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Facilitating Equitable Access and Retention for Underrepresented Students at the University of Mary Washington

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at the University of Mary Washington**

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of
Education in the Department of Educational Leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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Michael Abelson

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Abstract

FACILITATING EQUITABLE ACCESS AND RETENTION FOR UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MARY WASHINGTON

By Michael Abelson, Alvin Bryant, and Marra Hvozdovic

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the Department of Educational Leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University

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Capstone Chair: Tomika L. Ferguson, Ph.D., Department of Educational Leadership

Higher education institutions are facing increasing pressure to find new ways to attract, retain, and graduate the diverse populations of college students. As a result, colleges and universities need to adapt to the changing demographics of students who benefit from more sustained and engaged forms of support that are responsive to their specific social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. This sequential mixed methods study seeks to understand the ways in which the University of Mary Washington serves its underrepresented students in order to develop strategies to enhance the recruitment and retention of Black, Hispanic/Latinx, low-income, and first-generation college students. Building on the literature on retention and persistence, sense of belonging, and organizational change, researchers developed a student sense of belonging survey, an organizational readiness for change assessment, and conducted focus group discussions with UMW students. In particular, the project sought to understand the current institutional culture regarding inclusion and sense of belonging for underrepresented students. This study's findings inform how the University of Mary Washington can better facilitate the recruitment, retention, and graduation of underrepresented students.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The college student population in America is changing. This population is increasingly diverse, but at least for the next eight to ten years, the overall college-going population is also going to decrease (EAB, 2020; *Interactive*, 2019). As a result, higher education institutions are facing pressure to find new ways to attract, retain, and graduate the diverse populations of college students. Historically, predominantly White higher education institutions (HEIs) were not designed for the type of diversity colleges and universities encounter today (Harris, 2021). Subsequently, legislative and institutional actions have been taken to ensure access to higher education for nontraditional and underrepresented students (Bowen & Bok, 1998). College cultures and environments must recognize the complex and varied needs of Black, Hispanic, low-income, and first-generation college students, as the changing demographics of students need more sustained and engaged forms of support that are responsive to their social, cultural, and economic backgrounds (Gay, 2000).

Scholarly literature on retention and persistence details the various reasons why students leave college and why they stay until graduation (Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Hagedorn, 2006; Seidman et al, 2012; Tinto, 1993). However, the ways these insights get translated into real programming and infused into organizational cultures that are supportive of underrepresented students and are sustainable on real campuses, is more difficult to realize. To better understand these challenges within the context of a single university, the University of Mary Washington (UMW), this research will focus on understanding the needs of underrepresented students and identify promising practices to best facilitate student retention and success.

The University of Mary Washington is a small, predominantly White, public liberal arts university in Fredericksburg, Virginia and has sought numerous ways to better recruit and retain

underrepresented students (Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students).

In particular, programs such as the Rappahannock Scholars Program (RSP) and the Student in

Transition Program (STP) serve to recruit and support underrepresented students. RSP serves

high-achieving low-income students from the Northern Neck region of Virginia and the STP

provides bridge and ongoing support to underrepresented and first-generation students for

academic achievement at the undergraduate level. However, UMW seeks more ways to better

serve these students across the entire campus and to increase the overall numbers of

underrepresented students at UMW.

A team led by Dr. Rita Dunston at UMW submitted a Request for Assistance (RFA) to

Virginia Commonwealth University's Department of Educational Leadership to be included as a

Capstone project for students in the Ed.D. in Leadership program. In particular, the RFA makes

clear that UMW desires strategies "to promote an accessible and navigable education for

underrepresented students and create a community of support through high-touch and student-

driven programming." As a result, this study seeks to understand the ways in which UMW serves

its underrepresented students, their experiences on campus, in order to develop strategies to

enhance the recruitment and retention of Black, Hispanic/Latinx, low-income, and first-

generation college students at UMW.

Problem Statement

Researchers have explored the importance of strong sense of belonging for Black,

Hispanic/Latinx, first-generation, and low-income students to enhance retention and persistence

to graduation, beginning with improving how HEIs must be more accessible (Gopalan & Brady,

2020; Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2019). However, HEIs, such as predominantly White

institutions (PWIs) must develop programs and campus cultures inclusive of and responsive to

the needs of students from underrepresented backgrounds, especially because their small population numbers can render them to be unseen or their experiences on campus misunderstood (Strayhorn, 2019). It is imperative that HEIs are able to attract and retain more students from diverse backgrounds as the number of college-going students declines in the next few years (EAB, 2020; *Interactive*, 2019). HEIs that are unable to recruit and retain students from diverse backgrounds will face obstacles that can lead to crisis, where their existence may be threatened (Grawe, 2021). UMW has identified this as an area of improvement in order to position itself to attract a market share of underrepresented students and raise the level of equitable access and retention and graduation of these students.

Significance

Public higher education is more than a means of professional preparation in the United States, it is also one of the key pathways by which young people develop the skills and competencies to participate in and make social, cultural, scientific, political, and economic contributions to the world. Hispanic (80.7%) and Black (78%) students lag behind the national average (84.1%) for persistence and retention of college students (Persistence & Retention, 2021). When certain students, such as racially minoritized students, are excluded from higher education, they have diminished opportunities for social mobility and are also excluded from many influential dimensions of American society (Bowen & Bok, 1998). As the demographics of the United States and the college-going population have shifted, it might be argued that the core educational mission of higher education has shifted from one of exclusion and elitism to one of inclusion.

The economic impact of the Great Recession in 2008 caused a significant decline in birthrates in the United States (Kline, 2019). Over time the declining birthrates will have

widespread effects, including a drop in college-aged individuals in the general population. Kline (2019) called for higher education institutions to prepare for this *looming enrollment cliff*, as this crisis is likely to cause a decline in enrollment and tuition dollars that will have severe consequences for HEIs across the country.

Yet, college enrollment rates have steadily increased for all racial and ethnic groups over the last two decades, and students from underrepresented communities (e.g., first-generation, low-income, students of color) are still falling behind their White peers in terms of degree attainment (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). HEIs across America are grappling with ways to serve underrepresented students and to increase their ability to attract a smaller overall pool of students.

Specifically, the University of Mary Washington (UMW) seeks to improve the ways it serves its underrepresented students and to attract an increased market share of underrepresented students moving forward. To accomplish these intertwined goals, UMW strives to improve the access, retention, and graduation of students in the target populations. As researchers, we seek to study the ways in which UMW serves its underrepresented students and to understand student experiences on campus in order to develop a set of recommendations and strategies to enhance the recruitment and retention of Black, Latinx, low-income, and first-generation college students at UMW.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

Despite an increase in diversity among college students, there is inequity in college graduation rates between underrepresented students and their White and higher-income peers (NCES, 2021). The RFA submitted by UMW states the following purpose of this project:

The problem of practice is to assist UMW in determining how to facilitate an accessible and navigable education for underrepresented students and create a community of support through high-touch and student-driven programming/events directed at first-generation and historically marginalized and underserved students from all backgrounds, helping to ensure they feel a sense of belonging and value at UMW. (Appendix A).

This capstone project will study the ways in which UMW serves its underrepresented students, such as Black, Latinx, low-income, and first-generation college students, and the ways in which these students experience a sense of belonging at UMW. Additionally, the project will seek to understand the current institutional culture regarding inclusion and sense of belonging for underrepresented students among UMW faculty and staff. The data gathered in this study will inform the creation of a plan to address how UMW can culturally and organizationally facilitate increased retention and graduation rates and increase access to students from underrepresented populations.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How does the University of Mary Washington (UMW) facilitate equitable access to higher education for Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students?

    a. How does UMW facilitate retention of Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students?

    b. How do Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students experience a sense of belonging at UMW?

2. What are strategies that UMW can implement to facilitate access, sense of belonging, and retention of underrepresented students?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study brings together concepts from three frameworks related to the retention and support of underrepresented students: sense of belonging; student-ready institutions; and diverse student success infrastructure. Building on the interactional model of retention and persistence (Tinto 1975; Tinto 1993), we focus on literature related to sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn 2019), which highlights factors that impact students' decisions to stay in college or to leave higher education prior to graduating. We are particularly interested in understanding the ways underrepresented students experience a sense of belonging at their institutions (Fischer, 2007; O'Hara, 2020; Simmons, 2019; Taylor et al., 2020). McNair's (2016) concept of the student-ready university offers a way to understand what universities can do to orient their programming and culture to the needs of underrepresented students. Additionally, Kezar's (2019) discusses the importance of a diverse student success infrastructure, which encourages HEIs to situate more centrally diverse student needs and assets in institutional decision-making processes.

Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach was used in this study to gather quantitative and qualitative data on how UMW recruits, supports, and retains underrepresented students (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To start, data and document analyses were conducted to inform our understanding of the practices and culture of the institution. We administered two online surveys to collect perspectives from the students (i.e., Black, Hispanic, first-generation, low-income students), administrators, and faculty regarding the culture and organizational practices at UMW. Use of a sequential explanatory design allowed us to use results from the student survey to inform the facilitated focus groups interviews to gain expanded information

about the underrepresented student experience at UMW. Findings for both surveys and the focus

group interviews were analyzed to inform the development of responses to the research questions

and to develop recommended strategies for improvement of support for underrepresented

students at UMW. Specific details of this study related to design and methods are detailed in

Chapter III.

Operational Definitions

The following definitions for key terms and concepts are utilized in this study:

- **Access:** This study moved beyond the traditional understanding of access, which

  typically focuses on pre-college issues. But rather used a broader sense of the term

  inspired by Pierro's (2018), which calls for a bi-directional concept of access - one in

  which focus is given to how both HEIs and students have access to each other and puts

  more emphasis on the sustained needs of the students throughout their college

  experience.

- **Black**: While there is a long list of negative connotations with the color black in the

  English lexicon (Fairchild, 1985), the term "Black" has become a universal identifier that

  encompasses African Americans (direct descendants of enslaved Africans brought to

  America), but also the growing number of immigrants from the Caribbean, African

  countries, and European descent (Cokley, Obaseki, Moran-Jackson, Jones, & Vohra-

  Gupta, 2016). For many people of African descent, the reference of African American or

  Black does not make much of a difference (Castellanos & Jones, 2003). In this study,

  Black is a descriptor to identify individuals from the African diaspora or identify as Black

  or African American in the United States (NCES, 2021). The terms Black or African

American are used when directly citing researchers or participants that have used these terms.

- **Equity:** This study shares the understanding of equity offered by the USC Center for Urban Education, "Equity refers to achieving parity in student educational outcomes, regardless of race and ethnicity. It moves beyond issues of access and places success outcomes for students of color at center focus" (Equity and Student Success, n.d).

- **First-generation college students (FGCS)**: The literature defines first-generation college students in a number of ways (Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton, 2018), however, we chose to define them as students whose parents and/or guardians did not earn a four-year college degree.

- **Hispanic**: There is contention regarding the use of the term's Latina/o and Hispanic and the extent to which these terms are interchangeable (Alcoff, 2005). As defined by the Office of Management and Budget (1978, 1997), which determines the racial and ethnic categories for federal reporting, indicates that "Hispanic or Latino" would refer to "a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race" (p. 58789). Castellanos and Jones (2003) explained that while Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably, particularly across regions, "many groups rejected the term Hispanic because it is too broad and was given to the Latino group without consent...many have argued in history that the term Hispanic does not acknowledge the heterogeneity in the Latino group" (p. xx). Additionally, the term Latinx has emerged in the literature as a gender-neutral or nonbinary alternative to Latino or Latina (Pew Research Center, 2020). The terms Hispanic and Latinx are used when directly citing researchers or participants that have used these terms. However, for

the purpose of this study, we will use Hispanic when referring to this population of students.

- **Low-income**: In this study, "low-income" applies to individuals whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). For example, the federal poverty threshold for a family of four with two children was $39,750 in 2021. We used students' Pell grant eligibility to represent a high financial need for aid support.

- **Persistence**: The rate at which students return to any college until degree completion. Student persistence is something the student does in order to continue in their studies (Ericksen, 2020).

- **Retention**: The rate at which students remain enrolled at one institution from one academic year to the next.

- **Sense of belonging**: Strayhorn (2012) identifies sense of belonging as students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). Sense of belonging is a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an effective response or behavior (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3).

Organization of the Study

This study is organized in five chapters. Chapter I provides an introduction to the problem of practice, our study, and research questions. Chapter II offers a review of the existing literature related to the research topic. Chapter III reviews the methodology that will be used for data collection and analysis. Chapter IV offers the results of the data and document analysis,

survey, and focus group results. Chapter V offers a conclusion and recommended strategies for

UMW.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

The purpose of this chapter is to review existing literature focused on underrepresented student retention, sense of belonging and institutional-level factors that promote accessibility for this student population. This literature review has three sections. The first section identifies, describes, and highlights key factors that determine the higher educational success of underrepresented groups, particularly Black and Hispanic students, first-generation college students (FGCS), and low-income students. The second section draws on the existing literature on retention and persistence to identify the primary factors that determine the higher education experiences and outcomes of underrepresented student groups, particularly in predominantly White institutions (PWI). The third section examines institutional actions that higher education institutions (HEI) can take to best serve the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, particularly the student groups of interest in this study.

Access to Higher Education

In the following section, *access* is outlined as a foundational concept for recruitment, support, and graduation of underrepresented student populations of central interest in this project. Particularly in PWIs, such as the University of Mary Washington (UMW), these students have characteristics that need to be understood and taken into consideration to best meet their needs from recruitment through graduation. We offer an expanded understanding of access that goes beyond entry into college, to also encompass ensuring higher education institutions (HEI) have cultures and structures in place that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of these students.

Equitable Access to and Through Higher Education

Many HEIs have attempted to take a programmatic approach to increase access to higher education for underrepresented students. College access and success programs are typically

designed as supplementary education that focus on preparing students with the necessary academic, cultural, and social skills to be successful in college (Williams, 2019). The barriers to access are deeply rooted and complex. Because the challenges extend beyond enrollment, it is also necessary to understand the relevant program structures, as well as the broader range of college experiences relevant to retention and completion.

The traditional understanding of college access needs to be expanded. The most common understanding of college access focuses on pre-college issues related to recruitment, admission, and enrollment in higher education (Pierro, 2018). Access thus focuses on entry into college and on building a more diverse student population, with less emphasis and concern for the student experience after college enrollment. Pierro (2018) argues that this traditional approach to college access does little for students after they have enrolled in college. Further, Pierro (2018) suggested that an understanding of access that exclusively focuses on student entry into college can be viewed as one-sided in that institutions benefit from the inclusion of diverse student groups. As a result, Pierro (2018) called for a more expansive, bi-directional concept of access-- one in which focus is given to how both HEIs and students have access to each other and puts more emphasis on the sustained needs of the students throughout their college experience. An expanded understanding of access would prioritize a more sustained development and sharing of information, resources, social and cultural capital that are essential to student success (Pierro, 2018). When defined in this way, access fosters a mutually beneficial exchange and relationship between the student and HEI (Pierro, 2018). A culture of access is sustained over time as students and HEIs seek to integrate key elements of access into all parts of the college experience.

Access framed in this way facilitates both equitable opportunities to pursue college

degrees, but also equitable outcomes in earning those degrees. The Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California has coined the term, "equity-mindedness" to refer "to the perspective or mode of thinking exhibited by practitioners who call attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes" (Equity Mindedness, n.d.). Equity-minded campus leaders, staff, and faculty thus prioritize equitable access and outcomes by focusing on actions that are: evidence-based, systemically aware, institutionally focused, equity advancing, and race-conscious (Equity Mindedness, n.d.).

Similarly, the development of a *diverse student success infrastructure* "enables the institution to mobilize to effectively serve a diverse student population" (Kezar, 2019, p. 3). Kezar (2019) argued that campus leaders rarely consider the readiness needed to implement a cultural and structural shift to their infrastructure. HEIs often focus on program and service development without identifying the fundamental aspects of the institution that need realignment in order to support the new programs or services (Kezar, 2019). Further, changes of this sort may be short-lived as leadership or institutional priorities shift and HEIs lack the necessary flexibility to adapt to the changing needs of diverse student populations. As a result, Kezar (2019) calls on HEIs to embed diverse student success infrastructure into their campus culture thereby encouraging regular attention and review of student needs in the institutional decision-making process.

McNair et al. (2016) called for *a student-ready approach* to learning which would ensure that higher education is accessible to all students, particularly to historically underrepresented and underserved populations. The authors recognized that the priority adjustment originates from the structural issues in higher education and may be solved by adopting a more student-centric focus (McNair et al., 2016). We recognize this to be similar to and congruent with Kezar's

(2019) call for an HEI infrastructure that embraces a mindset of accessibility throughout campus culture. Understanding program structures and effectiveness is necessary to overcome the deeply-rooted and complex barriers to access that extend beyond enrollment and throughout the college experience. Therefore, we seek to identify and examine the particular considerations regarding access for the students of interest in this study.

Shifting student demographics within HEIs, particularly in the past 20 years, suggest a need for institutions to change to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse population of college students (see Figure 2.1). According to a report conducted by de Brey et al. (2019) for the National Center for Education Statistics, the percentage of racial minorities in HEIs increased between 2000 and 2016. Specifically, the percentage of college students who identify as Black increased from 31% in 2000 to 36% in 2016 (de Brey et al., 2019, p. 116). More significantly, the percentage of Hispanic students increased 22% in 2000 to 39% in 2016 (de Brey et al., 2019, p. 116).

Figure 2.1

Undergraduate Student Enrollment in Degree-granting Institutions, by Race/Ethnicity
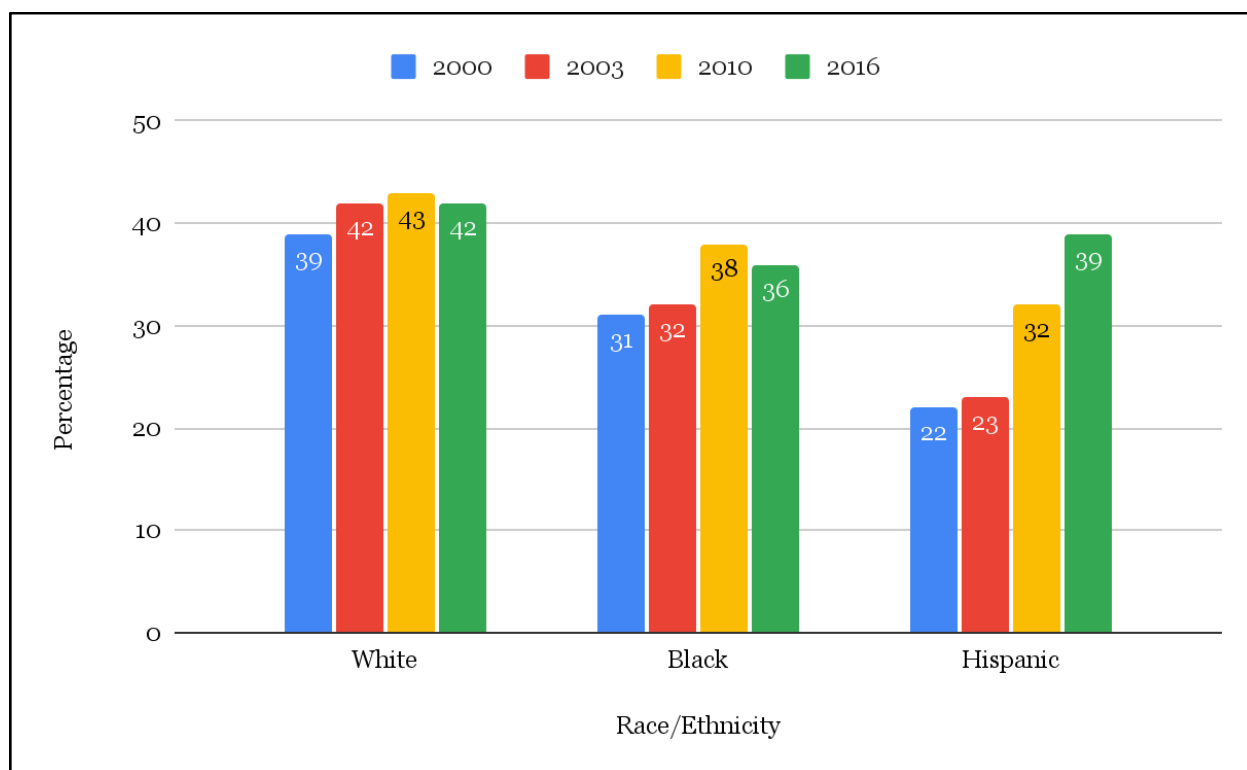
Note. The National Center for Educational Statistics draws this data from the U.S Census Bureau.

At the request of the client, we focus on the following student demographics: Black, Hispanic, first-generation college students, and those from low-income backgrounds. The following section introduces the student groups of central interest in this chapter. Because there are competing ways to define these groups, working definitions of the groups are offered, as well as key enrollment and graduation data for each group. Further, particular attention is given to barriers and challenges faced by each group. It is important to point out that these groups are not homogenous. While there are certain dominant characteristics for each group, not all students fit

these characterizations. However, there are also shared barriers and strengths that need to be understood to best serve these students.

Black and Hispanic Students

The participation of Black and Hispanic students in the U.S. higher education system has steadily improved over the last 20 years. In a 2019 National Center for Education Statistics report, Black and Hispanic students represented 33% of the U.S. undergraduate college population (NCES, 2019). Hispanic students (3.2 million) were second behind White students (9.1 million) in overall enrollment, while Black students followed closely behind (1.1 million) (de Brey et al., 2019, p. 126).

According to U.S. Census data (2021) the high school dropout rate for Hispanic students has fallen significantly from 34% in 1996 to 10% in 2016. While the overall dropout rate in the U.S. has also fallen substantially for all racial and ethnic groups (8.3% in 2010 to 5.1% in 2019), declining dropout rates could explain the rise in higher education participation across all student demographics. Between 2000 and 2016, Hispanic undergraduate enrollment more than doubled (a 134% increase, from 1.4 million to 3.2 million students) (NCES, 2019). While undergraduate enrollment for other racial/ethnic groups increased between 2000 and 2010, data shows a noticeable decrease around 2010. In particular, Black enrollment increased by 73% between 2000 and 2010 (from 1.5 million to 2.7 million students) but then decreased by 17% to 2.2 million students in 2016 (NCES, 2019). Kolodner (2016) offers a possible explanation for the drop in undergraduate enrollment for most students can be attributed to the 2008 recession. Particularly, the fact that public HEIs experienced precipitous cuts in state funding (21%) and steady increases in tuition prices (28%) (Kolodner, 2016). As a result, the rising cost of public

college made it difficult for low-income students and other underrepresented minorities to finish a degree.

Data from National Center of Educational Statistics from 2010-2019 showed that Black students had an increase in degree completion of a high school or a higher degree from 90% to 95%. In the same time period, Black students saw a completion rate from 19% to 28% in attaining a bachelor's degree or higher. Similarly, Hispanic students experienced an 11 point increase in earning at least a bachelor's degree in that same time period (10% to 21%). In comparison, the percentage of White students attaining at least a bachelor's degree increased ten percent (35% to 45%) (NCES, 2019). While there has been some improvement in the graduation rates of Black and Hispanic students, they still lag behind their White counterparts.

How students pay for higher education varies considerably by race and ethnicity, especially in terms of who borrows and who leaves college with high levels of student loan debt. In a 2021 report by Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI), it is reported that more than 70% of Black college students in the 2015-2016 academic year received a Pell grant, which is a type of federal aid for students with the most financial need. In comparison, lower percentages of Hispanic (60%) and White (34%) students received Pell grants to attend college (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). Additionally, in the 2015-2016 academic year, the percentage of federal student loans taken out for higher education by Black and White students, respectively, were 71% and 56% (PNPI, 2021). Espinosa et al. (2019) reported that patterns of financing postsecondary education varied markedly by race and ethnicity. Hispanic undergraduates also borrowed but at lower-than-average rates and accrued lower-than-average debts, whereas Black students were more likely to borrow and left college with higher-than-average debts, regardless of parental income levels (Espinosa et al., 2019).

First-Generation College Students (FGCS)

According to the Center for First-Generation Student Success (2019), 56% of the 2015-2016 class of undergraduate students nationally were FGCS, and 47% of students in four-year public HEIs were FGCS. Despite significant scholarly attention devoted to understanding FGCS experiences in college, one of the fundamental challenges of researching, tracking, and understanding the experiences of FGCS is that there is little agreement among researchers and HEIs about the definition of an FCGS. Toutkoushian et al. (2018) identified eight different definitions of the term, "FGCS," ranging from students who are the first in their families to go to college to students whose parents had some postsecondary education experience but had not earned a degree to students that may not even know their parents' highest level of education. Multiple definitions of FGCS complicate the possibilities of comparisons across studies, as well as processes of policy and program development. Unless otherwise noted, we define an FGCS as being from a family in which no parent or guardian has completed a baccalaureate degree.

While national data indicates that FGCS are predominantly White, the National Center for Educational Statistics reports that (as presented in Table 2.1) the highest percentage of FGCS are White (49%), Hispanic (27%), and Black (14%); Asian students (5%) and other ethnicities account for the remaining five percent (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017). However, as illustrated in Table 2.1, compared to non-first generation college students (NFGCS), a lower percentage of FGCS were White (49% vs. 70%) whereas, among Hispanic and Black students, the pattern was reversed (27% vs. 9% and 14% vs. 11% respectively). FGCS are also more likely to be female, older, Hispanic, and non-native speakers of English than NFGCS (Redford & Mulvaney, 2017; Wang & Joshi, 2018).

Table 2.1

Percentage of FGCS by Race and First-generation Status

	White	Hispanic	Black	Asian	Other
FGCS	49%	27%	14%	5%	5%
NFGCS	70%	9%	11%	6%	4%

Note. The National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018.

According to the Center for First-Generation Student Success (2019), the median family income for FGCS ($41,000) is less than half of that of NFGCS ($90,000). Additionally, NASPA (2019) reports that the retention rate for first-year FGCS at public four-year colleges was slightly lower (82%) than for NFGCS (86%). Correspondingly, the Center for First-Generation Student Success (2019) found that the six-year attainment rate at public four-year colleges for FGCS was much lower (20%) than for NFGCS (49%). FGCS frequently face a range of financial, social, and cultural challenges that interfere with their ability to succeed in college, which might account for these disparities.

FGCS often face challenges in acclimating to college life because they lack immediate family members who have been through the college experience. As a result, they cannot turn to family for advice on how to navigate complex logistical elements of the college experience and they may also lack psychological support and understanding for the new cultural and social experiences that are part of college life (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Further, FGCS might not have the social and cultural capital of their peers with a parent who graduated from college, missing the awareness and preparation for understanding academic expectations, social norms, or navigating the financial and academic bureaucracies of HEIs (Collier & Morgan, 2008). In their

comprehensive book on FGCS, Davis (2010) identifies a challenging dichotomy faced by FGCS between their home culture and campus culture, which brought about feelings of anxiety and identity conflicts. FGCS reported feeling the absence of family support, particularly in terms of psychological support and understanding for their experiences in college (Davis, 2010). However, Gibbons et al (2019) found that for FGCS that family provides crucial ongoing emotional support and motivation for continuing their studies (Gibbons et al., 2019).

Low-income Students

As the cost of attending college becomes increasingly expensive, the challenge of paying for college impacts students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds more. There are various standards regarding what classifies a student as low-income, as such, data and research on this specific student population is often combined with their other identities (e.g., first-generation). NCES defines low-income students as "those whose family incomes fell below 50% of the federally established poverty guideline for their family size" (Chen & Nunnery, 2019). According to the NCES (2018), 34% of undergraduate students nationally were eligible for Pell grants in 2015-16 (the most recent data available). However, a Pew Research study (2019) found that the percentage of lower-income students enrolled in higher education in 2015-2016 has increased 21% in the last 20 years. As illustrated in Figure 2.2, based on National Center for Education Statistics (2019) data, the percentage of students from all demographic groups receiving Pell grants has increased between 2003-2004 and 2015-2016. Universities will need to understand how to best serve the needs of students with increasing economic needs.

Figure 2.2

Undergraduate Students Receiving Pell Grant, by Race/Ethnicity
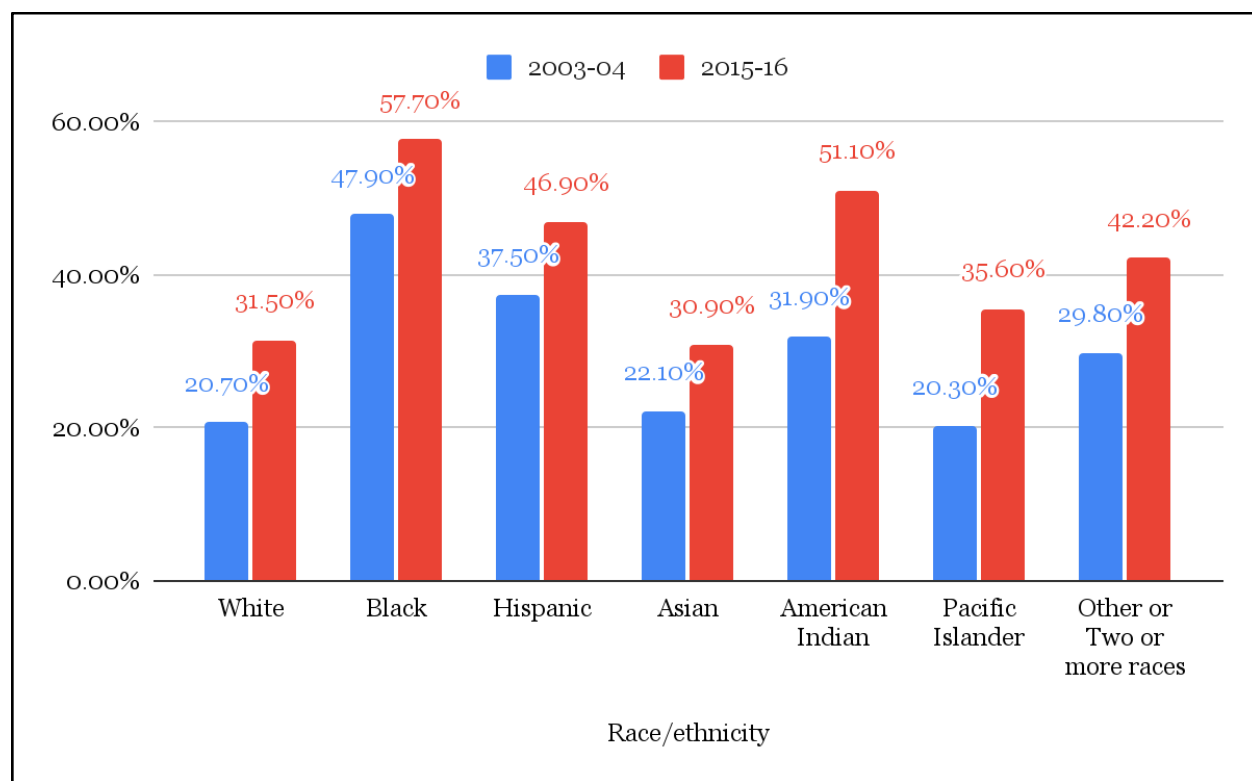
Note. Data adapted from Trends in Pell Grant Receipt and the Characteristics of Pell Grant Recipients, 2019.

Students from low-income backgrounds experience a complex set of challenges associated with college life. A survey by Hoxby and Turner (2015) revealed that high achieving, low-income students lack information about the costs of college. Additionally, Hoxby and Turner (2015) found these students did not have a strong understanding of the differences between institutional types, which may lead to making ill-informed decisions about selecting HEIs. King and Herdt (2019) point out that low-income students' experience "marginalization and encounters with the class- and race-based deficit discourse held by some students, faculty, and administrators" (p. 84).

Asset-Based Approaches to Student Diversity and Accessibility

The ways in which individuals think and talk about students from underrepresented populations can impact how they are supported. Creating an accessible culture for underrepresented students also entails using language and concepts that avoid inherent forms of marginalization. Research suggests that centering non-majority student populations may also promote deficit language that hinders the ability to understand the lived experiences of these non-majority students (Davis & Museus, 2019). This awareness is significant because attention is often given to the perceived deficits found in underrepresented students, as opposed to their skills and experiences that enhance the college environment.

Davis and Museus (2019) identified several detrimental attributes of deficit thinking. First, deficit thinking tends to adopt a "blame the victim" perspective, thereby "disregarding the powerful forces that produce and perpetuate challenges for historically oppressed populations" (Davis & Museus, 2019, p. 122). Second, deficit thinking reproduces classist and racist ideologies, which are also "intertwined with meritocratic ideologies, which misleadingly imply that systemic racism is not a major cause of racial inequities...." (Davis & Museus, 2019, p. 123). Third, deficit thinking becomes deeply embedded in the language and values of educational policymaking and practice. Fourth, deficit thinking perpetuates "a wide array of negative consequences that reinforce oppressive systems and inequities in society and education" (Davis & Museus, 2019, p. 124). Additionally, in their review of literature on FGCS, Ives and Castillo-Montoya (2020) argue that when scholars adopt deficit-oriented perspectives, they "...miss the opportunity to point out the problems within the structures of learning (as opposed to the students)" (p. 153). As a result, we seek to bring awareness that HEIs have an ethical and educational responsibility to do everything in their power, culturally and programmatically, to

facilitate student success for all admitted students (Tinto, 2012).

Higher education scholars have drawn from Yosso's (2005) concept of *community cultural wealth* as a way to conceptualize the strengths of underrepresented groups in higher education, particularly FGCS and underrepresented students of color (Da Graca & Dougherty, 2015; Garriott, 2020). Yosso (2005) points to six forms of cultural capital particularly relevant to understanding the experiences and strengths students bring with them to college: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance. Aspirational capital pertains to hopeful outlooks possessed by these students, despite real and perceived barriers. Linguistic capital pertains to communication skills developed through immersion in multiple cultural contexts, particularly storytelling, use of multiple language registers, or bilingualism. Familial capital is developed through extended familial and community networks prior to coming to college. Social capital is acquired through interaction with "networks of people and community resources (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Of particular interest here is the ways in which students utilize social networks to gain access to higher education. Navigational capital relates to the ways in which students interact with and navigate "social institutions," such as HEIs. Resistance capital is developed particularly in communities of color through "knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80).

Building on the community cultural wealth model, this literature review utilizes an asset-based understanding of underrepresented students and their path to graduation. We recognize that the college environment is enhanced by an anti-deficit approach to student diversity that seeks to celebrate and build on the skills, experiences, and capital possessed by all admitted students. This asset-based approach to student diversity is incorporated throughout the accompanying literature review, mixed-methods research, findings, and subsequent

recommendations.

Retention, Persistence, and Completion

The challenge of seeing students through the entire pipeline from enrollment to graduation is influenced by a combination of factors situated both in the students and in HEIs. In this section, we review the concepts of retention and persistence, which form a foundation for understanding why students remain in college until graduation.

Defining Retention and Persistence

Measuring college student retention can be complicated, confusing, and context-dependent (Hagedorn, 2006). Retention is the rate at which students remain enrolled at one institution from one year to the next. Persistence is the rate at which students return to any college until degree completion. Put differently, NCES defines retention as an institutional measurement and persistence as a student measure (Hagedorn, 2006). In other words, institutions retain and students persist. Maintaining an appropriate account of student retention is one of the most common ways students, parents, and stakeholders evaluate the effectiveness of an institution's reputation and sometimes its funding levels depend on its ability to retain a significant level of its students as proof of academic success (Hagedorn, 2006). A positive reputation increases a college's ability to attract the best students and faculty. Furthermore, departure prior to graduation represents wasted use of institutional resources and may therefore contribute to adverse budgetary conditions for universities with low graduation rates (Hagedorn, 2006).

Interactional Model of Retention

Tinto's (1993) *interactional model of retention* is considered a foundational model for understanding retention. Tinto (1993) framed retention as a dynamic interaction between student

characteristics and behaviors and institutional conditions and actions, including academic and

social features of the college experience. Tinto (2001) suggested that students leave a university

for a variety of reasons: academic difficulty, adjustment problems, uncertain goals, lack of

commitment, inadequate finances, lack of student involvement, and poor fit to the institution.

Additionally, Tinto's (1993) interactional model of retention and persistence conceptualizes the

ways student background or initial characteristics established prior to a student's entry into

college impact the ways students interact with the college context and as a result, their

persistence and retention. These entry characteristics include high school academic achievement,

gender, ability, race and ethnicity, income level, motivation for attending college, and career

aspirations (Tinto, 1993).

Academic preparation, particularly high school grade point average (GPA), has been

identified as an important element of determining college readiness (Attewell et al., 2011;

Duncheon, 2015; Gayles, 2012). Research has identified high school academic performance as a

key predictor of higher education outcomes (Galla et al., 2019). Additionally, high school GPA

is a stronger predictor of postsecondary outcomes than standardized test scores (Geiser &

Santelices, 2007; Westrick et al., 2015). Recent data from the National Center for Educational

Statistics showed that FGCS had lower cumulative high school GPAs than their peers (Redford

& Hoyer, 2017). While Taylor et al. (2020) concluded in their 2020 study that some Black

students may be less well-prepared in high school for the challenges of college based on high

school GPA, they also found that nearly half of Black students (45.5%) indicate a strong desire

to earn a college degree. Hispanic students were much less likely than other groups to report that

they were very sure they would pursue a bachelor's degree (Taylor et al., 2020).

Researchers have highlighted the central role of student commitment to successful degree

completion (Tinto, 1975; Hatcher et al., 1992; Okun et al., 2009; Savage et al., 2019). The level

of incoming commitment has a positive impact on students' likelihood of staying in college

(Tinto, 1993). Commitment is important, particularly for the groups of students of interest in this

study, because it is a more fragile factor than for students in majority groups. Black and

Latino/Hispanic students, FCGS, and low-income students tend to enter college with high levels

of desire to earn their degrees (Fischer, 2007; O'Hara, 2020; Simmons, 2019). However,

researchers have also found that particularly for these groups of students, commitment can be

undermined in explicit or more subtle ways that they might not belong in higher education.

Academic and Social Integration

A student's academic and social experiences after entering college also impact decisions

about remaining in school. The ways in which students perceive their university experiences is

influenced by the degree to which a student integrates, academically and socially (Astin et al,

2012; Campbell & Mislevy, 2013; Seidman et al, 2012; Tinto, 1975). Academic integration

involves academic performance as well as other forms of academic engagement. Tinto (1975)

offered the following definition of social integration, which focuses on interactions and

relationships with students, staff, and faculty: "Social integration occurs primarily through

informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and interaction with

faculty and administrative personnel within the college" (p. 107). Academic and social

integration can act as mutually reinforcing forces, which can promote a stronger sense of

belonging in college.

Students who perform better academically are more likely to be better integrated into

their college experience (Attewell et al., 2011; Gayles, 2012; Stewart et al., 2015). In addition to

academic performance, academic integration also involves a range of significant institutional

experiences that impact retention and persistence, including formal and informal academic

interactions with faculty members, as well as staff and administrators (Tinto, 1993). Academic

integration is about more than academic success, it also involves the ways in which students

connect with their academic experience, particularly their instructors and classmates. Tinto

(2007) explained that "the classroom is, for many students, the one place, perhaps only place,

where they meet each other and the faculty. If involvement does not occur there, it is unlikely to

occur elsewhere" (p. 4).

Bean (1980) emphasized the importance of understanding the ways in which HEIs impact

student commitment through the ways they might increase or diminish student satisfaction with

the institution. Strayhorn (2019) emphasized the importance of these sorts of campus

interactions:

> By interacting frequently and in positive ways with others on campus, students establish
>
> meaningful relationships (e.g., friendships) with peers and personnel, which, in turn,
>
> affirm that they are seen, cared about, and needed by others. Supportive relationships of
>
> this kind become critical resources that can be brought to bear on the college experience.
>
> Strong support networks tend to enhance students' commitments, campus connections,
>
> and, consequently, retention (p. 17).

Similarly, the more socially involved a student is in university activities, in both formal and

informal ways, the more likely that student will be retained (Astin & Oseguera, 2012). Students

are thus impacted by the ways in which they interact with their peers both within the academic

context and the broader social context of the university.

When students are well-integrated academically and socially, they are more likely to feel

positively about their experiences in college and therefore they are more likely to persist to

graduation (Tinto, 1993). Academic integration is closely aligned with academic performance or success. Building on the work of Kuh et al (2006), York et al. (2015) identified six core components of success: (a) academic achievement, (b) acquisition of skills and components, (c) attainment of learning outcomes, (d) satisfaction, (e) persistence, and (f) career success. The key distinction between academic integration and academic success is that academic success is more focused on discrete academic outcomes, whereas academic integration may involve more attitudinal elements, such as a student's interest or commitment to a particular field of study or topic. Similarly, York et al. (2015) argued that student satisfaction with their achievements might be an important element of integration, but it should be distinguished from academic success.

In response to this criticism, Tinto recognized that HEIs are made up of "multiple communities that attract and serve students from an array of backgrounds...it is important for students to find some form of community membership that helps them to feel connected to the campus, not that they need to assimilate in order to persist" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). The concept of membership instead of integration was intended to capture these multiple communities on college campuses and the diverse affiliations students bring with them (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

The use of Tinto's (1993) seminal framework has been used by numerous researchers to test the factors leading to a college student's departure and retention. However, critics of Tinto's framework around student integration have noted that the nature of integration (Tierney 1992), overuse of sociological issues (Braxton, 2020), and the applicability of many aspects of Tinto's model to students from non-traditional and diverse backgrounds (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, Davidson & Wilson, 2013) has raised some questions about its suitability to understanding the experiences of underrepresented students. Similarly, Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) stated "students

who are not traditional in terms of race/ethnicity, age, and full-time enrollment status, the

assumption is that in order to succeed in college (i.e., to persist) students must become integrated

into the college environment by abandoning their history, heritage, and outside interests" (p.

415).

Retention and Completion Rates

Despite a 2% decline due to COVID-19, national retention rates have remained largely

stable for over a decade (*Persistence & Retention*, 2021). Since 2009, the national persistence

rate has hovered between 73.8%, the low point in 2011, to the 2019 high of 76.3% (*Persistence*

& Retention, 2021). Nonetheless, students from the student populations of interest here are less

likely to be retained and persist to graduation. Once enrolled in college, Soria and Stebleton

(2012) report that FGCS are less likely than their peers to be retained into their second year of

college, in part, due to lower levels of academic engagement. Based on data from the National

Student Clearinghouse (see Figure 2.2), students attending four-year public institutions in the

2019 entering cohort, Asian (92.8%) and White (87.7%) students surpassed the overall retention

and persistence rate of 84.1%. However, the retention and persistence rate for Hispanic (80.7%)

and Black (78%) students lagged behind the national average. Not only is retention and

persistence for Hispanic and Black students below the national average, but Hispanic students

also experienced a 1.3% decline in the retention and persistence rate since 2018 (*Persistence &*

Retention, 2021).

A report by de Brey et al. (2019), using NCES data, identified racial disparities in degree

completion. Larger percentages of White (35%) and the Asian (54%) population aged 25 and

older have completed a bachelor's degree or higher in 2016 than Black (21%) or Hispanic (15%)

populations. Additionally, ten years after sophomore year in high school, a lower percentage of

FGCS had obtained a bachelor's degree compared to their peers (20% vs 42%) (Redford & Mulvaney, 2017).

Figure 2.2

Four-Year Public Institutions in the 2019 Entering Cohort
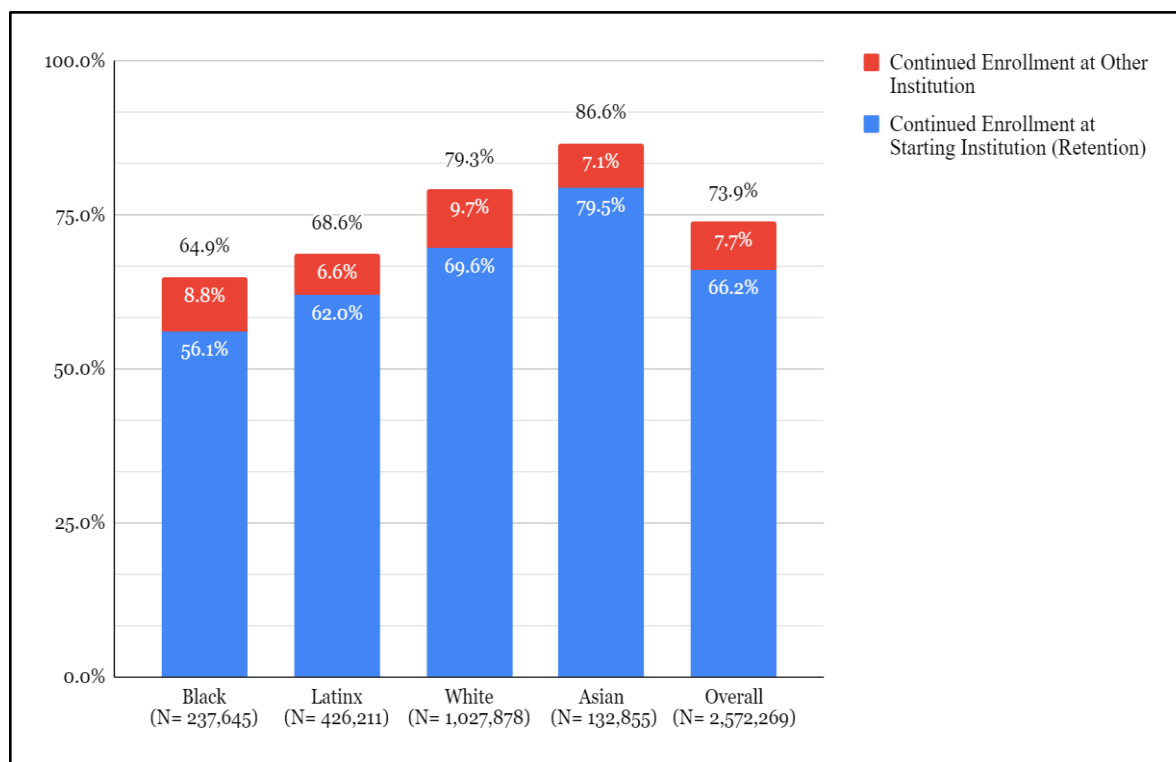
Note. Adapted from *First-Year Persistence & Retention 2019 Beginning Cohort*, 2021.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is among the most important factors in retention and persistence, particularly for underrepresented groups of students. According to Strayhorn (2008), sense of belonging can be defined as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feelings cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers" (p. 4). Hausman et al. (2007) argued that sense of belonging is

integrated in student persistence. Strayhorn (2019) expands the understanding of how sense of

belonging is experienced by undergraduate students and the responsibility of administrators and

faculty to cultivate it.

> To excel, students must feel a sense of belonging in schools or colleges, and therefore
>
> educators must work to create conditions that foster belongingness among all students.
>
> And we do this through any number of ways, including engaged teaching, providing
>
> academic supports, campus activities, positive messaging..., and striving to build learning
>
> communities where everyone's voice matters. And when educators do not concern
>
> themselves with students' sense of belonging, they conspire in the academic failure of
>
> their students. (p. 17)

Sense of belonging is enhanced when students feel academically capable and socially

comfortable in college. Feelings of confidence and comfort with the rigors of academic life

significantly impact student decision-making about whether or not they should remain in college.

In their analysis of a nationally representative survey of first-time, first-year U.S. college

students in 2011-2012, Gopalan and Brady (2019) found a positive association between

belonging and persistence, use of campus services, and mental health. However, Gopalan and

Brady (2019) also found that FGCS and racial and ethnic minority students experienced a

diminished sense of belonging compared to their peers. Developing a firm sense of belonging is

crucial for those who might feel different or marginalized on their campuses. Sense of belonging

is particularly important for students of color and other underrepresented groups, especially for

those that attend PWIs (Strayhorn, 2019).

The promotion of a college-going culture is essential to retention and persistence,

particularly for marginalized students where commitment and motivation to attend and graduate

from college can be undermined when they feel or are unprepared for the academic rigors of

college (Havlik et al., 2020). However, Davis (2010) concluded that when FGCS, for example,

feel competent and comfortable navigating the higher education experience, they are more likely

than their peers to succeed in college.

The challenge of acclimating to college can be impacted by a diminished sense of

belonging. Student commitment to the institution can be undermined when institutions

communicate (intentionally or unintentionally) that the student does not belong. Racist

interactions with faculty and staff create stress for students of color and are a significant factor in

student decisions about staying in school (Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017). Racist

encounters also diminish students of color's sense of belonging in higher education (Black &

Bimper, 2020). As a result, students also report feeling a lack of institutional support.

Many university-sponsored initiatives have been developed to provide academic and

social support and to build a sense of belonging necessary for students to be successful in the

college system. It is important to understand how students engage with university-sponsored

support services and the effectiveness of these programs in enhancing the college student

experience. Throughout the literature, underrepresented students report the influence formal and

informal programming has on their college readiness, engagement, and academic performance

(Moore, 2013; Patterson, 2021). For many, a collaborative and comprehensive model of

institutional action that extends throughout their student experience is found to create

connections among all parts of a student's life, including school, home, work, and community

(Torres, 2006). HEIs have particular responsibilities to develop programming and cultures that

facilitate a sense of belonging and community for FGCS, low-income students, and racial and

ethnic minorities.

Institutional Interventions and Support

Research brings attention to the role the institution has in influencing college student retention (Bean, 1980; Braxton & McClendon, 2001; D'Amico Guthrie & Fruiht, 2020; Pierro, 2018). Underrepresented students, including Black, Hispanic, FGCS, and low-income students report the impact effective faculty-student relationships and campus programming have on their ability to learn the university system and feel a sense of belonging in the campus community (Pierro, 2018; Simmons, 2019; Torres, 2006). Overall, accessible institutions that demonstrate the cultural readiness to engage various student populations are proven best equipped to retain and graduate all students. This section focuses on institutional factors that influence retention: cultural responsiveness, institutional agents and culture, institutional programming, and support.

Importance of Culturally Responsive Practices for Institutional Readiness

Existing literature emphasizes the significance of developing *culturally responsive* practices in support of the increasingly diverse college student population. Gay (2000) described culturally responsive practices as the use of "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them" (p. 29). Scholars consider these practices as those that seek to understand and attend to the cultural characteristics that make students different from one another and from their instructors (Gay, 2002; Rychly & Graves, 2012).

Gay (2000) argued that educators fail to see the need to be culturally relevant. When it comes to underrepresented students, Gay (2000) found that educators focus attention on their perceived shortcomings or deficits, which fails to hold educators and HEIs accountable for their responsibility in students' learning experiences. The educational experience is compromised because an instructor may not appreciate the value of the students' identity and the significance

of including it within the creation of the curriculum, as the relationship between student and instructor cultural identity may influence educational outcomes. In this context, culturally responsiveness is radical as it seeks to legitimize and validate the role of culture in the educational experience and calls on HEIs to adapt to meet the needs of underrepresented students (Gay, 2000).

Culturally responsive practices are ideally demonstrated when HEIs are prepared in advance of a cultural change or crisis. Dessource et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of developing culturally responsive practices, essentially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and continued social justice movement. When HEIs are prepared to disrupt and dismantle barriers to learning by enhancing the services, support, and other practices, faculty, staff, and students benefit.

McNair et al. (2016) discussed the significance of a student-ready approach, which called for significant adaptation to accommodate diverse student needs; a structural shift may be necessary for HEIs to embrace a student-centric focus in all parts of campus. In so doing, it is critical that HEIs evaluate their institutional culture, climate and readiness to provide culturally responsive practices. In order to make the cultural and structural shift needed to HEI infrastructure, campus leaders should evaluate the current status of the institution (Kezar, 2019).

The evaluation of the institution can inform the readiness of the campus to address specific barriers that marginalized students may face on their campus. An organizational readiness for change assessment (ORCA) can be used to identify the readiness of an organization and its stakeholders, including university faculty, staff, and administrators, to implement a specific goal, such as becoming more culturally responsive.

ORCAs were initially developed by Lehman et al. (2002) to understand Texas Christian University's readiness to make changes in the areas of technology transfer, with an emphasis on understanding organizational climate and staff attributes in relation to possible or planned changes. ORCAs have been used to assess individual and organizational capacity for change by focusing on factors such as motivational readiness by leaders and staff members, organizational culture factors, and institutional resources (Lehman et al., 2002; Miake-Lye et al., 2020).

Lehman et al, (2002) emphasized the importance of *motivational readiness* because it has "a facilitating effect on organizational climate, and increased motivation by the program director can lead staff to reshape organizational goals and openness to change" (p. 198). Motivational readiness can be understood as the perceived internal or organizational need, pressure, and readiness for change, with particular attention to motivation and perceptions of need for improvement (p. 199). *Organizational culture* focuses on understanding perceptions of the clarity of mission and goals, staff cohesiveness, staff autonomy, openness of communication, stress, openness to change (Lehman et al., 2002). *Institutional resources* can include physical resources, such as office space or facilities, and other less tangible resources such as the number and quality of staff, in addition to the training resources available to organizational staff and personnel to facilitate desired changes (Lehman et al., 2002).

While there is a great deal of variety in the content and use of ORCAs, Miake-Lye et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of developing assessments appropriate to particular contexts and change situations. ORCAs have the advantage of being easily tailored to particular institutional conditions and goals and to identifying areas in need of change at UMW and developing appropriate strategies to implement those strategies, with particular focus on motivational readiness by leaders and staff members, organizational climate, and institutional

resources (Lehman et al., 2002) both at organizational and individual and collective levels. (Miake-Lye et al., 2020). By illuminating the current status of an institution and its personnel, ORCAs can help an institution gain a greater understanding of the shift necessary to become more culturally responsive and accessible to student needs.

Institutional Agents and Culture

College faculty, staff, and administrators are examples of the *institutional agents* most responsible for acting on behalf of their institution and influencing campus culture (Perrio, 2018). The actions of individual institutional agents reflect the overall institutional culture and readiness to support diverse student populations. In particular, Museus (2014) described *culture* as the extent to which the campus environment engages cultural identities and reflects the needs of the student population. The actions of institutional agents also influence a student's academic, social, and cultural experience (Museus, 2014).

Students who feel supported and connected to the campus community have greater college student retention and degree completion (Weaver, 2019). One way for students to feel connected to the institution is through relationships with faculty. Connections made through faculty-student relationships to the culture of the institution are found to influence college student retention (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Stephens et al., 2012). For example, in their study of unseen disadvantages for underrepresented students, Stephens et al. (2012) found that a culture of interdependence and shared community help reduce the sense of difficulty and performance gaps without having an adverse impact on other students. As a result, it is important to understand how institutional agents and culture contribute to underrepresented college students' feelings of support and connectedness.

Faculty and staff serve as *campus cultural agents* – prepared to connect students to

campus resources, validate their identities and provide a supportive learning environment

(Schademan & Thompson, 2016). Schademan and Thompson (2016) examined college faculty

readiness to support FGCS and low-income students and found that faculty beliefs about student

academic readiness impacted the degree to which faculty could serve as cultural agents. In their

study of college faculty and students, Schademan and Thompson (2016) found that

predetermined personal beliefs and expectations for students impacted faculty perceptions and

willingness to support students. Specifically, instructors who acted as cultural agents felt it was

their responsibility to adapt their teaching style and educational content in order to better support

student development. Conversely, when faculty demonstrate an unwillingness to work with

students they perceive as being academically unprepared, student participants reported an

absence of connection or a diminished sense of belonging in the university. For these reasons,

Schademan and Thompson (2016) recommended that colleges bear a greater responsibility in

supporting and developing faculty as campus cultural agents for underrepresented students. For

example, they advised HEIs promote adaptability as a teaching style and foster a culture that

promotes a developmental view of student readiness.

The faculty-student relationship promotes connectedness and support for students

unfamiliar with the university system and campus community. A study of FGCS and low-income

students found that many students were intimidated by the idea of seeking faculty support, which

created feelings of a lack of support from their faculty (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice,

2008). Simmons (2019) discovered similar reports of the faculty-student relationship in their

study of underrepresented students of color. Torres (2006) found that the availability of faculty

has a positive relationship on the college student. Feeling connected with faculty and mentors

helps students understand the university system and encourages them to seek out advice on

academic and personal decisions (Torres, 2006). Resolving this dilemma may require action on both sides of the faculty-student relationship. Specifically, colleges need to be strategic and systematic in finding ways to develop faculty-student interactions for underrepresented students (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Simmons, 2019). Likewise, colleges should also encourage these students to see faculty and other institutional agents as potential mentors and role models (Davis, 2010).

It is possible that the academic and institutional culture, itself, serves as a barrier for underrepresented students. In a nationwide survey of university administrators, Stephens et al. (2012) found that the university culture causes a mismatch in supporting FGCS. Specifically, it was found that university cultures that promote student independence (i.e., paving one's own paths) may make academic tasks more difficult and undermine students' performance, particularly for students unfamiliar with academic culture (Stephens et al., 2012). Conversely, it was found that university cultures that promoted a sense of interdependence (i.e., being part of a community) reduced the performance gap for underrepresented students (Stephens et al., 2012). For this reason, Stephens et al. (2012) recommend that higher education practitioners recognize cultural obstacles, such as ideas about community, endorsed by the institution that may contribute to achievement differences between student populations and develop interventions to address them.

Institutional Programming and Support

In this chapter, much research is dedicated to studying the various types and the perceived effectiveness of institutional programming and support. The purpose of this section is to focus on the numerous approaches HEIs take to providing university-level programming and support to underrepresented students. Specifically, a review of these wide-ranging programmatic

efforts will encourage a greater understanding of each initiative's effectiveness in supporting the college student experience.

Campus Programming

Participation in student clubs and organizations is found to have a positive impact on underrepresented students (Chaudhari, 2016; Moore, 2013). Pierro (2018) suggests that campus programming can reduce the inequities of power relations found in the formal institutional structures of higher education. The author emphasized the impact informal education has on underrepresented students by allowing them to see themselves as equal contributors and valuable members of the campus social and learning community. Further, campus programming organized to encourage equity among students in the campus community has been found to foster a greater sense of belonging among students (Pierro, 2018). Specifically, campus programming that includes academically focused and peer mentor-driven programs successfully enhance a student's social capital by introducing them to faculty and peer mentors. The building of community and integrating the presence of faculty in informal and social contexts is a critical piece to enhancing student access to institutional information and resources (Pierro, 2018).

Relatedly, Moore (2013) found that involvement in on-campus activities gave students an outlet and increased sense of belonging. This is significant for underrepresented students who may have a decreased sense of belonging on their campuses. Benefits of campus programming include receiving support from peers, feelings of community and shared experiences (Moore, 2013).

While informal campus programming promotes access and equity among students, Bassett (2021) found that the opt-in structures of support (i.e., student-initiated requests) often promoted in informal programming may exacerbate barriers to receiving support. Specifically, it

assumes students are aware of their needs and are prepared to seek out support. As such, Bassett (2021) recognized that relationships with peer mentors or program support staff may reduce obstacles that keep students from participating in campus programming.

Institutional Support

As state support for higher education has significantly decreased, HEIs have been forced to be more reliant on tuition dollars thereby making retention a higher priority (Shuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2012). Universities have developed a number of programmatic responses to increase retention and persistence, particularly of FGCS and low-income students. In the section below, we discuss ways in which research has considered how various types of campus structures and programs impact student retention and persistence.

Federal Government Support Programs. The Higher Education Act of 1965 expanded access to higher education to many Americans. It created a financial aid program and established campus-based support services aimed at assisting underrepresented students once they arrived on college campuses (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). These campus-based support programs offer eight different precollege and retention programs (e.g., Educational Opportunity Center, Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement, Student Support Services, Talent Search, Training Programs for Federal TRIO program staff, Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math-Science, and Veterans Upward Bound) under the umbrella known as TRIO, which were designed to provide additional resources for FGCS and low-income students. The goal of TRIO is to provide additional assistance and support to FGCS, disadvantaged and low-income students to pursue a post-secondary education after high school graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). For example, the Talent Search program identifies and assists individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to succeed in higher education. The program

provides academic, career, and financial counseling to its participants and encourages them to graduate from high school and continue on to and complete their postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). These additional resources supplement the high school experience, especially at schools that lack strong academic programs to prepare students for a college curriculum; TRIO programs also provide information and available resources to prepare students for college matriculation (Perna, 2002).

Student Support Services (SSS), is a grant funded program through TRIO that HEIs must compete for to provide students with opportunities for academic development, assist with basic college requirements, and to motivate students toward the successful completion of their postsecondary education. SSS projects must provide students with academic tutoring; assist student's awareness of financial aid and other scholarship products; completion of financial aid application; and provide individualized counseling for personal, career, and academic development. Most significantly, TRIO programs develop an increased sense of belonging and connection between student and institutional agents who care about student success.

Orientation and Pre-Enrollment Programming. Pre-enrollment programs assist incoming students with the transition from high school to college, forms of pre-enrollment programs include summer bridge programs and summer orientations. Summer bridge programs introduce new students to campus academic and social support prior to enrollment to enhance their academic success and to promote retention and higher degree completion rates (Cabrera et al, 2013). The focus, length, related cost, and structure of bridge programs vary widely, but their fundamental purposes are to provide students with the resources they need to be college-ready and to further a college's efforts to recruit, retain, and graduate underserved populations. Topics discussed in summer bridge programs include: time management skills, encouraging utilization

of university services (e.g., library), exposure to university faculty and mentors, remediate academic skills, inform students about campus life, orient students to institutional culture, help develop social networks, focus goals, and help students begin college with a positive outlook (Cabrera et al, 2013; Stolle-McAllister, 2011). These programs also encourage academic self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and academic and social skills. However, research on the effectiveness of summer bridge programs has been mixed.

In an effort to measure the effect of participating in a summer bridge program on preparation for college among underrepresented low-income students of color attending a selective PWI, Strayhorn (2011) found that summer bridge programs had a significant impact on increasing academic skills and academic self-efficacy for participating students. However, it was also found that summer bridge participation was less effective at benefiting the social elements of the college experience, including development of social skills and a students' sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2011). Cabrera et al. (2013) found that while summer bridge participation positively impacts first-year grades and retention, there is little evidence its benefits continue through the student experience in higher education as compared to non-participating students. This challenges the assumption that summer bridge programs have a long-lasting impact on retention beyond the first year.

Raines (2012) researched the effectiveness of the FirstSTEP Scholars program on academic achievement and retention of underrepresented STEM majors during their first year at Middle Tennessee State University. FirstSTEP Scholars program is a two-year enrichment program supported by the National Science Foundation which provides financial and academic support for participating students which addresses mathematics deficiencies of incoming freshmen through structured mathematics instruction, peer-led learning, individualized study

plans, mentorship, summer stipend, academic and career advising (MTSU, 2020). Findings

highlighted a positive impact on participant's academic performance and persistence rates into

their sophomore year. The study also highlighted the importance of faculty-student interaction to

assist students in building connections to course content and to help develop career goals

(Raines, 2012).

The University of Maryland at Baltimore's (UMB) Meyerhoff Scholars program is an

intensive six-week residential program for talented, underrepresented minority STEM students,

which focuses on the strengths of its participants rather than remediation (Stolle-McAllister,

2011). Through an intense academic schedule, intentional and intensive socialization activities,

professional development, and meetings with program staff and premier scientists, students come

to understand what is expected of them academically at the institution, and what they could

expect from themselves (Stolle-McAllister, 2011). Stolle-McAllister (2011) studied the

programmatic effectiveness and social elements of UMB's Meyerhoff Scholars' summer bridge

program through the lens of social and cultural capital. It was found that these activities helped

bolster participants' academic, social, and professional skills. While community-building and

networking aspects of the summer bridge program increased students' social capital by forging

networks of peers and granting them access to the circuits of institutional authorities, their

cultural capital is intentionally developed through their exposure to the norms of their

professional fields (Stolle-McAllister, 2011).

Schwartz et al. (2019) examined how social capital could be cultivated for FGCS through

empowerment skills in a study to determine the effectiveness of the Connected Scholars Program

(CSP). The findings suggested that the 164 participants experienced improved attitudes and

networking abilities to seek out support in college, establish closer relationships with instructors,

and increase GPAs in comparison to non-participants at the end of their first year in college. CSP focused on cultivating the skills and attitudes needed to forge connections with an array of college instructors, staff, and mentors who could help advance students' academic and career goals, without actually creating a formal mentoring relationship. During the four-week intervention, students participated in a series of group-based lessons including: (a) instruction and discussion of the role of social capital in advancing goals; (b) activities designed to help students identify current and potential connections; and (c) experiential activities and real-world practice reaching out to and cultivating supportive relationships, with a focus on reaching out to university faculty and staff (Schwartz et al., 2019). The findings of this study emphasized mentorship to support students' academic and career development.

Academic Advising. Academic advising is an intervention that addresses a multitude of student needs at HEIs. Described in the literature as a systematic and developmental process, academic advising involves a student and an academic advisor establishing a relationship to facilitate decision making, resource identification, problem-solving, and goal setting in the advisee's personal, professional, and academic endeavors (National Academic Advising Association, 2003; Crooker, 2009). Oftentimes, advising services are located in either an academic department or a centralized advising unit that services a whole school, academic advisors are typically in the best positions to assist students in making quality academic decisions (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Schwartz (2019) suggested that the only variable that has a direct effect on student persistence is the quality of a relationship with a significant member(s) of the college community. Therefore, academic advisors are in a unique position to form lasting relationships with students and to connect students with faculty to foster supportive relationships.

Proactive advising, also known as intrusive advising, has shown to be effective with students who encounter significant academic difficulty, particularly when that difficulty is caught early and when interaction with academic advisers is part of the intervention (Schee, 2007). For example, Schee (2007) found students who had three to eight meetings with an adviser had greater academic success than those who attended fewer meetings. Additionally, it was suggested that a five-meeting sequence that addresses current coursework, preparation for the next registration period, and the creation of a plan to prepare for finals facilitates academic success in students (Rodgers, Blunt, & Trible, 2014). Swecker et al. (2014) investigated the relationship between the number of meetings with an academic advisor and retention of first-generation students. It was found that the chances for retention of a student increased by 13% every time they met with their academic adviser. Individual student effort to meet with the adviser may also demonstrate their connection to the institution, which strengthens retention and student success (Swecker, et al., 2014). When connecting first-generation and other underrepresented students with the resources necessary to persist, colleges and universities create environments conducive to student satisfaction and thereby capitalize on their retention efforts.

Comprehensive Programming. While individual programs such as those discussed here provide important support for students, according to Kezar and Kitchen (2020), there is value in the combination of comprehensive and integrated models for programming support. Comprehensive programs are those with a broad range of service areas organized within a single program. Kezar and Kitchen (2020) argued that together "there are opportunities embedded in integrated and comprehensive programs to structure support across multiple contexts within which institutional agents can proactively promote student success" (p. 225). Similarly, Holcombe and Kezar (2021) found

that it is the creation of a unified community of support that positively impacts student

success and also leads to new ways of working for staff and faculty on campus. These

unified communities of support break down the traditional barriers between departments

and divisions, namely academic affairs and student affairs, and integrate support for

students across these boundaries.... (p. 26).

In combination, both comprehensive and integrated support can bring meaningful campus

programming that promotes success for the students of interest in this project.

Chapter Summary

The college student experience is complicated, particularly for FGCS, students from low-

income backgrounds, and Black and Hispanic students. Retention and persistence require a

comprehensive effort from the university, institutional agents, and students. Thus, university

administrators and faculty should strive to provide a welcoming and supportive environment for

students, particularly those from populations that are vulnerable to early departure from college.

It is important that institutions demonstrate understanding of the barriers students experience as

well as factors that promote retention. The burden of action needs to be on the institutions to find

ways to support under-represented students. Importantly, Kezar (2019) points out that focusing

on institutional action "moves from a deficit approach in which students are seen as a problem

that higher education needs to accommodate to institutions being deficit in not having the

appropriate knowledge to address today's students" (p. 5). Chapter III details the methods

utilized to investigate the experiences of underrepresented students currently enrolled at the

University of Mary Washington. Additionally, the following chapter describes our

recommendations for the implementation of institutional programming and the development of

the organizational culture needed to best support student retention.

Chapter III: Methodology

A review of existing literature identified key factors that determine higher educational success of underrepresented groups, particularly Black and Hispanic students, first-generation college students (FGCS) and low-income students. As outlined above, students from these targeted groups face particular challenges in their efforts to earn undergraduate degrees. These challenges often relate to disconnection with their higher education institutions (HEIs) and to a lack of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2011). There is an urgent need to address these barriers as there is a growing population of Black, Hispanic, low-income, and first-generation college students. University administrators, staff, and faculty have the opportunity to create a welcoming and supportive environment for students, particularly for those from populations that are vulnerable to early departure from college. When universities are able to demonstrate an understanding of the barrier's students experience, they are subsequently able to develop cultures and programs that promote retention through graduation (Strayhorn, 2019).

Using a combined theoretical framework focused on a diverse and student-ready infrastructure, this study aims to support the University of Mary Washington's (UMW) goal of increasing the retention and graduation of underrepresented students. The following chapter is organized to detail our main research questions regarding access, retention, and sense of belonging. We identify the setting of the study and the participants, including UMW students, faculty, and staff. Finally, this chapter will describe the population, data collection and analysis procedures, as well as issues related to research trustworthiness and possible limitations.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

In support of the University of Mary Washington's (UMW) goal to improve the retention and graduation of underrepresented students, we seek to understand how the university recruits, supports, and retains non-majority populations (e.g., first-generation, low-income, students of color, and other underrepresented student groups). To accomplish this, the institution seeks to better understand recruitment, institutional support, and retention of underrepresented students (e.g., first-generation, low-income, students of color, and other underrepresented student groups) can be improved. The purpose of this study is to develop a plan for UMW to promote an accessible education for first-generation and historically marginalized students from all backgrounds, and to enhance students' sense of belonging and retention through relevant programming and interventions. In doing so, this study seeks to develop strategies for the target populations that may promote and support increased retention and graduation rates. The research questions guiding this study are designed to determine what programs and services facilitate academic achievement, success and retention for the target populations. The research questions are:

1. How does the University of Mary Washington (UMW) facilitate equitable access to higher education for Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students?

   a. How does UMW facilitate retention of Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students?

   b. How do Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students experience a sense of belonging at UMW?

2. What are strategies that UMW can implement to facilitate access, sense of

    belonging, and retention of underrepresented students?

Theoretical Framework

Due to shifting demographics within higher education, HEIs need to adopt more inclusive

cultures and practices to meet the needs of the underrepresented groups of interest in this study.

This project embraces a framework of college access that extends beyond considerations of

recruitment and entry to college. This understanding of college access also encompasses the

ways HEIs create comprehensive cultures, infrastructures, and practices that are responsive to

academic and professional needs and aspirations of these students. It also facilitates a sense of

belonging and community that promotes successful advancement to graduation. As illustrated in

Figure 3.1, this study combines concepts from three frameworks related to the retention and

support of underrepresented students: sense of belonging, student-ready institutions, and

culturally-diverse infrastructure.

Figure 3.1

Theoretical Framework
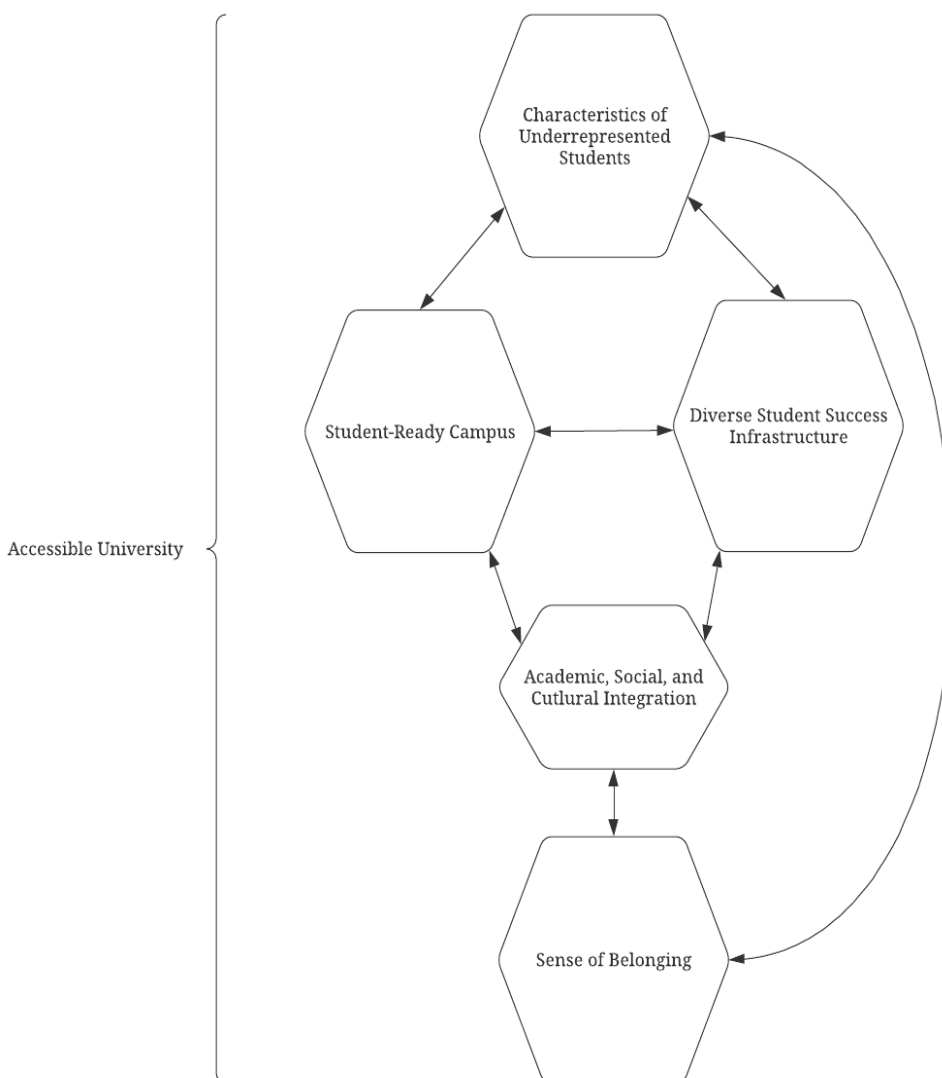
Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is a concept rooted in the literature on retention and persistence. Tinto's (1975, 1993) interactional model of retention and persistence helped subsequent researchers understand the importance of academic and social integration in student decision-making about whether to remain or depart from college. Academic integration represents the

steps students take towards achieving academic success, to include course completion, managing

grade expectations, and persistence towards degree completion (Toliao, 2017). Various

researchers have found that academic integration is considered as essential as social integration

during the first year and it is critical for the academic success of underprepared college students

(Collier et al., 2008; Tinto, 2007), increasing the potential for persistence and degree attainment.

Building on the interactional model of retention, Strayhorn (2008, 2019) further focused

attention on the importance of students' sense of belonging in college. The degree to which

students feel that they belong in college and in a particular institution, academically, socially,

and culturally significantly impacts their feelings about themselves as students as well as their fit

in the colleges they have chosen to attend (Strayhorn, 2019). Sense of belonging is not only

described as a basic human need powerful enough to drive action (Strayhorn, 2012), but also has

been found to have both direct effects on institutional commitment and indirect effects on both

the intention to persist and the actual reported persistence decisions of students in postsecondary

education (Hausmann, et al., 2009). By conceptualizing student experiences and decision-making

in this way, our framework takes into account characteristics students bring with them to college,

such as their status as a first-generation student, ethnicity, or economic background. The addition

of sense of belonging also highlights the importance of actions HEIs take that influence the

student experience in college and how institutional actions can influence recruitment, retention,

and graduation.

Student Ready Institutions

McNair et al. (2016) defined a student-ready institution as one that "strategically and

holistically advances student success and works tirelessly to educate all students for civic and

economic participation" (p. 13). They discussed the importance of a student-ready approach in

which significant institutional adaptation is required to accommodate diverse student needs. This structural shift can help institutions embrace a student-centric focus in all parts of campus and lead to institutional improvement and organizational learning. McNair et al. (2016) emphasized the importance of higher education institutions to evaluate their institutional culture, climate and readiness so that they can provide culturally responsive practices appropriate to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Diverse Student Success Infrastructure

Kezar (2019) states that diverse student success infrastructure (DSSI) "enables the institution to mobilize to effectively serve a diverse student population" (p. 3). A diverse infrastructure entails "three core areas related to change and systemic support for student success: implementation, sustained interventions, and, ultimately, culture change" (Kezar, 2019, p. 2). Student success infrastructure conceived in this systematic way offers the possibility of long-term sustained change in the way HEIs support underrepresented students. Specifically for this study, DSSI relates to organizational structures and culture supporting underrepresented students and will provide direction to answer our second research question, specifically, regarding the actions and strategies that promote access, sense of belonging, and retention of underrepresented students.

Both McNair et al. (2016) and Kezar (2019) emphasize the importance of collaboration and integration of efforts across campus units to best support underrepresented students. By connecting McNair et al.'s (2016) student-ready approach to building a diverse and inclusive campus with Kezar's (2019) call for the creation of a diverse student success infrastructure, our theoretical framework highlights the ways in which HEIs need to situate more centrally diverse student needs and assets in institutional decision-making processes, cultures, and practices.

Mixed Methods Design

This study used a mixed methods approach by combining quantitative and qualitative research components (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kezar, 2019; McNair et al., 2016; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). By adopting these principles, we incorporated techniques that allow understanding of the current context of interest at UMW and the ability to determine appropriate recommendations that are both significant and attainable for the university. A mixed methods design supports this approach as it incorporates both qualitative and quantitative research components with the goal of strengthening capstone conclusions (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). The combined design facilitates inquiry into the experiences of multiple groups (e.g., students, staff, faculty), while also generating ideas for feasible solutions.

The qualitative design utilized a phenomenological focus by allowing participants to share their lived experiences and perspectives related to supporting or being an underrepresented student at UMW (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). More specifically, the collective stories shared by participants were analyzed to describe "the essence of the experience of all individuals" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75) and to develop an understanding of the organizational culture at UMW.

As shown in Figure 3.2, we used a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach with UMW faculty, staff, and administrators (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach allowed us to build on the first phase of quantitative data collection (i.e., survey) was followed by the collection of qualitative data (i.e., focus groups) (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). We collected survey data from a representative sample size of the UMW undergraduate community to draw comparisons with the target student group and inform our qualitative study phase. These findings were used to inform the focus group interviews. Because students represent the target

population and beneficiaries of the capstone recommendation, focus group interviews enabled us to collect an in-depth perspective of the underrepresented student experience at UMW (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

Multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended survey data were collected from participants simultaneously and integrated into the research findings. At the same time, information was gathered from student participants in a similar survey focused on their experiences at UMW. This practice of collecting survey responses from both participant groups helped us identify commonalities, confirming and conflicting data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Collecting quantitative and qualitative data supported our efforts to validate findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Figure 3.2

Overall Research Approach
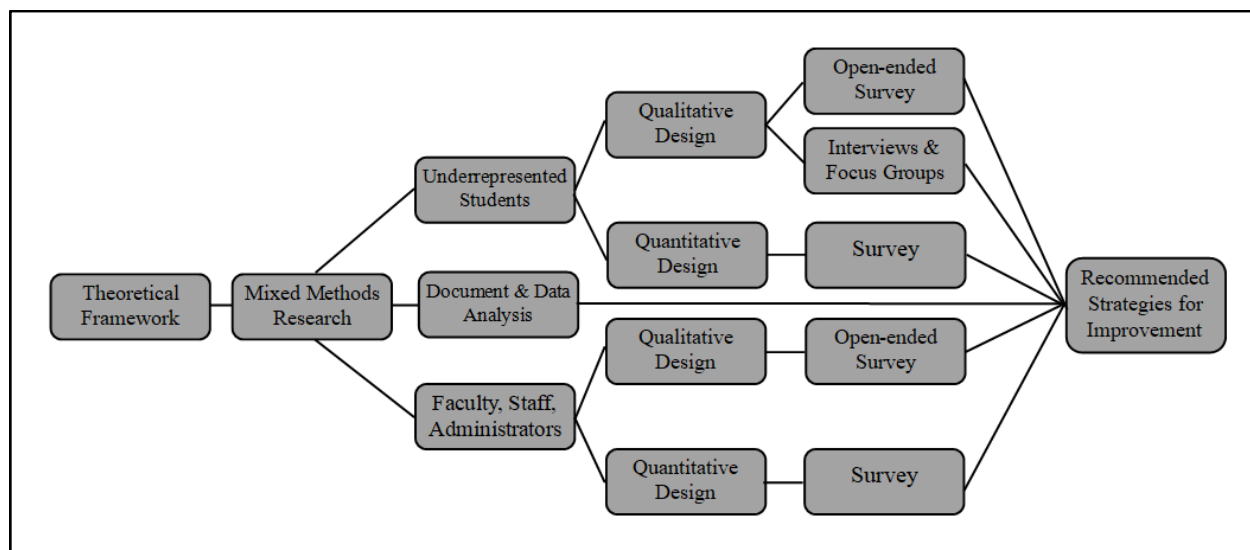
Setting

Located in Fredericksburg, Virginia, the University of Mary Washington (UMW) is a small public, liberal arts college with approximately 4,000 undergraduate students and 150

graduate students. UMW reports that approximately 28% of the UMW student population self-identifies as a racial or ethnic minority (Fast Facts, 2021). Approximately 55% of the undergraduate student population lives on-campus. UMW offers undergraduate degrees in a range of over 50 majors, including: Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education, Bachelor of Science in Nursing, and Bachelor of Liberal Studies (Fast Facts, 2021). Cost of tuition and fees for the 2021-2022 academic year is $13,770 for Virginia residents and $30,196 for non-Virginia residents (Undergrad Tuition and Fees, 2021). The student demographic information of UMW is outlined in Table 3.1 (SCHEV, 2021).

Table 3.1

Student Demographic Information.

Race	Number	% of UMW student population
White	2,722	68.1
Hispanic or Latinx	435	10.9
Black or African American	315	7.8
Multi-Ethnic	212	5.3
Asian or Pacific Islander	135	3.4
Unknown	146	3.7
International	28	.07
Total	3993	

Note. This data is drawn from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) website for fall 2020.

In 2018, about one-third of UMW's undergraduates were first-generation students, which included nearly 400 freshmen (Morrison, 2018). IPED data reported in 2018-19, 42% of all

undergraduates received a federal loan and 20% Pell grants, which is considered low-income for the purpose of this study.

According to UMW's admissions website (2021), freshmen enrollees for the Fall 2020 semester included an average 3.71 high-school grade point average. The group's average SAT ranged from 1090-1260 and had a composite ACT score of 23-30 (Office of Admissions, 2021). Nearly 30% of the entering students in the Fall 2020 term identified themselves as racially or ethnically diverse (Office of Admissions, 2021). Further, UMW's 2020 freshmen represented 24 states, while a majority coming from Virginia and neighboring mid-Atlantic states (e.g., Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, North Carolina). The admissions process at UMW offers two online application methods where students can submit their personal and academic information, letter of recommendation, and admission fee (Office of Admissions, 2021). Prospective high school seniors have the option to participate in an interview as part of the admissions process.

According to the UMW academic catalog (2021), undergraduate students are considered full-time by enrolling in 12-credit hours per term. Students are expected to maintain a 2.0 GPA in order to remain in good academic standing. Exact credit hours may differ by program, however, most undergraduate students at UMW can expect to accumulate 120 credit hours and 2.0 cumulative GPA to qualify for graduation (Academic Catalog, 2021).

Data Collection Procedures

In this study, data were collected through document and data analysis, surveys, and focus group discussions. Document and data analysis examined recent enrollment and retention trends for underrepresented students, as well as several recent institutional diversity and inclusion initiatives at UMW. All undergraduate students were invited to take a survey, as were executive

and senior leaders, staff, and faculty who work frequently with these students. The student

survey focused on issues related to their sense of belonging at UMW. The executive and senior

leader, staff, and faculty survey assessed the organizational readiness, both for individuals and

the collective institution, for adopting more inclusive and culturally-responsive practices and

culture.

Survey Population

Guided by our research questions, participants for this study included (a) enrolled

students identifying with one or more of the targeted underrepresented groups (Black, Latinx,

low-income, FGCS); (b) all other UMW students; and (c) executive and senior leaders, staff, and

faculty (see Table 3.2). Participants were selected based on their ability to meet the criteria of the

study.

Table 3.2

Survey Populations

Group	Type of Inquiry	Sample Criteria
Students identifying with underrepresented groups	survey and focus groups	Current UMW students who identify or are identified as Black, Hispanic, first-generation, low-income
All other UMW students	survey and focus group	All other UMW students who don't identify with underrepresented groups
Executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty	survey	UMW executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty who work frequently with these students (i.e. academic advising, admissions representatives, student accounting)

Survey

We developed two survey tools to help address each research question. The primary purpose of the surveys was to assist us in gaining a better understanding of how UMW's existing practices promote access to higher education among all enrolled students and determine institutional agents' understanding of these practices. Survey results lead us to develop recommendations to address gaps in existing programs identified in the survey. More specifically, we focused survey questions on UMW's efforts to promote retention and students' experiences of a sense of belonging. We used a cross-sectional approach to survey the identified faculty, staff, administrators, and students based on their experiences at one point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Survey findings were used to develop strategies that UMW can implement to promote access, a sense of belonging, and retention of the students in the underrepresented populations.

Student Survey. We developed a student-focused survey, UMW Sense of Belonging Student Survey (belonging survey), which was sent to all UMW undergraduates, approximately 4,000 students (Appendix D). The student belonging survey consisted of Likert scale questions and open-ended questions to gather the students' voice. We used RedCap, a secure web application used by Virginia Commonwealth University for building and managing online surveys and databases, to administer the belonging survey.

The belonging survey utilized items from four studies that measured sense of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2003), academic engagement (Yorke, 2016), self-efficacy (Chen et al., 2001), and racial climate (Hurtado et al., 1997). Each item used a five-point Likert scale, and responses ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. For sense of belonging (questions 15a - 15j), were adopted from Hoffman et al. (2007) sense of belonging survey. The academic engagement component (questions 28a - 28e) included items from Yorke's (2016) belongingness survey. The

racial climate component encompassed (questions 15k - 15p) items from Hurtado et al.'s (1997) work. We used these questions to understand the UMW student populations' sense of belonging in three dimensions: social belonging, academic belonging, and perceived institutional support. The survey contained approximately six questions that describe the four demographic background variables: racial/ethnic identity, parental education level, family income, and gender. Additional items inquired about students' involvement on campus, commitment to the university, and academic advising support.

A convenience method was used for distributing the internet-based survey to students. Recruitment emails were used (see Appendix B) to solicit participation in the research study. Students were offered a chance to enter a raffle for a $25 Visa gift card if they fully completed the survey. They were also given the option to opt-in for focus group invitations (see Appendix C).

Survey for Executive and Senior Leaders, Staff, and Faculty. An organizational readiness for change assessment (ORCA) was developed and administered to gather information on UMW's organizational culture, structure and readiness to increase access to the university's support and retention services (Appendix E). Executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty were asked to complete the ORCA to determine UMW's readiness for change connected with our recommendations. Utilizing concepts and structures developed by a number of researchers who have used ORCAs previously (Lehman et al., 2002; Miake-Lye et al., 2020; Weiner, 2009), we designed an ORCA for UMW to assess the attitudes about organizational support for underrepresented students, as well as attitudes about perceived need for and willingness to change.

The ORCA survey included 75 Likert scale questions and three concluding open-ended questions (Appendix E) designed to solicit findings helpful for answering two of our research questions: *How does UMW promote retention of Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students?* and *What are strategies that UMW can implement to promote access, sense of belonging, and retention of underrepresented students?* In particular, questions fit within the four categories. The *context* category assessed respondents' understanding and perception of current situations regarding underrepresented students. *Motivational readiness* assessed perceived need and pressure for change. *Institutional resources* include understanding of actual resources available for implementation (training, money, personnel, facilities, etc.). *Personnel attributes* pertain to the ability of personnel to carry out the change, which includes considerations such as efficacy, adaptability, and capacity.

A convenience method was used for distributing the internet-based survey to executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty. Recruitment emails (see Appendix F) were used to solicit completion of the survey. The client disseminated drafted recruitment emails using existing institutional listservs.

Focus Group Interviews. Participants in the focus group interviews included survey participants who expressed interest in participating and those identified using a convenient sampling approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Based on availability, we organized, scheduled and facilitated four focus group interviews that included a total of 18 participants. In an effort to collect diverse perspectives from UMW students, all UMW students were invited to participate. Personal email invitations were sent to UMW students who expressed interest in participating in a focus group interview after completing the belonging survey. Additionally, the client disseminated drafted recruitment emails to the UMW student population using existing

institutional listservs (see Appendix C). Confirmation and reminder emails were automatically

sent to registered participants via the Zoom video conferencing platform.

Each interview used a semi-constructed interview protocol that included eight primary

questions, also with supportive prompts or relevant follow-up questions as necessary based on

the group's initial responses (see Appendix G). Results and trends from the belonging survey

were used to inform research questions of the focus group. Coupling results from the belonging

survey with dialogue obtained from focus group participants served as major contributors to our

final capstone recommendations (Elliott, 2020).

<div align="center">**Data Analysis**</div>

Document and Data Analysis

We examined the UMW website to better understand the existing services, structures, and

personnel supporting underrepresented students. Further, we requested supporting information

from the UMW to understand the profile of their undergraduate students, particularly those in the

populations of central interest to this project: Black and Hispanic students, FGCS, and students

from low-income backgrounds. Specifically, the previously submitted documents for analysis

related to student admissions, retention, graduation rates, and participant information for the

Rappahannock Scholars Program and Student Transition Program.

In addition, drawing from data provided by the UMW clients, we analyzed trends in

enrollment, retention and completion, and student engagement, as well as participation in current

support programs available for these students. Employee demographic information, such as race,

ethnicity, and gender, was also incorporated in the analysis. With this information, as well as

knowledge from the literature review and personal experience, we designed a final draft of the

belonging survey, as well as the ORCA survey to be administered to executive and senior

leaders, staff, and faculty. Central themes and trends identified in the process of document and data analysis were also utilized to create an institutional profile of UMW and for the development of strategies to improve the ways in which UMW recruits and retains underrepresented students.

Survey

Survey data were analyzed by exporting data from Redcap into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. We performed descriptive statistical analyses to identify averages, percentages, and other trends in the survey data. SPSS® was used to analyze participant survey responses from both the UMW Sense of Belonging Student and the UMW ORCA surveys. Further, the triangulation process allowed data from both surveys to be compared across all research methods; including a comparison of results to focus group interviews.

Focus Groups

Student focus group interviews were administered virtually using video conferencing (e.g., Zoom). All focus group interviews were video recorded and transcribed using Zoom's software programming. Participants were provided with an overview of their informed consent, were offered an opportunity to ask questions and demonstrated their willingness to participate in the study (via gesture) prior to recording the group interviews. Transcripts were created using a combination of VCU's Kaltura MediaSpace and verified for accuracy by each researcher.

Prior to coding the transcripts, we assembled the most prevalent themes and concepts from this study's literature review, and a theoretical framework focused on sense of belonging (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn 2019), student-ready institutions (McNair, 2016), and diverse student success infrastructure (Kezar, 2019). The resulting four codes that guided the first-cycle of qualitative coding are described in

codebook format in Appendix G: social engagement, academic engagement, institutional engagement, and belonging. Once the research team developed the codebook, we coded all focus group transcripts independently and then reviewed as a group to identify trends and differences across the data.

A combination of inductive and deductive reasoning was used to identify and classify codes while using categorical aggregation to establish patterns across the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Coding allowed us to investigate the key elements of our research questions; including access, engagement and belonging. Further, exploration of the data and interview transcript allowed us to form direct interpretations and generalizations of the focus group results. We were able to recognize themes and key ideas from student focus group discussions to inform responses to our research questions as well as proposed strategies for improvement for UMW. These findings were influenced and supported by the previous analysis of data, documents, and survey results.

Triangulation

In order to satisfy the purpose of a sequential explanatory mixed-method design, we combined qualitative and quantitative data so that results may be analyzed and mutually corroborated (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). Doing so enhanced validity and created a more complete understanding of the problem of practice, which ultimately enhanced the responses to our research questions and capstone recommendations (Flick, 2018).

Data comparison across participant types (i.e., students, faculty, staff) was critical to understanding each group's experience, needs, and capacities at UMW. As shown in Figure 3.3, our mixed methods design was enhanced by incorporating a triangulation process (Flick, 2018). For example, our use of sequential explanatory mixed methods design for student participants

allowed us to use the quantitative and qualitative data from the belonging survey to inform the subsequent focus group interviews. Specifically, we performed coding and interpretation between each phase of research. Information found during the student focus groups revealed how students perceive and experience existing programming, and to what extent do they report a sense of belonging at UMW. This information was compared to themes identified from both the belonging survey and ORCA survey to identify commonalities or differences in participants' experiences at UMW.

Figure 3.3

Model Triangulation Plan
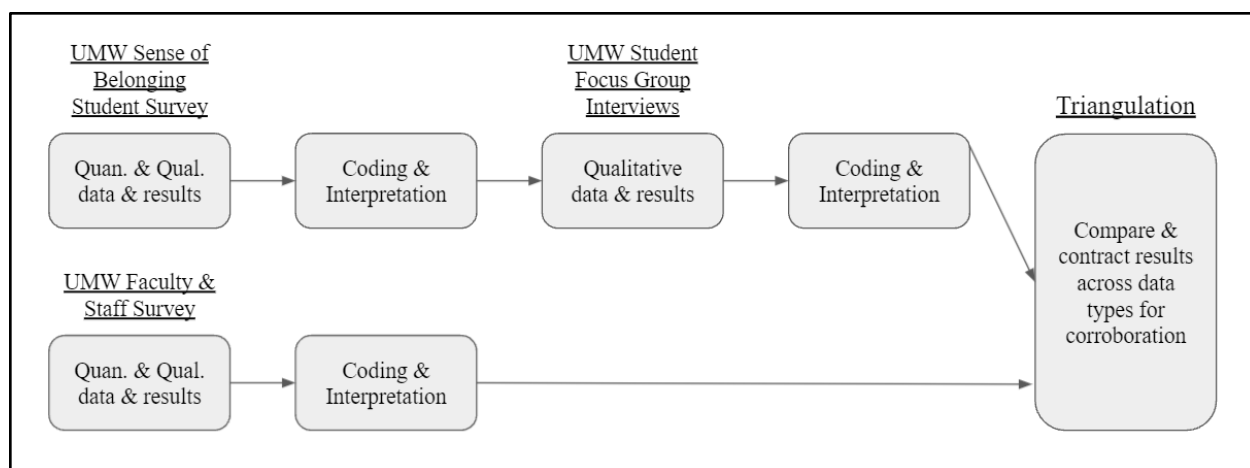
Results from the belonging survey and focus group interviews informed our responses to RQ1 regarding how UMW promotes access to higher education for Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students. More specifically, how UMW promotes retention and how students from the groups of interest experience a sense of belonging at UMW. Combined quantitative and qualitative data from UMW students were coded and interpreted by our research team to bring deeper understanding and context to our response to RQ1: *How does the University of Mary Washington (UMW) facilitate equitable access to higher education for*

Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students? For example, we were able to make comparisons between the results of students in the target population, those not in the target population, and the results of all UMW students. Information collected from UMW students at all phases of the study was used to inform RQ2: *What are strategies that UMW can implement to facilitate access, sense of belonging, and retention of underrepresented students?*

We coded and interpreted the ORCA Survey results to inform our understanding of institutional culture and readiness. These findings were compared to the feedback we received from UMW students during the triangulation process. Data collected from UMW faculty and staff was used to inform our response to RQ1 regarding how UMW promotes access to higher education for Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students and RQ2, which focused on recommended strategies to enhance access, sense of belonging, and retention of underrepresented students.

Trustworthiness

Anonymity of survey participants was preserved by removing identifiable information prior to analysis. Survey responses were assigned anonymous Record IDs in REDCap in the order of survey completion. To protect the privacy of all participants in the study, only the research team had access to the survey results during data collection and analysis. Further, focus group interviews were conducted in private and secure spaces, such as hosting in-person interviews in private on-campus meeting rooms and using secure Zoom meeting links. All data were housed in institutional cloud storage for enhanced security and all paper notes were secured in a locked cabinet in one of the researcher's offices. All notes and records with identifiable features will be destroyed after completion of the study.

Because some participant identifiers are considered key contributors to this study, we recognize that complete anonymity is not possible. In particular, the setting of the focus group may make it difficult to guarantee participant confidentiality. As such, we encouraged participants to see the focus group as a safe space by providing them with procedures to maintain confidentiality and request they not repeat or share the contents of the focus group with those not in attendance. As shown in Appendix I, participants were notified of these procedures in the informed consent form and provided the opportunity to ask questions prior to participating in the study. The final report uses pseudonyms in place of real names and professional titles are protected by using generic terms (e.g., faculty, staff, senior leaders).

In order to establish trustworthiness, we triangulated the findings from each step of the research (Flick, 2018); including the use of data and document analysis with results of surveys administered to UMW faculty and staff and the survey and focus group results from student participants. We used coding to draw comparisons across various data types to identify salient themes that inform responses to the research questions. The research project concluded with comprehensive recommendations to be presented to the client.

Study Limitations

This study was limited by the number of students, executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty we are able to survey. We understand that the results of our surveys may have been limited by people's willingness to participate in a survey at a time when their attention is divided among school, work, and personal matters in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the limitations of time and resources affected our ability to conduct extensive individual interviews following the surveys. While we would have liked to survey and speak with students

who have opted to leave UMW, we understand this was not feasible in the limited contexts of this research project.

To complete this study in an expedited manner, we relied largely on convenience sampling techniques, which potentially limited the number of respondents as well as the breadth of perspectives of the respondents. While people have become much accustomed to using Zoom, we realize that depending on Zoom for interviews and focus groups may have limited participants' comfort with speaking to us.

As researchers external to UMW, we were invited to come in and ask questions that might be perceived as challenging to the existing culture of UMW. This outsider status might have opened some opportunities for frank and open discussions that might not have been possible with people affiliated with UMW, it is also possible that it might have limited people's comfort with speaking openly with us. While the we worked diligently to limit the scope of our analysis to the parameters established in the research questions and the theoretical framework, it is always possible that our individual biases impacted our interpretation of all stages of the research: document and data analysis, survey, and focus groups. To help minimize potential bias, we worked together to code the focus group transcripts. We also sought to be attentive to possible expressions of bias in our analysis and communication of our findings and recommendations.

Chapter Summary

Students from underrepresented groups, particularly Black and Hispanic students, first-generation college students (FGCS) and low-income students, face challenges in their efforts to earn undergraduate degrees. In particular, we sought to identify ways to improve the accessibility of UMW for these student groups by developing a more student-ready and culturally-responsive

university through comprehensive programming, structures, and campus culture.

Using a mixed-methods approach, we surveyed UMW students, executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty from the groups of interest. This study aimed to understand UMW students' experiences and perceptions related to access, retention, and sense of belonging at UMW. The findings from this research are detailed in chapter four. Based on the research findings, we sought to identify key areas of potential improvement, particularly in terms of support and retention of underrepresented students and to offer concrete recommendations for UMW to create a stronger sense of belonging and inclusion for its underrepresented students.

Chapter IV: Data Analysis & Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how the University of Mary Washington (UMW) recruits, supports, and retains underrepresented students (e.g., first-generation, low-income, students of color, and other underrepresented student groups). This chapter outlines the data analysis and research findings from the study's quantitative and qualitative phases to answer the research questions that guided this study. Both phases were necessary because quantitative data alone would not provide sufficient explanation regarding the experiences of students, staff, faculty, and executive leadership. The outcomes of this research can assist UMW to provide an accessible education for first-generation and historically marginalized students from all backgrounds, and to enhance students' sense of belonging and retention through relevant programming and interventions. The research questions addressed in this study were:

1. How does the University of Mary Washington (UMW) facilitate equitable access to higher education for Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students?

    a. How does UMW facilitate retention of Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students?

    b. How do Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students experience a sense of belonging at UMW?

2. What are strategies that UMW can implement to facilitate access, sense of belonging, and retention of underrepresented students?

This study used a sequential explanatory design mixed methods approach to collect data from UMW students, executive and senior leadership, staff, and faculty. Multiple choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended survey data was collected from participants and integrated into research findings. Results from the Sense of Belonging Survey of UMW students and Organizational

Readiness for Change Assessment (ORCA) of executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty were used to inform the subsequent points of emphasis used in the student focus group interviews. The practice of collecting survey responses from both participant groups made it possible to identify commonalities, confirming and conflicting data. This chapter reports on results from both phases.

Document Analysis

We reviewed relevant background data to better understand the university, its mission related to diversity and inclusion, and trends related to enrollment of underrepresented students. The UMW website contains a statement of "Our Principles on Diversity and Inclusion," which emphasizes commitment to the values of diversity and inclusion both in terms of university programming and university administrative structure. In addition to a prominent position in UMW's stated mission, UMW has undertaken several recent wide-scale initiatives related to improving the culture and practices of inclusion at UMW. According to the UMW website (*Task Force Recommendations AY 2017-18*, n.d.), a Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion was appointed by President Troy Paino in 2016. The work of the task force culminated in a set of recommendations for academic year 2017-2018 addressing:

- Administration and Accountability
- Statement of Community Values
- Data Collection
- Curriculum
- Cultural Competency
- Student Activities
- Faculty Recruitment

- Student Recruitment
- Community Support
- Bias Reporting
- Athletics
- Campus Environment
- Institutional focal point for equity and access

- Communications

Task force recommendations focused largely on data collection, assessment of needs, and the development of programming in these areas. However, it is also important to note that one of the central themes of the recommendations is the need for more coordination of programming, activities, and planning regarding diversity and inclusion. These recommendations were presented to a subcommittee of the Board of Visitors in May 2017. UMW websites offer no indication beyond 2018 that progress was made on the outlined recommendations.

It should be noted that in November 2017 an updated strategic plan was approved by the Board of Visitors. The plan included a goal stating, "Creating a diverse and inclusive community as an essential requirement for academic excellence and academic success" (p. 5). The goals outlined include a twelve-step action plan (see Appendix H). The strategic plan goals related to diversity and inclusion focus on promoting a coordinated and accountable administrative structure that prioritizes diversity and inclusion, campus-wide training regarding diversity and inclusive practices, the recruitment and retention of more diverse faculty and staff, development of recruitment plans designed to attract underrepresented minority students, and to ensure that academic and student life support services meet the needs of all underrepresented students and are accessible to the students who need them.

Despite the central place of diversity and inclusion in UMW's mission and recent institutional goals, UMW has experienced declining undergraduate enrollment since 2012 (SCHEV, *Higher Ed Info for Virginia*, 2022). Figure 4.1 illustrates the decline in fall undergraduate enrollments at UMW since Fall 2012.

Figure 4.1

UMW Fall Undergraduate Headcount
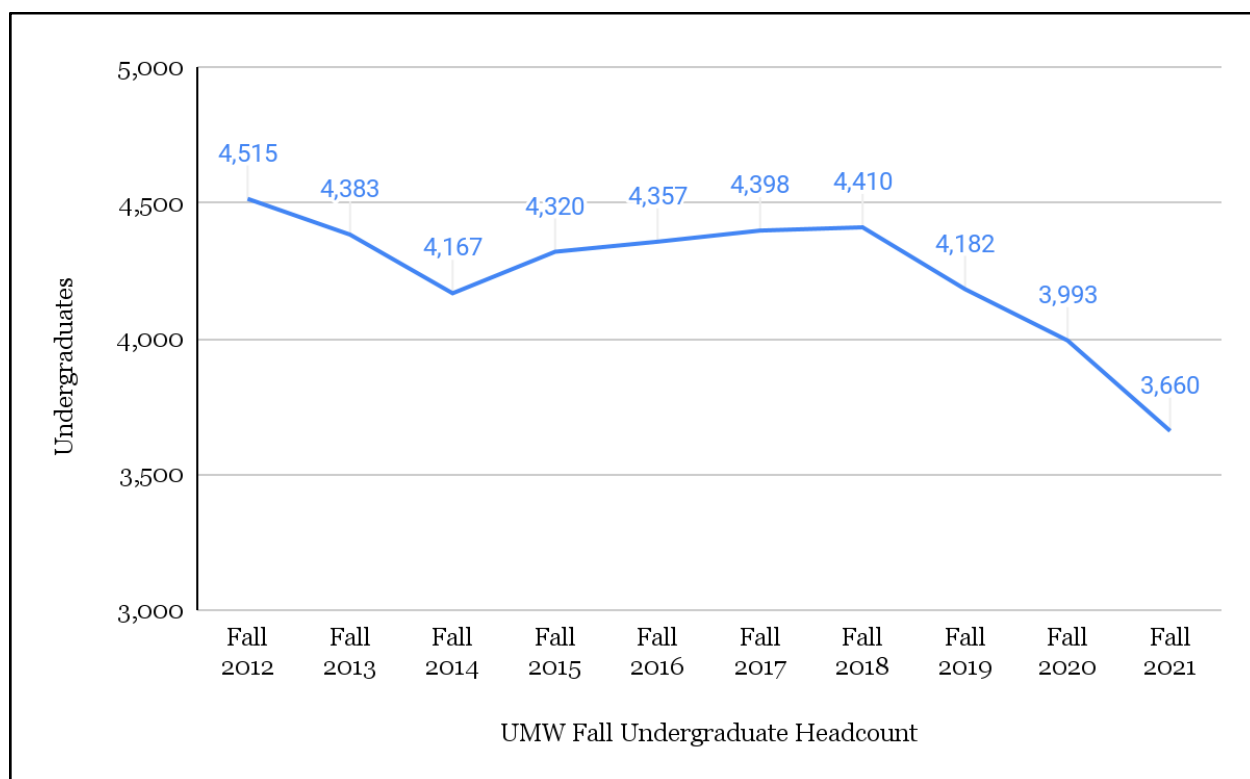
Note: From (SCHEV, *Higher Ed Info for Virginia*, 2022)

Figure 4.2 demonstrates the 6-Year graduation rates among the target student groups in this study, including Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, and Pell Grant recipients. As shown below, the six-year graduation rate for Black/African American students has declined in recent years from 56% to 48.1% between 2010 and 2014. Hispanic/Latino students at UMW also experienced a decline from 64.3% in 2010 to 58.6% in 2014. These findings support the urgency to enhance how UMW recruits, supports, and retains underrepresented students.

Figure 4.2

UMW 6-Year Graduation Rates (Hispanic/Latino, Black or African American, Pell Grant Recipients)
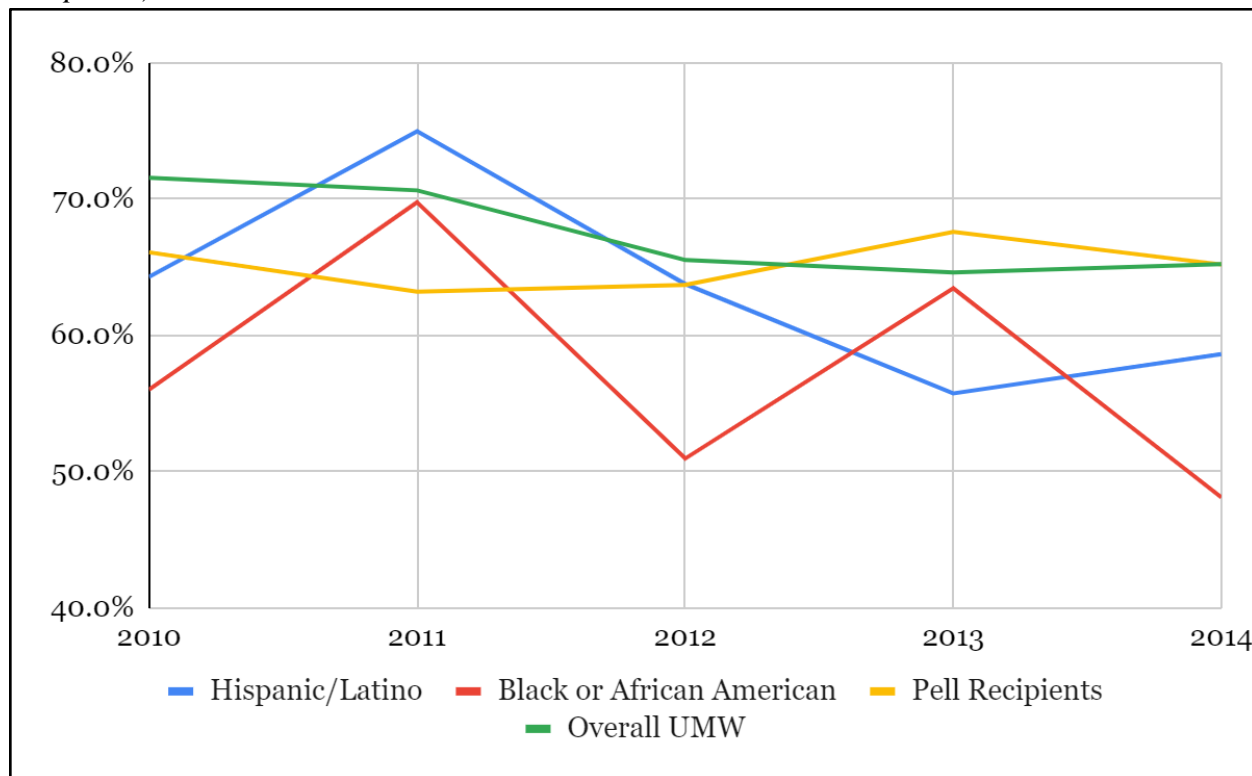
Note: Adapted from "Retention and Graduation Rates," by NCES, 2022,

(https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=university+of+mary+washington&s=all&id=232681#re

tgrad).

Table 4.1 demonstrates the racial make-up of UMW staff, faculty, and management. As

shown, the 10-year employment rate for Black/African American employees (8.93%) at UMW

has been consistent and representative of the current Black/African American student

populations (7.9%). However, the rate of Hispanic/Latinx employees (4.13%) at UMW lags

behind the current proportionate enrollment of Hispanic/Latinx students (10.9%) in 2021. These

findings support the urgency to enhance how UMW recruits, supports, and retains employees

who represent the racial diversity of the student body.

Table 4.1

Total Demographic Percentages of Faculty, Management, and Staff

Total %	Non-Resident Alien	Hispanic/ Latino	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	Asian	Black/ African American	Native Hawaiian /Pacific Islander	White	Multi-racial	Unknown
2012	0.00%	3.22%	0.00%	2.58%	9.12%	0.00%	84.98%	0.00%	0.11%
2013	0.00%	3.36%	0.00%	3.36%	8.66%	0.10%	84.51%	0.00%	0.00%
2014	0.00%	3.06%	0.00%	3.06%	8.77%	0.10%	85.02%	0.00%	0.00%
2015	0.00%	3.53%	0.00%	3.42%	8.51%	0.10%	84.13%	0.00%	0.31%
2016	1.52%	3.03%	0.10%	2.53%	8.79%	0.10%	83.54%	0.20%	0.20%
2017	0.00%	3.45%	0.00%	3.75%	9.57%	0.00%	82.84%	0.00%	0.39%
2018	0.00%	3.36%	0.10%	3.46%	9.46%	0.10%	82.60%	0.20%	0.71%
2019	1.87%	2.80%	0.10%	3.01%	8.93%	0.00%	82.66%	0.21%	0.42%
2020	1.83%	3.21%	0.23%	3.44%	8.71%	0.00%	81.90%	0.34%	0.34%
2021	0.00%	4.13%	0.12%	4.84%	8.74%	0.12%	79.57%	0.24%	2.24%
Avg. %	0.52%	3.32%	0.07%	3.35%	8.93%	0.06%	83.18%	0.12%	0.47%

Note: Based on IPEDS data provided by the client. These numbers represent averages of fall

employee headcounts.

Despite UMW's stated commitment to diversity and inclusion, the promise of the

recommendations by the Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion, and the goal set in the 2017

Strategic Plan, enrollment has continued to decline suggesting the need for a close examination

of student experience at UMW, as well as the perceptions of executive and senior leaders, staff,

and faculty.

Findings: UMW Sense of Belonging Student Survey

The quantitative phase of the study included the UMW Sense of Belonging Student

Survey (Belonging Survey), a 155-item survey created specifically for this study (Appendix D).

The survey contained questions that would gauge participants' academic and social belonging, as

well as campus engagement and commitment to the university, to get an understanding of how

students engaged the university academically and socially, as well as their perceptions of institutional agents and resources. The University Registrar provided assistance with dissemination of the recruitment email, which included a description of the survey and a survey link, to all undergraduate students at UMW. Reminder emails were deployed to increase the survey responses on a periodic basis.

Preliminary Analysis

We developed the belonging survey using REDCap, an online survey tool. The survey link was available for 30 days and sent to over 3,600 undergraduate students at UMW. The belonging survey included questions about demographic information (e.g., race, gender, first-generation status), academic preparation (i.e., college grade-point average), residency status (i.e., on-campus housing, Virginia resident), financial factors (e.g., financial aid received), and participation status (e.g., Student Transitions Program, Rappahannock Scholars Program), status in school (i.e., how many college credits the participant had completed). At the end of the data collection period, we had 560 survey entries collected with 559 consenting participants. Table 4.2 illustrates the demographics of surveyed participants. Prior to beginning the quantitative analysis of the data, we examined the data for missingness and extreme outliers to determine whether there were any data points that needed to be excluded. We determined that a completed survey would be any respondent who completed all parts of the demographic section. We had 28 incomplete survey responses, which left us with 531 completed surveys for analysis.

Table 4.2

Participant Demographics

Category	Item	Count
Gender	Female	366
	Male	114
	Non-binary	30
	Transgender	10
	Prefer not to say	11
Race/Ethnicity	African American/Black	47 (8.8 %)
	American Indian	7 (1.3%)
	Arab or Middle Eastern	10 (1.9%)
	Asian American	23 (4.3%)
	Hispanic (not white)	54 (10.2%)
	White (non-Hispanic)	411 (77.3%)
	Multiracial	26 (4.9%)
	Prefer not to say	14 (2.6%)
First-in-Family/First-Generation	Yes	131 (24.8%)
	No	400 (75.2%)
Pell Grant Eligible	Yes	134 (25.2%)
	No	254 (47.8%)
	Not sure	143 (26.9%)

Note: Students were allowed to select multiple racial and ethnic identities, in addition to stating they were bi-racial.

Belonging Survey Results

To share the belonging survey results, we organized results using the relevant research questions that informed the study. Themes identified in the study were engagement with campus resources, institutional agent engagement, and sense of belonging. We assessed participants' sense of belonging in three areas: social belonging, perceived racism, and academic belonging.

Our first research question asked how UMW facilitates retention of Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students? We used descriptive statistical analysis to determine if there were any significant differences in respondents' mean and standard deviation scores, and belonging survey response percentages from both the overall sampled population and our target student groups (Black, Hispanic, first-generation, low-income). We evaluated respondents' responses to questions regarding usage of institutional campus resources and levels of importance of these resources.

Engagement of Campus Resources

We selected 15 campus resources to assess students' usage and satisfaction with each resource. Participants were asked to rate on a Likert scale their usage of resources with a rating scale of one to five, with one indicating never used and five indicating frequently used. Based on survey results, students expressed minimal to no usage of all but two campus resources: professor office hours (M = 3.10, SD = 1.25) and Simpson Library (M = 3.08, SD = 1.33).

Participants were extremely neutral in their assessment of satisfaction of most campus resources. Similarly, participants used a Likert scale to rate their satisfaction with campus resources on a rating scale of one to five, with one indicating very dissatisfied and five indicating very satisfied. Survey results indicated that participants were most satisfied with professor office

hours (M = 4.03, SD = 0.86). Figure 4.3 displays the mean averages of usage and satisfaction of campus resources. Additionally, while student's overall awareness of these resources (M = 3.32, SD = 1.24) were moderately good, their usage (M = 1.80, SD = 1.02) ranged from poor to fair. There were no significant differences found between the target groups (i.e., race) and the overall sampled population.

Figure 4.3

Overall Mean Scores for Campus Resources Usage and Satisfaction
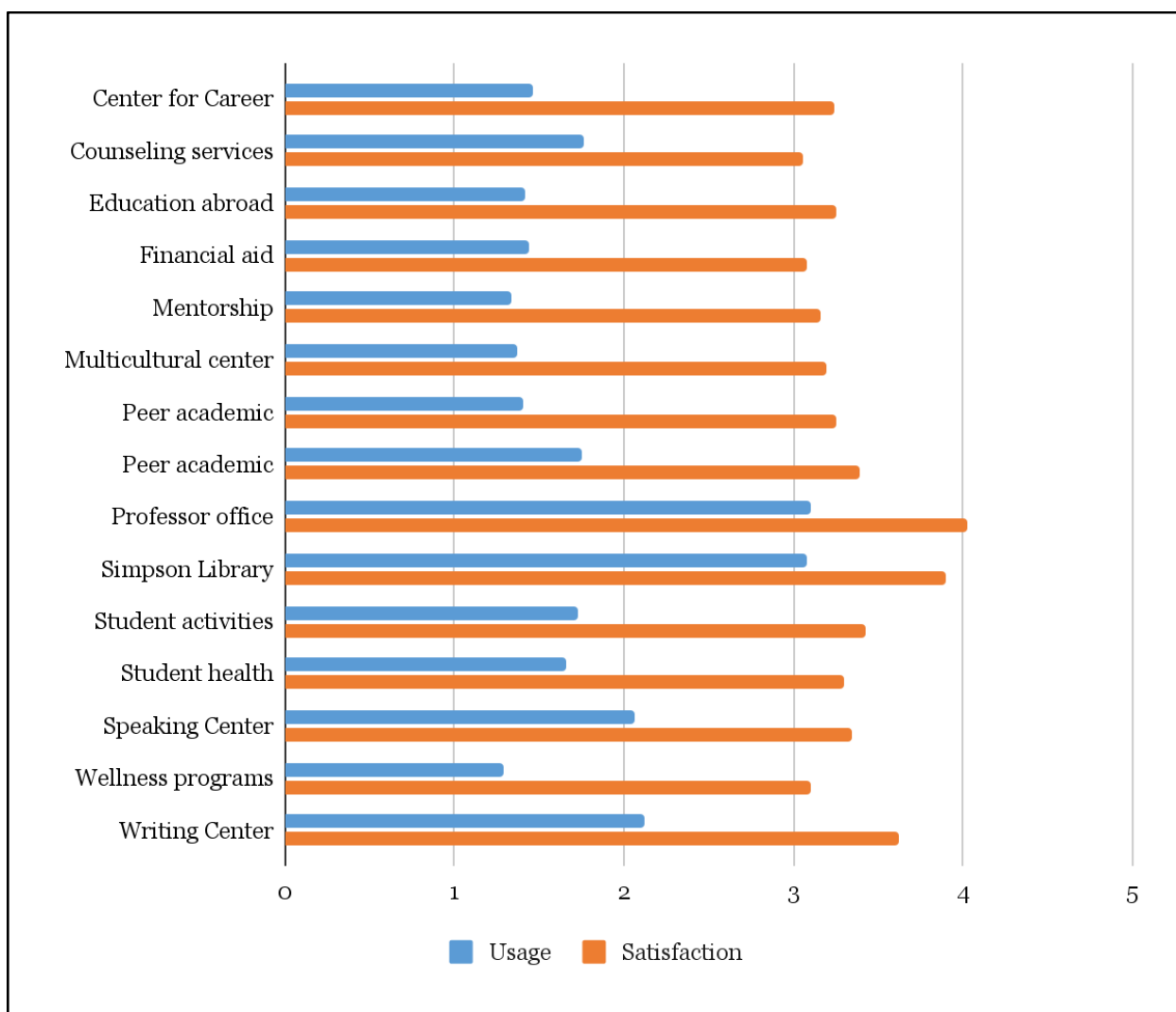
Institutional Agent Engagement

We asked participants to rate their interactions with institutional agents, such as academic advisors and professors, to see how these exchanges fostered growth and student retention. Participants used a Likert scale to rate their satisfaction with their academic advisor interaction with a rating scale of one to five, with one indicating poor and five indicating excellent. Overall, nearly all of the participants (96.4%) sought the advice of their academic advisor at least once a semester. When asked to rate the quality of their relationship with their current academic advisor, 77.5% of students indicated having a good or excellent relationship. In regard to the helpfulness of their advisor, 79% of students rated their academic advisor as good or excellent. Additionally, students were overall pleased (83.4%) with the availability of their academic advisor.

Similarly, students had high ratings for their professors at UMW. Participants felt that professors (82.4%) respected them in class. A large majority of participants (75%) felt comfortable seeking help from faculty members outside of class time (e.g., office hours), and 82% of participants felt comfortable asking a professor for help if they did not understand course-related material and their interactions with professors.

Students provided a variety of commentary in the free-response section of the belonging survey. For example, a senior male student stated, "I learned a lot and the professors at UMW are great and have always been there to help me out." A sophomore Hispanic student shared, "Being a first-gen college student has been difficult, but professors and faculty are eager to help and support me. If it was not for their support, I would not be in college right now or have been on dean's and president's list." A junior first-generation transfer student provided these comments while taking introductory courses with freshmen:

It has been great as they [freshmen] were new to the school too and I've made great

friends. I also have never had a professor as helpful or as involved as Professor Pitts. She

is quite amazing and although Greek is extremely hard, she cares so much and makes

sure we are truly learning the subject. She is the reason I am double majoring.

Comments regarding students' experiences with professors and advisors were generally

positive and the survey results indicate participants' positive relationship to the academic

component of UMW.

Sense of Belonging

This section details the information from the belonging survey that responds to question

1b: How do Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students experience a

sense of belonging at UMW? We looked to assess participants' feelings of belonging in three

distinct categories: social belonging, institutional inclusion, and academic belonging. We defined

a sense of belonging as the connection that an individual feels to their university, their peers, and

their professors.

Social Belonging

Participants were asked to complete a section of questions related to their experiences at

UMW during the current academic year regarding social belonging and perceived institutional

inclusion. Questions ranged from an overall sense of belonging, institutional support, ease of

making friends, to UMW's commitment to inclusion. Participants were provided with Likert

scales to rate their agreement with social belonging (Questions 15a - 15j in Appendix C) specific

statements with a rating scale of one to five, with one indicating strongly disagreed and five

indicating strongly agreed.

Survey results indicated that 48.6% of all participants agreed or strongly agreed that they felt they had a sense of belonging at UMW. In addition, participants indicated that 53.9% agreed or strongly agreed they felt like a member of the university community. While 67% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were glad they attended UMW, only 55.6% indicated if given the choice that they would choose UMW over again. Participants indicated that since coming to UMW (75%) they have developed personal relationships with other students. Correspondingly, during the pandemic under half (44.7%) of the participants indicated experiencing difficulty in the ease of meeting and making friends at the institution.

We used descriptive analysis to determine the mean and standard deviation of our target group (see Table 4.3). Among the target student group, Black students (M = 3.18, SD = 1.20) rated the lowest in overall social belonging in comparison to overall participants (M = 3.52, SD = 1.12).

Table 4.3

Summary of Social Belonging by Target Student Groups

Target student groups	Mean	Standard deviation
African American/Black	3.18	1.20
Hispanic/Latinx	3.73	0.84
First in family	3.38	1.10
Low income	3.53	1.10
Overall	3.52	1.12

Institutional Inclusion

In conjunction with social belonging, we included questions inquiring about participants' perceptions of racism on campus and UMW's commitment to diversity. Participants were provided with Likert scales to rate their agreement with institutional inclusion (Questions 15k - 15p in Appendix D) specific statements with a rating scale of one to five, with one indicating strongly disagree and five indicating strongly agree. Table 4.4 represents the Likert scale results of sample questions about perceived racism and inclusion at UMW from the belonging survey. Nearly half of the participants (49.7%) felt comfortable discussing culturally sensitive topics on campus with members of other racial or ethnic groups. On average, Black ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.38$) and first-generation ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.34$) students rated the lowest receptively in this category in comparison to overall participants ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.23$). This suggests that these participants felt that their identities may not matter to other students. Participants were asked if they have witnessed or experienced racial and/or ethnic tension on campus. While 42.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, another 20.6% were neutral. We found that Black ($M = 3.2$) and Hispanic ($M = 3.02$) students were more likely to agree with this statement.

Table 4.4

Likert-scale Results of Sample Questions on Perceived Racism and Inclusion

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
People of my identity are more likely to experience discrimination on campus than others.	10.1%	16.1%	23.1%	16.7%	34.0%
I feel awkward in situations at UMW in which I am the only person of my identity.	10.4%	18.1%	22.0%	23.7%	25.8%

Participants were asked a set of questions about how identity factors into acts of discrimination on campus (Question 15-q). Just over half of the participants (50.9%) did not believe that people of their identity are more likely to experience discrimination on campus than others. While the quantitative results of the belonging survey indicated that Black (M = 2.28, SD = 1.18) and Hispanic (M = 2.8, SD = 1.25) students reported relatively low frequency of discrimination due to their race, students shared several poignant experiences in the written comments. A sophomore Black female shared,

"I do not feel a sense of belonging at UMW. I actively feel I must hide parts of myself [from] people at UMW for my own well-being. If it were not for the organization, I am a part of at UMW and how close I am to graduating, I would not be at UMW."

Correspondingly, some students of color expressed similar experiences which expanded the depth of their lived experiences at UMW.

When asked if students felt confident the university would react quickly and appropriately to a racial incident on campus (Question 15-o), 25% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income students attested to the disagreement with this statement. Lastly, 39.2% of participants indicated that they believe UMW is committed to diversity and inclusion (Question 15-p), while 34.8% were neutral. Black students (M = 2.85, SD = 1.12) were more likely to disagree with this statement, while Hispanic students (M = 3.41, SD = 0.94) were more likely to affirm that UMW was committed. A comment from the belonging survey came from one junior biracial female student expressing a lack of safety and response minority students receive from UMW.

> I know so many minorities here that don't feel safe on campus. When they try to bring up issues to the administration or the police, they are brushed off, seemingly as if the safety of UMW students is not of concern to them.

Similarly, over half of the statements suggested a lack of trust from students related to the University's response to issues related to diversity and inclusion. As Hurtado and Carter (1997) stated, "perceptions of a hostile campus climate directly affects a student's sense of belonging in their college" (p. 330).

Academic Belonging

Participants were asked to complete a section of questions related to their experiences at UMW during the current academic year regarding academic belonging. Questions ranged from overall academic satisfaction and self-efficacy to interactions with their professors and classmates. Table 4.5 represents a sampling of questions with Likert-scale, mean, and standard deviation regarding academic belonging at UMW. Participants were provided with Likert-type scales to rate their agreement with academic belonging (Questions 20a - 20l in Appendix C)

specific statements with a rating scale of one to five, with one indicating strongly disagree and five indicating strongly agree. Overall, 68.1% of participants indicated that they were satisfied with their academic experience at UMW. When asked about their interaction with professors at UMW, 75.5% of participants felt that professors cared about how they were doing. Additionally, 72.1% felt comfortable contributing to class discussions.

Table 4.5

Sample Academic Belonging Questions

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Std. Deviation
I feel comfortable asking a professor for help if I do not understand course-related material.	2.6%	5.8%	9.6%	50.2%	31.7%	4.03	.94
I am satisfied with my academic experience.	3.6%	10.1%	18.1%	46.4%	21.7%	3.72	1.03
I feel comfortable contributing to class discussions.	3.1%	8.7%	16.2%	44.7%	27.3%	3.84	1.02
I have developed personal relationships with other students in my classes.	12.0%	14.7%	16.3%	37.7%	19.2%	3.38	1.28
The professors here respect me.	1.7%	2.2%	13.7%	53.7%	28.7%	4.06	.81

Participants were provided with Likert-type scales to rate their agreement with self-efficacy (Questions 28a - 28i in Appendix D) related questions with a rating scale of one to five, with one indicating strongly disagree and five indicating strongly agreed. An example of these self-efficacy questions was, I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself? Overall, participants (M = 4.0, SD = 1.0) believed that they have the motivation and skills necessary to perform well at UMW. There were no significant differences found between the target group and overall participants.

In regard to participants' interactions with other students in class, 56% indicated they had developed personal relationships with other students in class. Additionally, if a participant were to miss class, 60.8% indicated that they know of another student that could provide them class notes. For an institution that values small class sizes, these results suggest that relationships formed among classmates is underwhelming and stands to be improved. Overall, participants seem to have positive academic experiences in the classroom, they have the mental tools to excel academically, and interact well with their professors.

Commitment to the University

Participants were asked to complete a series of questions designed to assess their commitment to the university and if they were considering leaving UMW. Participants were asked to rate their level of commitment to completing their degree from UMW (Question 27 in Appendix C) on a rating scale of one to four, with one indicating not at all certain and four indicating completely certain. Of the sampled participants who answered this question (n=408), 75.2% indicated that they were completely certain they would earn their degree from UMW. Using skip logic, the survey posed follow-up questions to those participants who indicated that they were not as confident about their aspirations of earning a degree from UMW.

Figure 4.4

Percentage of Target Population Participants Considering Leaving UMW
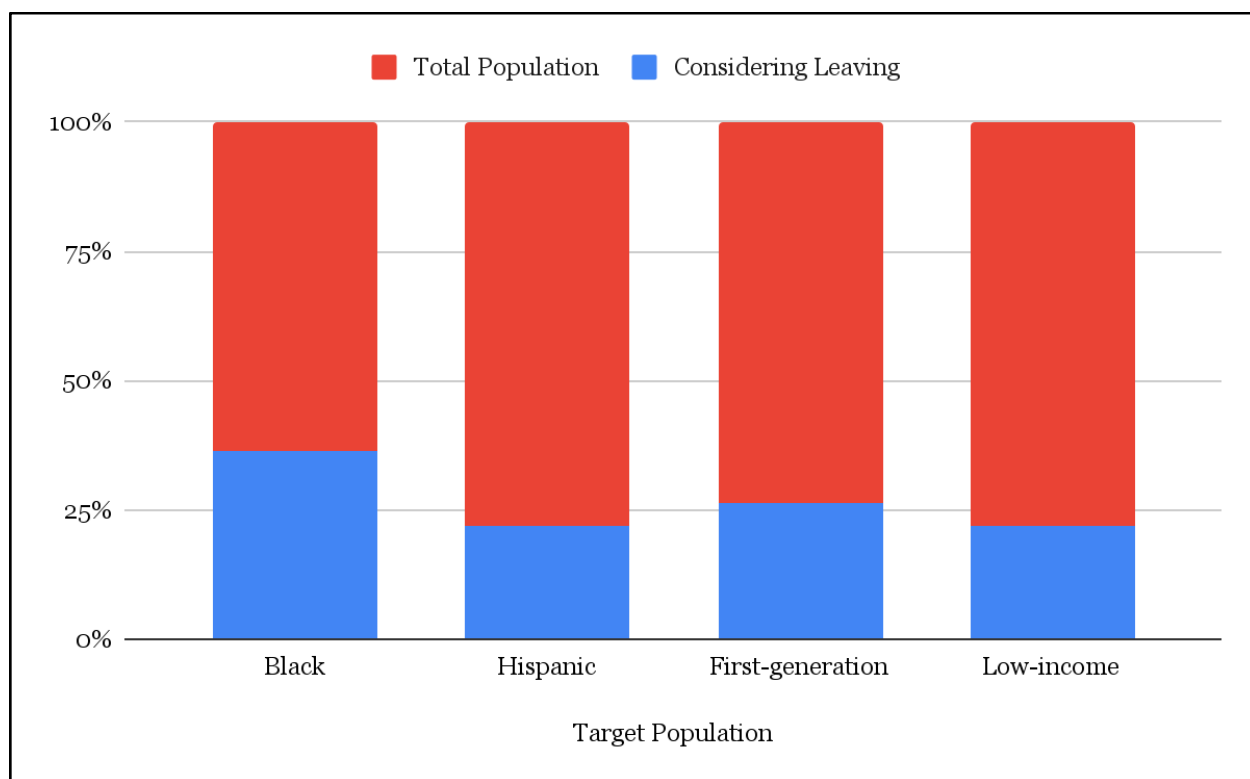
Figure 4.4 represents the survey results regarding the percentage of the target population who has considered not completing their undergraduate education with UMW. Using skip logic techniques, we asked those participants (n=101) who indicated that they were not completely certain about earning their UMW degree if they planned to return to UMW next year. Results indicated that only 34% of participants who answered this question were absolutely sure that they would return to UMW next year, suggesting that about 66% of sampled participants were considering transferring from the university. Additionally, these same participants were asked to provide reasons why they might discontinue their enrollment from UMW. The top three reasons were: (1) academic reasons, (2) UMW was not a good fit for them, and (3) feeling that they do not belong.

As described in Chapter 3, information from the belonging survey was used to develop focus group questions to gather more in-depth data on students' experiences at UMW. Results of the surveys and comments shared in open-ended questions informed development of focus groups questions to ensure that we centered students' voices in this study. Focus groups were implemented during the second phase of this research study.

<div align="center">

Findings: Focus Group Interviews

</div>

In support of the sequential explanatory mixed methods design, the next phase of our study included focus group interviews to collect qualitative data from a cross-section of the UMW student population. We used the project's research questions and the findings from the belonging survey to guide the open-ended questions included in the focus group. As described in Chapter 3, this qualitative design utilized a phenomenological focus by allowing participants to share their lived experiences and perspectives related to supporting or being a student at UMW (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The collective stories shared by participants were used to identify findings from the focus group interviews in response to each of our research questions.

Data Collection

Focus group interviews were completed virtually over a three-week period. We drafted recruitment emails for the client to disseminate to the UMW student population using existing institutional listservs. Additionally, we sent personal email invitations to UMW students who expressed interest in participating in a focus group interview after completing the UMW Student Sense of Belonging Survey. All recruitment emails included a summary of the purpose of the study and hyperlinks to register for the scheduled sessions. Each session registration allowed a maximum of 10 students.

Three focus groups were administered and included a cross-section of the UMW student population. We noted that the target student populations in this study (i.e., Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students) were poorly represented in the first three focus groups. Thus, we scheduled a fourth focus group that specifically invited participants representing the target student populations in this study. Prior to each session, participants were asked to complete a voluntary demographic survey that gathered information such as academic classification, gender, race, Pell Grant eligibility (suggestion of income status) and first-generation status. Table 4.6 illustrates the demographic survey responses from focus group participants. Focus group participants were given a participant number to maintain confidentiality.

Table 4.6

Participant Characteristics

Participant #	Classification	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	First-in-family	Pell Grant eligible
1-1	Senior	Female	White/Non-Hispanic	No	I don't know
1-2	Senior	Male	White/Non-Hispanic	No	Yes
1-3	Senior	Female	Hispanic or Latinx	Yes	I don't know
1-4	Junior	Male	White/Non-Hispanic	No	Yes
1-5	Sophomore	Female	White/Non-Hispanic	No	No
1-6	Senior	Female	African American or Black	No	Yes
1-7	Freshman	Female	White/Non-	No	I don't know

			Hispanic		
2-1	Sophomore	Female	White/Non-Hispanic	No	No
2-2	Junior	Nonbinary	White/Non-Hispanic	No	I don't know
2-3	Junior	Male	White/Non-Hispanic	No	I don't know
2-4	Sophomore	Female	African American or Black	No	I don't know
2-5	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
3-1	Senior	Female	White/Non-Hispanic	No	No
3-2	Freshman	Male	White/Non-Hispanic	No	I don't know
3-3	Sophomore	Female	White/Non-Hispanic	No	I don't know
3-4	Junior	Male	White/Non-Hispanic	No	No
3-5	Freshman	Female	African American or Black	No	I don't know
4-1	Sophomore	Female	African American or Black	No	No

We completed four focus group interviews, which included a total of 18 student participants. Each interview used a semi-constructed interview protocol that included eight primary questions, also with supportive prompts or relevant follow-up questions as necessary based on the group's initial responses (see Appendix G). All focus group interviews were administered using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Both the audio and video of the interviews were recorded with participant permission, which then made it possible to transcribe the interviews for qualitative coding and analysis.

We reviewed the collective results in order to identify emergent sub-themes or clear areas of emphasis within the original four deductive codes. Within the theoretical framework focused on a sense of belonging, a diverse and student-ready infrastructure, focus group themes centered on *academic and faculty engagement*, *social belonging*, and *institutional engagement*.

Themes

Researchers identified common themes among focus group interviews. Participant feedback was categorized into the following themes: academic and faculty engagement, social belonging, and institutional engagement. The subsequent section will discuss each of these themes, identify sub-themes, and connect findings for the focus group interviews to the results from the survey of UMW students, executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty.

Theme 1: Academic and Faculty Engagement

Faculty Relationships and Support. Participant feedback regarding relationships with faculty members was mostly positive. Participant 3-5, a freshman who identifies as an African American or Black female, expressed that the small class size supports their access to faculty members, stating "the size of the classroom allows me to focus on if I need any extra help or like extra time understanding something, I can really actually talk to the professor and it's not a crowd awaiting." Further Participant 2-2 stated that "the professors are just really, really nice. But I've yet to have a bad professor. And honestly, they're all, they really just genuinely want to help." Conversely, some participants expressed difficulty accessing professors. For example, participant 1-5 stated, "I've definitely had run-ins with my professors that like, they don't email me back for a week at a time, or I try and it's like they're not very open."

When reflecting on gaps in their experience as a first-year student at UMW, participant 1-7 stated, "I feel like a lot of people say that their freshman year is the worst and that is just really

sad, I think… because I feel like… that's just like it's a bad start." Similarly, participant 1-7 shared:

> There have been a couple [professors] where I've gotten good responses when I've gone to office hours and approach them before class and stuff. But I've definitely had also a couple of professors who have just seemed really unsupportive and unwilling to actually make time to help.

Some of the student participants shared the difference in relationships with faculty members based on the type of course and level. For example, Participant 1-6 said, "I've gotten into smaller classes and more upper-level classes. There's research classes and it definitely invited more of …, I come to office hours because there's less people." Participant 2-2's comments summarized the findings on academic and faculty engagement:

> The professors here are really willing to work with the students. And I think that's due to the size of the school compared to a big school. You don't really see that personal connection with the professors, to the students. And so, especially during the pandemic, I found that it was really nice to see the professors also trying to get our experience to be the best as it could be in these circumstances.

As noted, a majority of focus group participants were pleased with the relationships and support they receive from UMW faculty members. This finding is corroborated by results from the belonging survey, which demonstrated student satisfaction with professor engagement.

Access to Academic Resources. Access to academic resources surfaced as a common theme among focus group participants. There were mixed opinions regarding the access, quality and effectiveness of existing student resources, including peer tutoring, advising, and resources at the Writing Center and Speaking Center.

Participant 2-3 shared that the peer tutoring resources were "phenomenal and they helped me stay on track and to answer any questions I have. And yet they're a great resource for anyone to use." Other participants experienced difficulty accessing an effective peer tutor for various reasons, including due to the limited availability of tutors for a particular subject. Participant 4-1, a sophomore who identifies as an Black female, expressed difficulty finding support that complimented their learning style. They commented:

When I went to the peer tutoring for chemistry or biology, I think the students are doing the very best they can. And I just don't think it was clicking for me. And so I say that to say that I think it's really beneficial and that it wasn't beneficial for me.

Participant 1-7 expressed dissatisfaction with the peer-to-peer support model. For instance, they expressed:

One of my biggest problems with UMW is that there are barely any places where there are faculty actually working. It's 90 percent students. I'm looking everywhere and it's really hard to find an actual faculty member to assist you.

Participant 1-7 continued their description of the peer-to-peer support model. "I feel there's not a ton of super accessible options, especially if you need more in depth help with classes. Yeah, or [if you are] having trouble with your professor or something." Participant 1-3, a senior who identifies as a Hispanic female, "[UMW] would really benefit from more [administrative] positions. I mean our school, the departments do realize that there is a lack of a professional person who is on call or is able to do that work." This feedback suggests that some students prefer support from professional staff.

We found that most belonging survey participants were overall satisfied with their academic advising experience. As such, focus group participants were similarly asked to discuss

their satisfaction with the academic advisor. Participant 1-1 reflected on a difficult experience during their freshman year, in which their advisor provided support and shared, "it made it a little easier to talk to my advisor about it because I knew I wasn't alone in that." However, Participant 4-1 offered some illuminating criticism regarding their advisors support during the course selection process:

> I wouldn't say that I've been satisfied because I feel as though class selection is such a rushed process. And I understand that as an academic advisor that there is a certain number of students that you have to take care of in a day. But one of the things that I've reflected on is that I don't think the academic advisors that I actually have been assigned have really taken the time to understand me.

Participant 4-1 went on to explain that in the absence of advising support, they instead sought mentorship from a staff member in the Student Transition Program because they "made me feel like I can do anything that I want to do." Focus group responses highlight the importance of the professor relationship, unique dynamics of student workers on campus, and varied experiences with academic advising on campus.

Connection to Classmates. Relationships with fellow classmates emerged as a sub-theme among focus group participants. The relationships cultivated with classmates were detailed in reflection on the classroom experience. Some participants were able to find connections with peers through course-related interactions, however, others felt less connected to their classmates. These findings were similarly supported in the belonging survey which indicated most students had basic connections with classmates, however, results suggest that relationships formed among classmates is underwhelming and stands to be improved.

Participant 3-2, a freshman who identifies as a White/Non-Hispanic male, shared that "connecting with people in class very tough. It's not something that's encouraged in most of the classes." Relatedly, participant 2-5's experience demonstrates that the experience may depend on the type of course and level. They stated:

It wasn't until I was mostly down to my major classes by that fall that I really met people who I felt I communicated more effectively with. And I had longer lasting relationships with, but mostly that was with faculty and not with other students, barring a few, handful of people.

For some participants, the COVID-19 pandemic created barriers to their connections with classmates. Participant 3-4, a junior who identifies as a White/Non-Hispanic male, reflected on their academic experience during COVID-19, in saying:

And I think the problem that I've had recently with COVID… I feel like I lack connection with other students in my class. And I can't really like … I believe that for a lot of my academic career… [I studied] with other people [in] study groups. But most studying I've been doing has been on my own. And sometimes that feels really difficult.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was identified as an emerging theme, and will be detailed in a subsequent section. Connections with classmates as a sub-theme highlighted the significance of the classroom as a location for peer relationships to be formed, when encouraged by faculty members.

Theme 2: Social Belonging

Find Your People. The importance of *finding your people* was identified as a sub-theme among interview participants. Many participants described a student culture in which connections and friendship are made with students who have similar interests and experiences.

Participant 1-6, a senior who identifies as an Black female, described the student culture at

UMW.

> I definitely walked into Mary Washington not knowing anything about it and not
>
> particularly enjoying the university. But that was because I hadn't found my community,
>
> if that makes sense. UMW, in my experience and the experience that I've heard from
>
> many others, is very much a university that's community based. And so, the kind of find
>
> your people aspect of UMW is so, so important for creating a tailored experience to
>
> literally whatever you could possibly want.

Participant 2-3, who identifies as a White/Non-Hispanic male, detailed a similar experience

navigating the UMW student community.

> We have our little circles and stuff like that. But for example, people that are in a certain
>
> major, people with the same interests. It's all a big melting pot, but they're all inclusive as
>
> long as you show a willingness to go where you want to go. I think no matter what you
>
> want to be or who you want to be, you'll find a group that accepts you."

However, some participants expressed having difficulty establishing social belonging. While

reflecting on their efforts to participate in campus activities and intentional efforts to find

community, Participant 1-7 shared:

> I have really felt like joining clubs and organizations has made me feel more alienated.
>
> But because I have joined clubs and I was kind of completely ignored, I know I need

some accommodations and those have been completely ignored or denied. And I have

definitely not felt like there are people at UMW who care about me.

Some participants identified how the UMW student culture influences the campus

culture. Participant 3-3 explained the significance of the student culture by saying:

You won't really see people wearing UMW sweatshirts. You won't really see people

excited to be here. It's more of just like everyone's just here for their own reasons. But I

wouldn't say there's like a huge sense of pride to be a student at UMW.

These comments suggest that UMW student culture may have an adverse impact on the student

sense of belonging. Overall, we found that some participants were able to *find their people*,

however, others expressed difficulty establishing meaningful connections at UMW.

Awareness of Identity. Many participants expressed awareness of their identity, and,

more specifically, how their identity is represented in the UMW student population. We

identified this theme especially among participants who represented the student population

central to this project (i.e., Black and Hispanic students, FGCS, students from low-income

backgrounds).

Focus group participants were encouraged to consider personal challenges or obstacles

they have faced at UMW that may be related to their identity and how it has affected their

experience at the institution. Participant 1-6, a senior who identifies as a Black female, shared the

impact their identity has had on their experience finding belonging and connection on-campus,

stating "being the only Black person on this Zoom kind of feels both comfortable and

uncomfortable in a way that it's relatable because this is my experience at UMW a lot of the

times."

When discussing how their identity influences their experience at a predominantly white institution (PWI), Participant 3-5, a freshman who identifies as a Black female, shared:

> I'm African American at a PWI so it's a little bit daunting to enter into the area where I come from, a lot of diverse cultures and with a lot of different backgrounds. And so, when I came here, I was kinda like, oh no, oh God, am I going to be the only person who looks like me over here.

Several open-ended responses to the belonging survey corroborate this feedback regarding the awareness of identity. For example, the following comments were found in the belonging survey from a participant who identities as bi-racial: "I often feel isolated because people do not fully respect my identity." During the focus group interviews, Participant 4-1, a sophomore who identifies as a Black female, reflected on how their identity influences the way they contribute to UMW and how they feel pressured to represent their identity group, stating:

> Being a black woman on campus at a predominately white institution, I have to be able to kind of well… I think the correct term is code switch or code change. …You have to almost have to like you're kind of like mental armor on before you go into these spaces because you cannot show too much emotion and yet you have to be able to speak like you're educated. Even if African American vernacular or ebonics is the way that I speak around my family, friends. But you have to be able to present yourself in a respectful manner because unfortunately, if you don't and someone on campus who doesn't relate to you sees that can be one of their own experiences with an African American person or a black woman and sometimes it's just a lot of pressure because and in another way if I act a fool, then I don't want people to think that, I don't want people to think negatively of me, especially people who hold access to opportunities on campus.

For Participant 1-3, a senior who identifies as a Hispanic female, they discovered their identity while navigating the UMW student experience, expressed:

> I've enjoyed learning more about myself and what it means to be first generation. There was a first-generation or first-in-family club on campus. But like I said, I didn't exactly know what that meant. I just kind of checked it on a box or raised my hand when I was asked whether I was first-generation. But over the years I have learned how that affected my experience academically and mentally and how I navigate through my education.

Despite these experiences, many of the participants highlighted the fulfilling relationships they have with other UMW students who share similar identities. Participant 4-1 described their friendships as a safe space by saying, "when something happens on campus, I can kind of call them and describe them as overreacting and they will validate my feelings." Participant 1-6's reflection confirmed how relationships with other African American and Black students have improved their experiences, stating:

> I think a lot of my experience has been both looking for my people, but also finding my people as well. And clubs like the NAACP, and a lot of the other multicultural clubs on campus. And so in that, I have been more, I've felt more at home on this campus.

Overall, we noticed that participants who represented the student population central to this project (i.e., Black and Hispanic students, FGCS, students from low-income backgrounds) expressed awareness of their identity, and how it is represented in the UMW student population. This theme was demonstrated throughout the focus group interviews and corroborated by results from the belonging survey.

It's a Slap in the Face. Focus group participants consistently expressed dissatisfaction with UMW's efforts to promote an inclusive and safe campus. Findings from the belonging

survey expressed similar reluctance that the university would react quickly and appropriately to a racial incident on campus, in particular from participants who identify as Black, Hispanic, first generation, and low-income. We found this sub-theme demonstrated throughout the focus group interviews when discussing institutional response to various incidents on campus.

Participant 4-1, a sophomore who identifies as a Black female, declared "It's a slap in the face" when describing the university's response to incidents of racism. Participant 4-1 described an incident on-campus in which white supremacy symbols were perceived to be displayed in a threatening manner. Participant 4-1 also shared that there was "one instance where they had razor blades underneath the stickers. So, if you were to try to remove them you would cut your fingers and from what I was told Mary Washington did not, well, they didn't act in the way that as a black student on campus, I needed them to act, to feel comfortable." These stories indicate that instances of racism may influence the undergraduate student experience directly.

We noticed dissatisfaction was not exclusive to students in the underrepresented student population (i.e., Black and Hispanic students, FGCS, students from low-income backgrounds). When describing how to foster a sense of safety, Participant 1-4, a junior who identifies as a White/Non-Hispanic male stated, "There was no accountability. There is clear evidence that it was right there and they just said, we waited too long. I'm not gonna do anything about it." Participant 1-4 went on to say, "it's a little bit disheartening to kind of know that. While socially, it's hard to feel included up above, it's hard to trust them and makes the experience for us as well."

When discussing existing resources designed to promote student safety, some participants were critical of the campus police department. Participant 2-2, a student who identifies as nonbinary, said "I don't feel safe at all calling Campus PD". We found several open-ended

responses to the belonging survey that corroborate this feedback regarding the campus police department. For example, one participant in the belonging survey commented that "campus police are deterred from active policing and act more like a protective detail than actual officers of the law…this is ironic considering student safety has somehow become a problem on campus."

Many student participants acknowledged and discussed the experience of UMW students of color. In particular, Participant 4-1's personal story of students wearing Afro wigs to an event focused on celebrating Black History month. Participant 4-1 stated, "If you were not able to tell that that was inappropriate, that concerns me. And then if you then acted and still know that it's inappropriate, that also concerns me." Participant 1-6, a senior who identifies as a Black female, summarized their perspective of the institution's culture, stating, "The social justice costs will be predominantly white. And so in that the lived experience versus the perceived experience can be different."

We found that participants consistently expressed dissatisfaction with the institution's efforts to promote an inclusive and safe campus. This sub-theme was demonstrated throughout the focus group interviews and corroborated in the results of the belonging survey discussed above.

Theme 3: Institutional Engagement

Access to and Awareness of Campus Resources and Activities. Awareness and communication of campus resources and activities emerged as a sub-theme among interview participants. Some participants acknowledged the institution's efforts to support students and promote community, however, they also felt that awareness and communication of these campus resources and activities could be enhanced both in terms of publicity and support.

Focus group participants were encouraged to discuss their experience at campus events and activities. Participant 1-3, who described themselves as an active member of several student groups on campus, stated, "there are a lot of events that are happening on campus. You just have to look for them, but that's really hard when they're not in your face." Participant 3-3, a sophomore who identifies as a White/Non-Hispanic female, stated

I think that the university could do a better job of planning things for students, especially students who live on campus to do. Because… a lot of people do go home on the weekends, but there are also a lot of students that don't.

Participant 3-3 went on to recommend that UMW "facilitate greater community on campus through planning more engaging events for students to go to."

Some participants expressed concern that campus activities are insufficiently supported. The barriers to participation in campus activities were further illustrated when Participant 2-4, a sophomore who identifies as a Black female, spoke about their experience in university club activities. They shared, "I feel like they're spending money where it really doesn't make sense. Like I told you guys about how I'm in Model UN and I didn't have the money to pay for one of the trips to represent our school." They went on to state, "it's very upsetting to see, but I pay thousands to even go here. I shouldn't have to pay out of pocket in order to represent the school academically." Participant 2-4 concluded "I was like this is definitely not the school that I thought I was in, but I'm here now. I'm happy enough now where I'll stay, but they probably need to do better things with the budget." Despite the perceived lack of support for campus events and activities, the students in the focus groups still found ways to create community for themselves.

As a result of COVID-19, Participant 1-3 offered a perspective on campus activities stating, "Budget cuts affect student activities and events like big events that go on campus. And

UMW has been affected by the pandemic the first year." The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was identified as an emerging theme and will be detailed in a subsequent section.

Feeling Heard. Access to university leadership and decision-makers emerged as a sub-theme among interview participants. Many commented on the university's efforts to collect student feedback, however, expressed preference for more personalized opportunities to communicate with the university.

Participant 1-1 would prefer more individual or group meetings with university administrators so that they could, "actually have a personal conversation with students instead of just putting it on a survey." This statement corresponds to feedback from Participant 2-4, a sophomore who identifies as a Black female. They said, "It feels like the executives of our school don't really know what it's like to be here. They don't know. They're not in touch with how they've been neglecting their school in my eyes." Both of these comments suggest that students feel disconnected from UMW executives and senior leadership.

Participants discussed how their relationship with campus leadership influences the student culture. Participant 3-5, a freshman who identifies as a Black female, shared, "I wish there was more of a community built by the students and by the administration. But at the same time, I understand everybody is here for their own purposes." One participant referenced the university's "You Matter" campaign in the discussion.

And they just keep trying to add things that are important, like the whole "You Matter" thing was really frustrating for students, mainly because of how they rolled it out. They didn't explain what they were doing. We just thought they spend a whole lot of money to use the word matter.

Comments from the belonging survey similarly stated that "just posting banners and signs around campus that read "You Matter" does not actually do anything to make me feel like I matter."

For Participant 1-3, a Hispanic female who is first-generation, access to leadership opportunities on campus has provided them to feel connected to university decision-makers.

I'm in a lot more leadership roles as well as part of a lot of committees. Not just with my peers, but also with administration and faculty to help make decisions on this campus. And so I do think that UMW does a great job of facilitating students to have access to their administration and things like that.

Participant 3-1's comments summarize the general findings for this sub-theme: "you can empower students to raise their voices when they don't think that the system is working for them from the academic perspective, we should, students should have a voice." In sum, participants recognized the importance of strengthening their connection with UMW leadership and decision-makers.

Leadership and Employment. Many participants identified satisfaction with access to leadership opportunities and on-campus employment. The experiences and relationships cultivated while participating in these activities were not only significant in the personal and professional development of participants, but also appeared to have a positive impact on their sense of belonging. Belonging survey results corroborate this theme, indicating that 68% of participants felt belonging to a campus organization or club was important to them developing positive relationships at UMW. This finding highlighted the emphasis that Soria and Stebleton (2012) placed on the positive relationship academic engagement has on retention.

For Participant 3-3, their leadership role at the Hillel Center has provided friendships and connection, stating, "that's where I found my biggest community at UMW." Participant 3-5, a freshman who identifies as a Black female, shared that "I joined a lot of organizations and clubs. And one of the best things I did was join the NAACP because I really got to be able to connect and I got to be introduced to other programs that could be somewhere or other activities that can be hosted."

Of those who self-disclosed their employment on campus or leadership in student activities (e.g., club president), we noticed a higher level of satisfaction and sense of belonging at UMW. For Participant 1-3, a Hispanic female who is first-in-family, they recognize that on-campus leadership opportunities will prepare them for a professional career:

> I've been very grateful for the opportunities I've had in the office I work in. Because a lot
>
> of the work I'm doing, and a lot of the work of senior resident assistance or RAs workers
>
> is professional work, and it looks really good on a resume.

Overall, participants appeared satisfied with the leadership and employment opportunities at UMW. For many, these opportunities helped foster personal and professional development and had a positive impact on their sense of belonging. This finding is corroborated by results from the belonging survey, which demonstrated students recognized that having an on or off-campus job helped them to develop positive relationships at UMW.

Emerging Themes

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic. We were not surprised to hear from participants that their experience at UMW has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This emerging sub-theme was found in all four focus group interviews and in the belonging survey. Many participants recognized the impact the pandemic had on campus culture, the learning experience,

and fiscal discussions within the university. Participant 1-3, a senior who identifies as a Hispanic female, stated:

> I think that has taken a toll on campus culture in general. The pandemic and budget cuts. I think a lot of fun activities and clubs are limited by their budget. So, I'm not as involved with this activity. So, I can't speak to the full extent about the concerts, the other events and stuff like that.

As part of the open-ended portion of the belonging survey, a White/Non-Hispanic female shared that "COVID really put a hindrance on my ability to make friends at UMW. I'm a sophomore, so last year everything was so limited that I wasn't able to make proper connections."

As leaders in higher education, we recognize that educators should be cognizant of the long-lasting effect the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the college student experience. That said, since we did not ask specific questions about COVID-19, it is difficult to assess the exact impact the pandemic had on focus group participants. However, the fact that students brought it up willingly indicates its impact on the UMW student experience over the last two years.

Office of Disability Resources. Several participants commented on their experience with the Office of Disability Resources (ODR). In particular, many expressed dissatisfactions in their interactions with ODR, including poor customer service and difficulty fulfilling accommodations. We noticed similar feedback from various participants in all four focus group interviews. Participant 2-2, a junior at UMW shared:

> ODR does give me a headache sometimes because it's just hard to deal with them. You have to really, really prove all of this stuff. So, it's not helpful if you don't have the money to prove that stuff. But I think in theory it is an amazing thing and it's really helpful. But there are some issues with it.

Participant 3-3, a sophomore at UMW, shared a similar experience:

> They've been really challenging to deal with. They've kind of made my whole college experience a lot harder than it needs to be. Just meeting with the people in charge has been like such a nightmare. And they like that. It's just been so much more of an obstacle, and I think it needs to be.

The focus groups were an opportunity to learn first-hand about the student experience at UMW and the areas of opportunities for the university to be aware of for future interventions. Researchers recognize a limitation of the qualitative phase is that it only provides a limited number of perspectives from a small sample of students related to the thousands of students enrolled at UMW.

Findings: Organizational Readiness for Change Assessment (ORCA)

The ORCA survey was designed to assess executive and senior leader, staff, and faculty attitudes about organizational support for underrepresented students, as well as attitudes about the perceived need for and willingness to change. The ORCA survey included 75 Likert scale questions and three concluding open-ended questions (Appendix D) designed to solicit findings helpful for answering two of our research questions: *How does UMW promote retention of Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students?* and *What are strategies that UMW can implement to promote access, sense of belonging, and retention of underrepresented students?*

Data Collection

We administered the ORCA survey using REDCap, an online survey tool. A recruitment email was crafted which included a description of the study and survey link. We utilized the

assistance of the University Registrar to disseminate the recruitment email. Reminder emails were deployed to increase the survey responses. The survey link was available for 30 days.

Note about "Not enough information to respond" responses

UMW clients requested a sixth "Not enough information to respond" option be added to the five-point Likert scale initially proposed for the ORCA survey due to the feeling that without the sixth option, respondents would be forced to speculate about things which they had little knowledge or experience with. One of the primary purposes of an ORCA survey is to assess respondent perceptions regarding their institution. As detailed below, selection of the sixth option varied widely across responses to such a degree that "Not enough information to respond" emerges as a theme relevant to themes observed in the survey data. Unless otherwise indicated, findings below exclude instances when respondents selected "Not enough information to respond."

ORCA Sample Population

129 people consented to take the survey, but 22 respondents were excluded because they completed only the demographic questions and offered no other responses. As a result, the data shared represent 107 respondents, of which 3 (2.8%) self-identified as Staff, 21 (19.6%) Administrative or Professional Faculty, and 83 (77.6%) as Teaching or Instructional Faculty. As illustrated in Table 4.7, over 75% of the respondents have worked at UMW for more than 6 years. We planned to analyze responses by role (executive, staff, faculty) at UMW, but too few staff members responded to the survey to make such comparisons possible. As a result, all ORCA findings are analyzed in the aggregate.

Table 4.7

Length of time working at UMW

	N	Percentage
One year or less	5	4.7%
Two to Five years	18	16.8%
Six to Ten years	27	25.2%
Ten years or more	57	53.3%
Total	107	100.0%

56.1% of respondents were Female, 38.3% Male, and 5.6% preferred not to say. As detailed in

Table 4.8, the racial breakdown of respondents was primarily White (non-Hispanic).

Table 4.8
Respondent race and/or ethnicity

	N	Percentage
African American or Black	6	5.6%
Arab or Middle Eastern	1	0.9%
Hispanic or Latinx	3	2.8%
White (non-Hispanic)	85	79.4%
Multiracial or Biracial	5	4.7%
I prefer not to respond	5	4.7%
Other: (specify below)	2	1.9%

Themes

In review of the ORCA findings, three primary themes were identified that illuminated respondents' understanding of current practices and attitudes related to support for underrepresented students, readiness for change, and strategies for future improvement.

Theme 1: Perceptions of Mission and the Institutional Practices of Inclusion

ORCA questions were designed, in part, to understand how respondents perceived UMW's current context and practice regarding support for underrepresented students from the broadest indicators of intention, such as UMW's mission to more concrete practices relating to support for underrepresented students.

Mission and Commitment to Underrepresented Students

The ORCA survey included two questions to ascertain the level of respondents' perception of the degree to which UMW's mission statement conveys a sense of inclusivity and commitment to underrepresented students. Table 4.9 shows that 90.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the UWM mission statement reflects a commitment to being inclusive for all students. However, 84.8% agreed or strongly agreed that the mission reflects this commitment for underrepresented students in particular.

Table 4.9

Perceptions of UMW Mission

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
UMWs mission reflects a commitment to being an inclusive and welcoming institution.	0.0%	0.0%	9.4%	36.8%	53.8%

UMWs mission reflects a commitment to being an inclusive and welcoming institution for underrepresented students.	0.0%	2.9%	12.4%	43.8%	41.0%

While there is still an overall high level of agreement for both questions regarding UMW's commitment to inclusivity, the gap of agreement for UMW's commitment to being inclusive and welcoming for underrepresented students suggests more work needs to be done. In possible support of this suggestion, a respondent commented in the open-ended questions that the UMW mission statement needs to push for more specificity and substance: "The language in the mission feels too pandering, like we're just trying to do what everyone else is doing. It's hard to have faith or excitement in such conventional accepted language and tone." Similarly, another respondent indicated concern that UMW's statement on diversity and inclusion needs improvement, particularly in response to recent national incidents provoking concerns, "Concerned by administration's failure to respond sufficiently to heightened demands for social and racial justice over the past year. The diversity & inclusion page is inadequate and most guiding principles haven't been updated in 4-5 years." These comments suggest that UMW would benefit from a reexamination of its mission statement and/or discussion of how the mission statement aligns with current institutional values.

Several questions were designed to ascertain a more focused understanding of perceptions of staff and faculty personal commitments to improving student support and outcomes of underrepresented students (Questions 38, 40, 47, and 49 in Appendix E). Table 4.10 shows that in response to this question, 66% of respondents selected agree or strongly agree for staff (M = 3.77, SD = .96) and 54.2% selected agree or strongly agree for faculty (M = 3.56, SD

= .99). However, when asked about UMW's demonstrated commitment to the academic needs of underrepresented students, only 41.5% of respondents selected agree or strongly agree (M = 3.10, SD = 1.14).

Table 4.10

Levels of Staff and Faculty Responsibility

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Staff have a sense of personal responsibility for improving student support and outcomes.	0.0%	12.8%	21.3%	42.6%	23.4%
Faculty have a sense of personal responsibility for improving student support and outcomes of underrepresented students.	2.9%	10.0%	32.9%	37.1%	17.1%

One respondent offered the following comment, which might offer some explanation for this gap between staff and faculty commitment and institutional commitment. "I see disparity for both faculty and upper admin (Deans and above) for how much this is a priority, which is why too many answers fall in the middle range. I believe this issue is a strong priority for the President himself, but finances are never sufficient (space, programs, staff)." The gap between staff and faculty commitment and institutional commitment suggests a need for better alignment of intentions regarding underrepresented students across the institution.

Perceptions of UMW and Student Belonging

Faculty, staff, and executive leaders were asked to indicate their perceptions of the degree to which they feel that students belong at UMW (Questions 14-18 in Appendix D). As detailed in

Figure 4.5, respondents felt that the overall sense of belonging at UMW was lower than for any of the underrepresented groups of interest in this study.

Figure 4.5

Mean Perceptions of Student Belonging
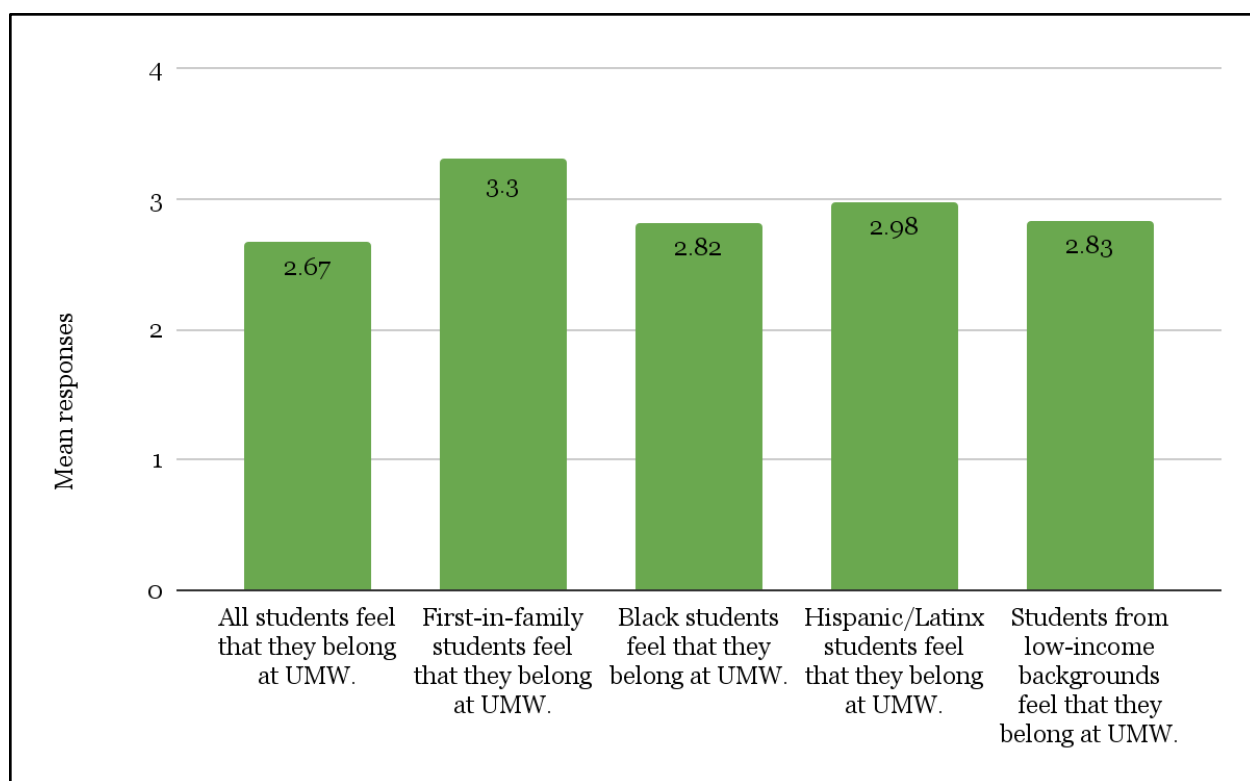
As detailed in Figure 4.6, when levels of agreement are displayed in greater detail, it becomes clear that respondents most strongly agreed that Hispanic/Latinx and first-generation students experience the highest levels of sense of belonging. Survey results found that 28.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Hispanic/Latinx students and 41% of first-generation students feel that they belong at UMW.

Figure 4.6

Levels of Agreement Regarding Perceptions of Student Belonging
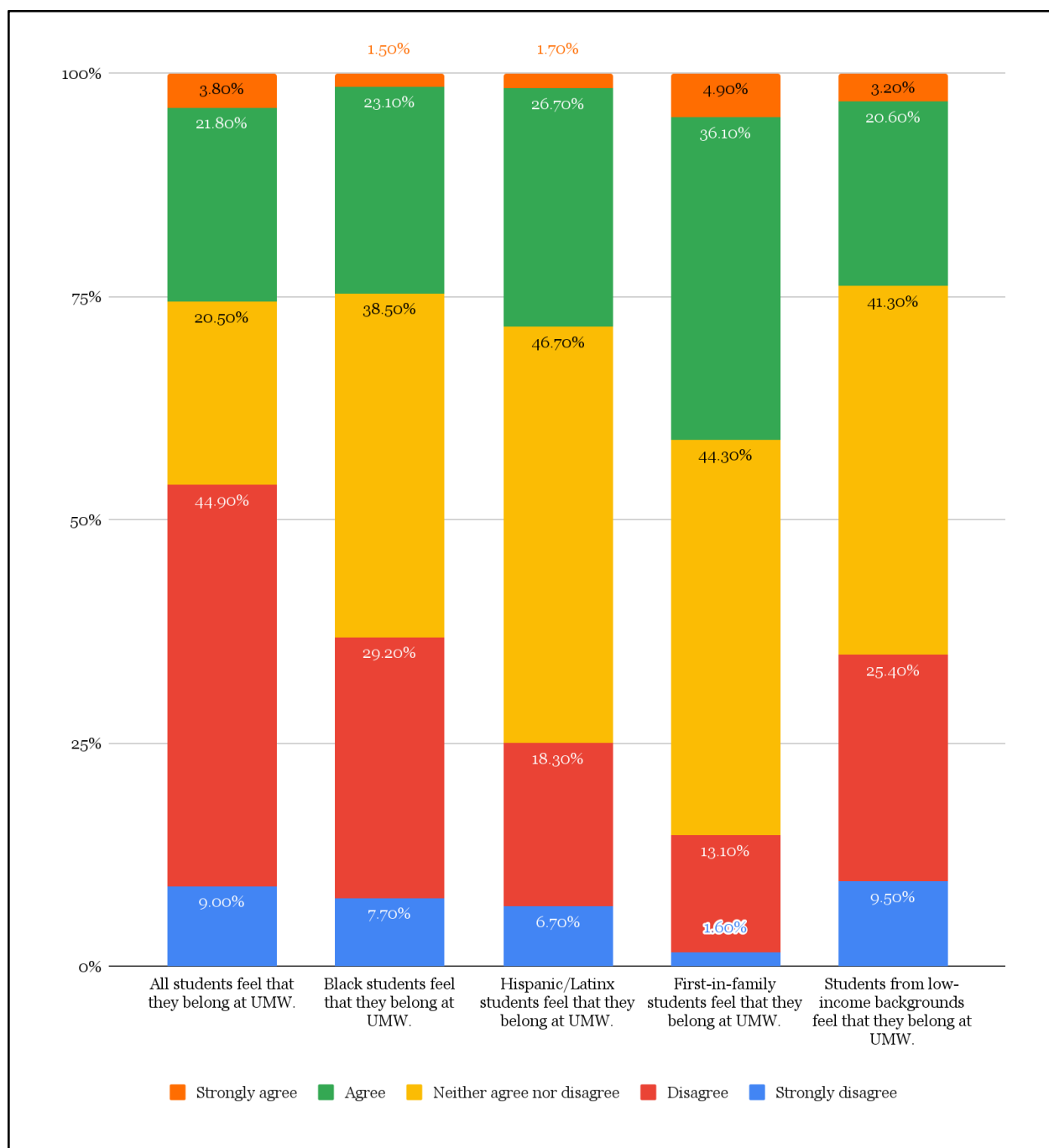
However, as detailed in Figure 4.7, responses to the four questions related to perceptions of

belonging of the groups of underrepresented students had high rates of respondents selecting

"Not enough information to answer," suggesting that respondents do not have a strong

understanding of the experiences of underrepresented students at UMW.

Figure 4.7

Selection of "Not enough information to answer"
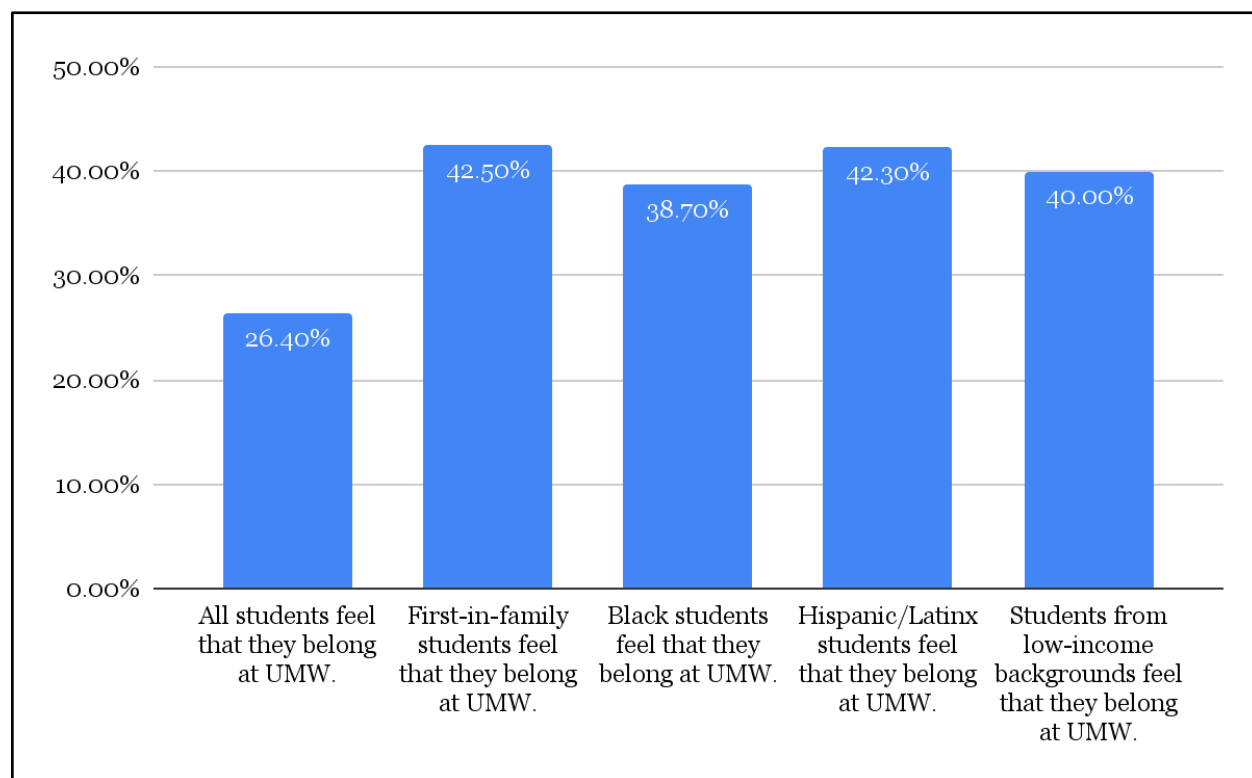
Despite the possibility that many respondents lack sufficient understanding of the experiences of underrepresented students at UMW, it is also clear from open-ended comments that there are staff and faculty who have a strong understanding of these experiences. One faculty member suggested that feelings of belonging may vary based on context.

> I think it would be helpful for the university to distinguish clearly between a sense of belonging inside and outside of the classroom. My classes do lots of group work, and I see students from underrepresented groups interacting easily with students from other backgrounds, probably because everyone shares clear interests and tasks. I imagine that it is more challenging to get students interacting in that way outside of the classroom, which is also an important component of college.

Perceptions of contextual differences become more apparent when respondents were asked to consider academic, social, and financial needs.

Understanding of Student Needs

Respondents were less confident that UMW is meeting the academic, social, and financial needs of underrepresented students.

Table 4.11

Perceptions of Underrepresented Student Needs

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The academic needs of underrepresented students are being met at UMW.	6.7%	39.3%	27.0%	21.3%	5.6%
The social needs of underrepresented students are being met at UMW.	5.5%	34.2%	32.9%	20.5%	6.8%
The financial needs of underrepresented students are being met at UMW.	18.5%	33.3%	37.0%	7.4%	3.7%

As detailed in Table 4.11, when looking more closely at the three different role groups' understanding of student needs, we see that respondents largely agree that faculty have a stronger understanding of students' academic needs (M = 3.33, SD = 1.04) than executives (M = 2.93, SD = 1.17) and staff (M = 3.19, SD = 1.14). There is also agreement that staff (M = 3.24, SD = 1.08) have a better understanding of underrepresented student social needs than either executives

(M=2.98, SD=1.201) or faculty (M=2.69, SD=0.99).

Figure 4.8

Understanding of Academic and Social Needs of Students
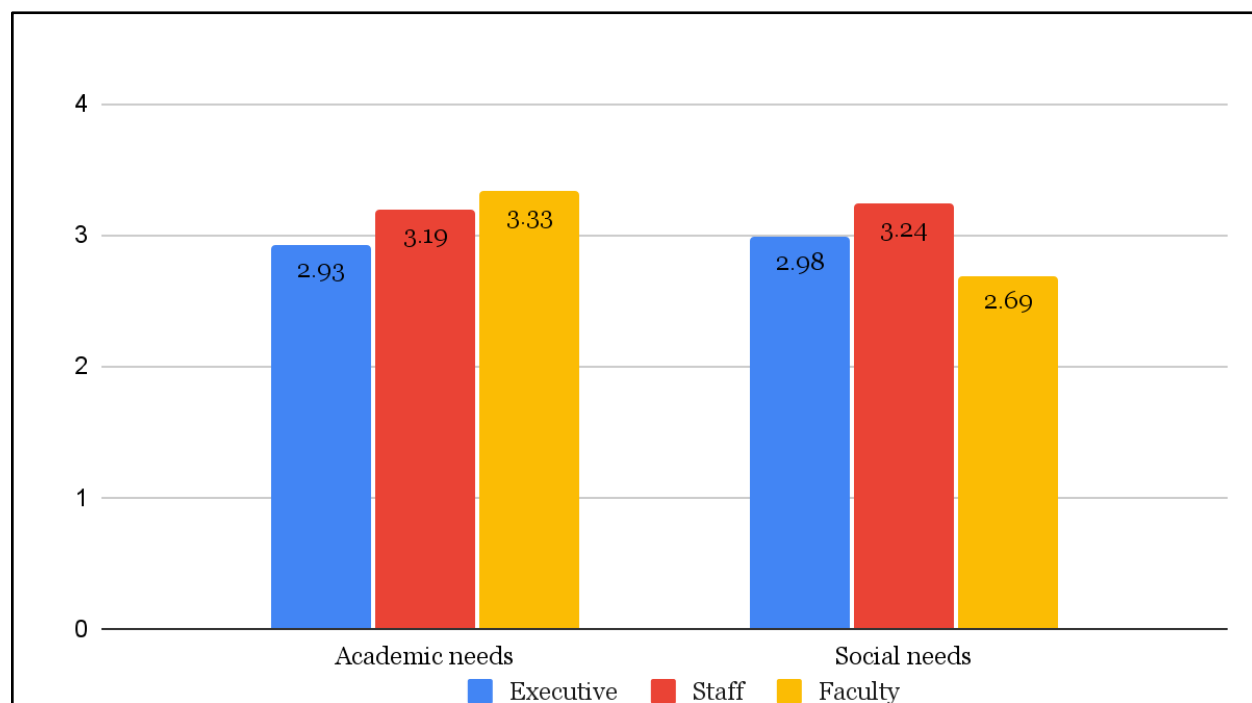
Note. This chart compares perceived understanding of student academic and social needs by

three role groups: Executive, Staff, and Faculty.

Figure 4.8 shows that respondents expressed the highest level of agreement in support of the idea

that faculty, as compared to senior leadership and staff, understand the academic needs of

underrepresented students.

As detailed in Figure 4.9, when looking more closely at the three different role groups'

understanding of underrepresented student needs, we see that over half of the respondents

(50.6%) agree or strongly agree that faculty understand underrepresented students' academic

needs. Yet, 49.5% of respondents selected *Neither agree nor disagree* or *Disagree* or *Strongly*

Disagree, suggesting that many respondents do not have a favorable impression of faculty

understanding of student academic needs. Perhaps most significant is the 65.5% of respondents

who expressed disagreement or strong disagreement that senior leaders understand the academic

needs of underrepresented students.

Figure 4.9

Perceived Understanding of Academic Needs
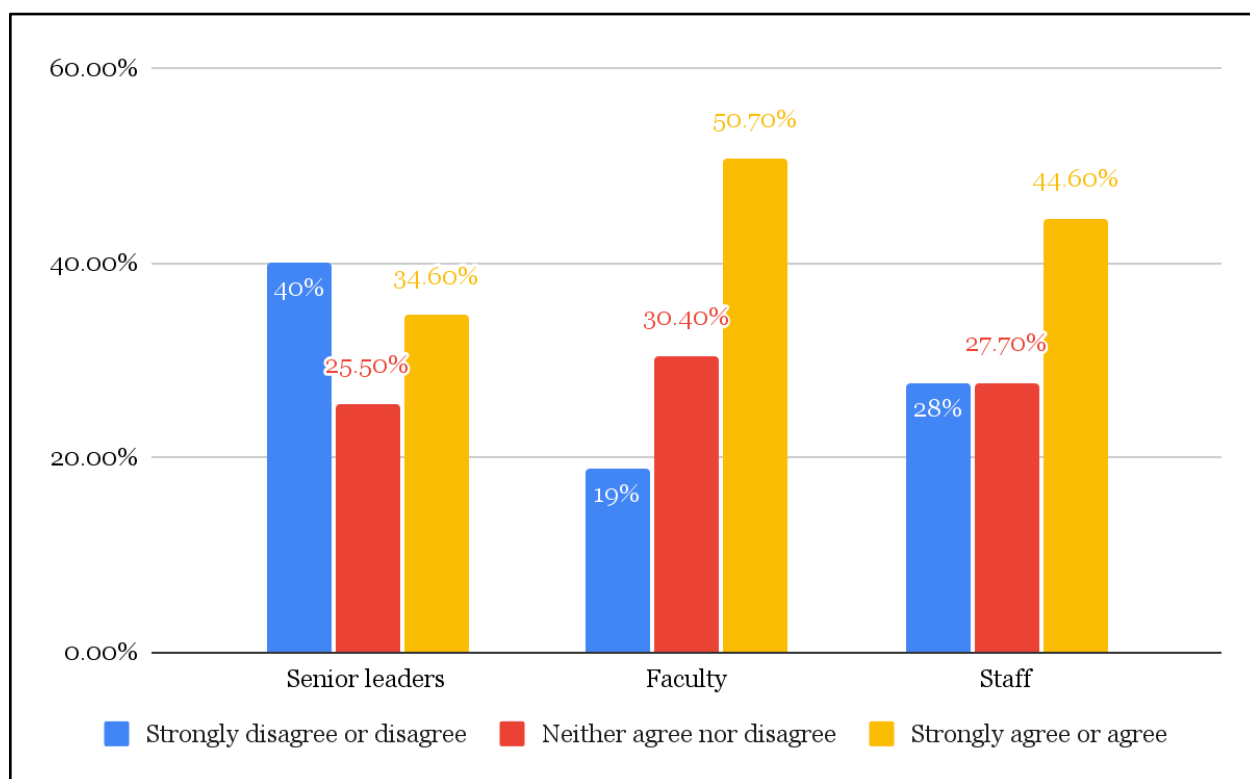
Similar dynamics are visible in responses relating to the understanding of students' social

needs. As detailed in Figure 4.10, 47.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that staff

understand students' social needs. However, responses also suggest a significant perception that

neither senior leaders nor faculty understand the social needs of underrepresented students, as

indicated by the percentage of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea that

senior leaders (42%) and faculty (51%) understand the social needs of underrepresented students

Figure 4.10

Perceived Understanding of Social Needs
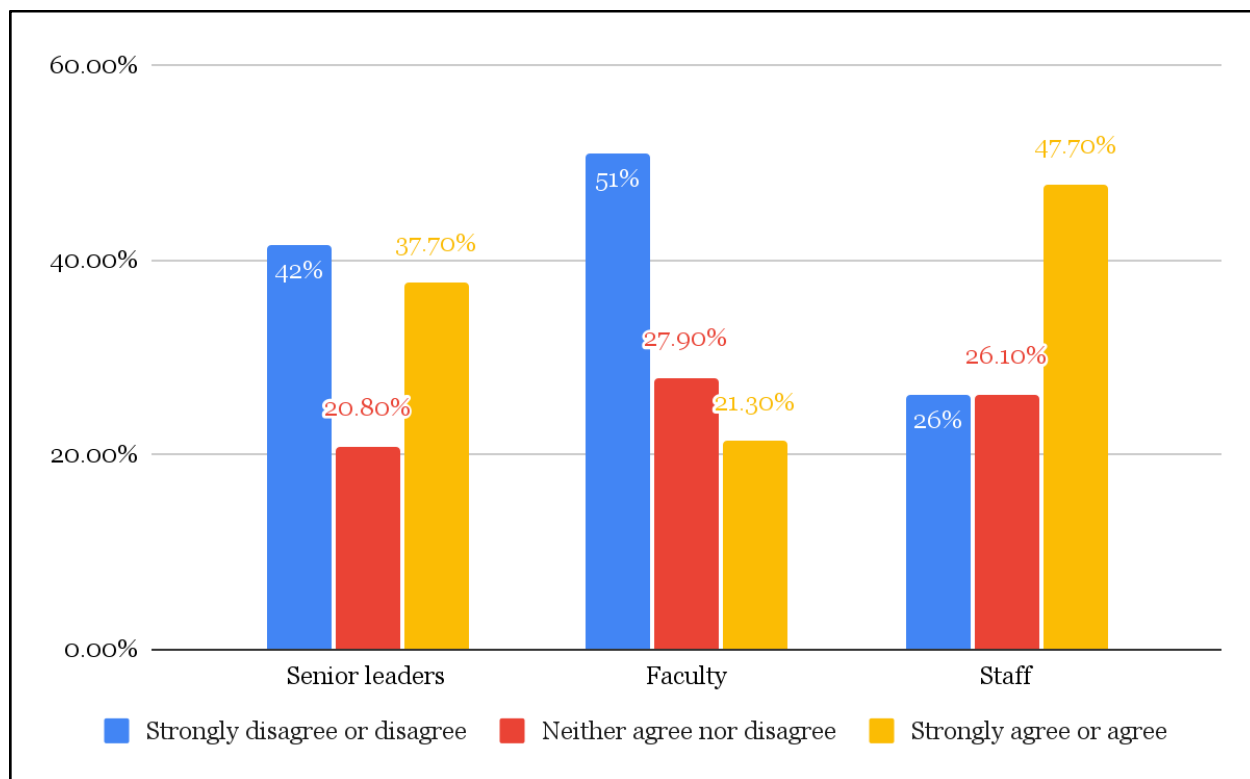
As noted in the discussion of the belonging survey and focus group findings, respondents in all three areas of our study identify student community as an area in need of attention. One faculty member suggested that underrepresented students need more opportunities to interact within their communities:

UMW has a homogeneous community history: white females attending college. Males were added with time, and a few minority members, and a few with less economic advantages. When Black, Latino, and other minority students are recruited to UMW, they are not offered a homogeneous community. They are now part of a heterogeneous community, and UMW embraces the diversity. It is effortless to find a room full of white students. Is it easy to find a room full of Black or Latino students? Can we talk about

that? NO! It is not. Did anyone ask the Black or Latino students if they would like a

homogeneous moment now and then? Students need to have the opportunity to join

homogeneous clubs and groups for social interest and belonging. I understand this is a

subject that is difficult to address, and it cannot be ignored. We are naive if we think a

black student or Latino student does not notice they are the only Black or Latino student

in the room, and there are no opportunities for them to meet and greet other students who

are similar to them.

Following a similar line of thought, several respondents suggested that inclusion of a Greek

system at UMW might offer this sort of homogenous community to underrepresented students.

Institutional Culture and Inclusive Practices

The ORCA survey sought to understand how respondents assessed institutional culture

and practices of particular importance to underrepresented students. Table 4.12 indicates fairly

strong agreement among respondents that UMW culture and programming are inclusive for

underrepresented students.

Table 4.12

Inclusivity of UMW Culture

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
UMWs culture is inclusive and welcoming for underrepresented students.	1.1%	15.8%	26.3%	40.0%	16.8%
UMW provides culturally-responsive programming that helps underrepresented students feel connected to the university.	3.3%	11.0%	22.0%	41.8%	22.0%

However, written comments suggested more specific areas where UMW might improve the inclusivity of its institutional culture. One respondent wrote:

> We need to look at our institutional culture and implicit bias, institutional policies that privilege/silence certain groups, etc. The students this year in particular are becoming more vocal. We need to be aware of when our curricular decisions may "other" students in our classrooms--the students themselves, especially from minoritized groups, should NOT always bear the burden of interrupting hurtful actions (which are often done by White people who mean well or do not even realize it's a problem).

Another respondent emphasized the need for sustained support, particularly for underrepresented students, "Short term programs appear to leave under-represented students with a nice welcome but that ends after the classes begin." Similarly, concern was raised by one respondent that while

the commitment for inclusion is evident on campus, it needs to be reinforced with sufficient academic support for students, "UMW is already very sensitive and proactive about this. There needs to be a balance between encouraging and supporting and lowering standards in the classroom. More Student Success and tutoring (perhaps beyond peer tutoring) can help."

More than half of the respondents (55.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that UMW's recruitment practices are inclusive and welcoming for underrepresented students. Similarly, 56.8% of respondents agree or strongly agreed that UMW's culture is inclusive and welcoming for underrepresented students. However, when respondents were asked to consider how strongly they agree that staff and faculty implement inclusive practices in their work with underrepresented students, the results are more mixed, as detailed in Table 4.13. The highest percentages (39.1% for staff and 44.3% for faculty) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that staff and faculty respectively implement inclusive practices. However, the fact that a larger percentage (60.1% for staff and 55.7% for faculty) did not offer such high levels of agreement suggest that either respondents are not aware of the degree to which staff and faculty implement inclusive practices or that there is more work to be done to ensure that UMW staff and faculty are sufficiently prioritizing inclusive practices in support of underrepresented students.

Table 4.13

Staff and Faculty Implementation

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Staff implement innovative initiatives to improve student support for underrepresented students.	8.7%	17.4%	34.8%	26.1%	13.0%
Faculty implement innovative initiatives to improve student support for underrepresented students.	3.3%	26.2%	26.2%	37.7%	6.6%

Survey results also suggest that more guidance might be needed from executive and senior leadership at UMW. While respondents indicate relatively strong agreement that executive and senior leadership seeks ways to increase the sense of belonging for underrepresented students at UMW (M=3.56, SD=1.1). As detailed in Table 4.14, respondents suggest that executive leadership, staff, and faculty guidance and prioritization of inclusive practices for underrepresented students, respondent perceptions of actual administrative actions by senior and executive leaders could be improved.

Table 4.14

Guidance and Goal setting

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Prioritize the development of inclusive practices for underrepresented students.	7.5%	18.9%	26.4%	32.1%	15.1%
Provide clear guidance for student success measures.	7.3%	23.6%	30.9%	21.8%	16.4%
Establish clear goals for support of underrepresented students.	12.5%	37.5%	25.0%	14.3%	10.7%

Communication and Collaboration

Respondents agreed that executive and senior leaders promote collaboration and communication in support of staff and faculty working to support underrepresented students. However, as illustrated in Table 4.15, survey responses also suggest that leadership does not sufficiently seek input from staff and faculty regarding decisions about academic support of underrepresented students by executive and senior leadership (M=2.58, SD=1.22). Similarly, respondents indicated relatively low levels of feedback provided to staff (M=2.55, SD=1.15) and faculty (M=2.07, SD=.99) regarding the effects of student support decisions related to underrepresented students.

Figure 4.11

Perceptions of Input Seeking and Feedback
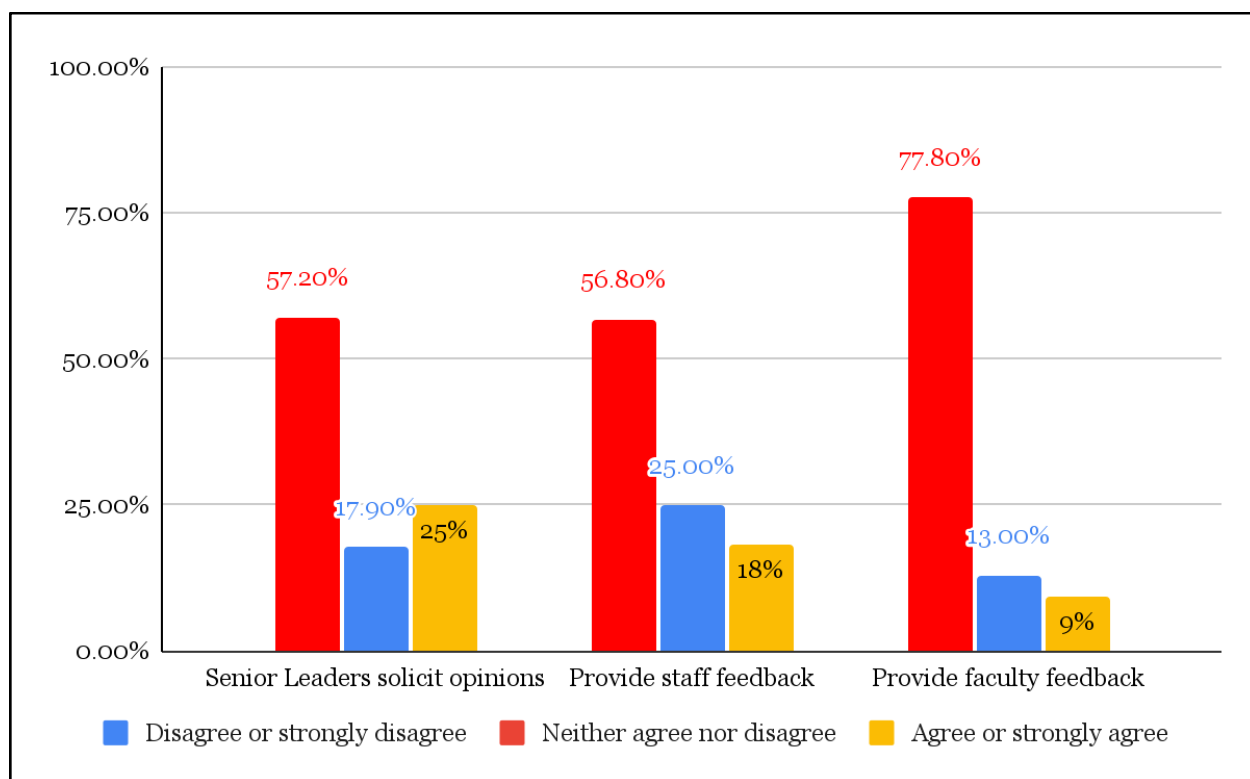
As detailed in Figure 4.11, 44.1% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that executive and senior leadership promotes collaboration to solve student support challenges. Similarly, 39.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that executive and senior leadership promotes communication among student support units and individuals working with underrepresented students. However, the fact that over half of respondents did not agree that senior leadership promotes collaboration or communication in support of underrepresented students suggests more work needs to be done in these areas.

Figure 4.12

Executive and Senior Leadership Promotion of Collaboration and Communication
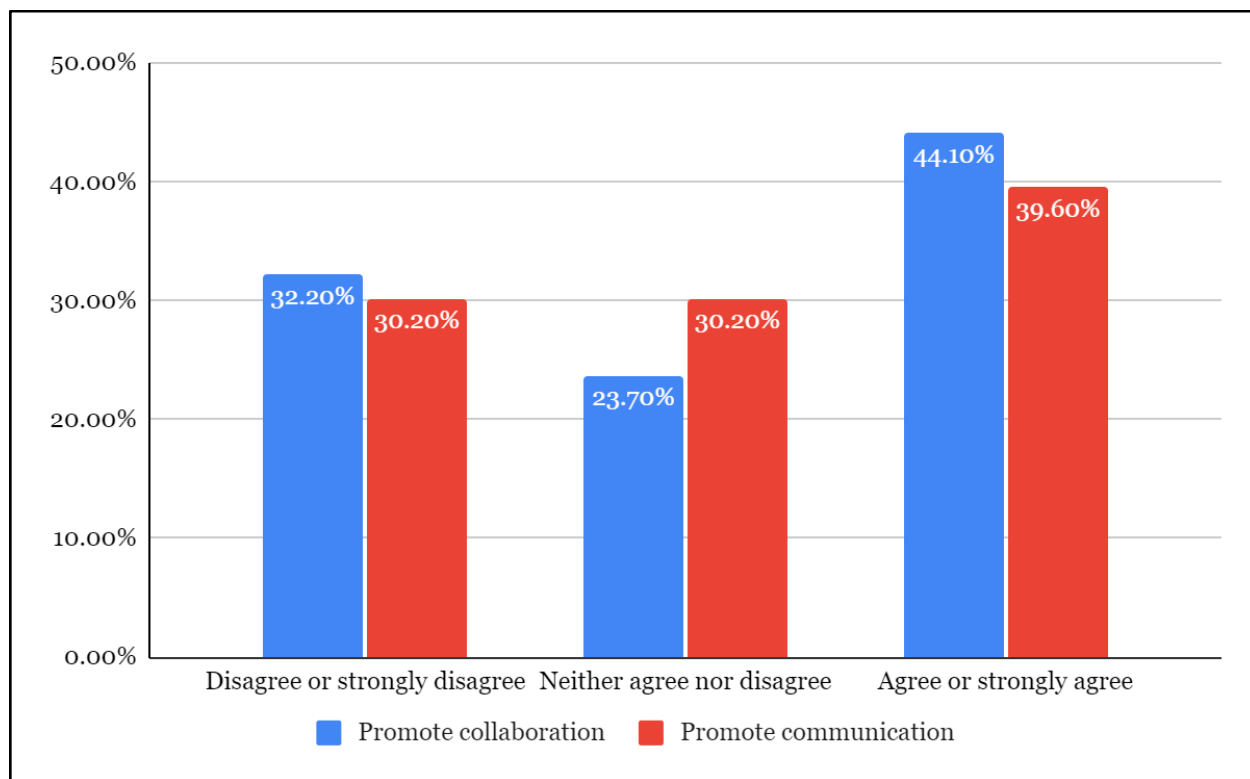
However, as detailed in Figure 4.12, there is much higher agreement among respondents about the strength of collaboration of staff with faculty and faculty with staff in support of underrepresented students.

Figure 4.13

Collaboration Among Staff and Faculty
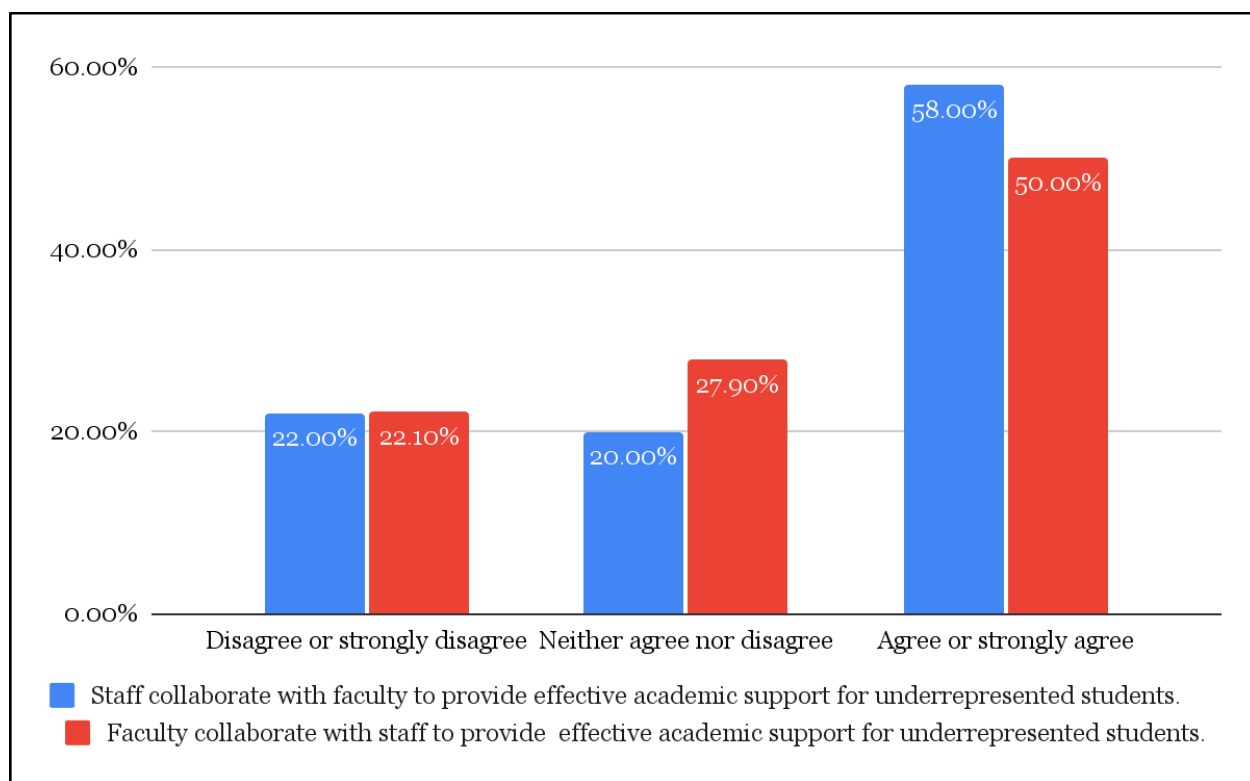
Despite the strong level of agreement about the presence of collaboration between faculty and staff, written comments suggest there is still a desire for more deliberate forms of communication and collaboration between staff and faculty. A faculty member suggested a desire for more communication between student support offices, such as the Student Transition Program (STP), when working to support underrepresented students:

> I love getting those email queries from STP in the middle of the semester to check on individual students; I think that really provides a safety net for students. (Also, my STP students are often doing very well; that is a program, in my experience, that recruits great students for Mary Washington. Maybe an expansion is in order if we haven't exhausted that pool of talent?).

Notably, this respondent also emphasizes recognition about the value of work conducted by student support units, such as STP.

Accountability

Implementation of campus initiatives also requires organizational accountability to ensure efforts are followed up upon. As detailed in Table 4.15, respondents indicated that executive and senior leaders hold low levels of accountability for staff and faculty in terms of academic success of underrepresented students.

Table 4.15

Executive and Senior Leadership Accountability Efforts

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Hold staff members accountable for the academic success of underrepresented students.	17.5%	45.0%	30.0%	5.0%	2.5%
Hold faculty members accountable for the academic success of underrepresented students.	22.4%	36.7%	32.7%	4.1%	4.1%
Reward innovation and creativity to improve student support for underrepresented students.	17.0%	24.5%	32.1%	22.6%	3.8%

A respondent offered the following comment about UMW executive and senior leadership:

wanting faculty and staff to act as if they are "accountable" for the success of

underrepresented students is a laudable goal BUT measuring and evaluating individual

staff or faculty members' accountability for this will, at the least, be difficult and if done

poorly could be unfairly punitive - especially if UMW does not make the investments

necessary to support such students.

In a similar vein, one faculty member wrote that it is important for the institution to "Be

willing to look at the performance and attitudes of middle managers and hold them responsible."

Yet, another respondent emphasized the importance of holding faculty accountable, as well.

"These are very important matters that require buy-in and resources. But they also require

accountability, something that is severely lacking on this campus. Faculty especially are not

generally held accountable for their missteps." Another respondent sees the accountability issue

more broadly and emphasizes the need to "Establish campus-wide accountable [sic] for

participation in and management of DEI initiatives."

Yet, despite the low levels of agreement regarding accountability, several questions

presented in Table 4.16 suggest there is a wider willingness to be held accountable for the

success of underrepresented students.

Table 4.16

Willingness to be Held Accountable

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Senior leaders are willing to hold themselves accountable for the long-term success of work to make underrepresented students feel a stronger sense of belonging at UMW.	10.7%	17.9%	30.4%	30.4%	10.7%
Staff are willing to hold themselves accountable for the long-term success of work to make underrepresented students feel a stronger sense of belonging at UMW.	10.4%	12.5%	27.1%	41.7%	8.3%
Faculty are willing to hold themselves accountable for the long-term success of work to make underrepresented students feel a stronger sense of belonging at UMW.	7.4%	16.2%	26.5%	41.2%	8.8%

Significantly, in written comments to the survey, several respondents indicated concern that UMW is not sufficiently responsive to racial incidents on campus. One person wrote that "A white male student shouted, 'White Power' at one of my African-American students, and now this student feels unsafe on campus." As discussed above, respondents to the Sense of Belonging survey and participants in the focus groups expressed similar sentiments about the need for UMW to respond more assertively when racist or other troubling incidents occur on campus.

One respondent to the ORCA survey offered a comment that offers helpful framing for

understanding the context of support for underrepresented students at UMW: "Our actions must begin to conform to our message!!!" In consideration of the findings from the ORCA regarding current practices and culture at UMW in relation to the underrepresented student groups of interest here, a gap becomes evident between strong intentions to support these students and the actual practices of support on campus.

Theme 2: Readiness for Change

A central purpose of the ORCA survey is to assess the degree to which executive and senior leadership, staff, and faculty feel motivated and capable of improving support for underrepresented students. Results suggest that respondents see the need for change, are eager to change, but they lack confidence in their capacity to do so.

Perceived Need for Improvement

As detailed in Table 4.17 respondents indicate strong agreement that current practices supporting underrepresented students should be improved, but this agreement is undermined by a lack of confidence that the strategic plan is sufficient to guide strategies for support of underrepresented students, as indicated by the 43.3% of respondents who disagree or strongly disagreed.

Table 4.17

Need for Improvement

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Current practices that support underrepresented students should be improved.	1.3%	1.3%	3.9%	47.4%	46.1%
The current strategic plan is sufficient to guide strategies for the university to promote retention of underrepresented students.	13.3%	30.0%	28.3%	21.7%	6.7%

Motivational Readiness

A central purpose of an ORCA assessment is to gain insight on the readiness of senior

leadership, staff, and faculty to make changes that will improve support for underrepresented

students. As detailed in Table 4.18, respondents indicate positive, but not overwhelming,

agreement that staff and faculty are receptive to changing organizational practices and

programming to meet the needs of underrepresented students.

Table 4.18

Receptivity to Change

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Staff are receptive to change	6.5%	23.9%	8.7%	43.5%	17.4%
Faculty are receptive to change	7.6%	19.7%	16.7%	39.4%	16.7%

Similarly, as detailed in Table 4.19, respondents also indicate agreement that all groups are willing to train to be able to provide more support for underrepresented students.

Table 4.19

Perception of Willingness to Train

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Senior leaders are willing to participate in training to improve support for underrepresented students.	5.8%	9.6%	19.2%	51.9%	13.5%
Staff are willing to participate in training to increase support for underrepresented students.	2.0%	6.1%	30.6%	46.9%	14.3%

Faculty are willing to participate in training to increase support for underrepresented students.	4.2%	9.7%	30.6%	41.7%	13.9%

Despite indicating faculty, senior leaders, and staff may be willing to participate in training to improve support for underrepresented students, comments in response to the open-ended questions suggest that respondents are also feeling overburdened, which may make finding time and energy for DEI work hard to find. One faculty member emphasized the need for more faculty. They stated, "Time is the problem. There are lots of good things we can do, but they all take time. Faculty are already full to the brim. Last thing we need is more upper-level administrative staff, of any flavor." Another faculty member also indicated a feeling of being overwhelmed and the need for workload relief to make room for DEI-related work. They wrote that "If you want buy-in to programming, etc. to support these groups, you can't just add it to an already overwhelming workload. Truth: Most of the time, I don't have time to care." Yet, another faculty member acknowledged the burden, but offered suggestions for initiatives in support of underrepresented students,

> To my mind, the two biggest issues right now at UMW are time; funding; and awareness. I think many staff and faculty members want to do all they can but we just have so many things on our plates right now. We need more hands-on deck--we need to have a more robust response to replacing people who have left the university and hiring in essential areas. That will free up time for people to be able to be more attentive. On the faculty side, I think there are a lot of people who work very very hard on these issues, but a lot who are either unaware or uninformed.

Reservations about the capacity to take on more work are reinforced by that fact that

43.6% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea that UMW is willing to commit resources (e.g. staff, funding, etc.) to support a strategy to improve academic support for underrepresented students. It should be noted that 22.6% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, leaving only 33.9% of respondents agreeing that UMW is willing to commit resources to support underrepresented students.

Ability to Change

While respondents indicated hesitation about their capacity to take on more work, they also express agreement that individually, and as an institution, as detailed in Table 4.20, they are confident about their ability to make changes that will better support underrepresented students. While respondents might not be confident that change benefiting underrepresented students at UMW can happen, there seems to be hopefulness among respondents that it should.

Table 4.20

Confidence to Make Change

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I have confidence in my ability to make changes that will help underrepresented students feel a stronger sense of belonging at UMW.	2.7%	8.1%	14.9%	51.4%	23.0%
I have confidence in UMW ability to make changes that will help underrepresented students feel a stronger sense of belonging at UMW.	5.3%	14.7%	20.0%	49.3%	10.7%

Theme 3: Need for Resources and Training

Four questions asked respondents to reflect on the sufficiency of resources available for support of underrepresented students. As detailed in Table 4.21, respondents were not all confident that UMW had sufficient resources for programs, staffing, and facilities available.

Table 4.21

Resource Sufficiency

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Sufficient financial resources are available for programs that support underrepresented students.	38.2%	45.5%	9.1%	3.6%	3.6%
UMW has sufficient staffing in place to support underrepresented students.	40.6%	35.9%	7.8%	9.4%	6.3%
UMW has sufficient facilities designed for support of underrepresented students.	31.7%	25.4%	17.5%	22.2%	3.2%
UMW provides opportunities for training and courageous conversations about inclusion and equity for staff and faculty.	8.5%	29.6%	28.2%	22.5%	11.3%

Two open-ended questions at the end of the survey asked respondents to offer

suggestions about ideas for strategies for improving support for underrepresented students: (1)

What strategies can UMW implement to improve the sense of belonging for underrepresented

students (e.g., Black, Hispanic/Latinx, first-in-family, low-income)?; (2)What strategies do you

believe are essential for UMW (senior leaders, faculty, and staff) to strengthen services provided

to underrepresented students? Respondents offered a wide range of suggestions, but the most dominant theme in these comments pertained to the need for more resources in several crucial areas.

Training for Faculty and Staff

As detailed in Table 4.22, a large percentage of respondents indicated concern about the availability of professional development opportunities to enhance support for underrepresented students, with over half of respondents for both faculty and staff professional development opportunities.

Table 4.22

Professional Development Opportunities

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Faculty	19.7%	32.9%	22.4%	17.1%	7.9%
Staff	17.0%	40.4%	21.3%	14.9%	6.4%

One respondent emphasized in a written comment the importance of pedagogical training and support for inclusion:

> For the faculty, please focus training on practical pedagogical enhancements that are specific to different parts of the university. It is 2021, and I don't need to be persuaded that implicit bias and micro-aggressions exist; they do, I get it. I need data about our students and conversations about how people are teaching relatively small humanities

courses. I have no need to know about best practices for teaching big biology lectures,

important as that is for other people. Thank you!"

Similarly, another respondent highlighted the need for cultural competency training for faculty

and staff. Several respondents commented on the need for more training and increased

understanding of student circumstances and needs.

Respondents also indicated a desire to learn more about how students experience the

university and what their needs are. In particular, one respondent suggested the need for

systematic processes for listening to students and to utilizing their feedback, "Systemic ways of

using the student voice/student input in policy and protocol reviews." This respondent also

suggested it is necessary to, "Ask the question about how UMW's distinctive strengths can be

attractive to underrepresented students." The need for more understanding of the student

experience also extended to a desire for more communication across campus units.

Communication, particularly in regard to student needs was emphasized throughout the

comments. One respondent wrote about the desire for "Training and education on the student

experience. Systemic ways of using the student voice/student input in policy and protocol

reviews…" Another comment emphasized that training opportunities need to be offered to more

than a small number of already committed, and possibly overloaded, faculty and staff members.

It was suggested that UMW, "Pay real $ to build/support evidence-based programs. Don't just

freeload off of the work of the people who are passionate about this." There is the desire for

more information about student experiences as well as relevant university policies that apply to

students. Specifically, a respondent offered, "Train us! I have no idea, for example, how

financial aid works, how it affects students who need it, what rules apply when they make their

class choices, want to study abroad." This comment, perhaps more than any other, captures a

widespread sentiment among respondents for the need for ongoing training and more information regarding support for underrepresented students.

Resources for Students

The most frequently commented upon topic in the open-ended question section of the ORCA survey related to the need for more resources that could support particular campus offices that serve underrepresented students, such as the Registrar, STP, the James Farmer Multicultural Center, the Talley Center, ODR, financial aid, admissions, career and academic services. Specifically, respondents suggested more training for faculty and staff, and more programming that would support underrepresented students.

One respondent offered a specific recommendation about the need for more targeted academic support for underrepresented students. They shared:

> UMW needs to make a fierce financial commitment to underrepresented students if they want them to succeed. It is not enough to recruit underrepresented students; UMW needs to offer the services which will make them successful and reach graduation. If UMW cannot do that, the underrepresented students previously listed are better served by first attending a community college, followed by attending a university with the financial ability to offer the services I have listed.

> UMW needs to offer more than the "traditional college experience" if the goal is to graduate minority, first-in-family, low-income students. Notice I say, "graduate," not "attract." It is cruel to recruit students who live in poverty and have no resources to succeed at a university. The change that needs to occur is compassion, as evidenced by financial support.

This call for greater financial support for underrepresented students was echoed by many respondents. Another faculty member wrote that UMW should,

Actively recruit these students through the admissions process, and place financial

funding and support that enables these students to actually afford to attend UMW. This

means putting up funding that is competitive with the schools these students are looking

at. Once these students get to campus actually have staffed and on campus resources that

are directed to them so that they can stay at UMW for 4 years.

Respondents also offered ample comments in support of the call for more resources for

faculty to better and more systematically engage in inclusivity work with their students. One

faculty member stated,

There's some faculty and staff who are busting their asses working together trying to help

these students. For the most part, they all work with their unit's resources or use personal

networks to make things happen between units. Like most everything around here, we've

got grass-roots things going on that are labors of love for the participants, but no

assistance to learn or $ to implement evidence-based best practices.

As noted by students in the focus groups, ORCA respondents also commented on the need for

UMW to be more visibly responsive to problems. One respondent wrote, "There needs to be

better security or perhaps security cameras to catch the very few people who are vandalizing and

leaving behind flyers/graffiti/nooses etc. One such action can undo millions of dollars or

proactive support," suggesting the need for prominent and centrally directed communication of

campus values surrounding inclusivity.

Overall, survey results suggest that executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty are

critical of how UMW allocates resources in support of underrepresented students. Respondents

recognize opportunities for improvement, including the allocation of resources for training,

programs, and coordination of support for underrepresented students.

More Diverse Leadership, Staff, and Faculty

Respondents also made a strong call for more diversity in leadership, staff, and faculty at UMW. One respondent emphasized the importance of diverse hiring to the issue of workload discussed above:

Increase our faculty diversity. I know there are already initiatives to do this with search advocate training, but we have a lot of work to do. This work can't stop with recruitment--we need to do a HARD look at retention. Stop asking minoritized faculty to serve on all the searches, do all the student mentoring, etc., without additional compensation. These efforts will allow underrepresented students to see themselves in the institution.

Similarly, the following response highlighted the importance of diverse hiring to ensure that UMW is able to implement the goals related to diversity and inclusion that people seem to desire:

We need to actually commit to making the faculty more diverse. Efforts to just try finding more diverse pools for the searches we would run anyway is necessary, but not sufficient. Instead, we need to hire into lines intentionally designed to increase our diversity, such as for an African American studies line which has been discussed but the admin. has been unwilling to commit to. We have 'said' a lot about being more diverse and inclusive, but the administration's unwillingness to commit real resources here is disturbing. We also need to do a better job providing staff for the Talley center & ODR which are both severely understaffed and can be even more important for our under-represented students.

In addition to numerous comments emphasizing the importance of hiring more diverse leadership, staff, and faculty, one respondent commented on the need to build in tangible ways to

measure and emphasize DEI work as a criterion for hiring, "More TT [tenure track] faculty for

depts that have the numbers to do it. Make DEI accomplishments a real criterion for those

searches. Not a cheap solution, but one that would work." A similar comment emphasized the

need to hire strategically and to encourage departments to communicate what they do well,

"Commit to hiring faculty of color and to opening up tenure track positions in underrepresented

fields. Make sure departments highlight their efforts towards." Among the other areas in need of

change, one of the most important is the strong call for more diverse hiring so that

underrepresented students at UMW are able to work with executive and senior leaders, staff, and

faculty who represent the areas of diversity of a more diverse student population.

Chapter Summary

Analysis of UMW's mission and several recent campus-wide initiatives related to the

promotion and diversity and inclusion reveals that UMW has emphasized the importance of

diversity and inclusion, at least in terms of priorities and importance. However, many of these

priorities have not yet been addressed or remain as areas in need of improvement, as evidenced

by ongoing declines in enrollment and other findings from this project's surveys and focus group

discussions.

The Sense of Belonging Survey (belonging survey) captured 531 responses from UMW

undergraduate students. The survey design collected demographic information, levels of

involvement, gauged sense of belonging, and commitment to the school. The demographic

sample size of the respondents was similar to the actual population at UMW. First, while

students were significantly aware of the university services available, students had a low usage

and satisfaction rating of these services, except for those related to professor office hours and

library access. Second notable were students' engagement ratings of institutional agents, such as

professors and academic advisors. Students were pleased with their availability and their attention throughout the academic year. Last, the overall sense of belonging of participants was mixed. Survey data indicated students had a moderate level of social belonging and revealed questionable confidence in UMW's ability to support an inclusive campus environment.

The qualitative phase of this study included four focus group interviews with students enrolled at UMW. The participants represented a cross section of the student population, including students who identify as being part of the population central to this project (Black, Hispanic, first-generation, low-income). The focus group interviews revealed several themes in the areas of academic and faculty engagement, social belonging, and institutional engagement. Participants were found to be satisfied with their academic experience, including the support and connection they have with faculty members. However, results suggest that relationships formed among classmates is underwhelming and stands to be improved.

Students reported social belonging is most often cultivated by *finding your people*, however, the existing student culture may have an adverse impact on the student sense of belonging. Many participants expressed awareness of their identity, and, more specifically, how their identity is represented on UMW's campus, including in make-up of the student, faculty, staff and leadership populations. We found dissatisfaction with UMW's efforts to promote an inclusive and safe campus, and a desire for the university to establish a culture of accountability. It was concluded that UMW may consider ways of enhancing its connection with and among students, improved collaboration and communication regarding campus resources, and establishing a clear and consistent commitment to fostering a safe and inclusive campus.

The ORCA Survey yielded 107 completed responses from executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty members. The survey responses yielded three themes related to the respondent

perceptions of UMW's motivation, readiness, and ability to improve support for underrepresented students. First, while there is significant commitment to support underrepresented students, there is still a sense that institutional culture and inclusive practices need to be improved, particularly in terms of communication, collaboration, and accountability. Second, while respondents indicate significant support for making changes regarding support for underrepresented students, there is some hesitancy about UMW's ability to make those changes. Third, respondents were clear in their call for more training, increased resources for student support units, and the need for more diversity among executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty.

The data collection in all phases of this study provided an understanding of how UMW recruits, supports, and retains underrepresented students (e.g., first-generation, low-income, students of color, and other underrepresented student groups). The following chapter will further discuss the findings, highlight study limitations, discuss implication for practice, and provide recommendations for the University of Mary Washington.

Chapter V: Discussion

Research has consistently shown that students from the underrepresented populations, such as Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income students, face particular challenges in their efforts to earn undergraduate degrees (Strayhorn, 2011). As the college student population becomes increasingly diverse, universities are facing pressure to find new ways to attract, support, and graduate the changing population of college-going students.

This study, initiated at the University of Mary Washington (UMW), aimed to understand how the institution recruits, supports, and retains underrepresented students (e.g., first-generation, low-income, students of color, and other underrepresented student groups). This study also provided opportunities to gather information for UMW to improve its efforts to facilitate access, sense of belonging, and retention of underrepresented students. Specifically, this research study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. How does the University of Mary Washington (UMW) facilitate equitable access to higher education for Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students?

   a. How does UMW facilitate retention of Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students?

   b. How do Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students experience a sense of belonging at UMW?

2. What are strategies that UMW can implement to facilitate access, sense of belonging, and retention of underrepresented students?

We used a mixed methods approach to collect data through student focus groups, student and executive and senior leader, staff, and faculty surveys. Our study had 18 student focus group participants, 531 participants in the student belonging survey, and 107 executive and senior

leaders, staff, and faculty participated in the Organizational Readiness for Change Assessment (ORCA). Study participants offered insights into the experiences of the underrepresented student population at UMW and opportunities for UMW to improve support for underrepresented students. This chapter summarizes the findings from the research, acknowledges study limitations, provides recommendations for the University of Mary Washington, explains implications for practice, and supplies opportunities for future research.

Summary of Research Findings

We conducted a sequential explanatory design mixed-methods study grounded in a theoretical framework focused on a sense of belonging, a diverse and student-ready infrastructure. This approach informed how we identified the ways UMW facilitates access and retention of underrepresented students. More specifically, our study focused on how underrepresented students experience a sense of belonging at UMW and identified strategies that the university can implement to facilitate access, sense of belonging, and retention of these students. The following information is a summary of the findings from this research study.

Document analysis provided relevant information about UMW's mission and recent initiatives related to diversity and inclusion, as well as trends in the enrollment of underrepresented students at UMW. The university website includes statements and other resources related to its commitment to DEI and recommendations provided by a 2017 task force on diversity and inclusion. However, we found little information about the progress of the outlined recommendations. A review of enrollment and retention trends at UMW demonstrated that the university is experiencing a gradual decline in retention of Black and Hispanic students. More specifically, the declining six-year graduation rate for both demographics support the urgency to enhance how UMW recruits, supports, and retains underrepresented students.

Based on the quantitative phase of this study, the student participants indicated in the belonging survey that their awareness, use, and satisfaction with 13 of 15 campus resources were low across the board. While students indicated that they were well aware of a variety of UMW resources offered (see Appendix D) to assist with academic support, professional and social activities, and well-being units, the usage of these resources was limited except for those that pertained directly to academic support, such as professor office hours and access to library facilities. Other academic services geared towards peer-led support (e.g., peer academic consulting, peer tutoring), Speaking and Writing centers, student activities centers, and wellness programming were underused resources designed to support student inclusion and success. Student participants in the free-response section of the belonging survey cited the COVID-19 pandemic and policies UMW enforced as barriers to engagement with the university. Due to the lack of utilization of many UMW resources, many participants were not able to provide a satisfaction rating.

We discovered that student participants had positive and productive interactions with institutional agents (i.e., professors and academic advisors). Based on belonging survey (see Appendix C) feedback, student participants provided high marks for access to and satisfaction with these institutional agents. Many participants indicated that their connection with their professors helped support their persistence during the pandemic and develop a sense of belonging at UMW. Academically, UMW participants seemed optimistic about their experiences in the classroom, and students were eager to participate in class discussions and felt their professors respected them. Additionally, students noted that they developed productive working relationships with classmates.

A student's sense of belonging is more than just their academic connection to a college or university, and the other side of the equation is associated with social belonging and institutional inclusion. Tinto (1993) and Strayhorn (2012) suggest that integration within a campus community and an individual-level sense of belonging are essential dimensions of student persistence in higher education. Our findings suggest that despite positive academic experiences, participants had moderate social belonging levels, perceived that racism existed on campus, and questioned UMW's commitment to building and sustaining an inclusive campus. Feedback from the student belonging survey found that some racially and historically marginalized students (e.g., Black and Hispanic students; first-generation or gender-identity students) questioned their social belonging and the administration's ability to create a safe, inclusive campus.

The focus group discussion highlighted how students found social belonging through a sometimes a challenging process of "finding their people." Students reported feeling a strong desire to establish relationships and connection with others on campus, however, they were disappointed to see how difficult it was to develop relationships with classmates, suggesting that social belonging was developed most prominently outside the classroom for most students. This social culture among students was found to have an adverse impact on student sense of belonging. More specifically, results from the belonging survey indicate low rates of students saying they would choose UMW again, which suggests a need for improved efforts to increase the sense of belonging among students. Similarly, executive and senior leader, staff, and faculty participants in the ORCA survey perceive a low sense of belonging for all students and expressed the belief that UMW could improve meeting the academic, social, and financial needs of underrepresented students.

Many focus group participants expressed awareness of their identity, and, more specifically, how their identity is represented on UMW's campus, including in the make-up of the student, faculty, staff, and leadership populations. Further, focus group interviews revealed dissatisfaction with UMW's efforts to promote an inclusive and safe campus, and a desire for the university to demonstrate a commitment to DEI and establish a culture of accountability.

Findings from both the focus group discussions and the ORCA survey suggest a lack of coordination and communication across campus units in support of underrepresented students. Students, leaders, staff, and faculty alike felt that UMW suffers a lack of coordination regarding services for underrepresented students.

Participants in the focus group interviews provided similar feedback regarding awareness and communication of campus resources and activities. There was a sense from students that the lack of coordination and communication across campus units impacted their awareness and participation in these activities. Focus group participants also suggested that their connection to university leadership and decision-makers could be improved. Findings from the ORCA survey suggest a perceived lack of understanding of the student experience that might exacerbate a sense of disconnection between students and university leaders, staff, and faculty.

In part, these issues result from a lack of coordination and communication across campus units about expectations, objectives, as well as means of support for underrepresented students. ORCA findings suggest that faculty and staff strive to embed inclusive practices in their work, but they also seek more guidance from senior and executive leadership. Similarly, while there is a sense that executive and senior leaders promote collaboration and communication in support of staff and faculty working to support underrepresented students, findings suggest that leadership

does not sufficiently seek input from staff and faculty regarding decisions about academic

support of underrepresented students by executive and senior leadership.

Faculty and staff also desire more feedback about the effects of student support decisions

related to underrepresented students. The findings made clear that UMW should consider ways

of enhancing its connection with and among students, improving collaboration and

communication regarding campus resources, and establishing a clear and consistent commitment

to fostering a safe and inclusive campus. In conclusion, our findings suggest that academic

belonging at UMW seems strong and accessible. However, it is also clear that work needs to be

done to improve academic support and accountability for support of underrepresented students,

but our findings suggest the need for improved social and cultural belonging.

Study Limitations

This study was limited by the number of students, faculty, staff, and executive or senior

leaders we were able to survey. We understand that the results of our surveys are limited by

people's willingness to participate in a survey at a time when their attention is divided among

school, work, and personal matters in the context of a pandemic. In addition, the limitations of

time and resources affected our ability to conduct extensive individual interviews following the

surveys. While we would have liked to survey and speak with students who have opted to leave

UMW, it was not feasible in the limited contexts of this research project.

To complete this study in an expedited manner, we relied largely on convenience

sampling techniques, which potentially limited the number of respondents as well as the breadth

of perspectives of the respondents. While people have become much more accustomed to using

Zoom, we realize that depending on Zoom for focus group discussions may have limited

participants' comfort with speaking to us.

As researchers external to UMW, we were invited to come in and ask questions that might be perceived as challenging to the existing culture of UMW. This outsider status may have opened some opportunities for frank and open discussions that might not have been possible with people affiliated with UMW, it is also possible that it may have limited people's comfort with speaking openly with us. While we worked diligently to limit the scope of the analysis to the parameters established in the research questions and the theoretical framework, it is also possible that our individual biases impacted our interpretation of all stages of the research: document and data analysis, survey, and focus group interviews. To help minimize potential bias, we worked together to code the focus group transcripts. Throughout the project, we strived to be attentive to possible expressions of biases in our analysis and communication of our findings and recommendations.

Our research methods and findings were influenced by the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic was prevalent in both surveys and focus group interviews. In the current context, experiences related to the pandemic cannot be disassociated from the regular student experience. Due to limited access to in-person visits to UMW's campus, focus group interviews were conducted via Zoom.

At the recommendation of our capstone committee, all UMW students were invited to participate in our belonging survey and focus group interviews. It is likely that including participants who were not part of the target population may have diverted our attention away from the student populations of central interest to this project. To help minimize the potential of deviating from our focus on underrepresented students, we analyzed findings in a way that allowed us to see differences between student groups and among various demographics. We

believe that doing so allowed us to report on similarities and differences across the entire student population.

While the ORCA survey was shared widely via email with UMW executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty, the generalizability of the results from the ORCA survey are limited due to the high percentage of faculty respondents (77.6%) and the low percentage of staff respondents (2.8%).

Recommendations

Our findings suggest that academic belonging at UMW seems strong and accessible. However, it is also clear that work needs to be done to improve academic support and accountability for the support of underrepresented students. Our findings also suggest the need for improved social and cultural belonging. Therefore, a review of the literature and the subsequent collection and analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data enabled the development of three recommendations for the University of Mary Washington. As discussed in Chapter 4, the Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion in the academic year 2016-2017 and the 2017 UMW Strategic Plan included many concrete recommendations relating to diversity and inclusion at UMW. The findings of this research suggest that many recent priorities related to diversity, inclusion, and support for underrepresented students have yet to be either implemented or accomplished. As a result, our recommendations build on and reinforce the recommendations offered by the task force and the 2017 Strategic Plan.

The following recommendations suggest ways to strengthen further how UMW recruits, supports, and retains underrepresented students (e.g., first-generation, low-income, students of color, and other underrepresented student groups). The first recommendation encourages UMW to develop a structure that creates comprehensive coordination and accountability measures in

support of efforts to promote the access, retention, and graduation of underrepresented students. The second recommendation emphasizes the importance of UMW's campus community and culture. The third recommendation offers suggestions by which UMW may create targeted support for their underrepresented students.

Recommendation 1: Comprehensive Coordination and Accountability

UMW's ability to create a more accessible, and supportive environment for underrepresented students hinges not just on its intentions, but also on its ability to create and sustain an administrative structure designed to prioritize these outcomes. Both the Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion and the 2017 Strategic Plan call for more coordination and accountability for diversity and inclusion efforts. To accomplish these goals, we recommend that UMW align its infrastructure with Kezar's (2019) framework for *a diverse student success infrastructure*, an administrative structure that reflects the values of equity and inclusion throughout its practices.

A diverse student success infrastructure prioritizes "three core areas related to change and systemic support for student success: implementation of interventions, initiatives, services, or programs; sustaining interventions; and ultimately helping lead to culture change" (Kezar, 2019, p. 3). An infrastructure of this sort requires alignment of the core areas of administration, including "planning, governance and decision-making, policy, finance/resource allocation, information and institutional research, facilities and information technology, human resources/development; incentives and reward structures, and metrics/accountability" (Kezar, 2019, p. 3). While this research did not examine each of the elements included in this model at UMW, we recommend the following areas in need of improvement to help UMW build a diverse student success infrastructure.

Guidance

Findings from the ORCA survey highlight a desire for more campus coordination and guidance regarding support for underrepresented students. It is recommended that UMW seek to develop improved central guidance on institutional goals related to support for underrepresented students. While there seems to be broad interest in supporting underrepresented students, findings suggest a need for stronger central campus objectives, particularly in terms of ways to coordinate campus services in support of underrepresented students. Clear objectives of this sort are listed in the 2017 UMW Strategic Plan, but our findings suggest that many faculty, in particular, are not aware of these objectives, suggesting the need for more visible and regular guidance on these matters. Clear guidance of this sort is central in "shared equity-oriented leadership," a core component in the development of Kezar's (2019) diverse success infrastructure which,

> ensures that leaders are focused on inequalities, understand historical patterns of power and privilege, and explore root causes of current inequalities. Equity-oriented leaders take personal responsibility for the inequities experienced by students and that current practices and policies are not working, then work to identify changes to ameliorate them (p. 8).

While the values of inclusiveness and access are important, it is also crucial that UMW develop coordinated systems of accountability to align these values with practices of support and outcomes that can be measured or described. It is important that the recently appointed associate provost for equity and inclusion and chief diversity officer, Dr. Shavonne Shorter, be empowered, with the appropriate institutional support and authority, to establish and direct the implementation of diversity and inclusion goals that can be embedded across campus units.

Community of Support

Holcombe and Kezar (2021) explain a "unified community of support" can help universities "incorporate knowledge" across campus units and "include multiple touchpoints of support for students both inside and outside the classroom, and are predicated on increased learning, strong relationships, and a sense of community" (p. 25). To develop a more unified community of support, improved coordination is needed at UMW across campus, including administrative offices, student support units, and academic departments. Holcombe and Kezar (2021) emphasize the importance of collaboration between student affairs and academic departments, which both support productive work relationships and the possibility of collaborative learning in the effort to better support underrepresented students. Because UMW is a relatively small campus, this sort of collaborative community-building and collaboration seems both realistic and potentially of great value to the entire UMW community. Recommendation #2 offers more concrete suggestions for ways to bring the UMW community together around matters related to diversity and inclusion.

Accountability

Diverse student success infrastructure prioritizes coordination across the following dimensions of campus administration: metric and accountability systems, human resources and development, planning, decision-making and governance, information and institutional research, finances and resources, policies, facilities and information technology, and incentives and rewards (Kezar, 2019). Further, Kezar (2019) emphasizes the importance of six shared features of effectiveness for student success infrastructure including equity, broad stakeholder engagement, collaboration, clarity and transparency, learning, and alignment (p. 14).

In particular, this study's findings highlighted the need for improved systems of accountability, which will enable UMW to enhance current practices and develop new practices

that promote accountability in support of underrepresented students across the organization. However, as Kezar (2019) notes, "one tendency of planning processes that distracts campuses from meeting their student success goals is a focus on new ideas rather than reexamining current processes. New ideas are always an add-on to the current systems and that can absorb lots of time and energy without always being pivotal for meeting goals" (p. 11). As a result, it is important to emphasize that UMW has much of the administrative groundwork in place for improved support of underrepresented students. Yet, emphasis needs to be placed on completing work already initiated such as the objectives offered by the 2017 Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion and the related goals detailed in the UMW Strategic Plan. However, there is little indication of these initiatives' accomplishments or ongoing progress.

UMW is recommended to center its planning, processes, policies, and practices on incorporating DEI interests into strategic planning and reporting efforts. This could be achieved by creating campus and unit-level DEI committees, which would establish a network of best practices that would then be shared with unit leaders—ultimately creating an infrastructure to support progress and accountability in achieving university-wide DEI goals.

Further, it is important that UMW continue to collect and make available data related to the experiences and academic outcomes for underrepresented students. Data of this sort might be shared on the "Diversity and Inclusion" section of UMW's website or a campus-wide dashboard (Bensimon, 2004; Williamson & Kizilcec, 2022). Additionally, department, college, and unit-level data might be shared directly with those units in annual or semesterly reports. Open communication of this sort can facilitate the development of clear guidance as well as desired outcomes for the retention and graduation of underrepresented students across campus units.

Additionally, communication is crucial for the development of accountability measures, goals, and priorities related to student success.

Recommendation 2: Community and Culture

Building a campus community that promotes an atmosphere where understanding and acceptance of cultural and ethnic differences is paramount to *a diverse student success infrastructure* (Kezar, 2019). A climate that represents and embraces different cultures enhances the university community's ability to provide all of its students with the experiences necessary to successfully compete and achieve in an increasingly diverse and complex society. A diverse student success infrastructure requires an alignment of the values and goals related to diversity and inclusion that promote retention and graduation efforts. While there seems to be a strong motivation to support underrepresented students at UMW, the institution may benefit from a better understanding of the ways in which faculty, staff, students, and senior leadership understand "equity-oriented values" through campus-wide discussions about these values (Kezar, 2019, p. 8). Towards that end, it is recommended that UMW consider incorporating regular discussion of DEI issues in leadership, faculty, staff meetings and conduct a campus-wide assessment of current DEI activities and initiatives. In addition, it is recommended that UMW facilitate discussions for executive level and unit leaders to share and align their understanding of values related to diversity and inclusion and to align priorities in support of those values. The work to ensure sustainable change will require a sustained commitment, continuous conversations, and shared understanding to shift culture and decision-making.

Recruitment

UMW is recommended to establish a student recruitment ambassadors' program that would support the enrichment of the UMW student body through outreach, engagement, and

recruitment efforts. These ambassadors would highlight the benefits of a liberal arts education and other possibilities available at UMW. A diverse team of students, representing the target student backgrounds, would be selected to work directly with the office of undergraduate admissions to assist with prospective students' connection to the campus community by helping with on and off-campus school visits and admissions events. Truman State University (Student Ambassadors) and Virginia Tech (Yates Society) offer similar programs that might serve as valuable models for developing this program because they help underrepresented students connect regarding their experiences as students at their institutions. The Rappahannock Scholars Program and Student Transition Program could benefit from an ambassador program to support community outreach, promote the benefits of existing services, and highlight their experiences at the university. Additionally, these student ambassadors could engage other students using interactive websites, social media takeovers, online blogs and webinars, campus visits, and other forms of direct communication with students during the admissions process.

Listening and Dialogue

The feedback from the student belonging survey and confirmation by focus group participants illuminated the desire among students to be heard on many matters that affected their sense of belonging to UMW. For example, a senior who identifies as white and non-binary expressed frustration with the UMW administration's lack of explanation regarding the *You Matter* branding. Other concerns involved the social disconnection of commuters and transfer students, lack of trust in campus safety, and expressions of group exclusion. We believe that the UMW administration should address these concerns with a collaborative effort to support student social belonging and student satisfaction with their campus experience and positively influence persistence and retention. As a result, we recommend the creation of a student advisory council

on belonging that includes a diverse student representation. This student advisory council could work as a conduit between students and UMW senior leaders, staff, and faculty to develop ways to create community and belonging with a particular focus on the needs of underrepresented students.

UMW administration is recommended to create listening sessions led by executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty on issues related to belonging and UMW student life. Listening sessions could assist in building a climate of trust and transparency within the UMW community in hopes of understanding the campus conditions better. These listening sessions could be conducted in small affinity groups so various points of view can be heard and different community members can participate. Listening sessions of this sort would help make UMW leadership more visible and present so that students feel that they are being heard regarding matters of common concern.

One of the emerging topics from the belonging survey and the focus groups was that students who live off-campus (about 50% of UMW students' population) and transfer students felt disconnected from the mainstream of UMW campus life. As a result, it is essential to create special events explicitly designed for nontraditional, commuter, and transfer students.

Recommendation 3: Targeted Support

As found at UMW and supported throughout literature, underrepresented student populations face particular challenges in their efforts to earn undergraduate degrees. These challenges often relate to disconnection with their institution and to a lack of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2011). We found evidence of this disconnect throughout their study of UMW. In response to these findings, we recommend UMW embrace a student-ready approach to accommodate diverse student needs. In this model, the needs of the student become the focus in

all parts of campus and requires that the institution orient its programming and culture to the needs of underrepresented students (McNair et al., 2016). As supported by the literature, researchers believe that by adopting a student-ready approach at UMW the institution will enhance the experience for its underrepresented students, and in turn, promote and support increased retention and graduation rates. To enhance targeted support for Black, Hispanic/Latinx, first-generation, and low-income students, UMW should consider creating programs that offer training, diversity-focused hiring, and increased support for units such as Student Transition Program (STP) and the Farmer Multicultural Center.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Training

Previous studies have shown the influence institutional agents, including college faculty, staff and administrators have on enhancing campus culture (Perrio, 2018). To embrace a student-centered culture, those who have direct influence with students must be equipped with the skills to support the needs of all students. The need for UMW to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion training was a theme that emerged from both the quantitative and qualitative phases of this study. Specifically, ORCA data showed that current training in this area is not sufficient; participants disagreed with statements affirming that UMW has sufficient staffing in place to support underrepresented students. Many respondents, in the open-ended portion of the ORCA survey, provided requests for cultural competency training and the need for more training to increase understanding of undergraduate student circumstances and needs. Further, it is understood that institutions that demonstrate the cultural readiness to engage various student populations are proven best equipped to retain and graduate all students. Due to UMW's peer-to-peer support model, we believe recommendations in this area should include students who are employed in roles that provide mentorship, tutoring, and other support to fellow students.

In order to develop a student-ready institution, we recommend that the following actions be taken to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusivity training at UMW:

1. UMW should require executive and senior leaders, staff, faculty and student workers to receive comprehensive diversity, equity, and inclusion training. As demonstrated at the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education (CUE), training on racial equity tools can empower faculty and staff to be equity-minded practitioners who have critical consciousness and the ability to combat institutionalized racism (Center for Urban Education (n.d.)) The four-phase educational model includes (1) laying the groundwork, (2) defining the problem, (3) creating solutions through inquiry; and (4) sustaining and scaling the work. This type of training is most effective when emphasized over time and it may be integrated into other required forms of training.

2. Faculty should be trained in equity-focused teaching practices, which is an inclusive teaching style designed to foster equal access to learning for all students. As demonstrated at the University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, training on equity-focused teaching practices should be available year-round at the individual and unit-level. We believe this programming would be best supported by UMW's Center for Teaching.

Diversity-focused Hiring

The present study's findings showed that underrepresented students, particularly Black and Hispanic students, need to interact with more diverse staff, faculty, and senior leadership. Results from the ORCA survey included numerous comments emphasizing the importance of hiring more diverse leadership, staff, and faculty. Many participants recognized that UMW requires a sense of shared responsibility to create an inclusive and safe learning environment for

underrepresented students. Additionally, students who participated in the focus groups expressed how a lack of diversity in the make-up of support staff hinders their sense of belonging and connection to the university. For many students, the perceived make-up of those in decision-making positions is a consideration in how they associate belonging and connection with the university. Data available on the racial make-up of UMW employees provides quantitative evidence of this sentiment and further demonstrates the need to enhance how UMW recruits, supports, and retains employees who represent the racial diversity of the student body.

It is our recommendation that UMW take deliberate action to increase the diversity of institutional agents, including those who serve as executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty at UMW. We recognize this commitment should be supported by the UMW's Board of Visitors, senior leadership team, faculty, and all others involved in the hiring process. The goal of diversity-focused hiring needs to be reinforced by accountability measures, such as the establishment of specific targeting goals for the human resource staff, individual departments, at the campus level and shared with all key stakeholders.

At a minimum, the university should strive to employ and empower people from various backgrounds, identities, and experiences. Doing so will increase opportunities for UMW students to connect with diverse staff, faculty, and senior leadership and enrich the UMW community. In particular, UMW may consider adding inclusive language to job postings and setting expectations regarding an applicant's commitment to diversity. Further, applicants should be encouraged to demonstrate how they can contribute to UMW's diverse and inclusive learning environment. As a result, an applicant's performance in this area can then be a strong consideration for their candidacy.

Increased Support for James Farmer Multicultural Center and the Student Transition

Program

This study gave us the opportunity to hear directly from UMW students about their sense of belonging and overall experience at UMW. Throughout the belonging survey and focus group interviews, participants were able to identify existing resources and relationships that allow them to feel connected to the university. In particular, we noticed that students that participated in the Student Transition Program (STP) and those actively involved in James Farmer Multicultural Center programming reported high satisfaction with these activities.

Strayhorn (2011) suggests that summer bridge programs positively affect participants' specific academic skills (e.g., use of technology, interpreting syllabus) and academic self-efficacy. Programs like STP develop a positive belief in participants' academic skills and pre-college aptitude, resulting in positive first-semester grades in college (Strayhorn, 2011). Students who disclosed their participation with STP provided overwhelmingly positive feedback about their experience. For many, the program and its support staff were considered a critical part of their sense of belonging and success at UMW. Recognition of the value of STP was also detailed in results from the ORCA survey, where respondents expressed gratitude for its collaboration and assistance when working with underrepresented students. That said, findings suggest that the program remains relevantly small in participation numbers compared to the overall percentage of underrepresented students in UMW's student population. Further, findings suggest that STP may not be sufficiently visible to potential student participants and others that may encourage their participation (e.g., family members, mentors). Some participants expressed initial confusion about the benefits of STP, how they came to be part of the program, and disappointment that other students are not afforded the same type of support.

Additionally, focus group participants who identify as members of the student populations of interest in this study (i.e., Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students) emphasized the impact that their participation at the James Farmer Multicultural Center has had on their sense of belonging and safety at UMW. We found that many participants referenced the center itself, its staff, or its activities when describing experiences of belonging at UMW.

UMW executive and senior leaders, staff, and faculty who participated in the ORCA survey felt that UMW currently provides insufficient financial resources to programs that support underrepresented students. Concerns were also raised about whether or not there is sufficient staffing in place to support underrepresented students. Institutional resources can be defined as the space or facilities, the number and quality of staff, in addition to the training resources available to institutional agents in order to facilitate the desired outcome (Lehman et al., 2002). We recognize that the resources available at UMW to support STP and the Multicultural Center have a disproportionate impact on the underrepresented student population, thus, it is even more critical that these programs be adequately supported.

These findings lead us to recommend that UMW recognize these resources as focal points of support for underrepresented students and to demonstrate awareness of their value through appropriate levels of support. Specifically, the institution must consider expressing visible and impactful commitment towards these initiatives. This includes considering the support in staffing and budgetary commitments made to STP and the Multicultural Center. Specifically, we believe that additional resources for staffing in STP will allow the program to grow in enrollment. Further, UMW may consider creating a bridge between the two resources in a way that fosters better participation in both programs. For example, the R.I.S.E (Resource

Inspiring Student Excellence) program is a peer mentorship program currently supported by the

Multicultural Center that offers first-year underrepresented students an opportunity to connect

with upperclassmen mentors to help them transition into the UMW community. Findings from

the belonging survey suggest that participants in R.I.S.E report a positive social and academic

sense of belonging. So, we believe that underrepresented students could benefit from concerted

efforts to connect STP participants with R.I.S.E mentors.

Suggestions for Future Research

We recognize the scope of our research was tightly focused on the experiences of

underrepresented students at UMW. Further research on the institution may focus on other

student demographics, such as LGBTQ and non-binary students, or incorporate all UMW

students. Because of the link between required academic courses, such as the First-Year Seminar

(FSEM), future research might examine the impact of required courses on the development of

student academic and social belonging for underrepresented students. While the primary work of

campus leaders often pertains primarily to administrative and managerial tasks, it is worth

considering the role of senior and executive campus leadership in the development of academic

and social belonging for underrepresented students.

Conclusion

The University of Mary Washington, a small, predominantly White, public liberal arts

university in Fredericksburg, Virginia sought out recommendations to better recruit and retain

underrepresented students, including Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college

students. While some student support initiatives, such as the Rappahannock Scholars Program,

the Student in Transition Program, and the James Farmer Multicultural Center have proven

successful, they remain limited in size and impact. This study examined the ways in which the

University of Mary Washington (UMW) serves its underrepresented students and their experiences on campus, in order to develop strategies to enhance the recruitment and retention of Black, Latinx, low-income, and first-generation college students at UMW. In particular, the project sought to understand the current institutional culture regarding inclusion and sense of belonging for underrepresented students among UMW faculty and staff. The data gathered in this study informed the creation of a plan to address how UMW can culturally and organizationally facilitate increased retention and graduation rates and increase access to students from underrepresented populations.

This study encompassed data from 18 focus group participants, 531 belonging survey responses, and 107 ORCA responses. The data collected in the belonging survey was analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis and a Likert scale rating system. Data from the belonging survey provided a baseline understanding of participants' overall social and academic belonging and campus engagement with the institutional agents and campus resources. These data points led researchers to the development of focus group questions. Findings from the focus group interviews were analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning to identify and classify codes while using categorical aggregation to establish patterns across the data. The data collected provides a clearer understanding of how UMW facilitates equitable access for underrepresented students and how these students experience the university. Data collected from the ORCA survey yielded three themes related to the respondent perceptions of UMW's motivation, readiness, and ability to improve support for underrepresented students.

For UMW to facilitate equitable access to higher education for its underrepresented students, it is our recommendation that UMW create targeted support and a student-ready culture for underrepresented students as part of efforts to build a diverse student success infrastructure,

which will make possible comprehensive coordination and accountability measures in support of efforts to promote the access, retention, and graduation of underrepresented students. Additionally, UMW's campus community and culture requires work to make it easier for underrepresented students to find a sense of belonging that will facilitate persistence to graduation.

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Appendix A

UMW's Request for Assistance (RFA)

UNIVERSITY OF
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where great minds get to work

Client Request for a Capstone Study (RFA)
Submitted to VCU's Department of Educational Leadership

Date March 15, 2021
Client (organization): University of Mary Washington
Contact Person(s): Rita F. Dunston
Contact phone and email: (540) 654-1265; Rdunston@umw.edu

Sections of the Proposal:

1. **Statement of the Problem:** What is the problem of practice that you wish the team to address? *Problems of practice are recognized as persistent and specific issues that impede the work of practitioners. These problems can hinder organizational responses to external challenges, create uncertainty within organizational decision-making, or reduce leadership effectiveness. These problems may require a response informed by both theory and practice (Carnegie Project for the Education Doctorate).*

In order for the University of Mary Washington (UMW) to position itself to attract a market share of underrepresented students and raise the level of retention and graduation rates of those currently enrolled at UMW, we must change the way we recruit and retain underrepresented students (First Generation, low-income, students of color, and other underrepresented student groups) and support them through graduation.

Currently, the university offers programming that supports a portion of underrepresented students. However, due to the expected increase of underrepresented students on college campuses and the challenges (academic, financial, and cultural) these students face, there must be institutional change to support this population.

Therefore, the problem of practice is to assist UMW in determining how to promote an accessible and navigable education for underrepresented students and create a community of support through high-touch and student-driven programming/events directed at first-generation and historically marginalized and underserved students from all backgrounds, helping to ensure they feel a sense of belonging and value at UMW. In doing so, increasing retention of this student group to degree completion while also providing the tools necessary for them to enter the workforce or graduate studies upon graduation. The comprehensive plan combines the components of access (high school students), pre-arrival support for accepted students, support during matriculation, and post-matriculation support.

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2. **Background:** What is the specific context that led to this problem of practice? Provide the context of the organization and brief overview of the circumstances that led up to the issuing of the RFA.

Overall, college enrollment is expected to decline by 12% across both public and private 4-year colleges over the next decade (EAB, 2019) due to a decrease in birth rate. The sharpest decline will occur between 2025 and 2029, with an average loss of 100,000 students per year.

One third of all first-year college students are first generation (NASPA) and the population of first-generation students is expected to increase (NPR, 2019). In the 2015-2016 school year, 56% of enrolling college freshmen identified as first generation (CFFGSS, 2020).

Enrollment at UMW is already declining, even with a growing number for first generation students applying to attend. Attracting and retaining more students from this growing population is critical to the success of the university, but it must be intentional.

3. **Resources and Support Available:** What assistance will be available to the Capstone team? For example, the scope of the project may require access to data sets, documents, employees during working hours, email lists, or other research items. How will the client support the research endeavor?

The Capstone Team will have access to available resources from the University of Mary Washington to assist in the research. Specific data may be provided by EAB Navigate, the student information system, and the Office of Institutional Research. The Capstone team will have access to solicit information from UMW students through both surveys and focus groups or interviews, as appropriate to the research questions. A team of representatives from two offices currently successfully serving the target population: the Office of Student Transition Program (STP), Rappahannock Scholars (RSP); and also Admissions, will be available to provide council throughout the process, collectively or individually as requested.

4. **Expected Products and Timeline:** Will the suggested timeline above be feasible? Do you have any additional requests?

The timeline for the project will begin as soon as the project is approved, and the Capstone team is formed.

Executive Summary to include:

- o Data on best practices for programming/events for recruiting and retaining underrepresented students
- o Barriers for underrepresented students and how to overcome these challenges
- o National trends regarding students pertaining to serving underrepresented students
- o Data on UMW's underrepresented population
- o An outsiders view of the university's current positioning with the target group

Appendix B

First Recruitment Survey Email

Subject: UMW Student Sense of Belonging Survey

Hello [Students Name],

The University of Mary Washington (UMW) is participating in a study that seeks to understand the undergraduate student experience at UMW to develop strategies to enhance student access, retention, and graduation. In this survey, we invite you to share your experiences as a UMW student to develop an understanding of student sense of belonging at UMW. Sense of belonging is defined as the connection that an individual feels to their university, their peers, and their professors. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of students at UMW and how their sense of belonging affects academic and social achievement.

Research is being conducted by doctoral students in the Educational Leadership program at Virginia Commonwealth University: Michael Abelson, Alvin Bryant, and Marra Hvozdovic.

This survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete and should be **completed by Dec. 10th**. If you agree to complete all survey questions, you will be entered into a raffle for one of two $25 gift cards.

Click here to access the link to the survey.

Survey participants may sign-up for optional focus group interviews. Students who indicate interest in participating in the focus groups will be contacted by email.

If you have any questions about this survey, you may contact the UMW Registrar, Dr. Rita Dunston (rdunston@umw.edu), the Principal Investigator of this study, Dr. Tomika Ferguson (tlferguson2@vcu.edu) or Alvin Bryant (arbryant@vcu.edu).

Thank you for your time,

UMW Research Team
Educational Leadership
Virginia Commonwealth University

Second Survey Email - Reminder

Subject: Reminder: UMW Student Sense of Belonging Survey

Hello {Students Name},

The University of Mary Washington (UMW) is participating in a study that seeks to understand the undergraduate student experience at UMW to develop strategies to enhance student access, retention, and graduation. In this survey, we invite you to share your experiences as a UMW student to develop an understanding of student sense of belonging at UMW. Sense of belonging is defined as the connection that an individual feels to their university, their peers, and their professors. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of students at UMW and how their sense of belonging affects academic and social achievement.

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Click here to access the link to the survey.

Survey participants may sign-up for optional focus group interviews. Students who indicate interest in participating in the focus groups will be contacted by email.

If you have any questions about this survey, you may contact the UMW Registrar, Dr. Rita Dunston (rdunston@umw.edu), the Principal Investigator of this study, Dr. Tomika Ferguson (tlferguson2@vcu.edu) or Alvin Bryant (arbryant@vcu.edu).

Thank you for your time,

UMW Research Team
Educational Leadership
Virginia Commonwealth University

Appendix C

Recruitment email for focus group

Subject: UMW Sense of Belonging Study - Focus Group

Hello Students,

The University of Mary Washington (UMW) is participating in a study that seeks to understand the undergraduate student experience at UMW to develop strategies to enhance student access, retention, and graduation. In this study, you are invited to share your experiences as a UMW student to develop an understanding of student sense of belonging at UMW. Sense of belonging is defined as the connection that an individual feels to their university, their peers, and their professors. **We invite you to participate in a focus group discussion to share your lived experiences at UMW.**

Focus group sessions will be conducted via Zoom and are expected to be 45-60 minutes. Participants in the study will be entered into a raffle for a $25 Amazon gift card.

Sessions are scheduled during the dates and times listed below. **Please use links to sign-up for the session that works best for your schedule.** You will receive an email confirming your registration and Zoom link. Focus group sessions will be capped at 10 participants.

     Wednesday, January 26th: 10-11am - click here to sign up
     Thursday, January 27th: 3-4pm - click here to sign up
     Thursday, January 27th: 7-8pm - click here to sign up

Research is being conducted by doctoral students in the Doctor of Education program at Virginia Commonwealth University: Michael Abelson, Alvin Bryant, and Marra Hvozdovic.

If you are interested in participating but the above dates/times do not work for you, please contact Marra Hvozdovic (hvozdovicm@vcu.edu) in the event that alternative focus groups are scheduled. If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the Principal Investigator of this study, Dr. Tomika Ferguson (tlferguson2@vcu.edu) or Marra Hvozdovic (hvozdovicm@vcu.edu).

Thank you,

UMW Research Team
Educational Leadership
Virginia Commonwealth University

Recruitment email for focus group sent to belonging survey volunteers

Subject: UMW Sense of Belonging Study - Focus Group

Hello <<First Name>>,

Thank you for completing the UMW Sense of Belonging survey and expressing interest in a follow up focus group discussion! The purpose of the focus group is to better understand undergraduate student experiences at UMW and contribute to the development of strategies to enhance student access, retention, and graduation.

Focus group sessions will be conducted via Zoom and are expected to be 45-60 minutes. Participants in the study will be entered into a raffle for a $25 Amazon gift card.

Sessions are scheduled during the dates and times listed below. **Please use links to sign-up for the session that works best for your schedule.** You will receive an email confirming your registration and Zoom link. Focus group sessions will be capped at 10 participants.

> Wednesday, January 26th: 10-11am - click <u>here</u> to sign up
> Thursday, January 27th: 3-4pm - click <u>here</u> to sign up
> Thursday, January 27th: 7-8pm - click <u>here</u> to sign up

Research is being conducted by doctoral students in the Doctor of Education program at Virginia Commonwealth University: Michael Abelson, Alvin Bryant, and Marra Hvozdovic.

If you are interested in participating but the above dates/times do not work for you, please contact Marra Hvozdovic (<u>hvozdovicm@vcu.edu</u>) in the event that alternative focus groups are scheduled. If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the Principal Investigator of this study, Dr. Tomika Ferguson (<u>tlferguson2@vcu.edu</u>) or Marra Hvozdovic (hvozdovicm@vcu.edu).

Thank you,

UMW Research Team
Educational Leadership
Virginia Commonwealth University

Appendix D

UMW Sense of Belonging Student Survey

    I.   **Demographic Information** (required)

#	Question	Answer Format
1	What is your classification at UMW?	List: Freshman (0-29 credits); Sophomore (30-59 credits); Junior (60-89 credits); Senior 90+ credits)
2	What is your gender?	List: Female, Male, Non-binary, Transgender, Other, Prefer Not to Say
3	What is your race/ethnicity? (mark all that apply)	List: African American or Black, American Indian or Alaska Native or Indigenous or First Nation, Arab or Middle Eastern, Asian or Asian American, Hispanic or Latinx, White (non-Hispanic), Multiracial or Biracial, I prefer not to respond, Other: (specify below)
4	What is your current overall GPA?	List: Below 1.5, 1.5-1.9 2.0-2.4, 2.5-2.9, 3.0-3.4, 3.5 or higher, This is my first semester, Prefer not to say
5	Are you a first-in-family/first-generation student (i.e., your parent(s) or guardian(s) has not completed a four-year college degree)?	List: Yes, No, Prefer not to say
6	Have you ever been eligible or received a Federal Pell Grant as part of your financial aid package?	List: Yes, No, Prefer not to say
7	Currently, which of the following best describes where you are living while attending UMW?	List: On-campus: (Double room); On-campus: (Single room); On-campus: (Special theme hall); Off-campus with non-relatives; Off-campus with parents or other relatives; Other:
8	Are you a Virginia resident?	List: Yes, No, Prefer not to say

9	Are you a member of the Rappahannock Scholars Program?	List: Yes, No, Prefer not to say
10	Did you participate in the Student Transition Program (STP)?	List: Yes, No, Prefer not to say
11	Did you participate in the R.I.S.E. Peer Mentoring Program?	List: Yes, No, Prefer not to say

II. Student involvement, college environment, and campus climate (SICE)
Please share your experiences with pre-enrollment and other campus activities at UWM

#	Question	Answer Format
12	If you participate in any extracurricular activities at UMW, for each type of activity, please (a) select the extent to which you have been involved, and then (b) select the importance that the following has helped you develop positive relationships at UMW. a. Varsity sport b. Club/intramural sport c. Political activities d. Multicultural Student Leadership Organizations e. Community service/volunteer activities f. Campus organizations, clubs, or activities g. Performing arts (music, dance, theater) h. Visual arts (painting, drawing, photo/video) i. Newspaper/literary magazines j. Other: (Please specify below) Other activity: _____	Column A: Extent of involvement, Column B: Rate importance Rank/Rate list: A1. Not at all involved A2– Slightly involved A3– Somewhat involved A4– Very involved A5– Extremely involved B1– Not at all important B2– Slightly important B3– Somewhat important B4– Very important B5– Extremely important
13	Do you hold a leadership position in an on-campus organization? Example: Secretary of Student Government Association.	List: Yes No *Skip logic*: if Yes, then ask: Please specify any leadership roles: (Open-ended)

14	Rate the importance of these orientation events or activities in helping you adjust socially and making friends at UMW:
	    a. First-year orientation during the summer
	    b. Transfer orientation
	    c. January orientation
	    d. Eagle Gathering
	    e. NEST
	    f. Rappahannock Scholars Program
	    g. RISE (Resources Inspiring Student Excellence) Peer Mentoring Program
	    h. Student Transition Program (STP)
	    i. Student Orientation Adventure Retreat (SOAR)
	    j. Transfer Semester Experience
	    k. Other:
		Likert scale:
		
		1-Not at all important
		2– Slightly important
		3– Somewhat important
		4– Very important
		5– Extremely important
		6– Not applicable

15	From your experience at UMW during the current academic year, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:
	    a. I feel a sense of belonging at my university.
	    b. I feel that I am a member of my university's community.
	    c. I feel comfortable on this campus.
	    d. If given the choice, I would choose the same university over again.
	    e. My institution is supportive of me.
	    f. There are a lot of activities that I can participate in at this university.
	    g. I feel comfortable being myself at this institution.
	    h. I am glad I attend UMW.
	    i. UMW is the right school for me.
	    j. It has been easy for me to meet and make friends with other students at UMW.
	    k. I feel comfortable discussing culturally sensitive topics on campus with members of other races/ethnicities.
	    l. I have witnessed or experienced racial and/or ethnic tension on campus.
		Likert Scale
		
		Level of Agreement:
		1– Strongly disagree
		2– Disagree
		3– Neither agree nor disagree
		4– Agree
		5– Strongly agree

	m. People of my identity are more likely to experience discrimination on campus than others. n. I feel awkward in situations at UMW in which I am the only person of my identity. o. If there were a racial incident at UMW, I am confident the university would react quickly and appropriately. p. This college is committed to diversity and inclusion.	
16	How aware are you of the following resources: a. Center for Career and Professional Development b. Counseling services c. Education abroad opportunities d. Financial aid counseling e. Mentorship programs f. Multicultural center services g. Peer academic consulting h. Peer academic tutoring i. Professor office hours j. Simpson library k. Speaking center l. Student activities center m. Student health center n. Wellness programs o. Writing center	Likert scale: 1– Not at all aware 2– Slightly aware 3– Somewhat aware 4– Moderately aware 5– Extremely aware
17	How often do you use the following resources: a. Center for Career and Professional Development b. Counseling services c. Education abroad opportunities d. Financial aid counseling e. Mentorship programs f. Multicultural center services g. Peer academic consulting h. Peer academic tutoring i. Professor office hours	Likert scale 1– Never use 2– Almost never 3–Occasionally 4– Almost always 5– Frequently use

	j. Simpson Library k. Speaking Center l. Student Activities Center m. Student health center n. Wellness programs o. Writing Center	

18	How satisfied are you with the following UMW resources:
	   a. Center for Career and Professional Development
	   b. Counseling services
	   c. Education abroad opportunities
	   d. Financial aid counseling
	   e. Mentorship programs
	   f. Multicultural center services
	   g. Peer academic consulting
	   h. Peer academic tutoring
	   i. Professor office hours
	   j. Simpson Library
	   k. Speaking Center
	   l. Student Activities Center
	   m. Student health center
	   n. Wellness programs
	   o. Writing Center
		Likert scale
		1– Very dissatisfied
		2– Dissatisfied
		3– Unsure
		4– Satisfied
		5– Very satisfied
		6 - Not Applicable

III. ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT AND ACADEMIC BELONGING

#	Question	Answer Format

19	How often do you engage in the following at UMW:
	   a. Participate in class discussions
	   b. Meet with professors outside of class time
	   c. Study with other students outside of class time
	   d. Engage in conversations about identity (gender, culture, race, etc.) with others
		Likert scale:
		1– Never
		2– Rarely
		3– Sometimes
		4– Often
		5– Always

	e. Professional development (goal setting, leadership training, experiential learning opportunities)	

20	In your experience at UMW during the current academic year, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:
	    a. I feel comfortable asking a professor for help if I do not understand course-related material.
	    b. I am satisfied with my academic experience.
	    c. I feel comfortable contributing to class discussions.
	    d. When I interact with professors at UMW, I feel they care about how I'm doing.
	    e. The professors here respect me.
	    f. If I miss class, I know students who I could get notes from.
	    g. I have developed personal relationships with other students in my classes.
	    h. If I had a reason, I would feel comfortable seeking help from a staff member for academic support or career advice.
	    i. Professors at UMW make me question whether I should be here. - *reverse score*
	    j. I do not feel comfortable asking questions in class. - *reverse score*
	    k. Support provided to me for my disability or accessibility needs to help me to do my classwork with confidence.
	    l. I feel my ideas or opinions are not valued in class. - *reverse score*
		Likert scale
		
		1– Strongly disagree
		2– Disagree
		3– Neither agree nor disagree
		4– Agree
		5– Strongly agree

21	In a given semester, how often do you see your academic advisor each semester?	List: None, Once, 2-3 times, More than 4 times

22	Rate the quality of your relationship with your current academic advisor.	Likert scale: 1– Poor 2– Fair 3– Good 4– Very good 5– Excellent
23	Rate the helpfulness of your current academic advisor.	Likert scale: 1– Poor 2– Fair 3– Good 4– Very good 5– Excellent
24	Rate the availability of your current academic advisor.	Likert scale: 1– Poor 2– Fair 3– Good 4– Very good 5– Excellent

IV. Retention and Commitment to School

#	Question	Answer Format
25	What is your current major?	Open-ended
26	What influencing factors **have led** you to select this major? (Select top three)	List: Interest in the major, Peer pressure, Family pressure, Academic ability, Reputation of major, Job availability/outlook, Job salary, Prestige of major, Other
27	How certain are you that you will complete your undergraduate education and earn a bachelor's degree from UMW?	**Conditional response** List: Not at all certain I will earn my degree; Fairly certain I will earn my degree; Completely certain I will earn my degree, but not necessarily from UMW; Completely certain I will earn my degree from UMW (skip logic if Completely Certain, see question 29)

SL1	If you are NOT completely certain you will get your degree from UMW, how certain are you that you will return to UMW NEXT YEAR? (Mark one)	List: Completely certain I won't return next year; Fairly certain I won't return next year; Undecided; Fairly certain I will return next year; Completely certain I will return next year
SK3	What are your plans if you do not plan to return next year:	List: I plan to transfer to another college; I plan to discontinue college for now
SK2	Reasons you may not return to UMW include: (check ALL that apply)	List: Cannot afford tuition; Don't think UMW is a good fit for me; Academic reasons; I do not feel that I belong; My academic needs have not been met, I do not fit in socially, Family obligations, Need to work; Joining the military; Transferring to another college or university; Transferring to a different type of educational institution (ex. trade school); Starting a business, Other:

28	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:
	  a. I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself.
	  b. When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them.
	  c. I believe I will accomplish the goals that are important to me.
	  d. I believe I can succeed at most any endeavor to which I set my mind on.
	  e. Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well.
	  f. I am motivated towards my studies.
	  g. I expect to do well in my classes.
	  h. I put a lot of effort into the work I do.
		Likert scale
		
		1– Strongly disagree
		2– Disagree
		3– Neither agree nor disagree
		4– Agree
		5– Strongly agree

	i. I seek out my professor in order to discuss topics relevant to my class.	
29	Do you have anything that you would like to share about your sense of belonging at UMW that may not have been covered in this survey? Remember that sense of belonging is defined as the connection that an individual feels to their university, their peers, and their professors.	Open-ended
30	Would you be willing to participate in a small focus group to discuss your sense of belonging at UMW (in the near future)?	List: Yes, No. Skip logic, if Yes, then see next question. If No, move to submit/raffle
SL1	Please provide our name and preferred email address where you can be reached.	Open-ended

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in our survey which helps us complete our capstone research project. If you would like to enter the raffle for a $25 Visa gift card, please click this LINK to complete the entry form.

To be entered into the raffle for a $25 Amazon gift card, please provide us your name and email.

Name:

Email:

Appendix E

UMW ORCA Survey

This Organizational Readiness for Change Assessment is designed to ask UMW leadership, staff, and faculty if they feel there is a need and readiness for change in the ways underrepresented students are supported at UMW. Questions can be coded using for organizational readiness categories (context, motivational readiness, institutional resources, or personnel attributes), perspective of particular groups of interest in the questions (UMW, leadership, staff, faculty), or by research question.

Survey Introduction

You are being asked to participate in a study to better understand administrator, faculty, and staff perspectives regarding support for underrepresented students at the University of Mary Washington (UMW), particularly Black and Hispanic students, first-in-family/first-generation college students, and low-income students. Your input will help to better understand how UMW can provide support for current and future students.

The survey you are being asked to complete will take about 15-20 minutes. Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. This survey does not ask you to prove sensitive, identifiable information. All responses are anonymous and completely confidential. Please be open and honest so we can genuinely learn from your important perspective. Additionally, you have the option to skip any questions you do not wish to answer, and you may stop the survey at any time and return to complete it later.

Thank you very much for your time!

Consent

Participation is voluntary and all survey responses are collected anonymously. Confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. We cannot guarantee against interception of data sent via the internet by third parties, but please be assured that this survey does not require providing any highly sensitive personally identifiable information.

If you have any questions about this survey, you may contact the UMW Registrar, Dr. Rita Dunston (rdunston@umw.edu), the Principal Investigator of this study, Dr. Tomika Ferguson (tlferguson2@vcu.edu) or research team member, Michael Abelson (mabelson@vcu.edu).

_Yes
_No

Survey

	Question	Answer Format
1.	Indicate your primary role at UMW.	List (Staff, Administrative or Professional faculty, Teaching or instructional faculty)
2.	How long have you worked at UMW? (select one)	List (One year or less, Two to Five years, Six to Ten years, Ten years or more)
3.	What is your gender?	List (female; male; non-binary/third gender; prefer to self describe; prefer not to say)
4.	What is your race and/or ethnicity?	List (African American or Black, American Indian or Alaska Native or Indigenous or First Nation, Arab or Middle Eastern, Asian or Asian American, Hispanic or Latinx, White (non-Hispanic), Multiracial or Biracial, I prefer not to respond, Other: (specify below))
5.	Other racial/ethnicity selection:	

The following questions will explore your *experiences and perspectives* as a UMW employee who works with underrepresented students, particularly Black and Hispanic, first-in-family (FIF) and low-income students. Please answer the questions honestly. This survey is confidential and will help researchers identify how UMW provides support to underrepresented students. For each of the following statements, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree.
Likert scale, (1-6) {strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree, not enough information to answer} **[all subsequent questions use this scale]**

Context - Perceptions of Current Practices at UMW		
6.	UMW's mission reflects a commitment to being an inclusive and welcoming institution.	Likert scale, (1-6) {strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree, not enough information to answer}

		[all subsequent questions use this scale, except the final 3 open-ended questions]
7.	UMW's mission reflects a commitment to being an inclusive and welcoming institution for underrepresented students.	
8.	UMW's recruitment practices are inclusive and welcoming for underrepresented students.	
9.	UMW's culture is inclusive and welcoming for underrepresented students.	
10.	The academic needs of underrepresented students are being met at UMW.	
11.	The social needs of underrepresented students are being met at UMW.	
12.	The financial needs of underrepresented students are being met at UMW.	
13.	UMW provides culturally-responsive programming that helps underrepresented students feel connected to the university.	
14.	All students feel that they belong at UMW.	
15.	First-in-family students feel that they belong at UMW.	
16.	Black students feel that they belong at UMW.	
17.	Hispanic/Latinx students feel that they belong at UMW.	
18.	Students from low-income backgrounds feel that they belong at UMW.	

	UMW Senior and Executive Leaders - Please respond to these prompts based on your experiences and perspectives regarding this specific group on campus. For each of the following statements, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree.	
19.	Understand the academic needs of underrepresented students.	
20.	Understand the social needs of underrepresented students.	
21.	Prioritize the development of inclusive practices for underrepresented students.	
22.	Provide clear guidance for student success measures.	
23.	Establish clear goals for support of underrepresented students.	
24.	Solicit opinions of staff and faculty members regarding decisions about academic support of underrepresented students.	
25.	Provide staff members with feedback/data on effects of student support decisions related to underrepresented students.	
26.	Provide faculty members with feedback/data on effects of student support decisions related to underrepresented students.	
27.	Hold staff members accountable for the academic success of underrepresented students.	
28.	Hold faculty members accountable for the academic success of underrepresented students.	
29.	Reward innovation and creativity to improve student support for underrepresented students.	

30.	Encourage and support changes in administrative practice and organizational culture to improve academic support for underrepresented students.	
31.	Seek ways to increase the sense of belonging for underrepresented students at UMW.	
32.	Promote collaboration among faculty and staff to solve student support challenges.	
33.	Promote communication among student support units and individuals working with underrepresented students.	

Staff members at UMW - Please respond to these prompts based on your experiences and perspectives regarding this specific group on campus. For each of the following statements, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree.

34.	Understand the academic needs of underrepresented students.	
35.	Understand the social needs of underrepresented students.	
36.	Understand the economic needs of underrepresented students.	
37.	Infuse inclusive practices in support provided to underrepresented students.	
38.	Have a sense of personal responsibility for improving student support and outcomes.	
39.	Collaborate with faculty to provide effective academic support for underrepresented students.	
40.	Implement innovative initiatives to improve student support for underrepresented students.	

41.	Are receptive to changing organizational practices and programming to meet the identified needs of underrepresented students.	
UMW Instructional Faculty - Please respond to these prompts based on your experiences and perspectives regarding this specific group on campus. For each of the following statements, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree.		
42.	Understand the academic needs of underrepresented students.	
43.	Understand the social needs of underrepresented students.	
44.	Understand the economic needs of underrepresented students.	
45.	Are aware of the barriers that underrepresented students may face as they persist to graduation at UMW.	
46.	Prioritize the inclusion of inclusive teaching practices in their classrooms.	
47.	Have a sense of personal responsibility for improving student support and outcomes of underrepresented students.	
48.	Collaborate with staff to provide effective academic support for underrepresented students.	
49.	Implement innovative initiatives to improve student support for underrepresented students.	
50.	Are receptive to changing organizational practices and programming to meet the identified needs of underrepresented students.	

Readiness for Change - For each of the following statements, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree.		
51.	Current practices that support underrepresented students should be improved.	
52.	Faculty have appropriate professional development opportunities and support to enhance current practices that support underrepresented students.	
53.	Staff have appropriate professional development opportunities and support to enhance that current practices that support underrepresented students.	
54.	I am committed to actively participating in student support initiatives that can increase the sense of belonging for underrepresented students.	
55.	Senior leaders are willing to participate in training to improve support for underrepresented students.	
56.	Faculty are willing to participate in training to increase support for underrepresented students.	
57.	Staff are willing to participate in training to increase support for underrepresented students.	
58.	The current strategic plan is sufficient to guide strategies for the university to promote retention of underrepresented students.	

59.	UMW is willing to commit resources (e.g. staff, funding, etc.) to support a strategy to improve academic support for underrepresented students.	
60.	Staff are aware of the barriers that underrepresented students may face as they persist to graduation at UMW.	

Institutional Resources - Please respond to these prompts based on your experiences and perspectives at UMW. For each of the following statements, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree.

The following resources are adequate and available to introduce and sustain a more inclusive and supportive culture for underrepresented students.

61.	Sufficient financial resources are available for programs that support underrepresented students.	
62.	UMW has sufficient staffing in place to support underrepresented students.	
63.	UMW has sufficient facilities designed for support of underrepresented students.	
64.	UMW provides opportunities for training and courageous conversations about inclusion and equity for staff and faculty.	
65.	UMW demonstrates a commitment to meeting the academic needs of underrepresented students.	

Personnel Attributes - For each of the following statements, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree.

66.	Senior leaders are willing to hold themselves accountable for the long-term success of work to make underrepresented students feel a stronger sense of belonging at UMW.	

67.	Staff are willing to hold themselves accountable for the long-term success of work to make underrepresented students feel a stronger sense of belonging at UMW.	
68.	Faculty are willing to hold themselves accountable for the long-term success of work to make underrepresented students feel a stronger sense of belonging at UMW.	
69.	I have confidence in my ability to make changes that will help underrepresented students feel a stronger sense of belonging at UMW.	
70.	I have confidence in UMW's ability to make changes that will help underrepresented students feel a stronger sense of belonging at UMW.	
Concluding Questions		
71.	What strategies can UMW implement to improve the sense of belonging for underrepresented students (e.g., Black, Hispanic/Latinx, first-in-family, low-income)?	Open-ended
72.	What strategies do you believe are essential for UMW (senior leaders, faculty, and staff) to strengthen services provided to underrepresented students?	Open-ended
73.	Please use this space to make any other comments you would like about any of the topics raised in this survey or any other related matters of concern to you.	Open-ended.

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in our survey.

Appendix F

ORCA Survey Recruitment Email

Subject: UMW Organizational Readiness for Change Assessment Survey

Dear [name],

The University of Mary Washington (UMW) is participating in a study that seeks to understand how UMW may best to support underrepresented students, particularly, Black, Hispanic, first-in-family, and students from low-income backgrounds. Your input will help to better understand how UMW can provide support for current and future students. As part of the survey, we will also assess your understanding of student sense of belonging at UMW. Sense of belonging is defined as the connection that an individual feels to their university, their peers, and their professors.

Research is being conducted by doctoral students in the Educational Leadership program at Virginia Commonwealth University: Michael Abelson, Alvin Bryant, and Marra Hvozdovic.

This survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete and should be **completed by Dec. 10th**. Your responses will be completely anonymous and confidential, so please be open and honest so we can genuinely learn from your important perspective.

Click here to access the link to the survey.

If you have any questions about this survey, you may contact the UMW Registrar, Dr. Rita Dunston (rdunston@umw.edu), the Principal Investigator of this study, Dr. Tomika Ferguson (tlferguson2@vcu.edu) or Michael Abelson (mabelson@vcu.edu).

Thank you for your time,

UMW Research Team
Educational Leadership
Virginia Commonwealth University

Appendix G

Focus Group Interview Script and Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our focus group discussion. The purpose of today's conversation is to help us understand the experience of being a student at UMW. We would like to ask you a few questions about what it's like to be a student here.

If you could join us in reflecting for a moment, we're interested in learning about your introduction to UMW.

1. And, we **would like to hear some of the reasons you chose to come to UMW?**
   - Was there a particular program or experience that attracted you to UMW?
   - What about the campus or community stood out to you?

2. Now that you've been here for awhile, you have had a chance to get to know UMW. **Can someone describe what it's like to be a student here? What is life like academically for you?**
   - Academic culture?
     - What are interactions with the instructors and staff like?
     - How are you typically getting in contact with them?
     - When you need support with school work or a project, who or where do you go?
     - What type of support do you receive?
     - Do you remember how you first found this resource?

We'd like to ask a few questions about your experiences with how you feel you belong socially at UMW. Including your experiences with fellow students, when part of UMW activities or other aspects of your social life…

3. We're interested in learning more about what it means to belong or feel included here at UMW. **From your experience, what aspects of your time at UMW make you feel connected to the campus or community?**
   - What clubs or other campus activities are you involved in? What's that experience like?

4. As we focus on a sense of belonging at UMW, **can you touch on activities or programs that made you feel included and that you belong at UMW?**
   - When did that experience occur?
   - What parts about the experience stand out to you/made it so special for you?
   - Are there other times you felt that way at UMW?
   - For example, summer orientation or the Student Transition Program (STP).

5. What about moments or experiences where you've had the opposite feeling…**Perhaps a time that you haven't felt connected or that you don't fit in at UMW?**
   - When do you experience those moments?

- What was that experience like for you?

6. We know that each of us may have a different perspective and experience, and that sometimes those differences are because of our identity or upbringing - including differences in our cultures, socioeconomic status, gender, or race. So, **we invite you to share what personal challenges or obstacles that you have faced academically at UMW based on your identity? And how have they impacted your experience at UMW?**
   a. Have you felt your identity or upbringing influence the way you contribute in the classroom? If so, please share.

7. As we talked about before, each of us may have a different perspective and experience, and that sometimes those differences are because of our identity or upbringing. So, **we invite you to share what personal challenges or obstacles you've faced in social settings at UMW based on your identity?**
   - Have you felt your identity or upbringing influence the way you feel connected to UMW or other students? If so, please share.

As we mentioned earlier, notes from our focus groups will be combined with survey results to contribute to the development of strategies to enhance student access, retention, and graduation at UMW.

8. **A major goal of ours is to enhance the college experience at UMW, so we'd like to hear from this group about what other parts of the UMW experience that we should consider?**
   - What could be improved academically?
   - What could be improved socially?
   - Were there any gaps in your experience that you would like to share?
   - What specifically would you like to change about the program?
   - How would you recommend improving it?
   - Anything else you would recommend to improve the student experience at UMW?

Thank you for sharing such valuable information about your experience at UMW! We recognize the time commitment each of you made - so thank you!

As a reminder, notes from our focus groups will be combined with survey results to contribute to the development of strategies to enhance student experience at UMW. Know that you've made an important contribution to our project!

Appendix H

Focus Group Transcripts Codes & Definitions

Code	Definition
Social Engagement	Actions that promote relationships with peers, social activities, identity-based engagements
Academic Engagement	Class (faculty), non-class (including services), identity-based engagements
Institutional Engagement	Awareness, communication, connection, UMW decision-making, identity-based engagements
Belonging	Social belonging, academic belonging, perceived racism

<center>**Appendix I**</center>

Informed Consent Documentation

<u>**UMW Student Sense of Belonging Survey - Consent Language**</u>

You are being asked to participate in a study to better understand the sense of belonging among undergraduate students at the University of Mary Washington (UMW). Sense of belonging is defined as the connection that an individual feels to their university, their peers, and their professors. This study will provide information about how a student's sense of belonging affects how they achieve academically and socially.

The survey you are being asked to complete will take about 15 minutes. Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. This survey does not ask you to prove sensitive, identifiable information. All survey responses are collected anonymously. Your responses will be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes to better understand student experiences at UMW. Additionally, you have the option to skip any questions you do not wish to answer, and you may stop the survey at any time and return to
complete it later.

We appreciate your participation in this research. If you complete all survey questions, you will be entered into a raffle for one of two $25 gift cards.

If you have any questions about this survey, you may contact the UMW Registrar, Dr. Rita Dunston (rdunston@umw.edu), the principal investigator of this study, Dr. Tomika Ferguson (tlferguson2@vcu.edu), or research team member, Alvin Bryant (arbryant@vcu.edu).

Do you consent? Yes or No

<u>**Focus Group Interview - Consent Language**</u>

We are doctoral students at VCU and we're studying ways to improve the student experience at UMW. We hope that today's conversation will help us to gain a better understanding of what it's like to be a student at UMW.

We're excited to have each of you here - as you represent different student groups here at UMW. We invite you to share about your individual experiences, as you feel comfortable.

Today's conversation will be recorded. Findings from our focus groups will be combined with survey results to contribute to the development of strategies to enhance student access, retention, and graduation at UMW. We expect this conversation to last 45-60 minutes.

Before we begin, I want to provide a few reminders about participation:
- Your participation is voluntary, including choosing to stop the interview at any point or skip any questions.
- Although this meeting is being recorded, all information that you share will be kept confidential and stored as securely as possible accessible only to individuals on the research team. The recording will be permanently deleted after the project is completed.
- To join the conversation, just feel free to chime in at anytime with your feedback. We encourage participants to be on camera if they are comfortable to do so. We've designed today's questions with the hope to spark informal conversation…
- Understand if you're comfortable using the chat function, but invite you to come off mute to join the conversation at anytime.

Are there any questions before we get started?

Do you consent? Yes or No. Please indicate by using the "thumbs up" feature.

ORCA Survey - Consent Language

You are being asked to participate in a study to better understand administrator, faculty, and staff perspectives regarding support for underrepresented students at the University of Mary Washington (UMW), particularly Black and Hispanic students, first-in-family/first-generation college students, and low-income students. Your input will help to better understand how UMW can provide support for current and future students.

The survey you are being asked to complete will take about 15-20 minutes. Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. This survey does not ask you to prove sensitive, identifiable information. All responses are anonymous and completely confidential. Please be open and honest so we can genuinely learn from your important perspective. Additionally, you have the option to skip any questions you do not wish to answer, and you may stop the survey at any time and return to complete it later.

Thank you very much for your time!

Participation is voluntary and all survey responses are collected anonymously. Confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. We cannot guarantee against

interception of data sent via the internet by third parties, but please be assured that this survey does not require providing any highly sensitive personally identifiable information.
If you have any questions about this survey, you may contact the UMW Registrar, Dr. Rita Dunston (rdunston@umw.edu), the Principal Investigator of this study, Dr. Tomika Ferguson (tlferguson2@vcu.edu) or research team member, Michael Abelson (mabelson@vcu.edu).

Do you consent? Yes or No

Appendix J

An Investment of Hope for the Future A Strategic Vision for the University of Mary Washington
As approved by the Board of Visitors on November 17, 2017

Goal 4: Creating a diverse and inclusive community as an essential requirement for academic excellence and academic success

Diversity and inclusion define UMW's commitment to serve the educational aspirations of all those in our communities. A diverse and inclusive classroom, innovative and culturally relevant pedagogies, and academic programs that are responsive and relevant to global change are fundamental and essential requirements for academic excellence and academic success. Further, as a public university building and exemplifying a culture of broadly based civic engagement is needed now more than ever amid our nation's current political and cultural divisiveness.

Action Steps:

4:1 Develop and implement the appropriate administrative and institutional structure to coordinate, assess, and provide accountability for university initiatives focused on diversity, inclusion, equity, and access.

4:2 Create a "characteristics of a UMW graduate" that describes the intellectual, personal, and social characteristics developed by a UMW education. Those characteristics should include a commitment to the value of diversity, inclusion, and equity in a pluralistic liberal democracy and the skills to live and work productively and well in an interconnected, diverse, and global environment.

4:3 Conduct a university-wide, interdisciplinary assessment of UMW's Statement of Community Values that includes revisiting UMW's principles on diversity and inclusion statement and raising that statement to the status of the honor pledge.

4:4 Fully develop the assessment of campus climate to determine progress on the values of diversity and inclusion. Included in this assessment should be regular climate studies and the addition of the Topical Module on Inclusiveness and Engagement with Cultural Diversity for future iterations of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

4:5 Examine current curriculum, both the core curriculum and the requirements of specific majors, to determine what changes could be made to better develop 6 students' cultural competencies, and develop skills for living, learning, and working in a diverse environment.

4:6 Apply best practices for the recruitment and retention of a more diverse faculty and staff that includes mandatory training for all members of search committees, approval of

all search plans, collection and review of data on all searches, and pursuit of all traditional and non-traditional sources to attract a diverse pool of candidates.

4:7 Continue to implement our admission tactical plan to recruit a more diverse student body in line with the targets set forth in the Strategic Enrollment Plan.

4:8 Create an ad hoc committee to assess the campus environment (with special attention to common areas) to ensure that it reflects UMW's commitment to a diverse and inclusive campus.

4:9 Develop a comprehensive outreach and communication plan around UMW's diversity efforts.

4:10 Reconstitute and reactivate the President's Community Advisory Committee on Diversity to foster communication and build community support for efforts around diversity and inclusion.

4:11 Ensure that appropriate academic and student life support services meet the needs of all underrepresented students including first generation, Summer Transition Program students, veterans, students with disabilities, and transfer students; establish a Transfer Center in the Office of Academic Services; provide appropriate support to the Office of Disability Resources to ensure that all UMW program and services are accessible to the students who seek and needs them.

4:12 Establish a robust and highly visible Division of Continuing and Professional Education to create, facilitate, and oversee adult credit and non-credit programs. The Division will lead to the establishment of high quality programs, as determined through market research, to serve the unmet needs of the large adult education population in the region, including veterans, first-generation, and other non-traditional students.