became more active my sophomore year. But that's because I feel like I could relate to a lot of the students. Many of them were from the Central Valley. Their parents were also farmworkers. And also just kind of having that *cultura*, even though I'm not indigenous, but I do have like, indigenous roots in my family. I felt like I was finally in community.

Connecting themes of community and belonging with the theme of student perceptions of success that surfaced in this study, some students talked about how culturally affirming spaces

unlocked their ability to feel success within the context of the larger institution. Flor talked in detail about a culturally affirming space she experienced that allowed her to feel encouraged and successful. She shared:

> I really liked going to the LSRC, the Latinx Resource Center. I think these are the areas where I feel most successful, or where I feel like I'm surrounded by many successful people that look like me. I truly like that. I mean, that's where I go to when I need to go study, when I need to go eat, just to hang out sometimes in between classes. And so to me, that's where I feel the most successful because I'm surrounded with many of my friends.

Student narratives like these underscored the value and impact of community and sense of belonging for SM students. Respondents emphasized that programs that build community not only provided essential resources and support but also fostered a profound sense of belonging, empowerment, and success among SM students.

Theme 3.3: Cultural Wealth and Values

Students described their resilience, intergenerational wisdom, and determination to succeed as being derived from their family values, backgrounds, and personal experiences. This Community Cultural Wealth (CCW; Yosso, 2005) and personal values were described as sources of strength and unique insights that contributed to their sense of belonging and purpose in higher education. Cristian described how witnessing the struggles of his parents working long days as farmworkers in the strawberry fields of the California central coast, along with his own time working in the same fields as a teenager, shaped his motivation and resilience. Cristian shared:

> At some point it felt like I was getting nowhere (at UCB) but I just didn't give up. I think I learned that skill from my parents. You know, just the way that they're able to push to a new day and continue to work at the same place. It's just not giving up and it's ultimately

> looking for a better future. And I think sharing that mindset and learning it from them was what made me persistent.

Drawing strength from their family values and personal experiences, students described how these attributes helped them navigate the challenges of higher education and find purpose in their academic pursuits. This resilience was often framed as a source of empowerment, enabling students to view their backgrounds as assets rather than obstacles. Martin, a 55 year old Latinx transfer student who is formerly incarcerated, talked about initially feeling like an outcast, and then experiencing validation that convinced him he had wisdom and contributions to offer at UCB. Martin described:

> Once I got here to Berkeley, I felt like I didn't belong. I'm one of the oldest ones in the classroom, all of these youngsters, 18 years old, people with money. That impostor syndrome kicked in right away. And I basically went to Underground Scholars to go tell them bye. I was over it. I take the bus every day to school and nobody wants to sit next to me. You know, like, I'm all tatted up. I still dress the way I dress. I just felt like I didn't belong. So, I went to Underground Scholars to go tell them I'm gone. The director was like, "What are you talking about? You're not leaving no where." Basically, she got me the support I needed. I didn't know 'nothing about impostor syndrome. They explained to me you're not the only one that's going through this. There's other people. She goes, "You belong here, you're in your spot." She goes, "If all these kids here at Berkeley were put up on the street to survive in the hood, would they?" And I said, "Hell naw." She goes, "You're ahead of the game. These kids haven't even experienced life yet. You need to teach them." I was like, whoa. That was pretty deep.

Martin's experience in finding validation and realizing his individual experiences and wisdom were strengths is what kept him from dropping out of Berkeley. Instead of feeling like an imposter, the staff member helped Martin begin to embrace his cultural wealth as a source of pride and empowerment, particularly among the fellow formerly incarcerated students he built community with. Martin benefited from an empathetic and skilled support professional who, in one interaction with him, reminded him of the power of his cultural wealth, and in doing so, helped him feel like he belonged at Berkeley.

Consistent with relevant literature (Adsitt, 2017; Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Covarrubias et al., 2018; Cuellar, 2015; Yosso, 2005), the majority of interview participants illuminated the value of CCW, showcasing how their personal histories, resilience derived from family struggles, and a sense of belonging and affirmation within UCB drove their persistence, academic success, and the desire to give back.

Summary of Major Findings

Interviews produced major findings that provided critical insights into SM students' use of support resources, how they feel these resources foster sense of belonging, and their individual definitions of success in college. Findings were presented in three overarching themes: sense of community, belonging, and success; challenges and systemic barriers; and the need for support and representation. These themes emphasized the necessity for community-focused support, inclusive environments, dedicated resources, and opportunities for engagement, highlighting the students' CCW as key in overcoming a wide array of challenges.

The first theme highlighted the challenges and systemic barriers faced by SM students, including the perceived inadequacy of institutional support and a critique of UCB's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Students expressed feelings of alienation and reported socioeconomic

challenges as significant obstacles. The skepticism towards the university's commitment to genuinely supporting marginalized groups underscores a disconnect between the institution's publicized values and actual implementation. This theme revealed a sense of distrust and frustration among students towards the institutional structures, which they felt did not adequately support their needs or recognize their backgrounds.

The second theme stressed SM students' need for identity-representative spaces offering emotional support and understanding, with students appreciating the empathy and practical help from CE3 programs (and others), which contrasted with their experiences of marginalization by the broader university. The lack of personal and relatable interactions further underscored their desire for better representation and support.

The third theme illustrated how SM students find success and belonging through community support and identity affirmation, focusing on personal and professional growth beyond academic achievements. Community-centric support and inclusive spaces were crucial in helping students feel accepted, boosting their academic and personal well-being. Programs that affirmed students' identities significantly fostered stronger connections and feelings of community. Students also highlighted their CCW and resilience gained from family experiences, which bolstered their motivation and feelings of individual success.

Together, the themes revealed by interviews also served to affirm many aspects of the conceptual framework (Figure 1, p. 33) proposed by the study. Interview participants consistently shared that they sought out support from programs and resources that reflected and affirmed their unique SM student identities and values, thereby making them feel a stronger sense of belonging. Students acknowledged a strong connection to community and family in their college journey and how these contexts external to the institution shaped the ways they

navigated UCB and their notions of success. Conversely, students also described strong feelings of disappointment in the institution in too rarely seeing their identities, cultures, and values reflected across UCB as a whole including the various resources and programs designed to support them. The resulting Cultural Mismatch (Stephens et. al, 2012) fueled SM student resentment, distrust, disengagement with support resources, and feelings of being othered or inadequate. Overall, the themes illustrated the significant role of community-centered support systems, the critical need for inclusive representation, and the importance of programs that understand and effectively address the unique challenges faced by SM students.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine how systemically marginalized (SM) students at UC Berkeley perceive and define success in college and how they experience holistic support provided by the university's Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3). The study aimed to understand the value of these support services and how they may play a role in helping students achieve success in college as they define it. By exploring students' personal perceptions of support and its impact, along with their self-authored definitions of success in college, the study intended to inform and enhance support practices for SM students. By centering and integrating the voices and experiences of SM students, the ultimate goal of the study was to improve the effectiveness of university-based support. This research was envisioned as a preliminary effort in a series of studies aimed at refining holistic support programs to better serve and empower SM students, contributing new insights into effective practices for promoting their success in college. This chapter is organized into four sections: summary of the study, discussion of findings, implications and recommendations, and conclusion.

Summary of the Study

This study utilized a qualitative research approach to investigate the engagement of SM students with support services offered by UCB’s CE3, their perceived impact of this support, and how these students define success in college. The qualitative methodology was chosen to capture nuanced insights and emergent themes that may not be revealed using quantitative methods. Data was collected through the completion of ten semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in-depth exploration of individual student experiences and the flexibility to pursue emerging themes surfaced in conversations. Interviews were conducted with students who had been at UC

Berkeley for at least a year and had engaged with at least one CE3 program, ensuring that participants had sufficient exposure to both the university environment and the support services. A total of 100 SM students were contacted based on their frequency of service use, with an equal split between low and moderate/high frequency users. From these, twenty students replied to the demographic/interest survey, and ten were selected for interviews. Each interview participant was unique, but they all identified as first-generation college, low-income, and Latinx. Upon completion of interviews, students received a $40 electronic gift card for their participation in the study. Inductive analysis including initial open coding, code categorization, and final axial coding revealed three overarching themes: Challenges and systemic barriers; Need for and value of support; and Success and belonging.

Research Questions

This study attempted to better understand the experiences and engagement of SM students with university support resources, their perceptions of the impact of the support received, and the multiple ways they each define success in college by applying three research questions:

1. What factors influence UC Berkeley students' engagement with Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3) support programs?
2. What are systemically marginalized students' perceptions of the value of CE3 programs and services?
3. In what ways do systemically marginalized students at UC Berkeley define success in college for themselves?

Discussion of Findings

While the study and the ten semi-structured interviews were guided by both the research questions and the proposed conceptual framework (Figure 1, p. 33), overall findings are discussed in relation to the study's three research questions.

RQ 1: What factors influence UC Berkeley students' engagement with Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3) support programs?

SM students' engagement with CE3 support programs was influenced by several key factors based on the themes identified from the interviews. As SM students, respondents articulated general feelings of not belonging and being othered at UCB, describing themselves as outsiders navigating an institution that felt unfamiliar, complex, and sometimes hostile. Undocumented interview participants acknowledged a fear of their status being outed and the perceived negative consequences of this happening. Consequently, students were drawn to CE3 programs that offered community-centered support, which provided a sense of belonging and acceptance that drove further engagement with CE3 and other programs. SM students sought to engage with programs that affirmed their identities and provided spaces where they felt represented and understood. Culturally affirming spaces, such as Multicultural Centers, helped build sense of belonging and functioned as an entry point (or point of referral) to support programs (including CE3) that offered co-curricular guidance such as academic advising or financial aid counseling. Students spoke about gravitating towards spaces, like CE3, with "people who looked like them" and that practiced cultural traditions similar to their own. Here, study findings are aligned with existing research in two important ways. First, findings were consistent with the literature (Bassett, 2021; Strayhorn, 2021; Winograd & Rust, 2014) and the study's conceptual framework (Figure 1, p. 33) in affirming that a positive sense of belonging drives engagement with support resources. Second, the study revealed that CE3 programs'

validation of SM students' cultural identities made it more likely that they would engage in the support services they offered (Brooms, 2022; Means & Pyne, 2017; Museus & Qualye, 2009; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Students described CE3 programs as inclusive, understanding, and representative of their communities; qualities that helped build trust and participation among SM students. Based on this trust, some students described being encouraged by fellow SM students to seek support from CE3 programs, thereby perpetuating a cycle of engagement and support.

Students also cited the need for support in managing their socioeconomic challenges as a key factor that influenced their choice to engage in support from CE3. Respondents felt that CE3 counselors understood their lived experiences of being low-income and the ways this shaped (or limited) how they navigated UCB. SM students were drawn to CE3 programs because of the tangible support they offered regarding their socioeconomic difficulties, whether it be by helping them interpret their financial aid eligibility and awards, identifying sources of supplemental funding, or receiving additional aid directly from CE3.

One of the most striking study findings was students' collective critique of the institution and its commitment to diversity and inclusion. They described a disconnect between the university's stated values and the actual implementation of programs and policies that support marginalized groups. For many students, this produced the experience of Cultural Mismatch (Stephens et. al., 2012) that eroded their sense of belonging and made it difficult for them to see their values and identities represented in the actions of the university. As a result, students sought out affirming and supportive spaces including CE3. Yet, despite the positive perceptions of CE3, students also expressed a critique of many other campus-based support resources available to them. Other support units, such as departmental advising offices, the career center, and the university health center, were described as inaccessible, lacking understanding or empathy of the

experience of SM students, being insensitive, or acting as “gatekeepers” of key information required to navigate UCB successfully. Students described multiple instances of negative experiences with general advising and support resources at UCB, and then turning to CE3 for the empathy, guidance, and information they were initially seeking from other programs.

RQ2: What are systemically marginalized students’ perceptions of the value of CE3 programs and services?

Students appreciated the empathy and understanding exhibited by CE3 programs, contrasting sharply with what they perceived as the broader university's impersonal or insufficient support. They valued the emotional support, understanding, and practical help these programs offered. Students recognized a degree of emotional intelligence and multicultural competency present among CE3 counselors as skills that made them feel safe and understood in CE3 spaces. Collectively, SM students highly valued CE3’s model of holistic support. Consistent with the literature (Bunnell, 2022; Museus & Ravello, 2021), students viewed CE3’s holistic advising approach (that regards students as whole people and considered their needs across dimensions of academic preparation, personal wellness, basic needs, belonging, community, and leadership) as most appropriate and effective for addressing their varied needs. CE3's ability to provide access to multiple practical and essential resources, including academic support, financial aid, and graduate school or career guidance, was another critical aspect valued by students. Providing or directly connecting SM students with these tangible resources helped mitigate some of the socioeconomic challenges that students faced and made their first-generation higher education journeys more accessible and less stressful. Mirroring existing research, the study affirmed the value of financial aid guidance and supplemental aid offered by

CE3 as particularly critical (Soria et al., 2014) given that all study participants were from low socioeconomic backgrounds and financial aid dependent.

In placing SM students and their identities at the center of the college experience, acknowledging the systemic barriers these students navigated, and offering multi-faceted support to address their varied needs, the value and framework of CE3 programs could be understood as a type of Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE; Hurtado et al., 2012). Functioning within this model, CE3 counselors acted as "cultural agents" (Museus & Qualye, 2009, p. 84), holistically promoting the conditions for SM student success. Overall, SM students saw CE3 programs as contributing to their success at UC Berkeley, providing not just academic assistance but also the opportunity for personal growth and community building. These programs were regarded as essential in helping them navigate institutional challenges and in fostering an environment where they could thrive academically and socially.

The study also revealed SM students' activation of aspirational, familial, and navigational capital rooted in their intergenerational wisdom and family backgrounds that together comprised their Community Cultural Wealth (CCW, Yosso, 2015). Mirroring extant research (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Covarrubias et al., 2018; Cuellar, 2015; Yosso, 2005), interview participants enacted aspects of their individual CCW as a source of strength, motivation, and resilience through college journeys that were lived as both academic and emotional experiences (Adsitt, 2017). Study participants highlighted how CE3 programs and support staff actively respected and affirmed their CCW. In some instances, SM students described support staff helping them reframe their individual values, culture, and past experiences as different types of capital instead of viewing them as differences that fueled internalized feelings of inadequacy or being othered.

The study revealed another important concern commonly expressed by students. Most respondents felt that programs designed to support SM students (including CE3) were insufficiently funded. They described how this perceived inadequate resourcing created structural limitations for these programs that negatively impacted their ability to support SM students. Considering the size of the SM student population at UCB and the challenges and systemic barriers they face, one student described CE3 and similar programs as "band-aids" - temporary, small efforts that are ultimately unable to effectively serve the scale of the SM student community and address the diverse scope of their needs. Students' concern about the inadequate funding of support resources and its disproportionate negative impact on SM students was consistent with existing research in this area (Mitchell et. al., 2018; Third Way, 2020; Ward et. al., 2018). SM students also suggested that campus administrators and leaders should work to increase the level of resources and funding provided to the various holistic, community centered, and culturally affirming programs they found so valuable and effective.

RQ3: In what ways do systemically marginalized students at UC Berkeley define success in college for themselves?

Interview participants primarily defined success in college in non-academic terms, emphasizing other areas such as personal growth, and community contributions. They saw success as involving the ability to apply what they learned to effect change and make meaningful contributions, rather than only achieving competitive grades. Success was also framed around building resilience, finding community and belonging, and utilizing their cultural wealth and personal experiences as strengths to navigate college life and contribute back to their communities. Study findings revealed an expansive definition of success similar to the one established by Delahunty and O'Shea (2019),

> For these students, tangible 'evidence' of success such as grades or employment comprised only part of their definitions. Of equal, if not more importance, were qualities such as perseverance, development of capabilities, quality of life, lifelong learning, satisfaction, giving back to society, confidence and happiness. (p. 318)

This broader definition of success included developing leadership skills, involvement with cultural or community based organizations, and achieving personal goals beyond academic metrics.

Success for SM students meant being part of a supportive space where they felt valued as part of a community, which enhanced their personal well-being, engagement, and self-concept. Culturally affirming programs were regarded as precious and invaluable spaces where students saw themselves reflected—both in cultural practices and in the people (advising or counseling staff) who worked with them—increasing their engagement and trust in these resources. This alignment with programs that mirrored their cultural backgrounds and offered genuine understanding and support largely shaped definitions of success for these students, as it led to validation and empowerment within the university setting. Overall, SM students constructed definitions of success rooted in their survival, personal accomplishments, and closely tied to finding a sense of community and belonging within the university. This involved engaging with spaces and programs that affirmed their identities and provided support that acknowledged their unique backgrounds. In fact, for some respondents, these types of inclusive spaces were identified as the only places they experienced feelings of success.

Students also regarded overcoming significant hurdles, including socioeconomic challenges or academic difficulties such as passing a rigorous course, as examples of success in college. In this way, "College success then becomes students' collection of obstacles defeated

and benefits gained throughout the college experience," (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021, p. 95). Achieving this type of success also produced a feeling of empowerment for students that elevated their confidence, a dynamic consistent with the benefits of empowerment documented by other studies (Cuellar, 2015). Most respondents emphasized the importance of defining success in college as a communal achievement, reflecting a desire to uplift their families and communities along with their own individual progress. This was especially apparent in the ways students articulated the need to achieve financial stability as a success, noting that the perceived financial security enabled by a college degree was important for them and their families. The highly varied, non-academic, and communal terms SM students utilized to conceptualize success in college was consistent with recent research in this area (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Collectively, students' more expansive and inclusive self-authored definitions of success stood in sharp contrast to what they perceived as institution's traditional notions of success primarily rooted in earning high grades

Implications and Recommendations

Implications for Conceptualizing Student Success

This study's long-term goal was to improve SM student success at UC Berkeley by contributing to a better understanding of how and when they seek support and by identifying students' own definitions of success in college. Utilizing students' own perceptions of the value and impact of holistic support provided by programs that focus on systemically marginalized (SM) communities helps us reshape the ways we think about measuring such programs and the success of the students they serve. This study sought to enhance the success experienced by SM students in college not only by seeking to improve their engagement with support resources, but by acknowledging and bringing into the light all the (non-traditional) ways they were already

being successful. By thinking more inclusively about what success in college means to SM students as reflected in the study findings, we can develop and enhance support and resources to cultivate this type of success. That, in turn, drives increased engagement with the specialized resources that reflect and affirm their values, complex identities, and rich Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). Across higher education, one implication of this study is the need for academic policy makers, educational leaders, and student support practitioners to affirm existing non-traditional, as well as develop more expansive, measures of success in college which will further "set up students for success" (Goegan et al., 2021; Lynam et al., 2022). Informed by this and other existing studies as well as future research, expanded measures may include measuring degree of sense of belonging, engagement with community organizations, affecting feelings of empowerment, contributions to family, level of financial (and basic needs) security, degree of participation with campus organizations and resources, and others.

Implications for Practice

Already, student support practitioners involved in programs that serve SM populations work to support the “whole student.” Yet, the ways in which their work is regarded and measured is not as inclusive. These practitioners, many of them serving as advisors or counselors, feel a constant pressure to justify the value of their work by showing a return on investment of what they do with traditional quantitative measures. Equipped with different ways to affirm student growth and success (such as increasing sense of belonging, empowerment, or engagement with community), advisors and counselors must operate with more confidence in spending additional time implementing high-touch programming and activities that cultivate these areas as opposed to spending a majority of their efforts on traditional informational and transactional advising. Counselors and advisors staffing programs aimed at SM students should ensure their support

strategies and resources are inclusive and multifaceted. Practitioners should also pay special attention to the factors that students describe as impacting their engagement with support services. As documented by this study and other existing research, students are drawn to programs that offer them holistic guidance (Bunnell, 2022; Museus & Ravello, 2021) and those that acknowledge, affirm, and engage their identities, values, and rich Community Cultural Wealth (Adsitt, 2017; Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Yosso, 2005).

College advising and counseling practitioners should craft their programs and interventions as holistic and culturally inclusive in a manner that recognizes the wide range of challenges and systemic barriers that SM students face including economic challenges (Soria et al., 2014), academic self-doubt (Strayhorn, 2021; Winograd & Rust, 2014), feelings of cultural mismatch (Phillips et al., 2020; Stephens et. al., 2012), and a distrust in the university. Recognizing many of the macro-level systemic forces surfaced in this study that impact SM students at the micro(individual and human)-level, counselors and advisors should reimagine their support interventions and services within the framework of Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE) with a focus "on intentional curricular and cocurricular practice for the education of the whole student.," (Hurtado et al., 2012, p. 49). This model significantly contributes to the success of SM students in college by focusing on creating a university environment that acknowledges and respects their unique backgrounds and life experiences. Structuring support in this manner will foster a greater sense of belonging and engagement by ensuring that the educational setting is responsive to the diverse needs of SM students who routinely face different challenges than non-marginalized students.

The results of this study also have implications for onboarding and ongoing training of student support professionals as an expanded focus on impacting growth and success in

non-traditional ways requires new and expanded competencies for practitioners. Beyond a siloed focus on academic excellence, leaders that oversee student support resources and equity focused student services must implement training that hones practitioner competencies in areas such as creating community, leadership development, and interdependence for SM students. Future training of advisors and counselors charged with supporting SM students should seek to develop the emotional intelligence and cultural competencies required for applying holistic advising (Bunnell, 2022; Museus & Ravello, 2021) that can be intentionally deployed via a Diverse Learning Environments Model (Hurtado et al., 2012) of support - strategies found to be invaluable by participants of this study.

Implications for Policy

Asserting the study's initial implication that definitions of success in college for SM students must be expanded and become more inclusive, it is necessary for individual colleges and university systems to move beyond existing policies that rely on traditional quantitative metrics (e.g., degree completion rates, time to degree, and grade point averages) to measure both student success and the effectiveness of support programs. Campus and systemwide assessment policies should be expanded to reflect alternate qualitative measures identified by SM students. New, inclusive assessment policies will provide a more accurate representation of the effectiveness and impact of support resources by applying a wider conceptualization of success in college. At the campus level, updated assessment policies will allow programs to better illustrate their comprehensive value in affecting student success thereby helping them make a stronger case for sustainability or scaling up of their efforts. Informed by expanded definitions of success and a better understanding of how SM students engage help resources, policy makers at

the system level can look to replicate effective support strategies, programs, and assessment policies across multiple campuses.

Results of this study also helps arm leaders and administrators who shape and interpret policy with multifaceted evidence of student success and the impact of the critical support mechanisms that enables it. Citing expanded narratives of impact and success included in this and future studies, educational leaders can help sustain and scale holistic programs and practices through their advocacy and decision making discretion (e.g., by expanding program budgets or prioritizing them in fundraising campaigns). Leveraging the findings of this study, leaders must act with urgency to establish a more holistic set of metrics that can help them address "return on investment" critiques that have served as an equity detour (Gorski, 2019) that impedes the ability for programs and institutions to best support their communities of SM students. Leaders and policymakers interested in improving traditional measures of success such as degree completion should pay close attention to the varied and expansive ways students define success in college for themselves. By doing so, those shaping policy can lift the importance of properly resourcing the spaces and programs that model inclusive definitions of success that create community and increased engagement. In turn, increasing participation in these programs would contribute to greater attainment of both academic/traditional and self-authored/non-traditional success.

Additionally, leaders responsible for support programs aimed at SM students should center the cultivation of community and building of sense of belonging as pillars of their activities, along with a commitment to constructing an advising/counseling staff that represents the identities of these students. Creating these representative community-centric spaces where students feel like they belong would fuel engagement with support, thereby increasing SM

students' chances for success and reducing feelings of isolation and academic inadequacy (Bassett, 2021; Strayhorn, 2021; Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022; Winograd & Rust, 2014).

Expanding the ways in which we conceptualize student success has implications for the tools we use to assess and measure the impact of support, student growth, and student learning as well. Traditional student information systems, learning management systems, and technology platforms at the campus and system level will be challenged to capture non-quantitative indicators of growth, impact, and success as experienced by students themselves (ideally in a manner that can be replicated at other institutions).

Enhancing policies to include and assign significance to non-traditional and qualitative measures will positively impact practice. Student support practitioners, typically occupied with a focus on impacting traditional academic performance indicators of success, should be encouraged to provide proportionate priority to affecting a more holistic concept of learning and success in college. Changing policy will transform the ways practitioners support SM students.

Recommendations

Clearly, the initial, immediate recommendation is to provide expanded funding and resources to programs that support SM students. Campus administrators and other leaders must prioritize supporting and sustaining these programs in their budget and fundraising strategies. To further promote philanthropic funding of programs, leaders should appeal to donors by centering and highlighting the compelling narratives of student experiences (as represented in this study and others) to convey the rich cultural wealth, strengths, and complex identities of SM students and the critical value of expanding specialized holistic support that enables their success. In California, leaders may pursue working directly with the state legislature to obtain funding support beyond the commitments to California's public higher education segments outlined in

the governor's annual budget. Already, programs that serve undocumented students, foster alumni, formerly incarcerated students, and college-based basic needs centers across California (including those at UCB) have recently secured additional state funding in this way (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2022).

SM students seek support programs and spaces that provide a sense of belonging and community, are culturally affirming, representative of their identities, and that provide multi-faceted holistic support (as documented in this study). Thus, a second recommendation is to ensure that colleges and universities connect and structure support programs targeting SM students as integrated ecosystems that, as a whole, provide these elements. As a cluster of multiple units, CE3 already operates much in this manner. For example, students engaged in CE3's Transfer Student Center frequently become connected with other relevant CE3 programs, such as the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) or the Undocumented Student Program (USP). This results in more opportunities for students to gain access to and feel part of a larger community while benefiting from the multiple practical resources offered by different programs. Similarly, cultural centers or other spaces that do not directly provide advising or counseling services to SM students should be strongly connected to the larger ecosystem of support, given the key role they play in attracting marginalized students. This study provided an example of this in documenting how UCB's Multicultural Community Center facilitated engagement with CE3 programs. Structurally connecting campus resources and strengthening existing collaborations between programs centers the diverse identities and needs of SM students, reflecting a framework of the Multi-Contextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE, Hurtado et al., 2012). This interconnectedness among resources collectively delivers the multi-faceted, comprehensive, and holistic support documented to be effective in supporting

communities of marginalized students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Cuellar, 2015; Means & Pyne, 2017; Museus & Ravello, 2021; Nunez, 2014; Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022).

For those engaged in analysis and research of students at the campus-wide level, another important recommendation is to reimagine the ways we define sources of data and how we assign value to the behavior of students. Before constructing new measures to track more inclusive definitions of impact and success, researchers and those who lead support programs should take inventory of what is already available to them. Every touch point with a resource, particularly with cultural centers, student organizations, and other co-curricular programs, has potential value to track and assess. There is much to learn from a comprehensive understanding of student engagement patterns across the university beyond a narrow focus on academic outcomes and measures. Leaders and researchers should look to "stack" the various sources of data available to them to construct a more accurate and holistic view of students' needs and success. For example, at the individual level, if we know a student identifies as foster alumni, is a commuter, has severe financial need, and has visited the campus food pantry several times, perhaps this combination of data points can trigger a proactive, intrusive support intervention. Similarly, if a student presents a modest grade point average but has also extensively utilized campus health services and co-curricular guidance, perhaps we can reframe this student's experience not as academically subpar but rather as an accomplishment and success, given the likely challenges they have endured in persisting in their enrollment. Casting a wide net to capture student activity and data in new ways has the potential to not only help us better understand student needs, but to then reshape support strategies and programs (including required competencies for advisors and counselors) and better ways to deploy them.

As a final recommendation, further study is necessary in several areas. While this study and others (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021; Yazedjian et al., 2008) affirm that SM students' conceptualized success beyond academic measures, current research is limited in illuminating how institutions (re)shape support programs to reflect and produce the non-academic success outcomes respondents of this study found so important. Additional inquiry is necessary to help understand the ways in which universities and their support programs can help promote and enable inclusive and expansive concepts of success, which in turn can drive more students to engage with their resources. Further study can aid in identifying specific strategies that cultivate sense of belonging, connection to community, cultural affirmation, and activities that generate feelings of empowerment among SM students, in addition to maintaining the important practical (e.g., academic advising; financial aid guidance) support offered by programs. Additional research is also needed to better understand the implications of one of the most interesting findings revealed by this study. It is important to know more about SM students' perceptions that support services and programs designed for them are underfunded and can "only do so much." How pervasive are these perceptions and how do they impact students' degree of engagement with support resources? Are some students effectively self-selecting out of assistance and guidance that would have otherwise helped them? For those SM students who see any university-based support resource as co-opted or compromised, where do they go for curricular and co-curricular support? For these students, what is the impact of not engaging in support services?

Conclusion

Late in the Fall semester of 2018, a new transfer student, who I will call Jack, reached out to me with a request to discuss his experience attempting to access support services. A meeting

was scheduled and when the time came to meet, I was surprised to walk into a session that was not the not a one-on-one I had anticipated, but instead a town hall style gathering of a dozen students that had been organized by Jack. Jack identified as an adult, re-entry, formerly incarcerated, and foster alumni student. In seeking support from CE3's program designed to support students who are foster alumni, Jack found himself rebuffed and excluded from participation in the program because of his age (he was in his late thirties at the time) and formerly incarcerated status. In seeking to address his exclusion, Jack discovered several fellow students with similar identities (e.g., non-traditional age, formerly incarcerated students) that had also felt excluded by the program. He rallied them to participate in an "intervention" with me, the Executive Director of CE3 that oversaw all its programs, including the one Jack unsuccessfully tried to join. For the entire hour of the meeting, I heard tale after tale of how students felt excluded, not supported or welcomed, and in some cases vilified (due to their formerly incarcerated status) by a program that was purportedly designed to support them. In passionately airing their grievances, the students questioned how genuine the universities', and CE3's, commitment to equity really was.

In the course of this study, I've often thought about Jack and his journey. To me, they are an example and further reminder of how critically important it is to center the voices and lived experiences of students. This study was inspired by and sought to honor the voices of SM students. Our communities of systemically marginalized students are passionate, brilliant, visionary, generous, and complex. As higher education practitioners and leaders, we must constantly ground ourselves in the ever-evolving experiences of students, their needs, and the shifting challenges they face; never assuming there is not more to learn about them and how to best enable their success.

This study provided insights into the experiences and perceptions of SM students at UCB regarding their engagement with CE3 programs, the value of this support, and their definitions of success in college. Findings underscored the profound impact that holistic support services can have on students' sense of belonging, empowerment, and notions of college success. The findings highlight the importance of moving beyond traditional metrics of success and advocate for a broader, more inclusive understanding that values personal growth, community contribution, and the ability to navigate systemic barriers. This includes prioritizing representative, understanding, and culturally affirming spaces that offer comprehensive and holistic support. Also required are systemic changes in how student success is measured and supported, emphasizing the need for policies and practices that reflect the diverse experiences and strengths of SM students. Future research should build on these findings to more deeply explore the specific strategies that can further enhance the engagement and success of SM students, contributing to higher education experiences of SM students that feel more equitable, successful, and empowering.

Today, the program that initially excluded Jack serves four times as many students as it did in 2018, adding program components including expanded supplementary financial aid for foster alumni students and a dedicated mental health psychologist. The program's growth is due in large part to the inclusion of a thriving community of formerly incarcerated and re-entry age students who had been de-facto excluded from participation just a few years ago. As much progress has been made in this program and others, this study, like Jack’s impromptu town hall meeting, is a reminder that there is still so much more to address and improve. We can only do that by working alongside SM students, not by accepting traditional institutional norms regarding support and success.

After coordinating the “intervention” with me, Jack was invited to become a CE3 student intern where he conducted research that explored effective support strategies for foster care impacted college students. His work contributed to the improvement of our foster program and set the foundation for a completely new CE3 program that Jack launched before completing his UCB degree (that continues today). Jack, with all his passion, commitment, life struggles, and complex identity, was not “a problem” as the former director of CE3’s foster program had suggested. Instead, Jack and other SM students like him are an essential part of solutions that create a brighter, more successful future of genuine equity in higher education.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Invitation and Demographics Form

Email Invitation

Subject: [Interview Request] Study on Students Engagement with CE3 Support

Hello CE3 Student!

I hope this email finds you well. I am the Executive Director of the Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3) and a doctoral student in the Capitol Area North Doctorate in Educational Leadership at UC Davis. My dissertation topic explores the factors that influence student engagement with CE3 programs and services. The study also will explore the ways in which students define success in college for themselves. By learning about these areas, we hope to improve the support we provide students, ensure students engage with available resources, and identify more inclusive ways to acknowledge student success.

As a CE3 student, you are an ideal participant for this study! I am looking for 10-12 students to participate in individual one hour interviews with me. Interviews will take place in person (on campus). In certain circumstances, a Zoom interview may be arranged in place of an in-person meeting. All interview participants will receive a $40 gift card upon completion of the interview. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed for purposes of the study. To protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms will be used in place of real names.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please complete this secure electronic form in its entirety. Once the form closes, I will select a group of 10-12 students to interview, ensuring there is representation from student communities and programs across CE3. By completing and submitting this form, you are expressing interest in the study and consenting to be interviewed. Thank you for considering!

Best regards,

Julian Ledesma

Principal Researcher, *Systemically Marginalized Student Engagement with Holistic Support Programs and their Perceptions of College Success at a Four-Year Research University*

Doctorate of Educational Leadership Candidate, UC Davis

Executive Director, Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3)

Interest Form/Demographic Questionnaire

Title of Study - Systemically Marginalized Student Engagement with Holistic Support Programs and their Perceptions of College Success at a Four-Year Research University.

As part of the participant selection and interview process, I am collecting student demographic data to help with understanding engagement with CE3 programs. All information you provide will be kept confidential. All information will be stored electronically in password protected, encrypted digital storage until the study concludes. After the study is completed, all digital data will be destroyed.

Welcome! Thank you for your interest in my study! I am the Executive Director of the Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3) and a doctoral student in the Capitol Area North Doctorate in Educational Leadership at UC Davis. My dissertation topic explores the factors that influence student engagement with CE3 programs and services. The study also will explore the ways in which students define success in college for themselves. By learning about these areas, we hope to improve the support we provide students, ensure students engage with available resources, and identify more inclusive ways to acknowledge student success.

By completing and submitting this form, you are expressing interest in the study and consenting to be interviewed. Please complete the questions to the best of your ability. You may also skip some questions. Identifiable information will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be assigned where applicable.

First Name	
Email	
Gender Identity	
Race/Ethnicity (will use UCB categories)	
Generational Status	
Socioeconomic Status	
Frosh entry or Transfer Student	
Class Level/Year	
Academic Field (Non-STEM or STEM)	
CE3 Program Primarily Utilized	
All CE3 Programs Utilized	

Thank you for completing the questionnaire. Students selected for the study that complete an interview will receive a $40 gift card. Feel free to reach out with any questions at juledesma@ucdavis.edu

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Title of Study - Systemically Marginalized Student Engagement with Holistic Support Programs and their Perceptions of College Success at a Four Year Research University.

SECTION	CONTEXT AND QUESTIONS
Welcome, Housekeeping Items, Consent Affirmation	Welcome! Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study! I am the Executive Director of the Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence (CE3) and a doctoral student in the Capitol Area North Doctorate in Educational Leadership at UC Davis. My dissertation topic explores the factors that influence student engagement with CE3 programs and services. The study also will explore the ways in which students define success in college for themselves. By learning about these areas, we hope to improve the support we provide students, ensure students engage with available resources, and identify more inclusive ways to acknowledge student success. If you have not done so already, please take a moment to complete the consent form. I will need your informed consent before we begin. If you have already reviewed and completed the consent, are you ready to proceed? Please let me know if you have any questions.
Consent and Ground Rules	Your participation today is voluntary and you should only discuss things you feel comfortable discussing with me. You may end the interview at any time. I will keep all the information you provide confidential. To protect your confidentiality, your comments will not be linked with personally identifying information. A pseudonym will be used in place of your real name. I will be audio recording our discussion so I can listen to your conversation later. These recordings and my notes will be stored in a password protected encrypted digital storage and destroyed once the study concludes. Finally, your personally identifying information will not appear in the published results of this study. Please silence or turn off cell phones. Any questions before we begin?
Purpose of Interview	The purpose of this interview is to better understand the factors that influence the participation of students with CE3 programs and services. The study also will explore the ways in which students define success in college for themselves.

Self-Definitions of Success in College	1. Tell me a little about yourself and your path to college. What brought you to Berkeley? Why Berkeley? 2. What does success in college mean to you? a. What has shaped this definition of success for you? 3. Where do you go to feel success(ful)? 4. What is a specific example of when you have felt successful at Berkeley? 5. Based on what you have experienced at Berkeley, how different, if at all, are the university's values as compared to your individual values you brought when you got here? 6. Imagine yourself at graduation. At that moment, what would success look like for you? 7. 7. What does the university need to know about the way that students view success? 8. Do you think CE3 students define success differently than non-CE3 students?
Help-Seeking	1. Talk about a time when you felt that you belonged at UC Berkeley. What about a time when you felt you did not belong? 2. On a scale of one to ten, how well do your individual values align with those of UC Berkeley? Tell me about that. 3. I noticed that last year you utilized CE3 services X times last year. Tell me more about what led to you seeking support. 4. How do your values and feelings of belonging impact your engagement with support resources? a. How well do the values of CE3 align with your own? 5. What specific questions, needs, or interests did you think you could get help with from the CE3 program(s) you engaged with? 6. Why do you think some students who are eligible for CE3 do not utilize the programs? 7. What is different, if anything, about engaging with CE3 programs at Berkeley as compared to programs outside of CE3?
Closing	Thank you for taking the time today to share your perspectives. Your thoughts and perspectives are critical to this research and I value your insights and experiences.

Appendix C: Member Check Communications

Good Evening,

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in my study. The information you shared was extremely helpful for understanding the factors that influence the participation of students with CE3 support services and how students define success in college for themselves. As I shared during the interview, as part of the process I am engaging in something called a "member check." This is an opportunity for you to review my initial writing and findings and provide any additional feedback.

Attached you will find two documents:

Participant Vignette

For each of the participants in the study, the research will feature a short vignette or story describing you and your identity as a student. Please take a few minutes to review your vignette. This was created from the information you provided in the demographic form and the interview. After reading the vignette, please let me know the following:

- Changes or edits: If you have any suggested changes or corrections, please let me know.
- Pseudonym: Currently, you have a temporary pseudonym picked for you but feel free to let me know if you would like me to use another name.

Summary of Initial Findings

I have coded all the interviews and am drafting initial findings. Please read through this second attachment and let me know if you have any questions or additional thoughts. The initial findings represent all interviews collective responses so it is possible some of these do not reflect your experience.

If you have any feedback or changes, please send to me no later than XXX, XX, XXXX. If I do not receive feedback or changes from you by that time, I will assume that your information is correctly noted and that you have no suggested changes.

Once again, thank you so much for your time and willingness to share your perspectives. I hope you have a wonderful rest of the school year.

Sincerely,

Julian Ledesma