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*Rowan University*

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**EXPLORING SUCCESS AND CHALLENGES OF BLACK STUDENTS TAKING  
AN ENGLISH COURSE ONLINE AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

by

Latoya N. Bond

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at  
Rowan University  
February 23, 2022

Dissertation Chair: Cecile Sam, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Educational  
Services and Leadership

Committee Members:

James Coaxum, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Educational Services and  
Leadership

Hijame Mitani, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Services and  
Leadership

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## **Dedications**

I want to dedicate this dissertation to my wonderful family, who have supported me throughout this doctoral journey. To my grandmother, I often reflect on how while working multiple jobs and raising three children, you pursued your education and graduated with your teaching degree from Rowan University (Glassboro State). Thank you for setting the example for our entire family of the importance of getting an education. To my mother, thank you for instilling in me a love for learning and giving back to my community. I do not think I would have gotten through this without the lessons you taught me growing up, always to aim high and believe that you can do great things. To my father, thank you for teaching me the value of hard work and finishing what you start with precision. Last but certainly not least, to my husband, who has been the calm in the storm throughout this entire process. You have cheered me on, wiped my tears, and calmed me down when I get overwhelmed. You have been beside me through every challenge and triumph and have made sacrifices to support me with love and understanding. There aren't enough words to say how much your support has carried me through. I love you so much.

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Completing this dissertation during a pandemic brought unique challenges. When I joined Steve Syoen's Virtual Academic Retreats, I felt that I could work through my lack of motivation and begin making progress toward completing my dissertation. The academic retreats opened a brand-new concept for me of working with other doctoral students across the globe over zoom. Thank you, Steve, for making the space for so many doctoral students and me to find community during a time of uncertainty and through a process that could have felt isolating.

## **Abstract**

Latoya Nicol Bond

EXPLORING SUCCESS AND CHALLENGES OF BLACK STUDENTS TAKING AN  
ENGLISH COURSE ONLINE AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

2021-2022

Cecile Sam, Ph.D.

Doctor of Education

Community colleges have expanded access to higher education and were early adopters of online courses. Among literature on online course performance, Black students are least successful in online learning despite being one of the growing populations at community colleges. This case study investigated the experiences of Black community college students taking an online English course for the first time. These experiences were particularly unique because the students participated during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings indicate that students navigate multiple priorities outside of school, technology challenges, and desire for increased preparation, representation, and support from the campus community. This study assists in expanding the limited research on Black community college students' experiences online. Growing technology adaptation within education necessitates conversation around online learning structure and supports so virtual spaces can be a tool to address existing inequities, so all students reach success.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Community colleges play a critical role in the training of the local workforce. In recent years, these institutions have been at the epicenter of raising graduation rates among students seeking post-secondary education (American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), 2016; Norris, 2014). Community college students make up 41% of the undergraduate student population across the United States (AACC, 2020). Over 8.5 million college students are enrolled in 1,050 community colleges nationwide (AACC, 2020; Community College Research Center (CCRC), 2018). Historically enrollment has been impacted by the economy (AACC, 2019). While there is a growing decrease in enrollment of on-campus courses, there is a growth in demand and enrollment of online courses (Norris, 2014).

Online course enrollment across higher education has increased in popularity at community colleges and community college students (Hart et al., 2017). Community college students typically are nontraditional and less likely to be on campus often; however, there has been a growing population of traditional-age students enrolling (Castillo, 2013; Schwehm, 2017). Over 60% of community college students work full-time or part-time while enrolled (AACC, 2020). Online courses appeal to both students and college administrators alike, providing flexibility for the community college student with multiple responsibilities while providing a cost-effective and campus space-conscious course delivery format for administrators (Calhoun et al., 2017; Robichaud, 2010; Travers, 2016).

While online courses appear to have a mutual benefit for community colleges and students, performance in these courses often lags when compared to on-campus courses. This performance gap connects to a lower persistence to graduation (Huntington et al., 2017). Travers (2016) highlights the conflict between a student's motivation to enroll in online courses and preparation to complete college-level work when explaining students' difficulty in online courses compared to on-campus courses (Travers, 2016). More specifically, students are often motivated to take online courses due to outside responsibilities such as work, family, or other time commitments (Travers, 2016). Thus, pursuing flexibility for their active lives outside of school instead of evaluating their skills to thrive in online courses' more independent learning environment (Travers, 2016; Xu & Xu, 2019). Community college students attending community colleges in urban areas often begin college less prepared and may not understand their expectations (Capra, 2014; Liao et al., 2014). Urban community colleges are typically located within communities of color or lower socioeconomic status and have more significant needs and fewer resources (Lassiter, 2013). Therefore, community colleges often serve students with a greater need with less financial resources (Dache-Gerbino & White, 2016; Felix & Castro, 2018). Less financial resources result in the surrounding community being underserved in many ways, including education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

From a broader perspective, the lack of preparation and understanding of community college expectations that students experience reflect inequity within education in the United States (Iloh & Toidson, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Hachey et al. (2014) suggest that previous online course experience predicts future course success (Allen et al., 2017; Hachey et al., 2014). When disaggregating



community college student performance, findings show that female students, White students, and Asian students have a higher performance in online courses (Hart et al., 2017). In contrast, the lowest-performing community college students in online classes are male and Black students (Xu & Jagers, 2014).

Black student enrollment at community colleges provides educational access and opportunity through improved career prospects and economic mobility (Howard & Navarro, 2016). Community colleges provide Black students with an open access path toward higher education that may not otherwise be available (Bush & Bush, 2004). Forty-two percent of Black undergraduate students attend community colleges (AACC, 2020). Specifically, community colleges in urban communities have a higher rate of Black students than community colleges in other areas (Abu-Ghazaleh & Hoffman, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Black students are more likely to need developmental education and may struggle in college-level courses (Felix & Castro, 2018; Liao et al., 2014). In addition to academic challenges, Black college students face the daily impact of societal and institutional barriers. (Bentley-Edwards et al., 2016). Some of these barriers include economic hardship among Black families and limited access to rigorous K-12 curriculum necessary for Black students to have the opportunity to attend more selective institutions that often provide more resources for success (Iloh & Toidson, 2013).

### **Problem Statement**

Technology has transformed higher education with expansion in online learning (Cho et al., 2017). Many community college students balance school with other life responsibilities and, as a result, benefit from flexibility (Capra, 2014; Travers, 2016).

Institutions find online learning provides an opportunity to expand their educational reach, resulting in increased enrollment and increased access to students who may not attend courses on campus (Capra, 2014). However, research unremittingly shows that community college students do not do as well in online courses as in face-to-face courses (Castillo, 2013; Hart et al., 2017; Huntingdon-Klein et al., 2017; Xu & Jagers, 2011). Students are more likely to withdraw or receive lower grades (Gregory & Lampley, 2016).

In gatekeeper courses such as English and math, this is an even more significant performance gap (Xu & Jagers, 2011). Gatekeeper courses appear to have higher withdrawal and failure rates when taken online (Xu & Jagers, 2011). Gatekeeper courses describe core courses in math, writing, and reading where completion is required and often a starting point in post-secondary education (Ngo & Kosiewicz, 2017). Reasons for this performance gap include a lack of support and resources when students begin their online learning experience, lack of understanding of expectations, and how to navigate online courses and competing personal responsibilities (Capra, 2014; Iloh, 2019; Liao et al., 2014).

Black students taking courses online face many performance challenges that all online students face, such as a higher percentage of course failure rates, a higher likelihood of dropping courses, or not completing their degree (Brown, 2011). However, these challenges are more prevalent among Black students than other student demographics (Xu & Jagers 2014; Hart et al., 2017). Some scholars contribute feelings of nervousness and self-doubt around their ability or negative emotions around online learning as added challenges. Black students have when they learn online (Okwumabua,

Walker, Hu, & Watson, 2011). Many students choose online learning due to external circumstances, regardless of their preparation for the online learning experience (Capra, 2014; Robichaud, 2010). These student barriers exacerbate with community colleges dwindling students' resources, especially at community colleges in urban areas (Bush & Bush, 2004; Felix & Castro, 2018). This shortage of funds is often part of a broader issue with educational inequity within primary and secondary schools in these communities, graduating students unprepared for college-level work (Iloh & Toidson, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2016).

Educational inequity in the United States has a long-standing history (Delpit, 2012, Jackson & Holzman, 2020; United States Department of Education, 2016). One of the most profound pieces of evidence of inequity in schools is state and local funding of schools (Epstein, 2011). In 2016, 45% of schools in high poverty areas received less funding than most schools in other districts (United States Department of Education, 2016). The basis of school funding is individual household incomes within the school's community (Epstein, 2011; Zamudio et al., 2011). The higher the household income, the greater likelihood that the school will have more financial support and have access to more resources (Epstein, 2011; Goodman, 2018). Schools within communities with residents who have a lower socioeconomic status face budget cuts that prohibit them from expanding support and resources for students (Epstein, 2011; Goodman, 2018). In addition to funding, less visible inequities exist in a lack of exposure to a rigorous curriculum, negative teacher interactions and expectations, and an overall lack of cultural connection with students (Gamoran, 2016; Howard & Navarro, 2016; McKenzie, 2009). These less blatant factors suggest that even students within the same school face

educational inequity (Gamoran, 2016). These factors result in differences in educational experiences and preparation for future educational endeavors such as college (Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Knaggs et al., 2015).

These perpetual inequities become apparent in courses on community college campuses, especially courses offered in an online format (Bentley et al., 2016; Castillo, 2013; Iloh & Toidson, 2013). Essential skills such as time management, work-life balance, and learning through self-guidance are essential to online student success and critical resources such as computers and reliable internet connection (Capra, 2014; Cho et al., 2017; Lack, 2013). As community colleges continue to increase online learning, the assumption is that a student's enrollment in online courses is an indicator of established preparation, resources, or support (Capra, 2014; Iloh, 2019). Providing these courses without considering students' unique needs, skills, and barriers may unintentionally set them up for failure, which is counterproductive to student success and retention. Under this lens, the expansion of online learning without this consideration undercuts a large group of community college students with the opportunity to benefit from all course formats. Understanding student experiences, specifically the Black community college student experience in online courses, create opportunities for community colleges to investigate further apparent and inapparent existing inequities that hinder student success.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative case study aims to understand Black community college students' experience taking an online course for the first time. Gathering shared experiences allows individual stories to come together to identify themes and concepts that reveal a broader perspective (Merriam, 1998). More specifically, this study focuses on Black community

college students' initial beliefs about online learning, environmental factors influencing their experience, and the on-campus support they sought and found helpful. This study takes place during their enrollment in an English developmental gatekeeper course.

Performance in English courses is linked to success in future subject areas (Allen et al., 2017; Xu & Jagers, 2011). With the high enrollment of Black students paired with the rise of community college online learning options, it is essential to understand the experience of Black community college students taking classes online (Iloh & Toidson, 2013).

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study centers on Black students' experience taking online courses utilizing two conceptual frameworks, composite persistence model (CPM) and critical race theory (CRT). Conceptual frameworks provide the lens within the study (Merriam, 1998). The lens refers to the perspective the study will be analyzed (Merriam, 1998). I selected both conceptual frameworks for this study because they include this population's multiple identities, creating a holistic view of their experience. Both conceptual frameworks help find shared meaning among students' experiences as Black students, community college students, and online students simultaneously.

The composite persistence model (CPM) developed by Alfred Rovai combines Vincent Tinto's institutional departure model and John Bean and Barbara Metzner's nontraditional attrition model and expands to include the online learning experience (Rovai, 2003). Persistence describes a student's ability to pursue a goal while overcoming obstacles (Tinto, 2017). Rovai emphasizes four factors within a student's ability to persist within this model. These areas are student characteristics, skills, internal factors, and

external factors (Rovai, 2003). Student characteristics, internal factors, and external factors all derive from the previous models of Tinto and Bean and Metzner describing factors such as but not limited to student demographic, prior educational experiences, motivations, current responsibilities outside of school, and campus supports and resources students' access (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1993).

Consideration of all these areas will help cultivate learning experiences to best support students (Rovai, 2004). Rovai expanded this by adding student skills needed to learn online (Rovai, 2003). In his expanded model, he includes computer literacy, time management, reading skills, and experiences with technology as factors that can influence the persistence of nontraditional online students (Rovai, 2003). These skills are essential to online learning success as it incorporates learning that is text-heavy, more independent, and less communal (Cooper, 2000; Rovai, 2003; Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Sutton, 2019).

Critical race theory (CRT) emphasizes the role of institutional racism in education, centering on the experiences of individuals who have faced oppression and the role race contributes (Tate, 1997). CRT frames their experience related to their identity as Black students in a broader societal context. Using CRT, I used their individual experiences to shed light on more prominent themes such as educational inequity, access, and opportunity (Zamudio et al., 2011). The use of CRT is significant within educational research because it allows researchers to analyze how long-standing institutions such as the American education system covertly and overtly exclude the experiences of Black students and other students of color and the consequences of this exclusion (Hiraldo, 2010). As the American demographic shifts toward a more diverse population, educators

must include more diversity and inclusion from curriculum to campus culture (Hiraldo, 2010). These conceptual frameworks provide a comprehensive perspective of the student experience. Many persistence models, while including multiple layers of how and why students persist, do not incorporate the Black identity and experiences marginalized students face that impact these factors (Berry, 2021). Combining the composite persistence model and critical race theory further explores their experience as community college students that includes their Black identity as they embark on their first community college English online course.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative case study seeks to understand Black students' experience attending community college courses during their enrollment in an online course for the first time. The four main research questions assist in capturing their experience. These questions are:

1. In one urban community college, what are Black community college students' experiences taking their first online course?
2. As a first-time online student, what are some of the initial beliefs, they have about their online learning experience?
3. According to students, what environmental factors shape Black students' experience taking online courses for the first time at urban community colleges?
4. According to students, what on-campus supports contribute to student success in online courses?

## **Definition of Terms**

Black Students - Students of any gender who identify as a part of the African Diaspora, including African American, Afro-Latinx, Afro-Caribbean, and native African (Gordan & Gordan, 2006; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1997).

Community College – Two-year institution that grants an associate degree or certificate upon completion (Cohen & Kisker, 2010)

Gatekeeper Courses – Courses that cover math and English and are required by all undergraduate students completing a degree at the institution. These courses may include a series of developmental and college-level courses (Ngo & Kosiewicz, 2017).

Online Learning – Learning takes place with a learning management system or another form of technology using the internet (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006; Sublett, 2019; Xu & Xu, 2019)

Urban Community College – Two-year institution located in a large metropolitan area or city (Myran et al., 2013)

## **Significance of Study**

There are currently gaps in research on community college students generally and Black community college students specifically, despite their large enrollment in community colleges (Crisp et al., 2016; Iloh & Toidson, 2013). Mirroring this sentiment has been an additional critique that online learning studies include a minimal focus on Black students and center students' experiences attending four-year institutions (Abu-



Ghazaleh & Hoffman, 2016; Crisp et al., 2016). The research conducted in this study would benefit practitioners in many ways.

### ***Black Students***

Black students would benefit greatly from this study as their voices are at the center instead of a microcosm of student voices about online experiences. Exploring Black students as online students is vital as online course enrollment grows at community colleges. This study may help create programming and improve support services for Black students. Improving support services and developing targeted programming for Black students have been successful strategies (Felix & Castro, 2018; Travers, 2016).

### ***Administrators***

Institutions view online learning as a cost-effective way to provide more courses; however, students receive limited support beyond orientations that vary in length and valuable information (Lack, 2013; Robichaud, 2010). This study could help build on already best practices by identifying key struggles students taking online courses may encounter throughout the course. Understanding who enrolls in online learning is an integral part of better understanding students' needs; especially the transition students make when taking online courses for the first time (Capra, 2014). Institutions could use this study's findings to create a better onboarding process for students who are new to technology or the online course format (Capra, 2014; Iloh & Toidson, 2013; Robichaud, 2010).

### ***Educational Leadership***

Leadership is an intersection of skills, actions, and situations that help move others toward a shared goal (Northouse, 2016). Educational leadership is an evolving

field consistently expanding to remain at pace with educational research, reform, and practice (Gurung & Prieto, 2009). Magnifying a focus on inclusivity, diversity, culture, and equity helps create learning spaces where all students can succeed (Gurung & Prieto, 2009; Santamaria, 2014). Analyzing the findings of this study using a CPM and CRT framework encourages educational leaders to practice transformative leadership. Transformative leadership encourages collective and individual progress through identifying structural and cultural patterns of inequity and injustice within education (Shields, 2010). Transformative leadership necessitates a critical lens to view policies and procedures that may overtly or covertly contribute to oppressive practices (Marshall & Oliva, 2010). Educational leadership that incorporates equity and social justice lens are of great value because it allows leaders to better respond to the American demographic and globalization (Santamaria, 2014). While online learning is a growing area of education, there is not extensive research discussing how current inequities are present in online courses at community colleges (Iloh, 2013, Lack, 2013). This study provides insight on how inequities in education reveal themselves within the online learning experience and how through transformative leadership, community colleges and other institutional leaders can be more supportive and instrumental in the success of Black students attending online.

### ***Societal Impact***

In a broader perspective, this study could assist in addressing inequity in education and give community colleges a more comprehensive view of how incoming students face inequity in their preparedness and support of online learning with consideration to on-campus and off-campus factors (Lassiter, 2013; Liao et al., 2014;

Rios-Aguilar, 2015). This study has even more relevance as access to technology and online learning has been a part of a global conversation with the spread of Covid-19 that required students to suddenly complete semesters virtually after campuses closed to fight the spread of the disease (Dietrich et al., 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020). This study could help administrators and educational leaders develop better online learning approaches, technology plans, skill development, and supportive virtual spaces, creating an opportunity for all students to do well.

## **Chapter Summary**

Many institutions utilize online course offerings to provide opportunities for busy students while eliminating costs to on-campus learning. The community college has explicitly taken this route enrolling a vast majority of online students with increasing demand. Online course performance is lower in comparison to courses taken on campus. Black students are among the lower performers in online courses. Black students are a large population of enrolled students each semester at community colleges. This study seeks to understand Black students' shared experiences taking online courses for the first time at an urban community college. Within these experiences, I focused on their initial beliefs on online learning, on-campus resources they have used, and environmental influences. This study utilizes CRT and CPM when discussing their Black and online community college students' experience for the first time. This study intends to find avenues for more intentional programming and support mechanisms for Black students taking online courses to assist them with support, skill development, and resources, especially those taking this course format for the first time.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Black community college students are a continuously growing demographic (AACC, 2016; Myran et al., 2013). What was once a place denied to Black students now is the leading educational institution enrolling Black students. (Beach, 2011; Myran et al., 2013; NCES, 2018). Despite a steady enrollment, Black students do not perform as well compared to other populations in college-level courses, including courses online (Hart et al., 2017; Xu & Jagers, 2014). Providing student support and resources at the capacity of a four-year institution is an unvarying challenge for community colleges due to state and local budget cuts (Felix & Castro, 2018; Gose, 2006). Community colleges embrace online learning and increase online course offerings to help mitigate costs (Simpson, 2012). As Black students continue to be a large part of the community college population, they do not have a prominent, documented voice on their experience and what contributes to their success as well as their challenges (Iloh & Toidson, 2013; Anzul et al., 2001).

As a researcher, it is essential to invest in the phenomenon and its interconnectedness with other contexts (Stake, 1995). This chapter provides a review of the literature that establishes the foundation for the case study. This chapter covers literature from four main areas, community colleges, Black students, online learning, and gatekeeper courses. Critical race theory (CRT) and composite persistence model (CPM) are conceptual frameworks that help frame the study's context to accompany these areas. Finally, this literature review discusses emerging literature on how campuses have handled the recent need to learn virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the literature review, I purport to explain that understanding Black students' experiences

during online learning is vital to community colleges to understand better how they can better assist students learning online.

### **Community Colleges**

Community colleges have an evolving history of American education with both advocates and critics. Over 1,050 community colleges are in the United States (AACC, 2020). Over 40% of students who attend post-secondary education institutions attend community colleges, and 39% of first-time college students attend community colleges (AACC, 2020). Student enrollment typically follows the trends according to the job market, such as the unemployment rate (AACC, 2019; Cohen & Kisker, 2010). When unemployment is high, there is typically an increase in enrollment, and when low, enrollment decreases (AACC, 2019). Originally referred to as the junior college, its historical foundation has roots in expanding access to more American citizens and fulfilling different roles within the education and economic systems (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The more specific purpose of community colleges has evolved and shifted to reflect changes in the community and across the formal educational system (Beach, 2011). Community colleges vary in geographical location, demographics, funding, and program offerings (AACC, 2020). Students who attend community colleges come with many characteristics, challenges, and goals. (Strohl, 2018).

### ***Historical Overview***

Like many other societal institutions, higher education in its inception provided education reserved for a small subset of society such as clergy and bureaucrats, specifically, White and male (Beach, 2011; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Strohl, 2018). Higher education was an institution of elitism and reiterated discrimination that could extend

across religion, gender, race, or class (Beach, 2011; Brint & Karabel, 1989). Due to a lack of access paired with the cost, post-secondary education was often unattainable for the majority (Beach, 2011). During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, education reform advocated for more access to education. The belief was that it served a greater good to have a formal education system to maintain a thriving democracy (Beach, 2011; Brint & Karabel, 1989). This reform included providing formalized education for children and a system for those pursuing an education beyond high school.

During the early 20th century, junior colleges' creation sought to expand access to higher education by providing an educational intermediary between high school and university at a low cost (Beach, 2011; Brint & Karabel, 1989). One of the earliest documented community colleges was the Joliet Junior College, established in 1901 in Chicago, Illinois (Beach, 2011 & Brint & Karabel, 1989; Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014). After World War II, enrollment at community colleges rose as they began to open their doors to more citizens. Veterans were a key population as some feared that the scarce job market needed an alternative avenue of productivity without overwhelming university enrollment (Beach, 2011; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014). Another added advantage to the expansion of community colleges was that it would provide four-year universities the autonomy to remain selective and, in some cases, discriminatory against groups they did not see fit for the pursual of higher education (Beach, 2011; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Strohl, 2018).

Over the decades following, the junior college evolved into what is now known today as community colleges and expanded throughout the country (Brint & Karabel, 1989). George Zook coined the term “community college”, and he believed that community

colleges were a vehicle for democracy and a social and economic improvement that reflects local culture (Beach, 2011; Martinez & Munsch, 2019). Also echoing similar ideas, advocates such as Edmund Gleazer believed that the community colleges should be local open access epicenters for an educational opportunity (Beach, 2011). The philosophy behind community colleges would be that they are inherently obligated to meet the local community and economic needs (Beach, 2011; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Kisker, 2010). However, community colleges' purpose has been an area of continued challenge and debate (Beach, 2011).

### ***Purpose of Community Colleges***

Throughout the history of community colleges, there have been ongoing changes in the purpose of these institutions. Scholars and practitioners alike have had ongoing conversations about what purpose the community college will serve in the community (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Strohl, 2018). Community colleges' foundational purpose was to expand educational access after K-12 education (Beach, 2011; Brint & Karabel, 1989). This expansion would serve as a greater good to society as a whole and provide access to many of the goals that most Americans value (Brint & Karabel, 1989). While there was consensus on the foundational purpose, educators had varying perspectives on how it would serve society best have been up for debate.

During the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, community colleges began much like 4-year universities, focusing on liberal arts (Strohl, 2018). The expectation was that students who attended these community colleges were high school graduates who had a goal of pursuing 4-year intuitions but could use some additional support (Strohl, 2018). For the first 20 years, community colleges enrolled students to complete general courses that



could be applied when transferred to a university (Beach, 2011; Strohl, 2018). This pipeline served community college enrollment and assisted universities who could not keep up with enrollment demands due to an increase in high school graduates.

Universities also could uphold any selective admission standards (Beach, 2011; Brint & Karabel, 1989).

There was a concern after World War II, many veterans returning during the Great Depression with few job opportunities would harm society (Beach, 2011; Brint & Karabel, 1989). This view resulted in a shift and expansion of vocational training that could allow completion without the need to transfer to a four-year institution (Beach, 2011; Brint & Karabel, 1998). The belief was that job training would allow more opportunities for the economy to recover as job markets would have an influx of semiprofessional workers to fill various jobs requiring skills (Brint & Karabel, 1998).

Today's community colleges have expanded beyond transfer and vocational training and assist current job markets by providing training for industries that need workers from local businesses to global companies (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Wagoner et al., 2006). Unlike the inception of higher education that was purposefully in place to serve wealthy White male students, community colleges serve large populations of students including marginalized groups and low socioeconomic status (Beach, 2011). The community college of today, despite its financial challenges, looks to fulfill many functions within the local community and an integral part of the community and societal advancement (Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014; Ocean et al., 2019; Strohl, 2018).

### *Urban Community Colleges*

One area that community colleges can differ and may impact their offerings, opportunities, and services is their geographical location. Urban community colleges describe community colleges located in a city. Urban community colleges began to rise during the 1960s due to the Civil Rights movement and a call for racial equality in access to quality education and jobs (Myran et al., 2013). Some of the first large cities to establish urban community colleges were Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York (Myran et al., 2013). Historically urban community colleges have been a part of larger local community movements as city planners and urban renewal programs have called on them to assist in providing resources, partnerships, or training to see these developments through fruition to overcome community challenges (Bacevice & Dunkley, 2018; Friedman, 2019; Myran et al., 2013).

Urban community colleges are emersed within the surrounding community near other entities within the city and cannot exist in isolated locations (Bacevice & Dunkley, 2018). These entities include residents, other schools, businesses, and local services (Bacevice & Dunkley, 2018). In addition, if the surrounding area experiences systemic challenges such as economic disparities, poverty, homelessness, crime, or a lack of educational resources within their public school system, this will also impact the community college in that area (Dache-Gerbino & White, 2020; Knaggs et al., 2015; Myran et al., 2013). Urban community colleges enroll a higher percentage of marginalized student populations such as immigrants, Black, and Latinx students (Abu-Ghazaleh & Hoffman, 2016; Myran et al., 2013; White & Dace, 2020).

Many students who attend urban community colleges also have attended the local urban public schools for primary and secondary grades. Graduates from urban public schools can face community barriers throughout their K-12 education resulting in under-preparedness for college-level work (Knaggs et al., 2015). Though one of the critical purposes of urban community colleges was to address racial disparities, multiple scholars note the underlying effects of racism within social institutions such as the educational system. The educational system's disparity has continued prevalence that negatively impacts student success (Beach, 2011; Dache-Gerbino & White, 2016; White & Dache, 2020). Even when students successfully transition into community colleges, these overarching concerns can create barriers to meeting daily needs essential to their success, such as transportation to campus or access to adequate support services. (Dache-Gerbino & White, 2016). These challenges impact the community and work against community improvement initiatives to address challenges in urban areas (Myran et al., 2013).

### **Community College Students**

The community college student population is comprised of various populations and make up a total of over 5 million students (CCRC, 2018). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2020), of the 1,050 community colleges nationwide, students are 26% Latinx, 13% Black, 45% White, 6% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% Native American. The remaining 8% identify as multiracial, other, or undocumented (AACC, 2020). Students are motivated to attend a community college to pursue goals including degree attainment, transfer to a four-year institution, obtain additional job skills, change careers, or vocational training for current job advancement (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Juskiewicz, 2020). It is common for community college

students to pursue these goals as part-time students or by starting and stopping enrollment over time (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Juskiewicz, 2020).

Sixty-four percent of community college students attend part-time (AACC, 2020). Juskiewicz (2020) suggests that part-time students attend school for a longer time to complete their degree and are at a greater risk of poor performance and not completing their degree or certificate (Juskiewicz, 2020). Currently, the rate of graduation continues to be lower than 50% (Juskiewicz, 2020). This data highlights consistent areas of challenge for community colleges to meet students' unique needs to aid in their success (Ocean, Cronin, & Granat, 2019). These challenges compound with a lack of research focused exclusively on community college students subsequently produce a lack of research access for practitioners (Crisp et al., 2016; Iloh & Toidson, 2013).

### ***Student Characteristics***

There are some broad common characteristics among community college students. Compared to students who attend four-year colleges and universities, these students are often older, having more responsibilities off-campus, and are less prepared for college-level work (Hagedorn & Kuznetsova, 2016; Juskiewicz, 2020; Liao et al., 2014). Combining these factors contributes to why many students attend part-time and are possibly hindered academically (Juskiewicz, 2020).

**Nontraditional Students.** Community colleges have a history and continued trend of enrolling older college students since the end of World War II when many veterans returned and sought educational opportunities to supplement dismal job opportunities (Strohl, 2018). Cohen & Kisker (2010) highlight the appeal to older adults as community colleges focus on job skill-building that may or may not require a four-

year degree (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The average age of community college students is 28 years of age (AACC, 2020). A nontraditional student is assumed to describe a student above traditional college-age ranging from 18-24. However, nontraditional not only incorporates age differences but also differences in enrollment patterns and responsibilities outside of school (Philibert et al., 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

**Responsibilities Off-Campus.** Most community college students commute to school from home, unlike students who attend four-year colleges who may have the opportunity to live on campus. Only 28% of community colleges offer on-campus housing (AACC, 2020). Similar to the campus inability to be isolated from the community, many students who enroll are also unable to separate themselves from other responsibilities outside of college (Bacevice & Dunkley, 2018; Juskiewicz, 2020; Sutton, 2019; Travers, 2016). Many community college students attend part-time, as many are balancing work obligations. Over 70% of students attending part-time will also work a part-time or full-time job (AACC, 2020). Even students who can attend college full time are working. At least 62% of students have indicated working at least part-time (AACC, 2020).

Personal financial stress leaves many students with no choice but to work while pursuing their education (Tannock & Flocks, 2003). Fifty-five percent of low-income students attend community colleges (CCRC, 2019). Some students work in jobs that do not pay well and can have added financial pressure due to navigating work demands, school demands, and personal responsibilities (Mukherjee et al., 2017; Tannock & Flocks, 2003). In addition to supporting themselves, many students may be taking care of

children or other family members (Juskiewicz, 2020; Troester-Trate, 2019; Walpole, Chambers, & Goss, 2014). Fifteen percent of students are single parents, and over 70% depend on financial aid to attend classes (AACC, 2020). These factors outside of school can hinder on-campus student engagement, a known factor for student success (Card & Wood, 2019). Also, a disruption in one of these areas, such as job loss, loss of childcare, or loss of financial aid, can have a detrimental impact on student academic performance and retention (Troester-Trate, 2019; Walpole et al., 2014).

**Preparedness for College.** Historically, community colleges served as an avenue for unprepared students interested in attending four-year institutions (Beach 2011; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Strohl, 2018). Though students who enroll in community colleges have often been less prepared for college-level work, they share many of the same goals of students attending four-year colleges and universities. This lack of preparation links to deficits within society and current inequities in access to educational resources and education funding and begins as early as kindergarten (Epstein, 2011; Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014; McNair et al., 2016).

Students enrolled in community colleges tend to have less college preparation and may not have previous access to the skills and information needed to understand and navigate college expectations (Beach, 2011; Capra, 2014; Liao et al., 2016; Travers, 2016). Community colleges overwhelmingly provide developmental education to fill this gap in preparedness for college (Martinez & Munsch, 2019; Mayhew et al., 2016; Ngo & Kosiewicz, 2017). However, there is debate on whether developmental courses help or hinder students in their likelihood of persistence and reaching graduation (Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014; Mayhew et al., 2016).

### ***Community College Student Success***

Despite these challenges, there are proven practices that support community college student success. Community college students are balancing multiple responsibilities in addition to their coursework (Strohl, 2018). Supports on campus can assist students with barriers outside of school that could interfere with their academic performance and persistence. Providing on-campus non-academic supports through partnerships with local healthcare services, food security, childcare, veteran support, and utility assistance could eliminate student barriers off campus (McNair et al., 2016). Providing this support gives students an improved quality of life and better focus on their schoolwork (McNair et al., 2016).

Community college students also come from various backgrounds; thus, it is essential to have a culturally competent and diverse campus community focused on an equitable curriculum (Abu-Ghazaleh & Hoffman, 2016; Martinez & Munsch, 2019). Cultural competence and diversity are essential because community college students thrive in environments representing the student population's diversity (Abu-Ghazaleh & Hoffman, 2016; Gurung & Prieto, 2009). A culturally competent faculty and campus community can build better relationships with students and better identify and support student needs (Abu-Ghazaleh & Hoffman, 2016). In addition to curriculum, Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher (2014) emphasize the importance of campus-wide collaboration to cultivate student campus involvement (Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014). Campus-wide collaboration requires supports within the campus community to provide initiatives that foster an engaging campus culture that is supportive, approachable, relevant, and diverse (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020; Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014).

## **Black Community College Students**

Black community college students represent over 40% of all Black undergraduate students and 13% of community college students overall (AACCC, 2020). For the first 50 years of community colleges' existence, segregation made it, so Black students were not welcome to attend. Though there were a few historically Black community colleges, these institutions did not receive funding nor accreditation (Beach, 2011). Black student enrollment has been a steady increase at community colleges since the 1960s due to the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement fostered laws that prohibited segregation and expanded access to higher education in large cities (AACCC, 2016; Myran et al., 2013). Though there is a steady increase in Black student enrollment, Black students' graduation rates are the lowest at 28.8% compared to other student populations (CCRC, 2019; Strayhorn, 2011).

Community colleges, especially ones located in urban areas, must identify Black student challenges, and implement support that assists them in being successful; however, research on Black students is not robust among community college research (Gipson, Mitchell, & McLean, 2018; Iloh & Toidson, 2013; Strayhorn, 2011). Some educational research about Black community college students faces critique for viewing students from a deficit perspective (Jones, 2019; Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). A deficit perspective views challenge that students face from a lens that looks at the individual and those associated with them as lacking and, as a result, contributes to difficulty while dismissing what unique qualities they add that could assist in their success (Anzul et al., 2001, Kunjufu, 2012).



### ***Black Community College Student Challenges***

Black students face many challenges like those of many community college students, such as a lack of preparation for college and managing multiple responsibilities outside of school (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016). However, Black students rank lower in performance and persistence than any other compared racial group (CCRC, 2019; Strayhorn, 2011; Xu & Jagers, 2014). Black community college students' challenges can reveal where institutions fall short of supporting these students and educational and societal inequities that provide significant barriers for Black students and their academic success at community colleges (Bentley et al., 2016). Simultaneously with educational challenges, students can face environmental challenges such as financial hardship, lack of resources, and racial disparities that hinder daily life (Dache et al., 2016; Delpit, 2012). These challenges include academic preparedness for college and establishing belonging within the college environment.

**Preparedness for College.** Black students are more likely to need developmental education upon entering community college before taking college-level courses (Felix & Castro, 2018). These performance gaps are not related to natural ability as research has shown that there are not achievement gaps at birth, but rather gaps are created over time (Delpit, 2012). Black community college students are less prepared for college-level work for a variety of reasons. Bentley et al., (2016) describe the Black college student as experiencing multilevel inequities that are societal and institutional (Bentley et al., 2016). Scholars note that these inequities begin early. These inequities in primary school mean that curriculums lack the academic rigor to adequately prepare students for college (Iloh & Toidson, 2013; Knaggs et al., 2015).

Black students have the lowest rate of attending college immediately after high school (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Though the college enrollment rate of Black students has increased mostly due to community colleges' existence, educational inequities often continue once a student arrives. Community colleges have a per-student spending gap that can be three to five times smaller than per-student spending at a four-year institution (Felix & Castro, 2018). This lack of resources means that campuses fall short in providing the resources needed for Black students to be successful despite espousing to be a direct path toward their success in higher education (Bush & Bush, 2004).

**Belonging in College Environment.** Finding a sense of belonging on campus is a crucial part of introducing students to the college environment and providing them the tools to thrive (Abu-Ghazaleh & Hoffman, 2016). Historically, community colleges, like many higher education institutions, were unwelcome to Black students (Beach, 2011). In addition to segregation laws, Black students experienced discrimination through social segregation, discriminatory policies, and bias curriculum even after physical segregation was outlawed (Beach, 2011; Dache-Gerbino & White, 2016). An unwelcome campus can create an incompatible learning environment for all students, particularly black students (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010).

Delpit (2012) highlights that Black college students can feel invisible when doing well or exhibiting what is considered positive attributes yet hyper visible when doing poorly or exhibiting what is considered negative attributes (Delpit, 2012). A hostile racial environment brings both social and psychological stress for students and a disconnect from the campus community (Delpit, 2012; Jones, 2019; Strayhorn, 2011). This disconnect can result in a mistrust of campus resources and underutilization (Herndon &

Hirt, 2004). Bukoski and Hatch (2016) point out Black students are less likely to reveal vulnerability and often view their academic performance as a responsibility of their own without expectations on how institutions could and should support them (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016). Instead, Black students look to family members who may or may not be familiar with campus resources for support (Gipson et al., 2018; Herndon & Hirt, 2004). These experiences, especially for previously high-performing students, may cause them to isolate themselves further from the campus community when they need help instead of seeking out available campus resources. (Delpit, 2012). Students who struggle to find belonging within the campus community can not only struggle academically but conclude they do not belong in college at all (Card & Wood 2019).

### ***Black Community College Student Success***

Students thrive in an environment where they received academic support and emotional and social support (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Though there are significant barriers that Black community college students face, research has shown some steps that can help Black community college students succeed. Black community college students are very involved with their families (Gipson et al., 2018). Their families can be a source of social and emotional support and a source of responsibilities that students must navigate (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Strayhorn, 2011).

Acknowledging how family influences the student experience is a way that students can feel support (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Acknowledgment can include inviting families of students to participate in activities, making them aware of campus resources and support services, and helping students address and support familial obligations (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Herndon & Hirt, 2004).

Black community college students thrive in a diverse campus environment and focus on a culturally conscious curriculum. (Abu-Ghazaleh & Hoffman, 2016). Card and Wood (2019) emphasize the impact that faculty have on belonging, engagement, and self-efficacy through faculty validation (Card & Wood, 2019). Through validation in and out of the classroom, faculty interactions become opportunities for students to develop meaningful interactions linked to community college student success (Card & Wood, 2019; Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020). Institutions must be intentional in providing curriculum and teaching practices that acknowledge current inequities and offer intentional actions to address them (Abu-Ghazaleh & Hoffman, 2016; Card & Wood, 2019; Felix & Castro; 2018). Race conscious planning helps review practices and policies from a critical lens that focuses on race to identify any covert or color-blind practices that impede student success (Felix & Castro, 2018). Bowman and Culver (2018) encourage coursework that includes conversations around inequality, diversity, discrimination, and privilege as a method of helping students improve academic outcomes, especially those who are marginalized or underprepared for college (Bowman & Culver, 2018).

Addressing the unpreparedness of Black community college students requires resources and support in their academic skill development. To aid in skill development, Black community college students benefit from first-year seminars that seek to provide instruction with a combination of introduction to the college and success strategies (Bowman & Culver, 2018). Mandatory skill-based experiences such as workshops can be an opportunity for students to obtain skills and assist students in expanding their campus network, receiving an introduction to other campus resources such as tutoring (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Students can also receive these opportunities

through mentorship or pre-college programming (Knaggs et al., 2015; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Family involvement, providing a conscious and welcoming campus environment and creating programs that help develop academic skills help students understand their place in college and how institutions can help them thrive on and off-campus.

### **Online Learning**

Online learning has grown in popularity over the past few decades throughout higher education (Perry & Pilati, 2011; Norris, 2014; Smith, 2015;) Over 35% of students enrolled in any college or university are taking at least one online course, totaling over 6 million students (NCES, 2019). A large majority are taking these courses at undergraduate public institutions (NCES, 2019). Many students find online learning an appealing option as it affords time flexibility and is accessible anywhere in the world (Smith, 2015). Despite the debate over its many benefits and challenges, online learning projections conclude they will continue to increase (Simpson, 2012; "Trends in Distance Education," 2016). Community colleges have embraced this course format to provide flexibility for busy students and are cost-conscious for institutional budgets (Calhoun et al., 2017; Capra, 2014; CCRC, 2013). The look and feel of an online class could vary by institution. Still, multiple scholars agree that a successful online learning experience is a cross between having appropriate technology and skilled pedagogy (Bambara et al., 2009; Lack, 2013; Perry & Pilati, 2011).

### ***History***

Despite online learning potential in expanding college access, the United States Department of Education initially did not provide full support. In 1998 an amendment

called the Web-Based Commission Act placed limitations on expanding online learning (Harting & Erthal, 2005). Institutions would be restricted from Title IV funding if they provided more than 50% of their courses online and limited funds for students who took over half of their courses online (Harting & Erthal, 2005; Xu & Xu, 2019). However, later, pressure from the educational community around the benefits of expanded online learning forced legislators to lift these restrictions and, as a result, fostered the creation of exclusively online universities and the increase in online course offerings at community colleges (Harting & Erthal, 2005; Slimp, 2016; Xu & Xu, 2019). Over the past 30 years, online learning has grown to be one of the fastest movements in higher education (Slimp, 2016; Xu & Xu, 2019). Much like its predecessor distance education and virtual education, it offered an expansion of educational access to the underserved and provided flexible learning options for those with multiple responsibilities (Harting & Erthal, 2005; Larreadmenny-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006; Slimp, 2016; Xu & Xu, 2019).

### ***Types of Online Learning***

Distance education and online learning courses exist in two ways or a combination of the two. Asynchronous online learning describes courses structured to be self-navigated by the students using a general guide such as a syllabus (Gregory & Lampley, 2016; Slimp, 2016). Students do not meet at a designated time online; instead, they have the flexibility to complete coursework at whatever time they wish before the expected due date (Gregory & Lampley, 2016; Harting & Erthal, 2005). On the contrary, synchronous learning provides a live class session for students to interact with the professor and each other (Gregory & Lampley, 2016; Slimp, 2016). These sessions may exist as conference calls, chat rooms, or video web conferences (Slimp, 2016). Hybrid or

Blended learning is an adaptable combination of asynchronous and synchronous course delivery. Hybrid and blended learning students have the opportunity to complete assignments when they wish and attend live sessions either on campus or virtually (Slimp, 2016).

Though all formats exist at many institutions, there is an ongoing debate on the best approach (Castillo, 2013). The asynchronous course has been extremely accommodating for students' busy schedules and campus space constraints but falls short in providing students' support to be successful, especially those who are academically unprepared for college (Capra, 2014; Slimp, 2014). Synchronous courses provide student engagement that has been linked with online student success and address concerns such as student isolation but are similar to on-campus classes in terms of time constraints (Capra, 2014; Slimp; 2016). Hybrid and blended learning espouse to be the best of both course formats. However, Lack (2013) emphasizes that multiple factors correspond with successful online learning beyond solely course delivery format (Lack, 2013).

### ***Online Learning Tools***

Online learning relies on key resources. While online tools vary, they are significant components for online learning in higher education (Sublett, 2019). Both computer and internet access have provided essential tools to participate in the distance, virtual, and online learning space since their creation (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006; Perry & Pilati, 2011; Slimp, 2016). Due to advances in technology over the past 15 years, computer features that once were only accessible through a large desktop device is now accessible through portable laptops, iPads, tablets, and smartphones (Wolfe et al., 2019). The internet has advanced to provide capabilities allowing the same information to reach

multiple devices without the need for external hardware such as disks, CD-ROMs, or USB drives (Jeong, Kim, & Yoo, 2013). Both technological advancements have expanded online course access so that it does not have to rely solely on one device and provide access at any time (Jeong, Kim, & Yoo, 2013). With expanded access, the software provides the structure for students in gaining access to courses. A growing number of institutions have adopted learning management systems (Dahlstrom et al., 2014; Jeong, Kim, Yoo 2013).

Learning management systems (LMS) provide an internet accessible platform that allows institutions to share information and collect data in an organized, structured format (Jeong, Kim, Yoo, 2013). Students can access information from their professors, such as syllabus and course assignments. They can provide information to their professor through engaging elements such as discussion boards, tests, quizzes, and submission of assignments (Dahlstrom et al., 2014; Ghilay, 2019). Learning management systems storage of all course information provides the students access to the learning process and material at any time and allows the instructor to access assignments, monitor progress, and provide prompt feedback to students (Dahlstrom et al., 2014; Ghilay, 2019). These systems can be various providers but are a crucial part of any course delivery, especially online courses (Castillo, 2013).

### ***Online Courses Compared to Face-to-Face Courses***

Online learning success compares how students perform with performance in a face-to-face learning environment (Bowen, 2013). Many comparisons show students who take classes online have lower performance (Brown; 2011; Xu & Jagers, 2014; Xu & Xu, 2019). Lower performance includes areas beyond GPA, such as retention and



graduation rates (Huntington-Klein, Cowan, & Goldhaber, 2017; Xu & Jagers, 2014). Online students are also more likely to withdraw from courses, thus, harming academic persistence, and can have a financial impact on students (Xu & Xu, 2019). Some scholars have critiqued studies that only compare face-to-face and online classes present some limitations. There is a need for more studies that go beyond online and face-to-face course comparisons and focus on online learning at community colleges specifically (Bowen, 2013; Iloh, 2019; Lack, 2013).

### **Online Courses at Community Colleges**

Online courses at community colleges have been steadily rising despite a decrease in enrollment across the country (Norris, 2014; Smith, 2015). Community colleges historically were early adopters of online course offerings (Harting & Erthal, 2005). Among community colleges, 34 % of students enrolled in at least one online course (NCES, 2019). This percentage equals almost two million students in the United States (NCES, 2019). This trend expects to increase steadily with improvements to technology and the need for more flexibility in course format options (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Capra, 2014; Slimp, 2016). Historically, students who participated in online courses were likely to have a strong academic foundation, higher socioeconomic status, and come from well-served communities (CCRC, 2013). Today, with the expansion of online learning in community colleges, students from many different backgrounds and academic foundation levels now participate in online learning (CCRC, 2013).

### ***Benefits and Challenges in Online Learning for Students***

Online learning is an appealing option for community college students for multiple reasons. Community college students tend to be of nontraditional age, working

adults, and parents (Philibert, Allen, & Elleven, 2008; Strohl, 2018; Troester-Trate, 2019). With these added responsibilities, online learning provides alternative options to campus and having to complete work at a set class time, providing the flexibility needed among this student population (Calhoun, Green, & Burke, 2004; Robichaud, 2010). Added flexibility permits enrollment in courses that fit within the constraints of a busy schedule. However, this can also produce significant challenges for students.

Beyond enrollment in courses, students can be unclear on online courses' demands and expectations (Bambara, Harbour, Davies, & Athey, 2009). Some students are balancing many responsibilities and may be too busy navigating their outside school responsibilities to dedicate the time needed to do well online (Smith, 2015). An added challenge is student access to necessary tools and skills such as technology literacy, academic preparation, a personal computer, or reliable internet access (Deitrich et al., 2020; Guth, 2020; Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014; Perry & Pilati, 2011). Inequity in access to these essential tools presents a challenge to students who benefit from the flexibility but do not have access to the resources necessary to be successful (Xu & Xu, 2019).

Students who can access the necessary resources may face an unforeseen challenge such as self-regulation skills needed to do well in a less structured online learning environment (Cho, Kim, & Choi, 2017). Essential skills are necessary for online learning success, and academically unprepared students have a higher chance of struggling with college-level work and the online learning environment (Liao et al., 2014; Smith, 2015; Travers, 2016). The online learning environment often does not provide enough student engagement, and they may feel isolated or lack connection to the college

community (Brown, 2011; Capra, 2014; Donnelly & Kovacich, 2014). These challenges result in many of the previously mentioned outcomes for online students.

### **Online Student Success**

Despite the many challenges of both students and community colleges regarding online learning, there are some best online student success practices. Online student success depends on understanding students' needs and assisting them with the resources to meet those needs (Castillo, 2013; Donnelly & Kovacich, 2014). These needs may include assisting with goal setting, self-motivation, self-directed learning, communication, and online course literacy (Iloh, 2019; Perry & Pilati, 2011; Xu & Xu, 2019). Faculty and staff training is necessary to design courses and learning environments to help students develop these necessary skills catering to the student population's reality instead of assumptions of who enrolled online students are (Xu & Xu, 2019). Capra (2014) highlights circumstances often push enrollment motivations, so it is important to understand students' circumstances to identify their needs, especially first-time online students (Capra, 2014). Providing orientation on online learning can help students better understand online learning expectations, resources, and policies before starting the class (Bambara et al., 2009; Robichaud, 2010).

Throughout the course, fostering community is an essential aspect of online student success. Among all student populations, engagement on campus is correlated strongly with student success, especially students from marginalized populations (Adams & Wilson, 2020; Card & Wood, 2019; Donnelly & Kovacich, 2014; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). Community college students, especially those online, are often not connected to campus (Capra, 2014; Walpole et al., 2014). It is

essential for faculty and support resources on campus to connect with students (Slimp, 2016). Support looks like early alert and retention initiatives that include direct outreach to students, tutoring, mentoring, or counseling available online, cultivating an online campus community for online students (Ayebi-Arthur, 2017; Bambara et al., 2009; Castillo, 2013; Xu & Xu, 2019).

### **Gatekeeper and Developmental Courses at Community Colleges**

Gatekeeper courses describe the entry college-level courses necessary to complete to reach advanced coursework (Ngo & Kosiewicz, 2017; RTI International, 2016). These courses cover core subjects such as writing, reading, and math (Ngo & Kosiewicz, 2017; RTI International, 2016). Success in these courses is crucial for degree completion and provides the foundation for future courses (Allen et al., 2017). Many students cannot enter college-level gatekeeper courses at community colleges right away and instead start with developmental courses. Sixty percent of community college students are not academically ready for college and take at least one developmental level course. (Bailey & Smith-Jaggers, 2016; CCRC, 2018). Among Black community college students, 78% of students need to complete developmental level courses, the highest compared to other groups of students (Chen, 2016). This gap in preparation for many students is a result of a lack of college preparation in primary and secondary school (Castillo, 2013; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Knaggs et al., 2015).

Developmental education historically has been a large part of the community college mission of open access education for all students, especially students from lower socioeconomic statuses or students from underrepresented backgrounds (Bailey & Smith-Jaggers, 2016; Bush & Bush, 2004; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Harting & Erthal, 2005;

Hawley & Chiang, 2017). Developmental education courses can vary in requirements based on its curriculum and policy (Hawley & Chiang, 2017). Some students may have to take multiple classes before they reach their first college-level gatekeeper course. Sixty-three percent of students participate in college-level gatekeeper courses following developmental education courses, with only 28% reaching degree completion (Bailey & Smith-Jaggers, 2016; Barhoum, 2017; RTI International, 2016). While many dedicated institution dollars fund developmental education, this has not translated into the bridge toward college-level course performance that it intends (Bailey et al., 2010; Crisp & Delgado, 2014). Developmental education faces critiques such as courses being confusing for students and hindering students looking for relevant material and completing it as quickly as possible (Bailey et al., 2010; Finkel, 2018).

### **Composite Persistence Model (CPM)**

Student persistence describes the ability for students to continue toward their educational goals despite challenges (Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 2017). In an online student context, this would describe the student's ability to continue working toward completing an online course even when faced with typical and unique challenges of online learners (Lehman & Conceição, 2013). Among nontraditional students, their busy lives can increase challenges as some are navigating responsibilities such as work and families while also attending school (Capra, 2014; Rovai, 2003; Strohl, 2018).

Albert Rovai developed the composite persistence model to understand what factors influence the persistence of nontraditional online students (Rovai, 2003). This model extends two existing persistence models, Tinto's Model on institutional departure and the nontraditional attrition model by Bean and Metzner (Rovai, 2003). Vincent

Tinto's model of institutional departure attempts to address persistence, focusing on student traits, student interactions on campus, and campus involvement (Tinto, 1993). This model centers traditional students at four-year institutions to explain factors that influence persistence and links success to a separation of previous community to join the institution community (Aljohani, 2016).

The second model Rovai used was Bean and Metzner's Nontraditional Attrition Model, which expanded upon these tenants of Tinto to include additional external factors that impact nontraditional students such as work, family, and support networks (Bean & Metzner, 1985). While both address various influences on persistence, when understanding online students neither theory expanded to include the necessary skills needed for online learning success, such as computer and information literacy and key study skills (Rovai, 2003). With these crucial skills, Rovai created a model including four areas that influence nontraditional student persistence in specifically online courses. These areas include student characteristics, student skills, internal factors, and external factors (Rovai, 2003).

### ***Student Characteristics and Skills***

Many factors that influence students' educational experience center their characteristics and skills before entering an online learning space (Lehman & Conceição, 2013). These characteristics can range from their demographic, generation, identities to previous educational experiences (Rovai, 2004). These characteristics create an important matrix that structures the student's unique perspective (Rovai, 2003). According to Rovai & Downey (2010), this perspective plays a crucial role in student persistence in courses and encourages culturally responsive teaching to meet student's unique needs (Rovai &

Downey, 2010). These characteristics do not determine deficits in student ability but rather as an information source to better develop and teach online courses that are beneficial to all students (Rovai, 2004).

In addition to characteristics, there are a set of student skills needed to do well in online courses according to Rovai's model. These skills center on literacy, time management, and interface level with computers (Cooper, 2000; Rovai, 2003). Though online courses can use various multimedia such as pictures, audio, and videos, a significant amount of information in online learning is in text format (Cooper, 2000). The amount of text used still requires the student to need the necessary reading skills to process and understand the information given within the course (Iloh, 2019). These skills are necessary from a content perspective and a course navigation and technology perspective (Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014; Xu & Xu, 2019). These skills allow assistance in completing course instructions on critical functions within the course, such as submitting assignments or responding to discussion boards (Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014; Xu & Xu, 2019). Coinciding with literature on gatekeeper courses, a student who can succeed in a high literacy online course such as English will have a good chance of doing well in future courses (Allen et al., 2017; Cooper, 2000).

Time management is another key component that emphasizes a skill needed by all students but even more in an online environment. In most cases, the student does not spend any set time in the classroom (Rovai, 2003; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Online courses are a much more independent environment requiring students to guide themselves through the course with some support from the professor (Cho et al., 2017; Sutton, 2019). Time management skills require students to have the ability to navigate

and balance their nonacademic responsibilities while meeting class expectations (Aljohani, 2016; Walpole et al., 2014). These skills are essential for educational purposes and have long-lasting benefits even after students graduate (McCann et al., 2012).

The basis of the last key skill is a student's experience working with computers. Computers continue to transform education and how people of all ages learn (Wagoner, Levin, & Karter, 2006). As technology has become a growing part of all students' educational experience, it is important to note all students have not had experience or access to computers in the same way (Iloh, 2019; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Various factors can impact a student's ability to gain this crucial experience and access to computers (Xu & Xu, 2019). Students who have had frequent access to computers compared to those who do not influence how they acclimate to an online environment (Rovai, 2003). For example, a student born in the era of computers compared to one who may have spent most of their life doing things before computers would have varying levels of difficulty adjusting to using computers regularly. Another example is the equity between schools where some students attend a school with resources to provide computers compared to students who attended an underfunded school where computer use was rare (Whissemore, 2020; Xu & Xu, 2019). These previous experiences can have a crucial impact on how students access and relate to the tools needed for success in online learning (Cooper, 2000).

### ***Internal and External Factors***

Internal and external factors describe influences on and off campuses that can impact the student experience (Rovai, 2003). Students thrive in spaces that allow students to feel a sense of community and connectedness (Rovai, 2004). Internal factors describe



the areas that center the academic experience, such as how well a student integrates on campus, study skills, grade point average, relationships on campus, and access to resources (Aljohani, 2016; Hiraldo, 2010; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Sutton, 2019; Xu & Xu, 2019). Internal factors produce opportunities for institutions to create programming and initiatives that support students. Many programs include early alert interventions, orientations, summer bridge programs, and learning communities often center strategies geared toward helping students with the internal factors (Hagedorn & Kuznetsova, 2016; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Lehman & Conceição, 2013; Robichaud, 2010; Rovai, 2003; Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Internal factors can extend to student's study habits, access to resources, the relevance of their major, life stressors, or satisfaction (Berjot & Gillet, 2011; Mukherjee et al., 2017; Rovai, 2003; Strayhorn, 2011). While institutions attempt to address many factors linked to persistence, some aspects are not as easy to address as campuses have limited influence in some areas of the student's life.

External factors describe aspects of the student's life that institutions have less influence (Rovai, 2003). These factors often relate to many nontraditional community college students' responsibilities (Aljohani, 2016). These responsibilities may include jobs, taking care of family members or children, or socioeconomic status (Mukherjee et al., 2017; Robichaud, 2010; Rovai & Downey, 2010; Tannock & Flocks, 2003; Troester-Trate, 2019). Students who have multiple responsibilities are often motivated by these factors, but these same factors can cause barriers to course completion or persistence (Travers, 2016; Troester-Trate, 2019). External factors can also include sudden life circumstances such as a loss of childcare, homelessness, changes in employment status, or, a most recent example, the COVID-19 global pandemic (Guth, 2020; Troester-Trate,

2019). These sudden life circumstances can also impact persistence (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Kelderman, 2020). External factors can also be positive, such as students being motivated to pursue their education by family or friends or being motivated by the desire for a better circumstance for their children (Bergman et al., 2014, Donnelly & Kovacich, 2014). While external factors are often not controlled by institutions, these are important considerations when supporting students in their persistence because they can be equally, if not more, impacted by these factors (Bergman et al., 2014).

### ***Limitations of Persistence Models***

While Rovai's persistence model does expand two significant persistence models from Tinto and Bean and Metzner, no persistence model can fully encapsulate every student (Aljohani, 2016). Throughout history, persistence models have excluded populations of students, particularly marginalized students (Aljohani, 2016). Community colleges are a diverse population of students of many backgrounds and serve a large population of marginalized students who may not fit perfectly into any particular model based on many different aspects of their lives (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). For example, Black students at urban community colleges deal with additional barriers such as discrimination, racial inequities, and color-blind racism (White & Dache, 2020). This omission of these barriers reflects the issues as mentioned earlier presented around a lack of research of populations such as community college students, nontraditional students, and Black community college online students specifically (Iloh & Toidson, 2013; Strohl, 2018). While there are well-studied persistence models, the limitations in their scope

require investigating the needs of Black students and explaining their persistence to include the impact of race (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015).

### **Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

Critical race theory (CRT) views issues through existing relevant social constructs (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). CRT, birthed from the 1960s but popularized in the 1990s, sought to identify paths to systemic change proceeding progress made during the civil rights movement and combat the inferiority paradigm (Tate, 1997). The inferiority paradigm describes the belief that people of color, specifically Black and Latino people, were inferior to White people, positioning White men, women, children, and communities as the standard and ideal group (Gordan & Gordan, 2006; Tate, 1997). This paradigm for centuries has created the guidelines dictating approaches to laws and our social institutions. CRT suggests that racism plays a significant role in how larger social institutions impact Black, Latinx, and other communities of color (Tate, 1997). Hiraldo (2010) underscores that a critique within CRT scholarship is that actions around diversity and inclusion can unintentionally encourage ignoring race or colorblindness (Hiraldo, 2010). CRT is grounded in five key tenants that include racism is omnipresent rather than a rare occurrence, amplifying views of marginalized people with an emphasis on oral stories, countering objectivity and color blindness, commitment to social justice and change, and the importance of intersectionality to gain a holistic perspective (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Howard & Navarro, 2016).

### **Critical Race Theory in Education**

Institutional racism describes discrimination against a group of people based on their color, origin, or culture through policies, laws, attitudes, and behaviors (Dixson et

al., 2012). CRT within education exposes how institutional racism itself plays a significant role in the barriers Black students face in thriving in higher education. According to Ledesma and Calderon (2015), many college campuses, due to America's history of racism, have created campuses that are often centered on Whiteness and do not have the innate tools to support non-White students, specifically Black students (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). The disparities within education continue to exist despite the increased population of marginalized groups enrolling in college, including Black students (Howard & Navarro, 2016). Many students of color, particularly Black students, continue not to perform academically at the same rate as White students and are punished in school at a much higher rate (Howard & Navarro, 2016; Skiba, 2015). This centering on Whiteness impacts students' support on campus and Black faculty and administration who face challenges in excelling in the educational environment (Hiraldo, 2010). These significant effects begin in the K-12 education and span to post-secondary educational environments, including on-campus and virtual such as online learning (Wladis et al., 2015).

### ***Existence of Racism***

The Brown vs. Board of Education's historic verdict in 1954 espouses to be the beginning of equality within education for all races (Skiba, 2015). However, while the verdict created progress in that all students can learn together, it did not address the historical racism throughout American history (Douglass-Horsford, 2011; Skiba, 2015). Students were affected, and Black educators found themselves replaced by White educators after desegregation no longer secured Black educators' jobs (Delpit, 2012; Douglas-Horsford, 2011). This exodus of Black educators was the beginning of what

Howard & Navarro (2016) describe as a growing lack of racial and cultural knowledge among educators and Black students (Howard & Navarro, 2016).

CRT does not argue the existence of racism but instead suggests that because racism is throughout American history, it has an undeniable influence within the education system (Dixson et al., 2012). Racism has a detrimental impact on a student's view of education and how they view themselves and can experience as early as age six (Hope et al., 2015). Racism in education reveals itself in discriminatory practices. These practices can include harsher discipline for Black students, lower academic expectations, lack of positive attention to diversity and race, negative interactions with teachers, lack of culturally competent faculty, and a curriculum that is oblivious to relevant issues around race and differences (Hope et al., 2015; Skiba, 2015). These practices reflect a disconnect in education between students and families, and educators and extend beyond race and cultural background to class and socioeconomic status (Gamoran, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2005).

### ***Views of the Marginalized***

Schools in the United States at all levels are becoming more diverse in many ways, including race (Santamaria, 2014). While the student population grows in diversity, the educators within schools have become less diverse over time and continue to have a curriculum mostly centered on Whiteness (Capper, 2015; Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2005). This shift means that marginalized groups are less likely to be heard, acknowledged, and considered. This lack of visibility assists in viewing these groups from a deficit perspective that impacts students and educators of the same race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

CRT emphasizes the necessity of counter stories (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Counter stories place the experiences of those marginalized at the center of inquiry, providing a juxtaposition to the narrative that aligns with privilege (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In this instance, this would include White students, families, educators, and administrators. Herndon and Hirt (2004) discuss that much of the existing educational research focuses on White students and generalizes results to represent all students' experiences (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Counter stories from marginalized students and educators not only provide benefits for those groups but provides information that can benefit all students and educators (Capper, 2015). The value of marginalized students' experiences provides the awareness needed to address oppression and work towards diversity and inclusion; moving from espoused policy to active practice campus-wide (Gurung & Prieto, 2009; Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2005).

### ***Color Blindness***

Throughout recent American history, the denial of racial oppression and inequity has presented as a commitment to color blindness or a post-racial society (Hiraldo, 2010; Ledesma & Calderon, 2015; Zamudio et al., 2011). Policy and curriculum at all educational levels often lack consideration of racial differences and the variation of marginalized experiences during development and implementation (Capper, 2015; Howard & Navarro, 2016). As a result, completely ignoring the many harmful ways racism permeates our student's experience (Hiraldo, 2010). Color blindness avoids looking at systems of oppression (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015; Zamudio et al., 2011). Instead, it infers that student difficulty reflects the student's actions and behaviors without considering the impact of social ills such as racism (Zamudio et al., 2011).

When educational policies and practices invest in colorblindness, it further invests in valuing Whiteness and making this the center, placing anyone non-White on the fringe (Zamudio et al., 2011). Colorblindness is impossible due to our natural biases, both conscious and unconscious, and at best helps to maintain inequity rather than dismantling it (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015; Zamudio et al., 2011). Within education, this can mean programs that address inequity framed as unnecessary given the racial progress made, particularly programs to help to desegregate schools or programs for students whose English is their second language do not receive support (Zamudio et al., 2011). Specifically, on college campuses, color blindness allows for less blatant acts of racism to go unacknowledged (Yosso et al., 2009). In addition, institutions recruit students of color as a commitment to diversity while lacking targeted resources to support their success and treating them as secondary within the campus community (Yosso et al., 2009).

### ***Social Justice***

CRT suggests that systems of oppression and efforts to dismantle them must be at the center of reimagining education to address racial disparities and support student success (Howard & Navarro, 2016). The social justice tenant of CRT supports irradicating racism and addressing sexism and poverty while empowering those who are marginalized (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Capper (2015) emphasizes that educators' social justice work must be continuous and will require challenging their personal and professional beliefs, values, and behaviors (Capper, 2015). To engage in social justice work means a combination of reflection, research, and practice. In practice, social justice approach policies and programs under an equity lens and within the classroom when engaging with students (Hope et al., 2015). Within education, a commitment to social

justice may include raising student standards, teaching civic engagement, providing more inclusive spaces, and creating student assignments around community engagement and social justice (Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Bailey & Smith-Jaggers, 2016).

### ***Intersectionality***

No marginalized group functions as a monolith. Within one marginalized group, there are many differences. These differences can include a plethora of characteristics such as culture, gender, socioeconomic status, class, or sexual orientation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Individuals can identify as the same race, but these factors can create a wide variety of unique experiences (Zamudio et al., 2011). Intersectionality describes the notion that no one has one single identity but simultaneously holds multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2014). Even when students are experiencing the same event, there are differences in perceptions and impact due to these intersections of identity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT emphasizes the importance of intersectionality to honor those unique experiences that derive when identities intersect in response specifically to racism, oppression, and inequity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2014; Zamudio et al., 2011). Incorporating intersectionality allows a more in-depth analysis of an individual experience and reveals insight into the social identity groups that individual holds and society at large (Mitchell et al., 2014).

Many college campuses promote supporting students with a holistic approach considering every student's aspect to address their needs (Mitchell et al., 2014).

Institutions have a vital responsibility to incorporate intersectionality to understand marginalized students' experiences better and dismantle oppressive and inequitable



policies and practices (Duran & Jones, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2014). Incorporating identity intersections allows institutions to expand the dominant campus culture to be inclusive of everyone instead of forcing students to assimilate to a narrow dominant culture or be excluded from it (Duran & Jones, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2014).

### **Connecting Composite Persistence Model with Critical Race Theory**

Multiple conceptual frameworks are beneficial and necessary to fully encapsulate students' experiences who identify as Black, attend a community college, and enroll in online courses. Utilizing the composite persistence model and critical race theory provides an expanded view that incorporates a student's entire state of being from a personal level to a broader community level within society. In college, persistence among Black students has remained lower when compared to other student groups (Bergman et al., 2014). Though there is literature that discusses Black community college online student persistence compared to other groups, little research centers on Black online student experiences to further investigate their persistence (Iloh & Toidson, 2013). More recent literature discusses gaps that continue to exist, and popular practices often center on white middle-class students (Iloh, 2019; Berry, 2021).

The composite persistence model provides four persistence factors for nontraditional students: student skills, student characteristics, external factors, and internal factors (Rovai, 2003). Unlike other persistence models, the composite persistence model also incorporates online learning, particularly how these factors impact persistence in online courses. Critical race theory helps us understand how a Black person's experience in society can affect them daily in all areas of life (Tate, 1997). From an educational standpoint, critical race theory helps to reveal inequities in many essential

areas that impact student success and retention (George, 2021). Combining these two conceptual frameworks allows us to understand student persistence and how issues around race within society can challenge the persistence of Black students.

Understanding student culture, educational needs, and demographics are necessary for understanding student persistence and providing beneficial programs to address persistence (Rovai & Downey, 2010). These conceptual frameworks complement one another, placing Black students at the center to tell what they are experiencing and using those experiences to better understand their perception of the educational space.

### **Pandemic Impact**

Dittbenner (2009) discussed the importance of pandemic planning over a decade ago, describing an occurrence of a global pandemic as inescapable (Dittbenner, 2009). Since the beginning of 2020, the world has endured a global pandemic with the rapid spread of a coronavirus called Covid-19 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Online learning has been at the forefront of conversations at every educational level. Institutions abruptly closed to stop the spread of the contagious disease (Mukhtar et al., 2020). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) advised campus leaders that the lowest risk of spread was to provide all campus activity online only (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). As a result, college campuses nationwide had to urgently develop a plan to convert current and future courses and resources online (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Due to an abrupt closure, some students struggled to adjust to online learning and ended up withdrawing from courses during the semester (Juszkiewicz, 2020). The pandemic also impacted the economy and caused a ripple effect impacting jobs, childcare, healthcare, housing security, and food security (Kelderman, 2020; Troester-Trate, 2019).

Despite the interest in online learning, higher education has faced decreasing college enrollment compared to last year (Dennis, 2020; Kelderman, 2020; National Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020). Among those who have suffered the most this decline in student enrollment are community colleges (National Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020). The decrease in enrollment at community colleges projects to be over 10% (Dennis, 2020; Kelderman, 2020). Some argue that the decrease in enrollment is rooted in the previously mentioned ripple effects, making school less of a priority for many students (Dietrich et al., 2020; Kelderman, 2020; Whissemore, 2020).

Institutions already invested in platforms such as learning management systems may have encountered fewer barriers in converting, as these platforms provide much of the technology needed for online courses (Whissemore, 2020). However, obtaining access to the internet and the computer equipment needed became a challenge for many students (Kelderman, 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020). While prepared to continue courses, some students had no way of completing them because they no longer had access to the campus WIFI network or campus computers (Dietrich et al., 2020). The pandemic has reconfirmed many of the existing inequities that community college students face and that those inequities are now more complicated when students are also attempting to learn online (Dietrich et al., 2020; Whissemore, 2020). Gurukkal (2020) predicts that the pandemic and push for online learning will spark new conversations and reimagining the college campus and classroom worldwide (Dietrich et al., 2020; Gurukkal, 2020).

## Chapter Summary

Community colleges have had a long-standing history of opening educational opportunities for many. Community colleges have had to serve a diverse population of students with limited resources. Students fit a wide variety of categories from veterans, parents, marginalized students, underserved populations to nontraditional students. Historically, Black students remained excluded from these spaces until the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s, resulting in community colleges' largest enrollments in urban areas. Community college students and Black students face a series of challenges that impede their college success. However, some proven methods include establishing a sense of community and skill development has been key to helping Black community college students do well.

Limited resources have required community colleges to find ways to mitigate costs while providing quality learning experiences. Having to strike this balance, community colleges have been early adopters and large proponents of online learning. While distance education has been a long-standing format in education, online learning has steadily risen in popularity even though overall community college enrollment has decreased. With the increased use of technology, there has been an expansion of online courses as they permit large class sizes without being confined to a physical space. Online courses also provide community college students, many of whom work or have other responsibilities flexibility in when and where they complete their work. While there are some benefits, there is a performance gap in online students having a decreased percentage of persistence and retention in courses. These gaps are especially prevalent among

gatekeeper courses and developmental education courses, central to community college course offerings because many students come unprepared for college-level coursework.

Research on community college student online experience is not robust, specifically Black community college students' experiences. Many Black community college students' first encounter with college is in a developmental education course in English or math. From the lens of CRT, institutional barriers hinder access and opportunity for Black community college students starting from primary school, resulting in a residual impact on their post-secondary success on campus and online learning environment. CPM provides a lens that allows us to look at the multiple factors that impact persistence in specifically online spaces. Performance in the online learning environment has increased relevance as we are amid a global pandemic that has placed online learning at the forefront, providing educational access to students at every level. Online learning has been viewed as a solution to keep students learning and assure the public's health and safety. While this has addressed the availability of a learning environment, it has exposed many structural and institutional level concerns around equity and access and how a lack of both impact student experience and performance.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

Community colleges provide additional educational opportunities to students who may not otherwise have access to a plethora of education options (Bush & Bush, 2004). Since establishing the first community college, its purpose has shifted and changed but maintained the general vision of providing open access education (Bush & Bush, 2004; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Powers & Schloss, 2017). These institutions continuously operate with decreasing state and federal funding and demand to lower operational costs (Calhoun et al., 2017). With fewer resources, community colleges cannot spend as much per student as four-year colleges and universities (Felix & Castro, 2018). Over the past twenty years, a popular cost-saving method has been to increase the number of online courses (Norris, 2014). Online courses provide institutions with an opportunity to save money and an opportunity to expand their educational reach to more students (Norris, 2014). The online course format appeals to working students or students who may not have ready access or time to take courses on campus (Travers, 2016).

Providing online courses at its surface seems an option that offers positive outcomes for all involved. However, student success rates are not consistent with students attending on-campus courses (Xu & Jagers, 2013). Community college students often chose online classes due to outside factors and not readiness or preparedness to do well online (Capra, 2014; Liao et al., 2014; Travers, 2016). As online course offerings continue to rise, support for student success in these courses varies by the institution, with some only providing an initial orientation at the start of the semester (Robichaud, 2010).

Gatekeeper courses in English and math areas yield lower performance than students taking courses on campus and online (Xu & Jagers, 2011). Black students are among the lowest-performing students compared to other student populations (Xu & Jagers, 2014).

Black student enrollment in community colleges has increased steadily over the past 30 years (AACC, 2016). Black community college students make up 13% of all community college students and are 42% of the total number of Black students in college (AACC, 2020). Black students have the least student success in online courses (Xu & Jagers, 2014). Black community college students face many of the same barriers as other community college students. These barriers can include unpreparedness for college and nonacademic factors that can hinder their success (Beach, 2011; Bentley-Edwards et al., 2016; Dache-Gerbino & White, 2016). As online course offerings rise at community colleges, researching Black student experiences is a significant opportunity to gain insight into how institutions could better support and accommodate students. This chapter focuses on the methodology of the study.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions reflect the study's purpose and the researcher's goals (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). My research questions meet my goals of identifying key themes in the Black community college student experience as they take an online course for the first time. The research questions explore how they initially felt at the beginning of their online course, identifying any nonacademic influences and the student's perception of them, and lastly, identifying any campus-related supports that the student found helpful during their online experience. These questions are worth exploring as there is a need for

more research on Black community college students, nontraditional, and community college students learning online (Iloh, 2019; Iloh & Toidson, 2013; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Some of the existing research on Black students frame their experience and barriers from a deficit perspective (Anzul et al., 2001). Rios-Aguilar (2015) points out that data that lacks a critical perspective can unintentionally reinforce existing inequities (Rios-Aguilar, 2015). As my conceptual framework critical race theory encourages, the research questions attempt to avoid framing Black students from a deficit perspective but instead focus on their perceptions of their success and challenges (Howard & Navarro, 2018).

The research questions in this study are:

1. In one urban community college, what are Black community college students' experiences taking their first online course?
2. As a first-time online student, what are some of the initial beliefs, they have about their online learning experience?
3. According to students, what environmental factors shape Black students' experience taking online courses for the first time at urban community colleges?
4. According to students, what on-campus supports contribute to student success in online courses?

## **Purpose**

The purpose illustrates the study's perceived goal, including critical areas of inquiry and guiding frameworks (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This study explores Black students' experiences at an urban community college, taking an online course for the first time. The



study's goal is to gain insight into how campuses that serve Black students can better support them when they participate in online learning. The guiding conceptual framework for this study combines critical race theory (CRT) and composite persistence model (CPM). Using the CRT and CPM frameworks enhances the purpose of looking at how Black students' individual experiences can reveal larger themes around race and oppression within education systems and more specifically the online learning space that can impede persistence. This study focuses on the Black student experiences taking a gatekeeper developmental English course over a semester. I selected this course because it is a required course for all students who, based on placement testing, are determined to be, to some degree, underprepared for college-level work. This course requires completion for students to reach upper-level foundational courses. The developmental English course is also a predictor of future success in other courses (Allen et al., 2017).

### **Research Design**

My inquiry focuses on understanding Black community college students' experiences taking online gatekeeper English courses online for the first time, therefore warranting the use of a qualitative research design. Investigating happenings and phenomena in the world is the central objective of qualitative research (Stake, 1995). These happenings provide reality through the individual lens (Merriam, 1998). For this qualitative study, the research design that would be most appropriate would be a case study research design.

A case study describes an in-depth inquiry of unique experiences (Merriam, 1998). Rossman & Rallis (2017) discuss case study research as approaching inquiry to provide full details of what is happening within the case to understand and draw implications and assumptions (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). The case can describe a person, group, program,

or institution (Stake, 1995). This study documents a unique student experience specific to one institution and in only one course subject. This study occurs during a unique period in history as we are currently amid a global pandemic that has made enrollment in courses offered online only. These factors cultivate a unique experience and using a single case study research approach is most appropriate.

Case studies are an intensive approach to research, meaning that the research goal is to gain a perspective on a small group of participants who have a unique experience (Swanborn, 2018). The participating students embarked on a new course in a new format. They bring to the new environment insight as they adjusted to course work and the online learning experience while they navigated the college system. There are few studies that focus on Black community college students' online experiences despite being one of the lowest-performing online student populations (Iloh & Toidson, 2013). A case study on Black community college students taking an online gatekeeper English course for the first time is appropriate because this study allows further insight into their shared experiences.

### **Unit of Analysis**

Determining the unit of analysis is a critical step in determining a qualitative research approach. Yin (2015) emphasizes that the unit of analysis uses the study's purpose to determine its focal point (Rosman & Rallis, 2017; Yin, 2015). Merriam (1998) frames the unit of analysis as the center of the case itself or the outcome sought by the researcher (Merriam, 1998). This study's unit of analysis is Black community college students' shared experiences throughout their enrollment in an online English course. Based on Creswell (2007), a case study has a unit of analysis that typically is an event, program, activity, or group of individuals sharing a common experience (Creswell,

2007). In this study, the shared event is that each participant took the course online at the same community college during the same semester.

### **Participants and Sampling**

The sampling strategy used is purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling describes sampling based on an intentional search for the best group of participants to address the study's purpose and research questions (Merriam, 1998). Purposeful sampling helps generalize the study to a larger sample population, and establishes external validity (Merriam, 1998; Schreier, 2018). The goal is to create a sample size that is large enough where saturation can occur; therefore, participants selected must meet the criteria that afford the most useful data that can be collected (Cleary et al., 2012). This study included 14 Black community college students. This total is beyond the number of participants needed for saturation, 12 participants (Schreier, 2018).

There are several purposeful sampling strategies used in qualitative research. Criterion sampling selects participants based on a set criterion to gather data that best answer the research questions as their common traits provide the most insight into a collective experience (Merriam, 1998). For this study, I searched student admissions and enrollment profiles to find students meeting the following criteria.

- The student identified as African American or Black.
- The student must be enrolled in one of the two developmental English courses described as English 098/101 or English 098/099.
- The student took the courses in an asynchronous online course format
- This was the student's first time taking an asynchronous online course

## **Setting**

A case study is a bounded system that includes parts that create an intricate and unique macrocosm (Stake, 1995). This study occurred at a public community college located in the United States' northeastern region within a large metropolitan area. The college was established in 1965 and is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. Enrollment consists of 15,996 students, 70% of whom attend part-time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Student enrollment comprises 43% of students who identify as Black. The community college offers 25 Associate of Arts, 5 Associate in Science, and 26 Associate in Applied Science degrees. The college also offers four academic certificates and 43 proficiency certificates. The college offers courses on campus, online, and in hybrid course formats. The current student to faculty ratio is 18:1. This public community college receives funding from student tuition, state funding, and city funding. Over the years, funding from the state and city has decreased, resulting in pressure to raise student tuition.

## **Data Collection**

Within a case study research design, data collection must be planned and can utilize various techniques (Stake, 1995). Semi-structured interviews are the most appropriate data technique for case studies as they allow structure and flexibility for participants and researchers (Merriam, 1998). Accompanying interview techniques, collecting documents can complement the meaning gathered during interviews (Stake, 1995). This study gathered data using semi-structured interviews and document collection to address the research questions previously shared.

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

Interviews in a qualitative study provide the researcher with the opportunity to interact directly with participants to gain their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions on a particular experience in their own words (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility and consistency for the researcher allowing questions to remain open-ended to gather participant interpretations (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). I conducted one interview with each participant. The goal was to gather a rich, thick description of the participants' experiences. The rich, thick description describes a detailed account of the participant's real-world experience (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998).

Each interview in this study ranged from 60–90 minutes. I utilized web conferencing software to conduct the interviews. The time length was selected to allow time for any technical issues on either end that may arise with enough time to ask questions from my interview protocol. The interview protocol consists of 11 questions that guide each interview. The interview protocol can be found in appendix A.

### ***Conducting Online Research***

This case study design utilized internet-based tools throughout the study. Due to the Covid-19 guidelines, it was in the best interest of the participants' physical health to avoid person-to-person contact; therefore, web conferencing is the best alternative to an in-person interview (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Interviews were recorded with the participant's permission. An example of the video recording consent form can be found in appendix D. Online interviewing affords a convenient and more comfortable environment for participants to choose the interview location (Gruber et al., 2008; Lo Iancono et al., 2016). Conducting the interview using web conferencing

software expanded participant recruitment because participants did not have to travel to campus.

Web conferencing took place using Zoom. Zoom is a web video conferencing software that allows virtual meetings utilizing the internet and is accessible on a computer, laptop, tablet, or smartphone (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2012). Zoom requires a stable internet connection and minimal familiarity with the technology; however, it can function with ease for interviews (Archibald et al., 2019). In this study, each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were kept electronically in a password-protected folder with the corresponding interview recording and researcher notes.

### ***Document Collection***

Collecting documents allows the researcher to find further depth in the participants' experience (Merriam, 1998). Collecting documents also aids the study by confirming the data gathered from participant interviews; this confirmation process is methodological triangulation (Stake, 1995). Documents can provide insight into key themes, symbolism, or language associated with the participant experience (Latham, 2014). Documents can also reflect inconspicuous shared values and social norms that influence participants' experiences both from an individual perspective and a shared perspective (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

This study collected documents associated with each participant's online experience taking the online developmental English courses. The document protocol can be found in appendix B. The documents included student profile information and course documents. The student profile information allowed me to gather data on the students'

course load, age, the number of semesters attended, and English level placement. Course documents collected consisted of the course syllabus, course communications from the course professor, and course materials and assignments that students found significant. Though participants were in the same course with a shared syllabus, experiences may vary among different sections taught by different professors.

### ***Participant Recruitment***

An essential aspect of a research design is a plan of participant recruitment. While there is no guaranteed recruitment method, this process should identify as much as possible a large population to recruit from by looking at available records that could identify those who meet the profile of participants wanted for the study (Newington & Metcalfe, 2014). My participant recruitment strategy included developing a list of students who meet my sampling criteria based on student data records. I obtained these records with the assistance of the campus records office. All students who met my criteria received an initial introduction email. This was followed up by a phone call directly to the student to ask if they would be interested in participating in the study.

The email sent to students included a recruitment flyer with the study's purpose, participant criteria, and expectations of their participation in the study. A copy of the recruitment flyer sent to students can be found in appendix E. This information was also discussed during the phone call with the student prior to their agreement to participate. As an incentive, after completing the interviews and providing requested documents, each participant in the study received a ten-dollar gift card toward a store of their choosing from a list of available shops where I could send gift cards by email.

## **Data Analysis**

The goal of data analysis is to find key themes or patterns that adds new perspectives of a phenomenon (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Every aspect of the study impacts the data analysis, such as the purpose, research questions, conceptual frameworks, and the research design (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). In its simplest form, data analysis takes all the information gathered and organizes it to prioritize essential information that helps provide new, conflicting, or consistent insight to add to current research literature (Swanborn, 2018). Within a case study research design, the data analysis process is emergent, meaning that it continuously evolves, and changes based on the researcher's findings (Merriam, 1998). This study utilized strategies aligning with the thematic analysis of transcripts from interviews and documents. Thematic analysis is coding based on the meaning behind the words shared in the interview to look for common themes that may be unambiguous or tacit (Guest et al., 2014). In thematic analysis, codes may range from one word to a series of words (Saldaña, 2016).

## ***Document Analysis***

Though interview transcripts were at the center of my analysis, document analysis includes additional data that help the researcher understand participant experience (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Documents gathered were analyzed throughout the interview process. In a case study, researcher documents are analyzed similar to interviews using thematic analysis (Stake, 1995; Bowen 2009). Documents collected included the course syllabus, course documents and assignments, and outreach communication that students have received and reviewed. I asked the participants to provide the documents they found significant to their experience.



## **Coding**

Understanding the data gathered requires approaching data analysis in an organized way. Coding allows for data to stay organized and categorized so that a researcher may begin to look for patterns and gain a deeper understanding of what the data reveals (Merriam, 1998). The tool I used to organize the codes is computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Computer-assisted data analysis software helps organize and keep track of codes during analysis and coding cycles to identify relevant themes (Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2016). The CAQDAS used is a software called Dedoose. The Dedoose software allowed me to analyze transcripts and documents with the ease of keeping all my materials and codes in the same place (Dedoose, 2018).

Codes can be based on categories identified during the data collection process or based on previous literature on the topic (Merriam, 1998). Initial codes are descriptive and specific and develop into broad themes through a cyclic process (Saldaña, 2016). The coding of data typically goes through at least two coding cycles guided by the researcher's conceptual framework (Saldaña, 2016).

### ***First Cycle Coding***

First cycle coding occurs at the initial gathering of data (Saldaña, 2016). During this time, coding attempts to break down extensive transcripts into short words or phrases to identify patterns (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). In vivo coding describes using the participants' words as codes to organize the data (King, 2008). In vivo enables the researcher to capture any common language that may give more insight into the participants' experience including campus culture, larger geographical location, or cultural background (Saldaña, 2016). Using the transcript, in vivo coding took place

using Dedoose software after each interview. Examples of in-vivo coding for this study are in appendix G.

### ***Second Cycle Coding***

The second cycle of coding allows the data to be analyzed again to discover new ways to organize to create possible themes (Saldaña, 2016). During this time, codes may be eliminated, combined, or rephrased (Saldaña, 2016). The second cycle method used was pattern coding. Pattern coding reanalyzes the data paying close attention to not only the process of combining codes but also looking at how those codes reflect intersections of larger social constructs or conceptual frameworks (Saldaña, 2016). During this process, I reflected on my conceptual frameworks, critical race theory (CRT) and composite persistence model (CPM) and developed common themes that reveal connections among the participant responses. Examples of pattern coding for this study are in appendix G.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Case study research allows the researcher to take on many roles. These roles may range from teacher, advocate, evaluator, biographer, or interpreter (Stake, 1995). Through the research process, the researcher may play one or more roles simultaneously, yet always, they are central to the case study (Stake, 1995). Case study research does not allow the researcher to be a passive member of the process as they are the main instrument (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher brings their own beliefs and is impacted by their research, which should be acknowledged and reflected continually (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). It is vital that the researcher remain cognizant of their thoughts and

feelings and how their own experience can impact their interpretations throughout the study (Merriam, 1998).

When I was an undergraduate student, I recall encountering my first online course during my senior year. Despite it being my last semester of college, I found it incredibly challenging to self-navigate the course. It was hard to balance as I worked multiple jobs to gain experience and explore my career paths of interest. As I reflect on this experience, I remember being drawn to an online course mainly because it better fit my life at the time. It afforded me fewer days of commuting to my college about 45 minutes away, money saved from paying for parking on campus, and flexibility to fit my schoolwork in between my multiple jobs. Though I was well acclimated by this time to the college environment, I recall feeling somewhat lost embarking on a new format with less structure than I had experienced. Almost 12 years later, online learning is now a part of many students' daily academic experiences. Many students like me often choose online courses based on other competing responsibilities such as work and family. As a community college counselor, I encounter students daily that, due to circumstances, find online courses appealing and a practical path towards their educational goals. I became interested in this topic as it aligns with two areas of interest, technology, and education.

While conducting a pilot on our department's online counseling services, I learned a lot about the performance gap between online and on-campus courses. As we introduced this new feature to students, many were very happy to have someone they could connect with without physically coming to campus. This service debuted only five years ago but is now a staple in the services that we provide in our department today and has only been expanded due to Covid-19. This experience made it clear that online

students, while not physically present on campus, still see having a connection to campus as a part of their success. As a counselor, I have seen students fall in jeopardy of losing critical financial aid funding due to poor online course performance. Some even partaking in a cycle of retaking the same courses at their own expense in an online format and not finding success.

In my own experience as a Black student, I found adjusting to college more difficult than I initially thought it would be. I had done well in high school, so I was surprised to struggle as I adjusted to college. I was hesitant to ask for help or get involved, which, as I reflect, hindered my student experience. As a Black educator, I often see this among community college students. Black students struggle with adjusting to college and while the campus has a plethora of resources, there is often a hesitation to ask for help. Many college students are often coming to college more unprepared and with other outside factors that impact them. These factors can range from family and work obligations to battling with socioeconomic barriers such as lack of technology, poverty, food insecurity, and housing insecurity. While students vary in circumstance, these factors can hinder student success especially in an online learning environment. Black students continue to be a large group that attends community colleges and are least likely to perform well in online courses. These experiences piqued my interest in this topic and this student population. Their experiences can offer an expanded perspective on online learning and student success.

### **Importance of Rigor**

All qualitative research must uphold a research rigor that ensures quality and veracity (Trainor & Graue, 2014). Validity and reliability are essential aspects of rigor, and tactics

to address them may vary based on the research design (Toma, 2011). The researcher is the key to interpretation and gaining insight into a distinctive experience (Stake, 1995). Specifically, within a case study, rigor is dependent on how the researcher communicates with participants and intentionally incorporates methods that assist with validity and reliability (Merriam, 1998).

### **Validity**

Validity in qualitative research confirms the findings can be considered credible (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Validity should be maintained both externally and internally. Internal validity describes the degree to which the study mirrors reality and measures what the study seeks to measure (Merriam, 1998). In contrast, external validity speaks to the findings' ability to be generalized outside of the group of participants within the study (Merriam, 1998; Toma, 2011). Four methods were used to address external and internal validity: purposeful sampling, member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation.

### ***Purposeful Sampling***

Purposeful sampling assists with maintaining external validity and generalizing among similar populations (Patton, 2002). Stake (1995) emphasizes that generalizability relative to the experience to many is not the goal. Instead, the goal is to gain a thorough understanding of the case and find themes that can be generalized among those with this unique experience (Stake, 1995). In this study, I utilized criterion sampling. I established a criterion that included students who identify as Black or African American, take an 098/099 or 098/101 level English course, and take this course online for the first time. The benefit of criterion sampling is that it allows the researcher to create a standardized

sample that helps focus on their various perspectives on a collective experience (Schreier, 2018).

### ***Member Checking***

Member checking allows the participants to inform the researcher that their interpretation of the participant's experience is accurate (Stake, 1995). Member checks include key patterns or themes found throughout the data and provides an informal written report to participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study utilized member checking to ensure that the themes that emerge reflect participants' actual experiences. Member checks were sent to each participant via email sharing the six major themes. One participant responded and gave feedback and referenced two themes that really resonated with them.

### ***Peer Debriefing***

Peer debriefing is a process by which a colleague who is familiar with the study assists the researcher in confirming their interpretation of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is done by asking a series of questions that challenge the researcher's process, intentions, and interpretations (Creswell, 2009). Studies that involve intersectionality among participants benefit from debriefing with fellow researchers who identify differently as it can broaden the perspective and interpretation of data (Duran & Jones, 2019). The benefit of peer debriefing contributes to the researcher's commitment to rigor and validity. Within this study, peer debriefing sessions included discussion throughout the coding process with the principal investigator of the study.

### ***Triangulation***

The document collection and analysis previously discussed also assisted with triangulation. Triangulation describes multiple data sources' utilization to get a copious understanding of the participants' shared experience (Carter et al., 2014). This method is beneficial in case studies as it allows the researcher to understand what is happening within the case (Merriam, 1998). If themes are consistent throughout multiple data sources, the data is valid (Merriam, 1998). The additional data source was taken from documents provided by the participants. These documents include the course syllabus, course assignments, and communication outreach from the professor that students found significant.

### **Reliability**

Reliability in a study is the researcher's ability to show consistency within findings to the point where replication can occur (DeCuir- Gunby et al., 2011). Merriam (1998) underscores that reliability in a case study and qualitative research, in general, is a difficult area because participant experiences include many factors that can impact their experience from one instance to another (Merriam, 1998). Rather than expecting exact results if duplicated, reliability in a qualitative study emphasizes that results should make sense, mirror the data collected, and be dependable (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). Reliability can be accomplished through triangulation as previously discussed and recording and transcribing interviews (Creswell, 2007). Each interview was recorded with the permission of the participant and later transcribed.

## **Confidentiality and Informed Consent**

Confidentiality is vital to protect participants' identities within the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Maintaining confidentiality includes protecting the identity of those outside the research study and within the participant group (Rossman & Rallis, 2017) Informed consent describes the process of confirming that participants understand the purpose of the research, risks, if any, benefits, and ensure they are participants of their own free will (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Before the interview and submission of documents, all participants signed an agreement that detailed the terms of confidentiality and informed consent. A copy of the consent form can be found in appendix C.

This study requires informed consent to include information about Zoom, the web conferencing software used. This software contains end-to-end encryption and the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) compliance to maintain confidentiality (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2020). Interviews were password protected for each interview, thereby allowing access only by the participant intended for the interview (Zoom Video Communications Inc, 2020). Informed consent was only accessible through the student's school email so that it could only be accessed through their password-protected student account.

## **Limitations**

The limitation of the case study design is the ability to generalize findings to a larger population (Merriam, 1998). This study focused on Black students' unique experience taking an online English course for the first time at a community college located in an urban area. While the findings may have some commonalities, they may not be generalizable for other racial groups, courses delivered in different formats, different



course content areas, or a community college located in a different location. In addition, this study may not be generalizable to students attending four-year universities or technical schools.

Another limitation is the current COVID-19 pandemic that has forced students to participate in online learning. As a result of students not choosing to take an on-campus course, this could impact how students feel about online learning and reveal limitations to campus resources that they are physically unable to access. Some students may lack resources or may have preferred in-person interaction that they currently are unable to receive while attending online (Mukhtar et al., 2020). This unforeseen circumstance could limit my findings further as this case study takes place during a unique time in our recent history.

### **Delimitations**

Both Merriam (1998) and Stake (1995) discuss the importance of the decisions of the researcher in how they conduct a case study as they are fulfilling the role as the central research instrument (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). It is crucial that each decision within the research design has a rationale and is in the participants' best interest. Maintaining trustworthiness, ethical considerations, informed consent, validity, and reliability are key components in conducting research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Stake, 1995).

Participants were selected based on a set criterion that includes community college students who identify as Black or African American and enrolled in at least one online English developmental gatekeeper course. Participants must also be taking the courses for the first time online. Criterion sampling or purposeful sampling uses the information to

find the best sample participants (Merriam, 1998). This sampling method is appropriate for this study. I accessed student records to identify students who meet this criterion across all English developmental courses in session during the semester.

Conducting interviews with participants is a process that should be rooted in respect and equal relationship (Sandvik & McCormack, 2018). Due to the global pandemic and social distancing guidelines, I conducted my interviews remotely utilizing web conferencing software to maintain a safe environment for myself and participants. Conducting online interviews allow participants to be in a more comfortable and convenient space of their choice (Gruber et al., 2008). This study included interview transcription, and documents that students submit from the course, such as syllabus, course assignments, and professor communications. This provided supplemental information for the analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical dilemmas are a realistic aspect of research, even when the researcher has the best intentions and has properly planned (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As a current employee of the institution where I conducted my study, I am aware that I may have contacted students previously who were a part of this study in a capacity outside of this study's purpose. I did not include any information that I may have access to outside of the information presented in this study. I did not reveal to any colleagues the students that participated in the study to protect their confidentiality if they work with other counselors to avoid a disruption of services from our office. I sought students who I have never met within my counseling role, to eliminate bias or influence based on a previous relationship with the student.

## **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this case study is to understand the experience of Black community college students taking an online English course for the first time. Previous studies on Black students at community colleges show that they have the lowest online course performance than other racial groups. Case study research designs allow the researcher to gain a detailed understanding of the complexities of this unique educational occurrence. A total of 14 students participated in the study. The study included both semi-structured interviews and document collection. Through thematic analysis by way of in vivo and pattern coding, I found themes that provide insight into each student's perceptions of their experience in the course.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

#### **Introduction**

My study aims to explore the experiences of Black students at a community college taking an online English course. Fourteen students were recruited for this study and represent a typical developmental English classroom size. I recruited these students through email and phone, and 14 students total agreed to participate. I interviewed each student and collected documents relating to their experience. These documents include reference guides, assignments, and helpful tools. I analyzed all interview transcripts and documents to find common themes among student experiences. Multiple modes of data provide the opportunity for triangulation which affords a well-rounded point of view and make results dependable (Carter et al., 2014).

This qualitative case study details the analysis of transcripts of each participant interview. All interviews took place during the Spring semester of 2021. In addition to interviews, participants included a document they found important to them. These documents could be a book, assignment, helpful tool, or guidance worksheet for students throughout the course. It is important to note this study was analyzed using thematic analysis, which focuses on the exceptionality of participant responses rather than only relying on similar responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This focus on unique stories among a shared experience allows me to interpret and aggregate the data (Stake, 1995). Chapter 4 summarizes the case, participants, and common themes and sub-themes based on the data.

## **The Case**

The community college in the northeast region of the United States is within a large metropolitan area consisting of over 1.5 million people (United States Census Bureau, 2018). The college has 15,996 students (National Center of Education Statistics, 2019). The student population consists of 43% Black, 22% white, 16% Hispanic, and 9% Asian. Regarding age distribution, 59% of students are under 24 compared to 40% of students aged 25 and older. Among the college's educational offerings are an associate of art, science, and applied science degrees in addition to over 43 proficiency certificates.

In addition to college-level courses, the college provides English as second language courses and developmental courses to assist students in improving their skills to succeed in college-level courses. These courses are in the areas of math and English. Based on their placement, they enroll at a specific level. Placement testing occurs before enrollment at the college. The English courses consist of four English as second language levels and two developmental English levels 098/099 and 098/101. These 098/099 courses provide a developmental writing course paired with a developmental reading course, while 098/101 pairs a developmental writing course with a college-level writing course. During Spring 2021, there were 10 sections of 098/099 offered and 7 sections of 098/101 over the entire 15-week semester. The capacity for each section ranged between 12 to 20 students and was in an asynchronous format.

This case was particularly unique in that classes were offered during an unforeseen global pandemic. Covid-19, a coronavirus, began during the earlier part of the previous year with the United States going into a lockdown in March 2020, causing many to work from home if possible or attend school from home. All levels of education had

the task of adjusting coursework, resources, and campus activities to a virtual format for students. Many college campuses had to provide classes online, giving students no option to participate in on-campus learning. There had not been a global pandemic in over 100 years before COVID-19. Despite this unimagined circumstance, many students still chose to begin or continue their education and enroll in courses.

### **Participants**

All participants completed at least one interview during enrollment in a developmental gatekeeper course called English 098. The course is paired with a developmental reading course, English 099, or a college-level writing course, English 101. Students enrolled in this course for the first time and participated in an asynchronous section. There were 14 total participants in this study. All participants identified as Black students and residents of the local metropolitan area. In addition, all students were within their first year of college, defined as having 30 or fewer credits. Twelve of the participants were attending their first semester of college. Two participants attended the previous semester though their participation in the class was for the first time. Seven of the participants identified as female, and 7 identified as male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 62 years of age. Ten students obtained their high school diplomas from the same metropolitan area. Two participants received their diploma from another state, one participant received his high school diploma out of the country, and one received a graduate equivalency diploma (GED). Nine participants were currently working, 3 working part-time and 6 working full-time. Five participants shared they were either retired or unemployed. Five students reported being parents.

Table 1 includes the demographics of the participating students. Each student had a pseudonym to protect their identity, and data came from interviews and student record profiles. The table includes participants' age, the number of credits enrolled at the interview, majors, and career goals. Seven participants attended school part-time, defined as less than 12 credits, while seven attended classes full time, defined as 12 credits or more.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Name	Age	Semester credits	Major	Career Interest
Alisha	37	6	Healthcare Studies	Diagnostic Medical Imaging Tech
Brian	20	12	Computer Info Systems	Robotics Developer
Carol	19	12	Healthcare Studies	Psychologist
Desiree	19	15	Criminal Justice	Lawyer
Gordon	62	12	Recovery & Transformation	Drug Abuse Counselor
Grace	19	9	Education	English Teacher
Isaiah	22	10	Computer Info Systems	Business Owner/ Computer Scientist
Jocelyn	18	10	Healthcare Studies	Nurse
Raymond	20	9	Healthcare Studies	Nurse
Rochelle	24	9	Education	Early Childhood Teacher
Samuel	31	10	Liberal Arts	Biomedical Engineer
Thomas	18	13	Cybersecurity	Game Designer/App Developer
Whitney	24	13	Healthcare Studies	Nurse
Zara	18	13	Healthcare Studies	Doctor

**Themes**

All 14 students participated in a semi-structured interview consisting of 11 interview questions. Each student shared their unique experience, which included their life as

students, employees, parents, grandparents, siblings, caregivers, community members, and many other roles they have while attending school. While each interview had its separate distinction, 8 themes emerged that were significant to their experience as Black students attending an online English course for the first time. These 6 themes are the importance of preparation, technology roadblocks while adjusting to online learning, work-life school balance, the necessity of support systems, the desire of campus community, and Black identity and sense of belonging. The following section describes these 6 themes in greater detail.

### ***Importance of Preparation***

At the start of anything new, preparation can have a significant impact on the experience (Berry, 2021). In an educational context, navigating college for the first time can present opportunities where preparation can play a crucial role in a student's success. Students expressed how they prepared for their semester and enrollment before embarking on a writing and reading-intensive course that would be online and asynchronous. The level of preparation is contingent on several factors. These factors include their educational background, previous experiences, level of technology skills, and access to sources of knowledge.

**Recent vs. Less Recent Graduates Preparation.** What was particularly interesting was how recent high school graduates prepared compared to students who had not graduated recently. In this study, recent high school graduates graduated high school less than 2 years ago and students categorized as less recent graduates graduated from high school more than 2 years ago. The preparation methods include technology preparation, content preparation, and mental preparation. In the interviews with recent



high school graduates, they expressed technology and content preparation whereas less recent high school graduates expressed mental preparation.

***Recent High School Graduates Technology and Content Preparation.*** Some students interviewed were recent high school graduates and participated in virtual learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic or were not far removed from their educational experience. Brian, who attended high school during the pandemic, shared that his preparation was minimal due to his previous experience with online learning. He shared:

Well, I wouldn't say I prepared for it per se, but recently, when Covid first started, I was still in high school, senior year. I heard that we were going to be doing online classes soon, so it kind of brought back some old memories of me building a computer on my own and I'm using that computer right now, and basically, I got a computer and I have two monitors that helped me out with multi-tasking through my work, so I guess that's how I prepared myself for this upcoming semester.

Brian's preparation, he felt, needed to be minimal because he already had exposure to all the preparation, he would need having experienced online learning in high school. While no virtual space is exactly alike, his exposure allowed him to understand the technology and the tools that he may need for his success, such as dual monitors. Another student, Thomas, shared that his previous online experience was not due to the pandemic solely. He attended a high school that online learning was embedded in the school day structure. When asked about how he prepared, he shared, "Not particularly anything specific, I just kinda already knew it would be online because my previous school, we were a hybrid school and classes, and then we also did some online, I already kinda had experience with it." Thomas attended a school where online learning was an expectation empowering him

for his online college experience. In these cases, both Brian and Thomas prepared for the technology aspect of their online class.

A few recent graduates prepared not for the technology but rather for the content of the English course itself. Desiree discussed preparing by purchasing materials she felt she needed to stay organized and keep track of assignments. She said, “I actually started getting a lot of journals, a lot of planners, calendars, sticky notes.” In contrast, Grace describes preparation that included reviewing old material from high school. She shared, “I went to Girls High, and I had these pages that were a list of English terms. So, I just got those and put it into my new binder, and that was like all the prep I did for it.” In Grace’s response, she references her high school, Girls High, one of the leading magnet schools for girls within the metropolitan area. This school focuses on preparing students for college. All the recent graduates attended different schools. While this study can’t determine if one school prepared recent graduates more than others, these students expressed how their former high school experience was a part of the preparation process.

***Less Recent High School Graduates Mental Preparation.*** This group had a more mental approach to their preparation for their online English course. A mental approach in this study describes using the information to shift mindset by asking others about their experiences and changing habits. These mental approaches are students mentally preparing for their roles as students. Among these students, there was one exception, Carol. Although she would be considered a recent graduate, Carol mentioned explicitly using other experiences as her way to prepare. Particularly her siblings and mother. She shared,

Before I started, so my brothers are actually doing online schooling, and I just seen how they had it set up, and I just took tips off of that and then I'm like, You know, my Mom also does the school online, so everyone in here is doing online schooling, and I assist my mom sometimes just help her out, and it wasn't that bad, so mentally assisted me with the stress of actually being online, and it just like I realized, Hey, it's not that bad so those were my help and my resources.

Carol utilizes her family and their online experience to prepare herself for what she would encounter in school. Using the experience of others as a guide was a common theme among most students. Most obtained these experiences through family members and friends familiar with college life or had attended college before. An older student, Alisha, shared she prepared by getting insight from a friend she works with who also attends the school and is a year ahead of her. She said, "I also got that friend that helped me, and she guided me, and she prepped me, and she's also helping me through this course also, lets me know what's needed." Like Alisha, many students utilize their relationships outside of school as their first resource to prepare and gain insight on what to expect as they start their college experience. For example, Raymond shared that he also sought the counsel of a family member who graduated from a 4-year school and friends who are also students. When asked about preparation, he shared,

One of my cousins went to Howard... Well, she graduated from Howard, so it was like, I'm... asking her how college is, and stuff like that. And I have friends that are on campus, and still are so I talk to them about stuff like that.

This student also utilized their relationships for sources of information about expectations with the college experience. What is particularly interesting about this pattern is that none

of the students discussed asking anyone affiliated with the college itself for advice on preparing. Though the college has many support services, and the enrollment process provides opportunities to connect with student services such as academic advising and orientations, none mentioned using the virtual campus resources available before starting.

Some students focused on changing their habits and acknowledged that this was their plan for preparation. For Whitney, she shared that she would look within in order preparation and empower herself. She discussed this, saying, “Honestly, no, I prepare myself; honestly, I talk to myself. Okay, it might be a little challenge, and it may get hard. I’m not gonna have perfect days.” For Whitney, her preparation was for the reality that there would be challenges along the way, but she must persist even when things didn’t go according to plan. Similarly, Samuel shared that he also empowered himself, saying,

I did prepare myself mentally first because one, it's not really normal, it's not what I'm used to, just having an online class, I'm like, this isn't something I'm used to. So mentally, I had to get ready for that. I had to get myself in a mode... Where I knew I was gonna have to take in a lot very fast and be able to keep up the pace and balance work and school, so I knew it was gonna be a very strict dedication I had to make to school by doing online classes.

Shifting their mindset toward resilience seems to be a habit they were creating within themselves in preparation for their educational journey. With this mindset shift, students translated this into getting more sleep, establishing improved daily routines, and managing their time more effectively.

**Student Who Did Not Prepare.** Among all the participants, there was only one that shared they did not prepare at all. Gordon, age 62, was enrolled in college for the

first time and attended classes full time. His lack of preparation, he shared, really caused many challenges for him being an older student and far removed from the educational experience. He shared his difficulties stating,

Oh, I didn't do no preparation, I should have because it got me behind for like a month, and I had to play, catch up. If I had known that I would be prepared in a way. I would know more about the computer; I would have read a little bit more and gave me something in little notes. I didn't do none of that and next semester. I'll be more prepared.

Gordon shared in retrospect his desire to prepare for the technology aspect of online learning and the content he would encounter in the class. All students interviewed in the study valued preparation even if they varied in how they prepared and what degree they prepared. Regardless of the method, none of the preparation included on-campus resources or contacts.

### ***Technology Roadblocks While Adjusting to Online Learning***

Adjusting to any new educational experience often has its own set of challenges. Online learning courses can present a multi-layered adjustment as students adapt to the coursework itself and learn how to navigate college and online learning (Iloh, 2019). These adjustments can bring about a plethora of emotions. Students shared that they experienced a mix of emotions from excitement to anxiousness, motivated to feel ready to quit. Ten students shared that online learning was an adjustment for them though they experienced it in varying degrees. For many, technology was one of the significant adjustments. Students described roadblocks in two specific areas, technology skills and technology resources.

**Technology Skills.** Technology skills describe the skillset needed to successfully navigate the learning management system and technology features necessary to access the course and complete assignments. Isaiah, who immigrated from Africa 5 years ago, shared that he was adjusting to online learning and the American school system as he had his previous educational experiences in his home country of Liberia. He had taken a writing workshop on campus, which is a program that helps students improve placement test scores before the pandemic and was able to make some connections but struggled with the technology at first. He shared,

Although I knew how to use the computer so well, but it was just a different app, you're not used to something. Yeah, the first week it was so complicated, I was so stressed, I'm not even going to lie, I was so stressed out, I couldn't open my work, I didn't know how to do nothing on my work site app... But that's when my grades started to drop, it wasn't that I wasn't trying to do it. I couldn't do it.

While Isaiah did have some experience with the computer, he struggled with the learning management system, which he referred to as the "app," short for application. He continues, sharing, "Like the first week I remember, I knew how to watch the videos and understand a few stuff, you know, I didn't go to high school over here, right, so it was also a new process for me." Not only was Isaiah adjusting to the online learning system but also the American college education system. These adjustments to online learning were synonymous with other students who also had difficulty navigating the learning management system. Five students mentioned that the learning management system specifically made it difficult to adjust. Gordon referenced a similar frustration of navigating the learning management system when he said, "I was doing the work, but I

didn't know how to upload it and send it in electronically and turn my assignments in... I didn't know how to do that. So that was frustrating." His comment about his adjustment illustrates that while a student could be eager to complete the work, not knowing how to navigate the technology used is a roadblock to their success until they can learn the technology and use the tools provided within the learning management system. In addition to the learning management system, 6 students shared issues with overall technology skills or obtaining the necessary technology tools for the class.

**Technology Resources.** One should not assume that a student's enrollment in an online course indicates that they have all the essential technology. Having the proper technology resources can include but are not limited a laptop or computer, internet access or any resources that are necessary to access the course content within the learning management system. Isaiah shared that someone stole his laptop before school began, and he had difficulties getting a laptop from the loaner program at school. He shared,

I didn't have a computer for the first week, and then I tried to contact the school to help with a computer. It was a process because they didn't give me the computer on time... I still had to go and buy a new computer. Yeah, so it delayed me a little bit because I was trying to do my work, there was no computer, had to ask people to use their computer, like my friends and stuff like that.

This delay of computer access, Isaiah shared, made it difficult for him as he had to rely on others to access a computer for class. For another student, Zara, she shared having issues with the internet connection in her neighborhood to complete assignments.

"Sometimes my WIFI at home isn't so good. So, when I'm doing my assignments or taking a test, it will go slow or pause, so that could be some problems." To access their

materials, students need to have access to the internet, which Zara is referencing when she uses the term WIFI. For Jocelyn, who also was having issues with WIFI, she resorted to relying on her WIFI at work to complete assignments, she shared,

I bring my laptop to my job, and I do work from over there, 'cause the WIFI over there is kind of good. So sometimes I do it on my break and I do home health aide, so sometimes when the ladies, don't need nothing from me, I sit and do my work

Jocelyn, determined to access and complete her assignments, used the WIFI at her job. During this time, while the campus does have free WIFI and computers for student use, the campus was inaccessible due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, students had to find ways around some of these technological roadblocks without the help of campus resources. Technology plays a significant part in student success in their online learning adjustment, including navigating the required learning management systems, having WIFI access, and access to a laptop or computer. Another student, Gordon, shared this sentiment succinctly when he said,

The more you know about the computer and technology the easier it, becomes. Cause I'm gonna put the work in, I'm gonna read what I gotta read, I'm gonna do what I got to do, but if I can't. If I don't know how to direct things where it's going to be directed.

Without further inquiry, a professor may mistakenly assume a student is not motivated or unwilling to do the work, especially in an online course that is asynchronous and receive a negative grade. Isaiah shared,



I might be one of the smartest students in the class, but you don't know nothing about me, because I'm not submitting my work, I got so many other things going on that I'm not submitting my work, so basically... You can't just think that I'm doing it because I'm not serious.

Both comments convey that one should not quickly assume that a lack of submitting work means a careless or unmotivated student. While the desire to do well and the motivation to complete the work can be present, the necessary tools and skills around the technology must also be available. Barriers to success can exist regardless of the student's desire and determination to do well.

### ***Work-Life School Balance***

Community college students are often navigating their coursework along with work and life responsibilities (Bergman, Berry, & Shuck, 2014). Each student shared responsibilities throughout their week that they must complete in addition to assignments, online discussions, readings, tests, and quizzes they may have. For many, this often means navigating their lives so that they can manage their time effectively to maintain their roles in their lives outside of school with their roles as students. This juggle often can result in competing priorities when students seek to reach their educational goals.

**Work Responsibilities.** Nine out of the 14 students shared that they were currently employed. Regarding workload, 5 shared that they are full-time employees, and 3 shared that they worked full time. One student did not work for money but rather volunteered at a facility where he helped run groups at a recovery program. Because of the regular commitment to his volunteer position, I have included this as work also. The remaining 5 students were not currently working, 3 were looking for work, and 2 recently

left jobs due to a need to prioritize other responsibilities. While the jobs varied among fields, their commonality was that they were all hourly wage positions and positions considered essential during the pandemic. Table 2 includes what type of job each student had and their workload. In the scope of this study, full-time employment status means that the student works 30 or more hours per week and part-time employment status means they work less than 30 hours per week.

**Table 2**

*Student Work Characteristics*

Name	Age	Employment Status	Job
Alisha	37	Full Time	Certified Nurse Assistant
Brian	20	Unemployed	Looking for Employment
Carol	19	Unemployed	Looking for Employment
Desiree	19	Part Time	Dollar Store Cashier
Gordon	62	Volunteer	Recovery Facility Volunteer
Grace	19	Full Time	Supermarket Cashier
Isaiah	22	Full Time	Healthcare Behavioral Tech
Jocelyn	18	Full Time	Home Health Aid
Raymond	20	Full Time	Hospital Parking Concierge
Rochelle	24	Unemployed	Looking for Employment
Samuel	31	Full Time	Hardware Store Worker
Thomas	18	Unemployed	Not Looking for Employment
Whitney	24	Part Time	Healthcare Hospital Worker
Zara	18	Unemployed	Not Looking for Employment

In the table above, all those employed worked at facilities and positions that remained open during the Covid-19 pandemic. This trend is significant because while many

employers encouraged their employees to work from home or suspend working hours so a worker could stay home, this group of employed students did not have that luxury. Not only did this impact their experience as students, but it heightened their exposure to getting Covid-19. Samuel shared that his exposure at work put him in a position where he at times sacrificed seeing his son, who lives with his child's mother. Samuel shared,

“Right now, the covid thing is in the way of that because we don't want our son getting sick, so basically, he's quarantining with her, so when I come around, I've had to get tested a few times just to make sure I was okay when I wanted to go see him. And that's pretty tough, but I know I look at that as temporary.”

This comment is an example of the priority negotiation that students had to do during this time. While the pandemic is a unique factor, he continues to describe how he must do this same negotiation when navigating work and school. He explains, "I have to keep reminding them, Hey, I have school when you schedule me Tuesday and Thursday, I have to be gone by 4 o'clock...that can be a bit annoying." Here he shared his frustration with having to remind his job of his priority of school. Desiree also discusses this issue, sharing,

“If I see a schedule, if the schedule was made and they're like, Yeah, you work... Monday through Friday, and I'm like, I can't do Monday through Friday. I have a test on Tuesday, I have a quiz on Thursday. And, well, I don't know what to tell you, I'm like, Okay, listen it's either... We work this out or I have to go because, I honestly, care about school enough to where I would leave my job, I honestly would.”

Desiree shared that she has also to remind her employer that work is her priority. For students in the position to negotiate their schedule, they can work their schedule around school. However, for some students who have fixed work schedules, this is not a reality. For example, Isaiah, who has two full-time jobs, must work school around his fixed shifts from 3 pm to 11 pm and 11 pm to 7 am five days out of the week. When asked about how he navigates this, he shared,

I still be having time in my job to do my schoolwork, basically, I just sit down and look like... So, if they don't do something out of the blue you have some down time where you can... I have a lot of time to do my school.

His navigation around these dual priorities is by doing his schoolwork at his place of employment during times that are not as busy. This option is not available for all. One of the students shared that she quit her job, unable to navigate them both properly. Zara shared her feelings while trying to juggle work and school,

I was getting really overwhelmed with work and school, it was like I was really stressful to the point like, I started crying, ' cause it's like dang, I wanna make my money. But this is my money. This actually is my money. So, I was like, you know what, I can always pick up work another time.

In Zara's experience, she felt forced to decide between her short-term and long-term goals. While working was a priority to her, she thought it was getting in the way of her long-term educational goals. When asked further about her leaving her job, she shared that she has the financial support of her mother and sister, who encouraged her to quit to focus on school. While other students expressed time limitations and similar feelings of overwhelmed and stress in juggling work and school, this was not an option because

students had to support themselves and others financially. Samuel expresses how, despite some of these similar feelings, he must be resilient and push through until he gets to improve his work situation. He sees the road to accomplishing this is his education.

Samuel shared,

Where I'm at in life right now is more so I'm prioritizing, and I looked at school as the next level of my life, I felt like I would get more of what I wanted done with education, so mentally I had to get into a very focused mode where I was gonna have to put aside my emotions about what I really don't feel like doing it. I was like, this is gonna be time-consuming for me, so I have to mentally prepare that most of my time is gonna be in front of the computer, learning. That for me, it causes me to be more patient than what I was

In this excerpt, Samuel mentions the sacrifices of navigating school and work while also sharing how it has made him more patient, which he views positively. Each student who shared working as a consistent part of their balancing act expressed commitment and a willingness to try to navigate despite the challenges that may come along as a result.

**Life Responsibilities.** In addition to work, students shared having to manage life responsibilities and events while in school. In this study, life responsibilities include additional responsibilities students regularly have. Twelve of the students mentioned additional life responsibilities that they must factor into a routine on a daily or weekly basis. Each student who expressed other life responsibilities noted that these responsibilities involve other people. Students referenced caring for children, parents, grandparents, siblings, extended family, or friends. Having to balance schoolwork with these life responsibilities can be a challenge due to time constraints.

Five students shared that they were parents of at least one child. Being a parent is a tough job in and of itself, with many demands of time and resources. Alisha, who has a son and daughter ages 10 and 2, shared the challenge when trying to complete her work while caring for her children. She expresses this saying,

When I'm trying to do my work. That's when they want to play, or that's when she wants something, that's when she wants assistance in something, that she wants to go somewhere. Entertaining them as well, keeping them active

Alisha discusses the balance she tries to maintain between completing her work and meeting her kids' needs. Carol, who has a one-year-old son, also discusses what it is like to be a parent and a student. She shared,

He wants to get up, run around, and then it will be right here or in the next room, or trying to get in the bathroom, or try to go down steps, so it's just that can be a little difficult, especially when I'm in the middle of doing an assignment that's due. So, it's just like, you gotta do that and then... But it's okay, it's okay. We're managing it. We're working on it, so I try to just get up before he wakes up and do my work now...or if he goes to sleep like later on for a nap, I'll get back into it.

Carol shared having a small child at times makes it difficult to focus on him while doing schoolwork. However, like many students, she is finding ways to navigate her responsibilities to complete her work.

Three students discussed that they helped care for their siblings as a part of their responsibilities. In sharing the details of having to navigate parenthood and school, Carol also shared that she helps her mom care for her siblings at times when her mom, who is a student herself, needs to study. She shared,

Whenever my mom isn't here, if she's out running errands or something, and I do have to look after my brothers, and I think they're a little old enough to watch themselves, but I don't mind. I have to look after them. Sometimes my nine-year-old brother, he say I'm hungry or something, so I have to prepare something for him, and then my mom, who's also in school, whenever she's in class, she may need assistance. So, I will assist her. And then I have to work on my own stuff as well

Carol describes responsibilities which include caring for siblings if her mother is not home. However, one student, Isaiah, currently works two full-time jobs to support himself and his siblings, who reside in Liberia with his mother. He shared,

I'm the person to look up to right now because they're in Africa, so I say I don't wanna go to university. They are not gonna go to university because basically, in my family, I'm like the bread winner, I take care of everybody. I got two jobs and they are also going to school, so I think I'm doing basically for my siblings because I want them to get the same mindset.

During the interview, Isaiah shared that he is the oldest of 3 siblings and is responsible for sending money home to care for his family in Liberia. He shared that caring for them is important and setting an example for them will help them move toward their own educational goals. In both cases, students navigate their own needs with the needs of their siblings and care for them, whether physically or financially.

Two students discussed being caregivers to parents or grandparents due to chronic illnesses. Supporting a loved one experiencing a chronic disease is often hard on the person and the family supporting them. A recent high school graduate, Thomas was

doing well in his courses until his mother received an unexpected cancer diagnosis. He bravely shared,

Yeah, that was kind of the biggest sudden roadblock as it kinda happened over night, she was fine and a little bit of sickness here and there, but it wasn't too big up until she end up having to go to hospital for it.... I'm her home health aide basically, she's in the hospital now for the next two days getting chemotherapy and kinda these days I gotta catch up on (school) work make sure I'm doing good. A while back I stopped working and I'm here full-time since she's a fall risk so I'm there all the time, I just do whatever she needs done and help out

Isaiah discusses how becoming his mother's caregiver has caused him to shift his life to center his mom's needs, finding time around her treatments. Isaiah, a recent high school graduate and previous experience with online learning, was doing well until he could no longer prioritize school. An unexpected family crisis can force the most astute student to navigate challenging situations while in school. In addition to having a small child, a female student, Whitney takes care of both her grandparents, who have dementia and prostate cancer. She shared how this has impacted her this semester,

My English (class) started off very well. I was doing good, and then my grandparents started taking hospital trips back-to-back, it got a little challenge in getting my work in, so I told her (professor) in advance, I've been going through a lot over here.

Whitney shared that while going through this with her grandparents, she kept her professor informed about what was going on, hoping she would work with her as she caught up on assignments. This example speaks to students finding ways to work through



challenges that may come with their life responsibilities. Whether parents, grandparents, children, or siblings, family relationships play a crucial role in balancing life responsibilities and school responsibilities. As students balance school, work, and life, they constantly must shift priorities to navigate their responsibilities simultaneously. Each student discussed navigating these areas in their way and that each area holds value to them. In many of the space's students have responsibilities; they have also found support.

### ***The Necessity of Support Systems***

Part of the human experience is to connect with others. When people can connect with others positively, this can be a space where they find support (Gipson, Mitchell, McLean, 2018). Support is crucial in student success and consists of many things and comes from many areas. In the context of this study support system is described as people in the student's life who help them stay encouraged toward their academic goals. Having a sound support system can make all the difference with how a student can navigate the challenges and adjustments of starting a course online for the first time. Each student discussed their support systems, and I received a variety of answers. Out of the 14 students, only 3 students discussed campus programs as part of their support systems, while the remaining 11 mentioned a host of friends, family members, and colleagues. Table 3 shows the support systems students mentioned within 4 areas, family, friends, colleagues, and campus.

**Table 3***Support Systems Identified*

Name	Age	Family	Friends	Colleagues	Campus
Alisha	37		*	*	
Brian	20		*		
Carol	19	*			*
Desiree	19	*			
Gordon	62	*		*	
Grace	19	*			
Isaiah	22	*	*		
Jocelyn	18	*			
Raymond	20	*	*	*	
Rochelle	24				*
Samuel	31	*			*
Thomas	18	*			
Whitney	24	*		*	
Zara	18	*			

**Family.** The family was the largest group where students shared that they have support. Throughout the interviews, family members were most prevalent when students discussed their support systems. Isaiah shared that his immediate family, including his mother, lives in Liberia but still is a large part of his support. He shared, "She asked every day how was school, how was classes. You don't play about that." While Isaiah's mother is not close in location, she keeps up to date when it comes to her son's schooling and reminds him of the importance of education. Similarly, Zara's mother, along with her sister, wanted Zara to focus on her education, so much so that they offered to help her financially so she could quit her job and focus on school. She shared what it was like when they encouraged her to leave her job.

They was actually telling me not to work when school came and I'm just like, well, are y'all gonna give me money for my stuff and it was just like yeah... they was actually telling me though it was something that's gonna be hard, it's gonna be tough. So, when I actually decided not to do it, they was really supportive.

Support from family can range from words of encouragement, check-ins, or supporting financially and can come from a family member within the home or around the globe.

The family was the most popular source of support among interviewees.

**Friends and Colleagues.** Another common source of support was friends and colleagues. Friends and colleagues, while not being biologically related to students, were some of the people that students confided in, perhaps even more so than their families in some cases. Brian discusses how the friends he has made in various gaming communities have, over the years, become confidants a lot like family. He shared, "I wouldn't say I'm on my own in this. But I would say I've kind of created a family of my own." Brian has connected with others online and over the years, has created close bonds that he considers like family. A few other students interviewed referenced that they sought support from friends. Alisha, who is supported by a colleague turned friend throughout her educational journey, shared that she is not originally from the area and most of her family live out of state. She befriended a colleague at work who not only encouraged her to attend college but helped her prepare and even watched her children when needed. She shared this saying,

My co-worker, she was telling me about it and how she completed it was not hard with help, family on her side. And she encouraged me to go for it. Also, that

friend helped me, and she guided me, and she prepped me, and she's also helping me through this course also, let me know what's needed.

For Alisha, her colleague helps her get through her course and supports her. What was most interesting about this was when Alisha shared that she is attending school in secret and has only shared her school pursuits with her colleague. When asked why she shared that she didn't want her partner and family to know until she was sure that she would remain committed. Whitney also found that her colleagues have been her source of support for her educational journey. She shared, "they talk about classes all the time with me" when asked what something that helps her be successful. She currently works at a hospital, so her relationships at work help her stay encouraged and not lose sight of the bigger picture.

**Campus.** Out of all the systems of support interviewees mentioned, the area least noted was the campus. Only three students shared a campus resource as a part of their systems of support. What is particularly interesting is that the resources that the students mentioned were programs in which students received one-on-one support. One of the programs mentioned is a mentoring program for Black students, and the other program is a scholarship program where students receive full tuition and a support coach. Samuel discussed how his participation in the mentoring program has been helpful and how his mentor even helped him refine his career goals. He shared,

I had got a mentor, a young lady that's studying, or actually she's a teacher's assistant in the biology class... She has given me a little bit of insight of how she navigated through college... and... actually, she's been very, very helpful. I asked about the engineering thing, and she was the one who brought the biomedical side

of engineering to me, I was like, wow, this is something that I think I really would like doing more so than mechanical engineering

Samuel shared how his mentor has been a very supportive as he was starting his classes and gaining more direction on navigating college. The mentoring program pairs new students with a mentor that is a part of the campus community. This program is open to all new Black students, and students can continue the relationship with their mentor throughout their time at the college.

On the other hand, the scholarship program has guidelines for students that include working with a success coach. These success coaches meet with the students receiving the scholarship throughout the semester to provide support. Rochelle shared that her relationship with her success coach has been a significant part of her support in her courses. She shared, “I like Fred; he is cool. We talk about other stuff too. Just school and life stuff.” Here, she discusses how he assists her with her schoolwork, acknowledges her personal life, and supports both. Carol is part of the same program and discussed how she has also found meeting with her success coach as supportive. She shared,

He's actually very helpful. So definitely shout out to the (program name) people. They are very helpful. Because I know that if I didn't have these meetings, I definitely would be procrastinating a lot more than I do now, so definitely, a big thanks to you guys.

In Carol's comment, she credits her relationship with her success coach as to why she does not procrastinate in her work. Both programs, the scholarship and mentoring programs assign students with members of the campus community that reach out to them directly and become a point of contact to help them navigate accessing the resources on

campus. All students interviewed were not a part of these programs, but they seemed to emphasize the follow-up and check-ins that they enjoyed most because it helped them stay on track. This component among all systems was direct outreach. Students shared that within their systems, whether family, friends, colleagues, or campus community, they all reached out to them directly to inquire about their progress, share supportive words, or guide them in different situations. The critical commonality shows the importance of outreach, support, and follow-up that is personal.

### *Desire for Campus Community*

While some students did mention resources on campus, many provided great insight into how they can be supported more by the campus. Making connections on campus has been linked to student progress and achievement (Perry & Pilati, 2011). While students may not consistently articulate this desire unprompted, all had an idea of how they were or wanted to be supported and what this support should be. In the scope of this study, a desire for campus community describes students' desire to feel a part of the campus and make connections that allow them to feel supported throughout their educational journey. Within this theme, three subthemes were present: classroom expectations, resource knowledge gap, and access to resources.

**Classroom Expectations.** Entering the learning spaces, each student had their expectations of what they would like to experience within the classroom. Each student has an opportunity to discuss their current online classroom experience and what additional aspects would enhance their experience. Seven students shared that they were looking for faculty that exemplified communication, openness, support, and interest. Brian explained that faculty should have a mutual power dynamic. During his interview,

he shared that faculty should cultivate relationships of mutual understanding, saying, “instead of putting yourself on a high pedestal, why not just bring out another chair for them to sit next to you” Characteristics around openness and communication appeared to be the most prevalent among responses. Some students shared specific experiences where their professor expressed this.

Alisha, a mother of 2 children, talked about an instance where the professor connected with her. The professor showed her understanding of her life of juggling school and parenthood. She shared,

I explain to her that I did not get time to get the assignment done, and she came out, she's like, it's okay, I just had a newborn of my own, so I take forever to grade your paper, so it's okay, if you need time, just email me before, not when the work is due, email me before the work is due... And let me know you need a day or so. She would give you a day to complete

Alisha shared that this experience made her feel seen and that her professor understands what she is going through as she balances school and life. Another student described that she enjoyed that her professor gave them advice and had relatable discussions. Zara discussed her experience with her professor sharing that,

She made me feel very comfortable when I first started, I was nervous in her class, I don't know why I was nervous. I did good in English in high school, but was nervous in that class for some reason... And when we would do our Zoom meetings the way she would talk, the way she would explain it, it just made me feel like... I don't know like... I was really comfortable. I felt secure in her class, I just felt like I can really do this. Like she just gives me that...she just gives me

motivation as well too like...She made me feel like I got it. Like I can handle it and I am.

Zara's account of her experience mentions zoom classes. Her professor provided optional zoom opportunities for students if they wanted to come. There she would check in and explain the expectations for the week. This style is atypical for asynchronous courses as many do not have virtual meetings.

Students shared their ideal experience where they could pick anything they felt would support them in their online class. Most of the feedback received centered on the professor-focused characteristics above, including timely feedback, zoom options, flexibility, and interactive lessons. Grace, who wants to become an English teacher herself, discusses the importance of having a professor that embodies traits that show that they care and want to be there. She shared,

I feel like it's the type of job you should do when you have the patience. It's definitely not a job you do when you don't wanna do it because other people's knowledge is in your hands. It's more than I want teachers to see. It's more than the work. It's more than just you do assignments and making them do it, you may be teaching the next teacher.

Grace emphasizes the importance of having a professor who acts with intention and finds value in teaching their students. When asked about their ideal experiences, each student responded with an answer focused on the classroom expectations beginning with the actions and interactions with the professor. The professor is a vital part of the experience.

**Knowledge Gap of On-Campus Resources.** While there is a plethora of resources on campus, a common theme among the students was that many were unaware of the



variety of resources that could assist them. The interviews took place close to the middle of the semester. It was fascinating to find that 8 students, when prompted, would mention a resource that would be beneficial to students on campus, not knowing that resource is already on campus. This theme exemplifies a gap in knowledge about campus resources. Below is a series of examples of questions or statements shared that show that while campus resources exist, some students do not know of them.

“I don't know if CCP has a way of giving out laptops” *Grace, 19*

“Do they have... Do they have childcare? I don't have any kids, but I'm just wondering about that” *Desiree, 19*

“I don't know, now, maybe I'm wrong, but I don't really know too much. But do you have counseling at that school?” *Samuel, 31*

These three examples show that while the school has childcare resources, counseling, and the laptop borrowing program, there is a lack of knowledge that these supports exist. Students explained why this lack of knowledge might exist. Desiree shared that perhaps it is that the information is not vocalized to students enough, stating,

They probably have really great tutors, they probably have really great counselors, they probably have great day care assistance, so a lot of times we don't even know about it because you don't really get the message or get the word out as often

For her, it is a matter of better marketing to make students aware of resources. On the other hand, Alisha explains that as a new student, you may not know to ask the right question and until the question comes up, you may not know. She shared her experience at the school orientation of how she learned about resources saying,

And then they'll tell you what the school have and what's available to you, but the only way you can know if someone asks a question like, okay, what do you guys have ... You have to ask about it. And if another student didn't ask, I wouldn't know

What Alisha is expressing is that she relied on the feedback of others during orientation to learn about resources. While these resources were available, she was not aware until she heard a person ask about them. Orientation is voluntary, and not all students can attend. A student should receive information about resources as they relate to them before the semester begins. Students seeking to connect and access resources will be unable to if they are unaware of their existence.

**Lack of Access to On-Campus Resources.** Access to resources in the context of this study discusses students' use of on-campus resources and the appearance of desired campus resources. Nine students explicitly detailed support services that currently exist on campus. Some students complained that there was, at times, a lag in access. For example, Isaiah shared that the enrollment office dropped his classes right before the semester due to a financial aid issue. Dropped means that the student was removed from his courses due to payment or issue of financial assistance. Students in his situation lose their seats in the class and the seat automatically becomes available for another student to take. He shared,

My classes got dropped. It was a process. I couldn't reach out to no body, I have to call, financial aid had to email me, or they call people, even a lot of people on

the campus, there was nobody reaching out to me at first because it was just starting with the school semester

While the resource was available, he had trouble accessing someone promptly when the student ran into an issue. He describes that this experience made him stressed when he had already experienced stress about starting school. Not only did this add a challenge for him because he could not get in touch with anyone, but the task of having to essentially reenroll in classes and risk not getting the courses he previously had. Similar to professors' expectations, students also want campus resources to respond timely and be accessible when needed. Students consider all interactions a part of their online experience, not just what takes place in their classes. Another student, Gordon, shared that he was not pleased with the lack of follow-up about resources. He shared, "They supposed to help me with housing and that was a month ago and I haven't heard anything yet. We were talking about it one time; I never; heard nothing else." Gordon is referencing a campus resource that helps students connect with community programs that assist with needs such as housing. He expresses dismay with the lack of follow-up after the initial promise of resources. Not reaching out to students in a timely manner or not having intentional follow-up can make students feel unwelcome and unsupported.

Each student expressed a desire to be engaged with the campus community and resources. Students differed in what they thought engagement was. For some like Brian, it was having a general feeling of welcome. Since he had never been on campus before due to the pandemic, he expressed what he wanted to see, sharing,

So obviously, number one invited. Okay, number two, don't just show us the classroom, show us the extracurricular stuff. That's all I have in my mind because every school is different, so I'm not sure on what to incorporate.

His desire to want to feel invited is a similar thought that Desiree shared about using student feedback and asking questions rather than waiting for students to come to the resource. She shared,

Just like us doing this interview, they should be able to call somebody or, hey, would you be interested in... Are you a mother? Do you think you could help organize and...? Because a lot of times they don't have people who are actually going through the problem representing, so I feel like if they did wanna get it out, they should probably reach out to people who are in those shoes... You know what I mean?

Desiree also wants to feel invited and like her experience matters and makes a positive change to help students. At the end of the interview, many students thanked me for simply thinking to ask them about their experiences and learning more about them. It is clear the importance of making students feel heard and a part of changes.

Other students expressed improved technology and campus operations. This desired support focused on streamlining campus services to be easier to access and helping students with the technology for a smoother transition to online learning. Gordon emphasized his vision of what support with technology should be. He shared,

Have a place with a struggling student can go and point it out and point out his problem and attack that right there, one on one with somebody, so when you leave that environment, you have a better understanding then when you first go there

In his vision, he received one on one support to address a need at that moment. He is describing drop-in services, and while these supports are available in many areas, none are technology-specific around navigating tools for courses. Gordon, as previously mentioned, fell a month behind in his work because he could not figure out how to upload his assignments. Isaiah envisioned one on one support, but before the semester stating,

I didn't know how to do it. For freshman, the schools can have a little bit a class for them to show us how to do the online classes. Be like, oh, you gotta go online and press this module now that I'm still, I can understand when you're saying...They gotta have a little bit like one-on-one class, If just for two days.

That's it.

He also shared that there should be one-on-one for technology so that students learn how to navigate the learning management system.

Ten students discussed resource expansion. Participants described the most areas where resources are needed, usually surrounding opportunities to obtain resources such as books, emergency funds, WIFI access, laptops. Some felt that the college should embed these resources in the tuition, while others suggested borrowing programs or programs where students apply if they are in need. Desiree, who was surprised at the additional cost outside of her tuition shared,

I understand we're in a pandemic and it's a virus, but I feel like they should have either some spots around everywhere around the city where we could have more libraries. The textbooks are super expensive. And a lot of times I bought textbooks and we barely went in the book; you know what I mean?... And there's

people that need computers. They need WIFI. That just need a bunch of resources...places to study, so they should probably have more outdoor resources that you could take advantage of when you can...

Desiree's words, shared by other students, express that expanding access for resources incorporates helping students obtain resources that are necessary tools for online learning.

Another area of desired resources was for more structured connections about nonacademic topics. These topics could include mental health support and financial planning resources. Jocelyn expressed that this could consist of coursework that caters to your field, saying, "CCP should have more classes, not just about math, but mental health and a lot ...Mental health, financial help. Life in general." Carol, on the other hand mentioned creating virtual spaces where students could have these conversations when she shared,

Another resource would be having a place where students can meet up basically, and discuss stuff, and I not even just school, just like our mental health and stuff like that, like... So, we can talk about things like what we like to do, and just overall good things, enjoy a good laugh.

Carol envisions a virtual space where connections can be made with others and finding a sense of community. Samuel, who was not previously aware that counselors were available on campus, shared, "The mental health thing, I think should be... Push more on the students. I feel like... 'cause a lot of students just go through some things, and they just need someone to talk to." He emphasizes the importance of mental health and having resources to support students going through different circumstances.

What was common among all the desired resources was that most required increased interaction and more targeted and personal support. It is not enough for help to be present on campus, but there must be targeted outreach and one-on-one support based on students' feedback. According to them, this approach makes them feel invited and supported and a part of the campus community.

### ***Black Identity and Sense of Belonging***

While there were no direct interview questions about student experiences related to their Black identity, this came up in multiple conversations. Identity can, and often does, influence student perceptions of their experience (Duran & Jones, 2019). Multiple students spoke about their Black identity. Black students are not a monolith; therefore, their views of being Black and pursuing their education are varied. Some spoke of their reality as a Black person in society, whereas others spoke of pride and representation. All three areas closely related to the student's sense of belonging. Sense of belonging in this context describes the capacity that the student feels a part of the campus community and capable of being successful with the educational space (Card & Wood, 2019; Rovai, 2002; Tierney et al., 2018; Tinto, 2017).

**Perception of the Realities of Being Black.** Some students in the study spoke specifically about the systemic challenges that Black people face. While many face adversity at one time or another institutionally there are disparities among specific groups, including Black people. Desiree discussed that she was inspired to go into her career field in a criminal justice class while learning about the inequities in the criminal justice system. During her interview, she shared,

I like the idea of defending people who need it and really want it, and I wanna help others, and you can help others with being a doctor, but I feel like being a lawyer is just a different type of help, and I feel like a lot of African-Americans and minorities in general don't get the representation that we need as far as law, so I wanted to branch off and do that.

To Desiree, she recognized the institutional barriers Black people face, and for her, this was a call to action for her to go into law. On the other hand, Samuel did not point out a specific area but generally mentioned that, in his view, a part of being Black is overcoming obstacles. He shared, "Me being a young black man; Obstacles is something we used to having, so I just knew it was gonna be obstacles to overcome once again, and I prepared my mind for that." His comments aligned with an essay he read in class about Malcolm X and how he overcame challenges to become great. When asked why this was significant to him, he shared that it was a story of a Black man who had a rough start due to life's circumstances but overcame challenges to succeed. Malcolm X's story also speaks to the systemic challenges that Black people faced then and now. He adds to this by sharing his critique of the media's messages to Black youth.

Media and everything else, push it towards us like, hey, just pay attention to that, don't worry about reading no books on how to build yourself up. That ain't being promoted. Black people, we know about self-care, but only some of us have to do it under survival mode, and we don't wanna have to be doing it under survival.

In his view many of the societal messages about Black people are harmful and not focused on education and self-growth and that Black people deserve to not only survive but thrive. Another student, Zara, mentioned how the messages she received from media



were a part of her motivation. She discussed that she was motivated by a famous rapper and his lifestyle. She shared,

I feel as though celebrities give me motivation as well, seeing them take trips, all that money they be having...they're honestly living their best life and I be looking... I'm like, Yeah, I gotta stop, I gotta pick myself up. 'Cause I want to live like this, I don't wanna live paycheck to paycheck. Even though my paychecks be nice. I don't wanna live like that, I wanna live with so much money. It's just like, I don't gotta worry about it.

Contrary to Samuel, what Zara sees in media, specifically the lifestyle of celebrities, is motivation to continue to pursue her education so that she too can live a lifestyle where money is not an issue for her. Both positive and negative viewpoints within societal messages contributed to the student's desire to engage in the educational process to either combat negative messages or reflect positive messages. This impacts their sense of belonging because it is a part of the reason why they are pursuing their education and taking the first step to view themselves as college students. In many ways students accepted these realities as motivation to call out inequities, make social change, or uplift themselves to work hard to live a good life.

**Taking Pride in Self, Family, and Community.** In this study, pride describes moments students referenced their Black identity and things that made them proud.

Gordon discussed that he felt great pride in seeing Black people succeed. He shared,

I love to see our people make something of their self even though only a piece of paper, but still to have one of our people with letters behind they name, and they went to school and they learn and they put the work in spite, all the things that's

holding them back, that's happening that aim toward them, not to make it, there's so many obstacles in your way that you just want to make it, but when you do... And I was a part of that, and I have the luxury of seeing you... Or listen to one of your speeches there isn't a better feeling in the world to me. They give me the motivation to keep it moving.

Gordon was referencing the pride he feels by seeing other Black people succeed specifically within their education. He also referenced an essay he was reading in class by Barack Obama, whom Gordon shared he admired. He shared that he takes great pride in seeing others succeed and wants to motivate others through his success too. Samuel also shared pride in Black people, specifically when it comes to their resilience. He shared, "Black people, we can make the best out of worst situations, that's just what we're good at doing... I don't care where we at on the planet; that's what we could do; we have a lot of strength." He not only shared the resilience he sees within his community as admirable but the strength. Many other students shared stories of resilience and provided examples even within their own families. Raymond discussed his mother and father and how they immigrated from Haiti to the United States when they were very young and are now living a successful life, he wants to one day live. He shared,

My mom is a black lady who does, who's in the hospital and my dad had his own thing, he owns something... So, it was like... They have the American dream, what everybody thinks about. My Mom had five of us while she was in nursing school. Yeah, so it was like I was old enough to watch her do it.

He speaks to the pride he has in his mother and father's ability to surpass odds to create a good life for him and his siblings. He too would like to would like to become a nurse like his mother.

Like Raymond's mom, Alisha navigates parenthood and school and spoke that she works hard so her daughter can take pride in her success. She expresses this when discussing her motivation. She shared "She was the main reason I'm like, Okay, I'm not gonna show her this is not for me. So, I want her to see that, mommy can do it. So, she can do it too." Her success is not only something that she will be proud of, but her daughter can also share this pride and be confident that she can also succeed despite challenges that may arise. While many stories of pride speak to how Black people overcome obstacles this is not to say that their resilience and strength negates their need for equity, compassion, understanding, support, and empathy from the campus community. The pride that students showed by sharing stories of success can be supported by the campus through creating opportunity to amplify these success stories to the campus community at large and when students encounter obstacles, the response of the campus community is crucial in reaffirming their sense of belonging and community.

**Call for Representation.** Though I did not explicitly ask students how Black students can be better supported, two students provided specific feedback, including their Black identity. Zara, who had a Black professor, discussed that representation meant a lot to her experience. Specifically, her professor being a Black woman. She shared,

She's an English teacher and like some of our topics will be related to African Americans, and I just feel as though she presents it well, because she is an African

American, she can really give us the heartfelt of an African American rather than someone who's not

For Zara, her Black professor made the material easier to relate to and easier to connect with her professor. Samuel also spoke of representation but within the course content. Though his professor was not Black, the fact that she covered essays and stories about Black people meant a lot to him. He shared,

People have these stories, and they should embrace them, and I think that part of the reason it reminded me of that, and it also told me where my teacher mentality was at as well, what kind of questions is she gonna ask from this... Can she relate? She talked about some black history, and I thought that was pretty interesting coming from an Asian-American woman, I didn't know that she was gonna dive into the Black History of Malcolm X

For Samuel, the fact that his professor, who is not Black, discussed Black people's experiences was significant for him to feel supported and let him know that his professor was thinking of people that look like him. In a course like English, where many of the literature read and focused on is often authors who are not Black, both students expressed feeling represented made them more comfortable in the course and made it easier to connect.

Zara and Samuel also mentioned ways outside of the classroom they could be more supported. For Zara, representation beyond the classroom included every aspect of campus life, even marketing materials. In her interview, she mentioned,

I would really love to see someone of my color advertising something, it would just like, it would make you drawn to it like, oh yeah, you look like me, what you talking about, I want to see what you're talking about

Zara saw that representation should extend to every area and that this representation is what draws her into different aspects of campus. This comment was consistent with Samuel, who shared that he wanted to see more representation and sharing of success stories of Black students at the school. In his interview, he shared,

I would like to know how many successful black people have made it through, and I know it's a lot... I applaud all people for getting an education, not just black people, 'cause we all are human at the end of the day, but I would like to see how recent the black community have been involved in school and being successful. I think that's important.

While acknowledging that the success of all students is valuable, Samuel would like to see some examples of students who have achieved, who also look like him. What was interesting was that some students were hesitant to say they wanted to see Black representation specifically. Those students prefaced their comments by making a statement denying bias or making a statement like Samuel where he speaks of all student success before mentioning Black student success specifically. This discomfort with centering themselves could be because, in many spaces, Black people are not centered or included in the conversation. This was evident as multiple students at the close of the interview were thankful for even being asked about their experience. This included Isaiah, who said, "Thank you for allowing me to speak my mind" and Zara who said, "Thank you for giving me an opportunity to voice what I've been thinking." and Gordon

who shared “It felt like I was talking to a family member.” While I was thankful for being able to connect and develop a rapport with the students, I wondered if I had been of another race, if students would have shared this with me at all without explicitly asking, or if I did, would they have shared with this level of depth. This observation sheds light on the importance Black representation on campus and within research to provide spaces where Black students are centered, heard, and feel safe to share their experience from a Black perspective. Representation plays a large role in developing connection and establishing a sense of belonging on campus for Black students who historically have been underrepresented in educational spaces.

## **Chapter Summary**

This study focused on the experiences of Black students taking an online English course for the first time. This chapter discussed the case, participants, and 6 themes that emerged. The data was compiled from interviewing 14 Black students between 18 and 62 years of age while taking an English course during the Spring 2021 semester. All students participated in an online English class due to the COVID -19 pandemic and campus closure. Students varied in major and career interests, but all were in pursuit of a degree or certificate. The 6 themes that emerged were the importance of preparation, technology roadblocks while adjusting to online learning, work, life, and school balance, the necessity of support systems, the desire of campus community, and Black identity and sense of belonging. From these themes were numerous subthemes that helped to analyze some of the larger themes in greater detail. Overall, the findings show that despite being a student learning online both while navigating life in and out of the classroom, students remained resilient and committed to learning and their educational journey. Students also shed light on the need for increased support and outreach to take advantage of all the campus has to offer.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of Black community college students taking an English course online for the first time. This study sought to address gaps in the literature about Black community college students participating in online learning (Iloh, 2019; Berry, 2021). Fourteen students participated in the study and shared their unique experiences. Each student participated in one interview, and I collected data from transcripts and documents students submitted. After data collection, I conducted a thematic analysis, and among the findings, six themes emerged. The previous chapter explores these themes and their subthemes in further detail. Chapter 5 summarizes the six themes and answers the research questions addressing the students' experiences, initial beliefs, environmental factors, and on-campus support.

The answers to the research questions connect the study findings to current literature in the field. The conceptual frameworks I will discuss are the composite persistence model and critical race theory. It is worth noting that the findings do not suggest only Black students experience many of these areas. Some of the findings reflect previous studies on community college students and online students of other backgrounds. However, the use of the conceptual frameworks provides an expanded lens on unique factors or increased challenges that Black students face due to issues around race in America. In addition to the answered research questions, this chapter will discuss implications for leadership, future research, and recommendations.



## **Summary of Findings**

The data collected within this case study provided insight into the experiences of Black students taking an online English course for the first time at a community college. Among their experiences, six themes emerged. The themes that emerged from the data were the importance of preparation, technology roadblocks while adjusting to online learning, work-life and school balance, the necessity of support systems, desire for campus community, and significance of the Black identity.

The first theme that emerged was the importance of preparation. Most of the students felt that they needed preparation before beginning their course. Students who were recent graduates from high school tended to prepare for the content and technology aspect of the course. Examples ranged from reviewing previous English course content or building their computer. In contrast, older students who graduated from high school more than two years ago opted to prepare mentally by speaking with family members and friends, creating positive affirmations, and changing daily habits.

The second theme, technology roadblocks while adjusting to online learning, revealed roadblocks in two areas, technology skills and technology resources. Some students shared that their struggle in adjusting was mainly about utilizing the technology. These struggles ranged from navigating the learning management system to access course material to basic computer skills such as uploading documents. Roadblocks to access included students having issues finding stable internet access or WIFI and not having a personal computer at the beginning of the semester. These roadblocks made it difficult for even a motivated student to complete assignments.

The third theme was balancing work, life, and school. Many students faced competing priorities as they balanced school with work responsibilities and life responsibilities. Many of the students worked and held a job position that would have been considered essential during the Covid-19 pandemic. Workloads ranged from full-time to part-time, and students shared the challenge at times to navigate scheduling conflicts, finding time to complete school assignments after or during work hours, and feeling overwhelmed. In terms of life responsibilities, students shared that they juggle the time management they must do as parents, caregivers, and siblings, which comes with a host of stressors, even some sharing they were caring for family members with severe chronic illnesses. At times, taking care of their families caused conflict in finding time to get their schoolwork done or finding a place to focus on schoolwork.

The fourth theme, the necessity of support systems, discussed how students seek support for their educational journey. The student sought support from four different groups, family, friends, colleagues, and campus supports. Many students sought support from family, sharing how they keep family up to date on their academic progress and asking family members with college experience questions on how to navigate their educational journey. Some students also sought friends and colleagues for support, mentioning that they could go to them not only for advice but emotional support and encouragement. Lastly, students mentioned campus resources the least among the groups they sought support. Students who did discuss campus support described programs they received one-on-one outreach and support, such as a mentoring program and a scholarship program with a built-in success coach.

The fifth theme was the desire for campus community. Many students expressed their classroom expectations, a desire for more knowledge about campus resources, and improved access to on-campus resources. Students shared that they appreciated transparency, good communication, love for teaching, and inclusivity from professors. Many students liked especially when the professor tried to relate to them and their experiences by sharing their own experiences. Outside of the classroom, many students cited a lack of awareness of resources on campus or having issues accessing available resources. Students shared that this could be due to a lack of outreach and follow-up, especially during crucial times like the start of the semester.

The sixth and final theme was the significance of Black identity, in which students discussed their Blackness sharing their perception of reality, pride, and representation. Some students discussed their perception of what it means to be Black in America, describing inequities within the criminal justice system, media messaging, or the general hardships of being part of a marginalized group. Students expressed great pride as they discussed examples of success and surpassing the odds to reach success. These stories spanned from historical figures who inspired them, people within their family structures, to their hopes of inspiring others and future generations. Finally, students called for more representation within the classroom and on campus. Examples of representation include more faculty including Black people in their curriculum to seeing Black representation in campus advertisements. In addition, their responses appeared to expand to a desire for more opportunities to be heard on campus and see more representation among those working on campus with them. Each area connected back to the student's sense of belonging within the educational experience and campus community.

## **Research Questions and Discussion**

A case study seeks to provide the depth of a specific experience (Merriam, 1998). Within this case study, the purpose of the research questions was to understand the experiences of Black community college students taking an online English course for the first time. An unexpected element that made this experience particularly unique was that students took this course during the Covid-19 pandemic, which impacted every aspect of their lives, including their education (Whissemore, 2020). Research questions are the guiding aspect behind a study and guide the methodology, analysis, and discussion of findings (Stake, 1995). This study sought to answer four research questions. These questions explored student experiences in their first online course, including their initial beliefs, environmental factors that shaped their experiences, and on-campus supports they believed to contribute to success.

### ***Online Student Experience***

Research Question 1: In one urban community college, what are Black community college students' experiences taking their first online course?

Black community college students' experiences are not often researched compared to other racial student groups. Online education research is often exploring primarily the experiences of white students attending 4-year institutions (Abu-Ghazaleh & Hoffman, 2016). In this study Black community college students' experiences during their online class consisted of many different aspects. Many students considered their online experience beginning from the early admissions process, including financial aid and registration. Some students found that frustration with these offices caused more stress and barriers to a solid start to the semester. This coincides with studies that emphasize the

importance of college knowledge that includes navigating other areas of the college, such as admissions, financial aid, and enrollment (Berry, 2021; Sutton, 2019). The semester taking place during the pandemic and all services and courses being virtual forced all these offices to provide these critical services virtually, which presented some challenges with transition (Whissemore, 2020). It is equally important to students that these areas offer many similar traits they expect from the professor in the classroom, such as easy access, transparency, and timely response (Perry & Pilati, 2011, Xu & Xu, 2019). This study aligns with the literature on students' need for assistance in navigating all aspects of their college experience, not just aspects relating to course content and classroom expectations.

Student experiences within their courses were positive in terms of class expectations and course content. Students were happy with their professors and shared that they were learning. Faculty validation can significantly influence students and their sense of belonging (Card & Wood, 2019). Examples of faculty validation shared were professors sending students check-in notes or using personal stories to relate to students' life experiences. Students enjoyed it when the professors made the material relevant and discussed issues and stories that they value. Some stories were introspective, whereas others mentioned stories that talked about Black historical figures. These efforts can help address student difficulties around common online learning issues such as lack of relevance, isolation, and lack of student and teacher interaction (Bambara et al., 2009). Students mostly saw the content while rigorous, a positive opportunity to learn more about themselves, improve writing skills, and further understand the world at large. In this regard, this study both differs and aligns with field literature that discusses how

faculty have difficulty with connectedness and rapport online. While students did express that generally feeling connected at times can be an issue, they expressed that their professors did make efforts to connect with them and build a rapport despite being online. These examples of how students connect can be used as a part of a model to address isolation issues within the online classroom.

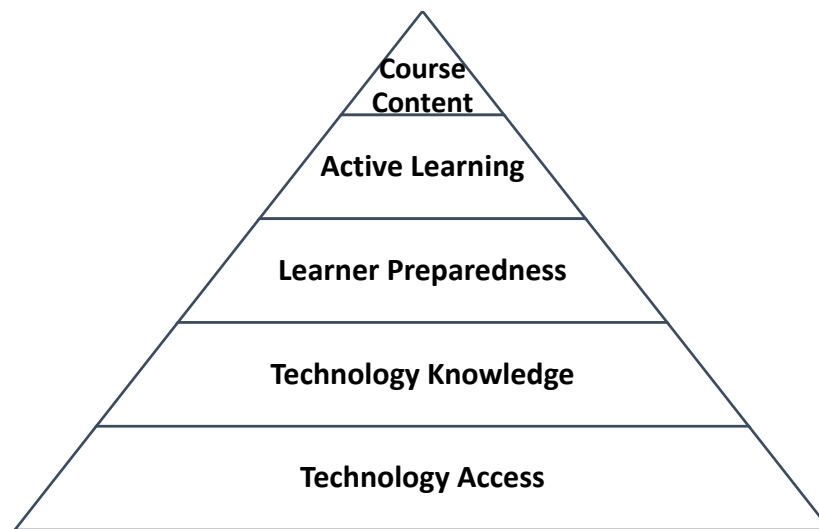
Many of the negative experiences that students shared were around the technology used for the course. Technology provides the necessary landscape for online learning (Berry, 2021; Jagers & Xu, 2016; Larreamendy-Jorns & Leinhardt, 2006). Students must be knowledgeable about the technology and comfortable using it (Cooper 2000; Lehman & Conceição, 2013). Like the literature, students were very open to online learning and using technology; however, their comfort level varied. Some were hesitant to learn the technology needed to do well in the course (Okwumabua et al., 2019). Many students found an issue with the learning management system specifically.

The learning management system (LMS) provides a customizable platform for students to access course content from the faculty to students (Dahlstrom et al., 2014). For some, the difficulty arose in learning how to navigate the LMS, and for others, it included completing specific tasks or feeling that the LMS did not do enough. Some students desired more help in developing the skills to use the technology or accessing the technology. Berry (2021) emphasizes that skill-building around technology is essential for student success regardless of course and content. A student shared that it would be helpful to acquire the technical skills to navigate the learning management system and obtain the necessary tools such as stable WIFI or a computer or laptop. Black students are more likely to rely upon publicly accessed WIFI connections (Berry, 2021). Cooper's

(2000) hierarchy on online education displayed in Figure 1 shows that access and knowledge are at the foundation of online education success. Technology access and knowledge must be present before divulging their learning skills and applying them to the course content (Cooper, 2000).

**Figure 1**

*Hierarchy of Online Education*



Overall while students enjoyed their experience from a content and faculty satisfaction perspective, the lack of technology skills, navigation, support, and access is where they encountered the most difficulty. This study expounds on issues concerning online courses not always relating to course content, but rather to the technology aspect of the course. Very few studies mention the technology skill and access as foundational needs and but rather a part of a matrix of other needs. In practice, this could give the impression that students can work on content and technology skills simultaneously rather than needing to focus on one before the other.

The composite persistence model discusses the multiple facets of a student's life and impact on student persistence in online learning. These facets include student characteristics before starting the course, internal factors, external factors, and skills needed for online student success (Rovai, 2003). This model considers the lives of many non-traditional students and how it may present additional risk factors to their persistence in online courses. Some aspects of this model present in the findings were the importance of faculty interaction and relatable course content. These aspects provide students with a sense of belonging and help address feelings of isolation and alienation as online students who could not come to campus (Rovai & Downey, 2010). Another finding consistent with Rovai's model is the importance of skill development, including computer literacy and computer-based interaction (Rovai, 2003). The findings showed that this was present in varying degrees and most discussed more difficulty in these areas than the course content itself. This study aligns with much of the research done in the context of the composite persistence model yet takes it a step further to help give perspective to why this lack of development may be present.

The impact of acquiring technology skills and technology resources could be explained somewhat by Rovai's theory in his discussion of student characteristics before starting courses. Still, this explanation can expand further through critical race theory. Critical race theory (CRT) discusses how race impacts every aspect of life, in this instance, the online experience of Black students. In a broad context, racism results in a denial of resources, access, and knowledge. From this lens, there could be some explanation for why the findings concluded areas of struggle, particularly at the technology skill and resource level. Community colleges enroll 40 percent of the Black



college student population and are often a hub for students who are not the most prepared for college despite receiving less funding overall compared to other colleges (Beach, 2011; Bowen, 2013; Gose, 2006; Hagedorn & Kuznetsova, 2016; Rodriguez, 2015).

The community college as an educational institution is not remiss of inequities due to racial discrimination. There is a historical legacy of excluding Black students, discrediting historically Black community colleges, socially segregating Black students on integrated campuses, and defunding community colleges where large populations of Black students attend (Beach, 2011; Douglass- Horsford, 2011; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Lassiter, 2013; Myran et al., 2013). Though access to community colleges has expanded and there is increasing enrollment of Black students, the approach to online learning remains colorblind. Colorblindness is a tenet of CRT and describes approaching solutions to issues excluding the role of race and the impact of racism (Myran et al., 2013). The current approach to online learning continues to follow a narrative that online learning caters to a specific population. Among the literature, students who do well tend to be White, Asian, female, and at least middle class (Berry, 2021; CCRC, 2013; Hart et al., 2017). One of the root issues around colorblindness is that it positions whiteness as the standard and does not recognize other groups of people, their experiences, and what they need to be successful (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Tate, 1997).

Community colleges pride themselves on being open enrollment; however, the virtual space caters to a white and middle-class standard with assumption made of who enrolls and what access, resources, and knowledge they have. For example, a sense of community is an essential aspect of the success of Black students; however, many online courses' current structure lacks establishing a sense of community (Rovai & Wighting,

2005; Slimp, 2016; Xu & Xu, 2019). This example reflects how Black student needs are excluded and current research is often paired with an accepted notion that Black students do not do well in online learning without further investigation as to why (Bergman et al., 2014; Xu & Xu, 2019). Historically, online learning and research within online education cater to a smaller portion of students and have made that the standard even in spaces such as community colleges where they are a large part of the growing population (Iloh, 2019). This gap in research shows how colorblindness denies the need to see differences. What has been considered student success best practices is not always synonymous with all student success practices. Additional work is needed to find out how researchers and practitioners can consider differences in experiences and needs to translate strategies that improve experiences for Black students. The utilization of critical race theory in this study is important as it provides a greater context to the reason for the challenges. This study brings together a perspective that incorporates all the identities of the participating students, community college students, online students, and Black students.

### ***Initial Beliefs***

Research Question 2: As a first-time online student, what are some of the initial beliefs, they have about their online learning experience?

In the context of this study, initial beliefs describe some of the students' initial thoughts and feelings about entering their online learning experience. One of the most prominent initial beliefs was the value of preparation. Preparation in this perspective is not to be confused with academic preparedness, which describes the degree a student performed academically based on standardized tests and previous grades before entering college (Barnes et al., 2010). In this case, preparation describes students' actions to get

ready for the expectations they perceived they would need to meet in college. Students prepared in various ways, some opting to prepare for the content, technological demands, or preparing their minds and habits of how school would change their daily life.

Each student prepared to varying degrees, with some wishing they had prepared more. Their recognition of preparation is consistent with the literature pointing out that preparation is essential to online learning success (Cooper, 2000). Not only must students be prepared by way of digital literacy to navigate the course content, but they also must have active learning and self-directed learning skills (Cooper, 2000). Community college students, particularly ones in urban areas, may lack this level of preparedness before starting the course (Dache-Gerbino & White, 2016). This study aligns with the literature discussing the needs for preparation on many levels for many community college students learning online.

Within the CPM model, preparedness plays a crucial role and suggests addressing after assessing the student's characteristics and skills to provide early intervention (Lehman & Conceição, 2013). Some of the relevant skills that students should develop during this early intervention were skills focused on literacy, time management, and computer skills (Rovai, 2003). Currently, community colleges continue to struggle to provide the adequate amount of intervention needed to address gaps in skill sets ("Trends in distance education," 2016). There is a need for initial programs that provide support and skill development for students because it prepares them for the course expectations ahead and builds a sense of community and support (Bambara et al., 2009).

Viewing the value of preparation from the CRT lens highlights the history of under-preparedness of Black students in educational spaces. The beginning of these

preparation gaps can be explained by first acknowledging the inequities that exist within K-12 education in areas of lower socioeconomic status and regions with large, marginalized populations, both of which represent the area the case study took place (Epstein, 2011; Knaggs et al., 2015). While college access has expanded on a superficial level, there is a countrywide spread of resegregation patterns within the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Even in areas where desegregation has occurred, social segregation remains and includes lower expectations for Black students (Douglass-Horsford, 2011). Many students entering the college space for the very first-time face barriers at educational, societal, and institutional levels (Bentley et al., 2016). In practice, this looks like a lack of funding in schools to expand technology access and skill development, digital redlining in which discrimination occurs through access to quality internet connection, or not providing the appropriate training for faculty to be able to utilize technology within their classroom (Barhoum, 2017; Berry, 2021; Dietrich et al., 2020; Gurukkal, 2020; Kelderman, 2020). These practices compound over time and leave students less prepared for a world that more and more embraces technology and its increased utilization within educational spaces. While many students valued preparation, none shared that they had looked to the institution with an expectation to be prepared by the campus community. Instead, they looked to friends, family members, and colleagues. This study aligns with other studies speaking to students' lack of preparedness and tendency to seek assistance first from family and friends before those within the educational space (Berry, 2021). Students entered their online learning experience eager, excited, ready to learn, and prepared only to the capacity they could prepare or saw fit to prepare based on their perceptions and those of family, friends, or colleagues. While the

students in the study did have access to resources and orientations were available virtually, none of the students shared that they sought these available resources. This study highlights a lack of students seeking out resources which is similarly highlighted in many studies done on community college students and Black students.

### ***Environmental Factors***

Research Question 3. According to students, what environmental factors shape Black students' experience taking online courses for the first time at urban community colleges?

Environmental factors describe areas that students shared were a part of life outside of their education. Environmental factors play a crucial role in students' daily lives taking courses online (Robichaud, 2010). Students often seek online learning due to their environmental factors such as work, family responsibilities, and to have the flexibility for navigating competing priorities (Robichaud, 2010; Strohl, 2018; Walpole et al., 2014). Their relationships outside of school played a significant role. Some students were parents or caregivers for other family members. Many community college students are considered non-traditional and are navigating caring for others outside of school, and these responsibilities are unlikely to change when students begin online courses (Bean & Metzner, 1985; CCRC, 2013). Despite the prevalence of non-traditional students, most student learning models cater to a traditional student with minimal responsibilities outside of school (Philibert et al., 2008). For Black students in the study, family is an integral part of their lives. The same was true among the literature, for many Black students' family is their largest support system in school (Bergman et al., 2014; Berry, 2021; Gipson et al., 2018). Many students in the study mentioned family as a source of responsibility and

support. These dual roles must be acknowledged and considered when supporting Black students within online courses. While other studies also recognize the dual relationship of support and responsibility this study emphasizes how these dual relationships with family are important to students, play a major factor in their success, and can be incorporated by early intervention programs to support student success. Considering the many roles' students have in other areas of life can be opportunities to relate, educate, and empower.

Another environmental factor apparent in the findings is their work life. Most students worked either part-time or full-time jobs. This finding was consistent with other research that Black students are more likely to work while attending school (Jones, 2019). Online learning is appealing to students who work due to its flexibility to work around their schedules. Despite time flexibility, many working students had to find the time around work or during work to complete assignments. For some, this presented a challenge. All students shared that they worked at hourly wage jobs and hoped their education would help them establish a more stable career. Many view the role of education as a path to create an opportunity to move upward economically (Howard & Navarro, 2016). All students viewed their current jobs as temporary while pursuing their educational goals. Students at urban community colleges often work jobs with little earning potential and that are considered lower wages while they are in school (Tannock & Flocks, 2003). Many in the study were not financially able to leave their jobs to focus on schoolwork, so they found ways to navigate their work demands and school demands. The constant negotiation of priorities may require online educators to find ways to become more flexible, keeping in mind the lives of their students (Donnelly & Kovacich, 2014). This study expands the perception of working students, reframing their work environments as more than a necessary distractor,

and including that it can also be a place where they can be more productive in completing their schoolwork. This amplifies the resourceful nature of students to reach their goals.

The composite persistence model highlights environmental factors as external factors that can heavily impact a student's persistence (Rovai, 2003). These external factors are usually related to familial and work responsibilities such as concerns around childcare or financial circumstances (Rovai, 2003). Even online students who can complete their work anywhere with WIFI access can encounter these concerns that may spill over into their academic lives. A loss of job or childcare help can shift how and when a student completes assignments. While the community colleges are unable to predict unexpected life circumstances that may arise and change a student's priority list, it is vital to have campus supports in place to help students with resources to navigate these external factors (Lehman & Conceição, 2013).

On the other hand, critical race theory makes it necessary to point acknowledge the historical context as to why Black students may seek out familial, friend, and colleague relationships for information before campus resources. These relationships, while familiar, more importantly, provide a sense of safety and consistency for students. Asking for help is often an area met with stigma and fear for Black students that could stem from the history of being racially discriminated against within major U.S. systems such as education, healthcare, and the criminal justice system (Berry, 2021; Tierney et al., 2018; White & Dache, 2020). Students within the study also discussed their Blackness and the perceptions of their reality regarding discrimination. Discrimination can be identified as early as age six and can impact students' sense of belonging, perception of education, and perception of themselves (Hope et al., 2015; Jones, 2019).

A mistrust of these major systems may cause apprehension in students to reach out for fear of being mistreated, misrepresented, and misunderstood. This study not only discusses examples of this apprehension but how every campus connection plays a role in a student's sense of campus rapport including nonacademic areas they encounter before enrollment such as admissions and financial aid. The critical race theory tenet of social justice emphasizes the importance of dismantling barriers through challenging personal and professional values, beliefs, and behaviors (Capper, 2015). This reflection is necessary within educational spaces to support students and avoid indulging perceptions rooted in bias or narratives created by racism. It is crucial for all areas on campus to be mindful of how their words and actions impact the student experience.

The findings showed that all students worked at jobs for an hourly wage. Students who work or have financial stressors are more likely to have persistence barriers (Mukherjee et al., 2017). Many Black students are not financially able to eliminate work when they begin school (Jones, 2019). There is also decreasing financial help that community colleges can provide, requiring them to consistently support students with less, especially in urban areas (Bailey, 2016). Some students struggle to cover tuition and books, let alone living expenses, even with financial aid. The existence of racism, a critical race theory tenet, explains that we should not limit our view of racism as isolated acts but rather a system that historically impacts all areas of life for marginalized communities. When critical race theory is applied in this way, light is shed on economic inequities due to the legacy of racism making it difficult for black students to avoid working while in school. Economically, there are persistent income gaps between Black and white households (Bangs & Davis, 2015). Not only are Black families more likely to



have less money for their education but also receive less in wages even for the same job as their white counterparts (Bangs & Davis, 2015). Within the findings, most students saw work as a necessary means for survival, not a priority that supersedes their investment in their education. While work was important current job positions were not a part of their long-term goals. This study highlights a need for more literature to explore how work environments specifically for marginalized communities, impact their educational goals and how supporting better work environments in the community help with the persistence and retention of students.

### ***Campus Support***

Research Question 4: According to students, what on-campus supports contribute to student success in online courses?

Finding a sense of belonging within the campus community has been linked to persistence and success among community college students taking coursework in any format (Card & Wood, 2019, Martinez & Munsch, 2019, Tinto, 2017). Within online learning, this remains a crucial aspect of student success. The study's findings show that students desired to feel more a part of the campus. This ranged from more opportunities to be involved or to know more about available resources. Many students did not share using on-campus supports except for those part of mentoring or scholarship programs with built-in support and outreach. The findings of this study align with other studies that have discussed that mentoring can be a great way to keep Black students engaged and assist them in navigating college (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Students shared how they benefited from check-ins and follow-ups with their assigned faculty or staff member at the college. Creating these connections benefits students in

finding a sense of belonging, building their confidence and community, and providing them with the knowledge to navigate a college environment (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Card & Wood, 2019; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). These supports were provided virtually at the time and supporting campus community members were still able to establish these connections and rapport (Tierney et al., 2018).

While students did share on-campus supports they believed would contribute to their success, many were uncertain if the supports were offered and available at the college and had not yet used them. For example, participating students in the study while aware of tutoring, and acknowledging it could contribute to their success if needed, did not use this resource. Additionally, supports such as assistance with childcare, technology support, and counseling, students questioned if they were available. Berry (2021) describes this as college knowledge. She points out that students are not as likely to use campus resources to obtain college knowledge and usually seek out family and friends first (Berry, 2021). In addition, Black students tend to believe they need a high level of independence to be successful students, and even when students struggle, they do not necessarily ask for help (Delpit, 2012; Jones, 2019). Throughout this study students while desiring community did not articulate a direct path of when and how the provided campus resources should be used except those a part of programs with one-on-one outreach. Students need resources that are available, easy to access and work around their busy lives (Sutton, 2019). The findings show that students are willing to use the resources available, however, lacked the knowledge of the existence of the resource or how to take advantage of the resource. Targeted outreach with limited resources can present a challenge. Bailey (2016) highlights the challenges with many initiatives and emphasizes

the importance of resources collaborating across campus to reach students rather than working in silos (Bailey, 2016). Students wanted to see culturally relevant and targeted outreach to feel welcomed by the campus community and take full advantage of what is available. The need for cultural relevance within this study mirrors other studies and its link to success for Black students (Bergman et al., 2014; Berry, 2021; Rovai & Downey, 2010; Tierney et al., 2018).

Rovai describes campus supports and resources as internal factors within the composite persistence model. Internal factors include aspects that involve the college, including school policies and procedures, course expectations, on-campus supports, and other academic needs (Lehman & Conceição, 2013). One of the significant aspects of these internal factors centers on establishing a sense of community for students and helping them understand what online learning entails (Rovai, 2003). The findings showed that some internal factors, such as campus support, link to success, but students had difficulty accessing them or were unaware of all the available support. This barrier highlighted within this study agrees with the composite persistence model and research centering the need for students to develop a sense of community. Part of building a sense of community specifically for Black students is providing knowledge that they find valuable (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Students who participated in the study shared how important it was to them when members of the campus community, whether faculty or staff, took the time to check-in and share information with them that would help them better navigate college. Student interactions with campus community members should provide a plethora of opportunities for students to gain valuable knowledge about what the campus offers regardless of area (Berry, 2021).

In virtual collegiate spaces, multiple studies speak to how isolated and alienated students can feel during their online courses (Berry, 2021, Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Slimp, 2016; Xu & Xu, 2019). For Black students specifically, this can have a detrimental impact as culturally they come from communities that value community and thrive in spaces where they feel a sense of belonging (Card & Wood, 2019; Rovai & Wighting, 2005). The findings highlight the role of representation when developing sense of belonging or community. Sense of belonging is not only a necessity for Black students' achievement but also among students learning online (Adams & Wilson, 2020; Berry, 2021; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Jones, 2019). Sense of belonging contributes to student success in multiple ways such as persistence, engagement, improved mental health, less feelings of isolation, and more motivation (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Rovai, 2002; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 2017). Jones (2019) emphasizes that racially hostile campus climates directly impact Black students' sense of belonging negatively (Jones, 2019). This makes it even more important to focus on how race impacts students within policy, practice, and daily interactions (Santamaira, 2014).

Multiple students referenced how seeing other Black faculty and staff and learning about the success of Black students was important to them. Historically after facing physical segregation, many Black students faced social segregation in educational spaces making Black students feel unwelcome and outcasted (Beach, 2011; Douglass-Horsford, 2011). A tenant of critical race theory is the emphasis on counter stories. Counter stories amplify the voices and experiences of marginalized people (Hiraldo, 2010). The findings showed that students desired to have their voices and experiences represented in many aspects such as marketing materials, teaching faculty, success

stories, and curriculum. When institutions do not consider the importance of representation, this does not provide diverse viewpoints to all students and makes Black students feel undervalued (Hope et al., 2010). The purpose of education is to provide an opportunity for economic advancement, empowerment, and seek to address inequities that persist so that all students can come to a welcoming environment to learn (Howard & Navarro, 2016). When students are disengaged, this could be because they do not see themselves in the educational space. This study agrees that Black students are not suffering from an achievement gap but gaps in opportunities, resources, and knowledge (Delpit, 2012; Jones, 2019; Kunjufu, 2012; Mukhtar et al., 2020). Much of this is rooted in inequities caused by racial discrimination and underrepresentation (Berry, 2021; Dache et al., 2016). I also want to acknowledge that representation on college campuses is of great importance especially when Black students encounter on social media and television daily acts of discrimination around the country against Black people. This has both an emotional and mental toll on students (Eichstaedt et al., 2021). For Black students, racism will remain a backdrop in every aspect of their lives. Still, institutions can do many things to help minimize this in their own spaces and make students feel a part of the campus community, capable of success, and that all on-campus resources are there to support that success.

### **Significance of Time in History**

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the unique time in history that this study took place. Each student who participated in the study enrolled in their first English course during the Covid-19 global pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic shut down community college campuses across the country, leaving institutions with no choice but

to provide online courses only. Typically, online learning is a choice students make when provided with course formats (on-campus, hybrid, online). While Covid-19 shed even more light on many inequities, it forced institutions to reframe student success in online learning (Dietrich et al., 2020;). The pandemic removed the choice to enroll in online courses from the learning experience, making institutions find creative ways to provide all courses, services, and resources virtually (Mukhtar, 2020).

The findings show that the pandemic did have an impact on students. Many were essential workers, navigating the health of themselves and loved ones, and all on the backdrop of the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection in Washington D. C. and continued racial violence in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmad Arbery (Eichstaedt et al., 2021; Laurencin & Walker, Lansing et al., 2021; 2020; Murty & Payne, 2021). Not only were Black students faced to navigate college during a global pandemic but also dealing with the everyday racism that exists within society. Despite all these external circumstances, these students chose to pursue their education and did all they could to reach academic success. The pandemic placed even more importance on technology tools and online learning and virtual spaces became a staple in the learning environment (Gurukkal, 2020). This study showed that even post-pandemic, it will be equally essential that we provide greater accessibility and support every online student's success.

### **Impact of K-12 Inequities on Community Colleges**

Chapter one discussed inequities within education and how this relates to students entering college and participating in online courses. Before discussing leadership and recommendations, it is important to revisit how inequity within K-12 relates to

community colleges and Black students attending them. Primary and secondary education plays an essential role in shaping student's perception of themselves as students and members of the learning process (Hope et al., 2010). Inequity often is the extension of existing societal ills, including but not limited to racism and income inequality (Jackson & Holzman, 2020). As a result, students may experience a lack of curriculum rigor, resources, or lowered expectations from teachers during their K-12 educational experience (Douglass-Horsford, 2011; Iloh & Toidson, 2013; Knaggs et al., 2015). Budget issues, particularly at primary and secondary schools in urban areas, are more likely to be impacted due to funding challenges paired with other challenges in the community such as poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity (Bangs & Davis, 2011; Myran et al., 2013). Students who graduate from K-12 education but lack the necessary resources come to college not only underprepared academically but unclear of college expectations (Liao et al., 2014). For community colleges with limited resources, incoming students also have greater needs requiring community colleges to give more with less (Lassiter, 2013). These compounded challenges require a focus on social justice and equity as a necessary part of institutional leadership if the goal is student success for all (Marshall & Oliva, 2010).

### **Implications for Leadership**

Black student success in online courses requires leaders at every level to have a vested interest. The findings show that students want to see more representation and more campus outreach and support as they navigate their online courses for the first time. With the proper support for students during their first online course, they could not only reach success in the current course but increase their likelihood of doing well in future online

courses (Hachey et al., 2014). There are multiple inequities within online learning as many of the current practices within online course structure do not support all student needs. These inequities can include but are not limited to racial, digital, and socioeconomic (Berry, 2021). The pandemic was a larger case study in how online learning success is not evenly accessible to all students (Kelderman, 2020).

As leaders, it is critical to lead with a focus on addressing current social inequities in education (Marshall & Oliva, 2010). These deep-rooted social inequities at community colleges, especially those in urban areas, may bear fruit, including lack of funding for technology tools, understaffed online learning support, lack of resources for students to learn essential technology skills, lack of support in securing stable internet access off-campus, students feeling isolated during their online learning experience, and barriers to accessing quality resources that assist with online learning. Online courses should not be a course format that students must "enter at their own risk." If the pandemic has taught us anything, all students, especially online, need quality services and those students choose online courses based on circumstances, not skillset or access to resources. Within leadership, it is vital to assist the needs of the students and meet them where they are to set them up as best as we can for success.

Community colleges enroll at least 30% of the Black college student population, and a significant number of Black students attend urban community colleges (Lassiter, 2013; NCES, 2018). Institutional leaders must value the voices of this group of students to address their needs and support their success. As technology becomes part of our educational experiences and daily life, it is vital to consider the equity in this area and its impact on students. Educational leadership focused on equity helps leaders better respond



to the growing changes within education and American society (Santamaria, 2014). Educational spaces should embed fostering change within our society. As educational spaces have expanded virtually, leaders must create a vision for how institutions can better equip all students to handle online courses regardless of background, outside responsibilities, technology skills, and technology resources.

### **Future Research**

This study sought to understand the experiences of Black community college students taking an online course for the first time. While there is research separately on Black students, students at community colleges, and students learning online, there are currently gaps in research on Black community college students' online experiences. This gap impacts the availability of strategies and best practices that practitioners can use to reach these students. While this study helps fill that gap, there are multiple areas that researchers can expand upon related to this topic area. Based on the findings, these are the areas for expanded study.

### ***Black Students***

Research on Black students is often framed from a deficit perspective, seeking to point out only what is wrong with students (Anzul et al., 2001; Jones, 2019). Future research should include an anti-deficit perspective pointing out areas where students have found success and investigating further what this could mean for assisting students in finding success using skills and information they already possess. In addition, future studies could more explicitly ask students about their experience as Black students and how their identity impacts their experience in educational spaces. Discovering more transferable skill sets rooted in their culture or life experiences can be applicable and

relevant to their lives as students. When information is relevant to students, it becomes more helpful (Klasik et al., 2018).

### ***Community Colleges***

Much higher education research includes four-year traditional students only (Strohl, 2018). Further research on community colleges provides more perspective of the non-traditional and Black students and how they develop a sense of belonging and relationship building. The current literature discusses that many non-traditional students are less likely to be available on campus to access resources and attend events even if they are helpful. More research on their experiences could help create best practices in getting non-traditional students more involved with the campus community that is flexible to their schedule and how students already make connections on campus. The findings of this study discussed that individualized interventions made the most fruitful campus connections. Building upon research on student connections could help establish a better understanding of how the campus community in policy and practice can create a model on fostering connections with students who have busy lives.

### ***Online Learning***

Online learning encompasses many areas, including a student's ability to learn course content online, adjust to online technology, and understand the needed technology skills and resources. Learning management systems are a continuous investment at institutions (Wagoner et al., 2006). In the findings, students shared having issues specifically with the learning management system, which plays as a central aspect to online learning. Further research is needed to discuss the learning management system and the impact on student experience and attrition. Expanded research in this area could

assist institutions when selecting educational technology and help companies that create learning management platforms create more student-focused products that are more user-friendly to students with limited technology skills.

### ***Gatekeeper Courses***

Like English, students in developmental math courses online also have a lower rate of completion (Xu & Jagers, 2019). Further research can explore Black students' experiences taking a math course online. This additional research can help compare the preparation strategies and perceptions of what students need to succeed and how these compare to English courses. Math focuses on different skills, and it would be interesting to see how learning skill development online would be similar or different. Expanded research on Black students in gatekeeper courses can also provide improved and more culturally relevant approaches to math and English.

### **Recommendations**

#### ***Expand Campus Community***

At community colleges, the campus is a part of the surrounding community. Students who attend are often commuting and cannot leave behind the communities they come from, whether good or bad (Bacevice & Dunkley, 2018; Berry, 2021; Strohl, 2018). It is important for students to feel that their communities are a valued part of the campus community, especially those who have felt devalued in past educational spaces (Delpit, 2012; Hope et al., 2015). Building a rapport with students starts at the first interaction with the institution, whether in person or online. Institutions must ensure that all support offices are accessible online and online students receive targeted outreach that caters to them to make sure that students are aware. College campuses can also create marketing

campaigns that incorporate and encourages students to share information about the college with family and friends. Asking students who are their supporters can cultivate an opportunity for targeted outreach to those supporters on how they can support the online student in their life.

An example of this can be a semester newsletter for parents, family, friends, and colleagues detailing where students can access online resources, tips for online learning, and how they can support student goals. Students often look to these groups before accessing campus personnel, so it would be important to ensure they have the correct knowledge and are empowered to encourage students to build relationships on campus. This form of relationship-building can also be a tool to build relationships with community members that can also become future students.

For online students especially, access to the internet is essential. Digital redlining discriminates against communities of lower socioeconomic status and communities of color accessing quality internet service (Berry, 2021). Community colleges must advocate for more WIFI access points in their community and improved infrastructure in neighborhoods where students live. This initiative would rely on establishing community partnerships with local businesses that provide internet service and technology resources and advocating for increased spaces where students can connect to the internet beyond campus. An example could be virtual hotspots and promoting existing areas where students can access the internet for free or computer access. This expansion can also include creating a designated space on campus for online students. This space could be promoted as a place with extended hours throughout the day for students to complete work at a time that works best for them. If funds permit, this space would include a

strong WIFI connection and computer and printer access. Online students need to know that though they are online, the campus is thinking of them too, and they are welcome.

### ***Anticipate and Support Student Technology Learning Curves***

Community college students often come to college needing additional resources and support because they are not as prepared for college (Dache-Gerbino & White, 2016). In addition, there may be some level of under-preparedness for the technology resources and skills required for online courses (Berry, 2021; Cooper, 2000; Lehman & Conceição, 2013). Institutions and community college leaders should anticipate a learning curve at the beginning of the semester as online students are acclimating to both the technology and course content simultaneously. This learning curve will be especially true for students taking online courses for the first time. Providing students with a checklist of things they can do prior to class to best prepare can be a first step in helping them prepare for online learning. The checklist can include skills and resources needed and how to gain skills and resources if students do not have them. Skill preparation can consist of one-on-one or small group sessions for students with minimal technology skills. These sessions would assist with navigating the learning management system and performing common tasks that they will be required to do in the course, such as uploading documents, opening documents, organizing materials for class, and responding to discussion boards. Students will have an opportunity to learn and practice the technology needed before class.

It is important to connect students to a virtual space to receive resources and support throughout the semester. This space can be within the learning management system or a promoted school webpage that links all relevant resources to online students.

This space can house resources, information, helpful links, tutorials, and access to campus support if students need one on one resources. Content should be relevant to online students with topics that pertain to developing academic skills and technology skills. Developing these skills is crucial to online student success, and students will come with varying levels of readiness for online courses (Xu & Xu, 2019).

If additional support is needed, institutions can develop a team of campus community members that can help students acclimate to online learning. The members of this team can vary from student support services to academic and information technology personnel. There can be check-ins with first-time online students during crucial semester periods, such as the beginning of the semester, during midterms, and during finals. These check-ins can include a live chat feature on the resource pages or virtual office hours where students can come and receive help. Faculty members of online courses can alert this team if they have a student who is having difficulty with the technology and may benefit from one-on-one support. Once alerted, a team member can contact the student to assist them with any technology challenges that they are having. This benefit is twofold. The personalized support can help students starting online courses feel less isolated and assist them with adapting to the new technology while allowing teaching faculty to focus on content and not the technology challenges of students (Brown, 2011; Berry, 2021; Slimp, 2016). However, teaching faculty should remain up to date with technology and learning management systems needed for their courses to improve course design and online pedagogy (Rovai, 2010). This additional support can introduce students to more professionals at the college, acclimate to the technology aspect of the class, and improve their sense of community.

### *Close the Question Gap*

The discussion of achievement gaps often frames marginalized students from a deficit perspective. Kunjufu (2012) notes perceived achievement gaps and often question gaps (Kunjufu, 2012). Question gaps describe looking at all areas of student success, focusing on environmental factors that impact individual student success, not just individualized success compared to other groups. (Kunjufu, 2012). Research on Black students' online experiences is minimal, leaving a void in possible best practices (Berry, 2021; Iloh, 2019). Community colleges must first ask themselves if their current online learning practices align with students that enroll in their courses. Using campus data, institutions can better pinpoint practices that cater to not just online students generally but their online students specifically. Students can be involved in the process through individual interviews, surveys, or focus groups, asking them what their needs are and how they can be better supported focusing on technology and the online learning experience. While student success relies on many factors, asking students questions about their experience can allow institutions to drive initiatives that students want and need rather than limiting ideas to only researched best practices but rather patterns seen from local students.

All technology used in the classroom should be in the best interest of students. As technology tools are purchased and implemented, students should be a part of the selection process. The use of a learning management system or online course program varies from student to professor to the administrator. Tools used for courses must be user-friendly for both faculty and students. Involving students in the selection and implementation process can help institutions better understand how students will use the

technology and provide the best learning space for students. Technology tools often come with a significant expense to the school and the institution should make purchases with a decision-making process that includes all students. In addition, once a technology tool is purchased, there should be an opportunity to provide student feedback on ways the tool could be more beneficial. Involving students can also point out equity concerns as many learn and interpret information differently. The more perspectives represented, the more the technology tools selected can be accessible and user-friendly for everyone.

### *Value the Black Experience*

Where we educate Black students, we must celebrate Black students. Community colleges continue to enroll over 30% of the Black college student population, which is even higher at community colleges in urban areas (NCES, 2018). It is even more critical for these educational spaces to include Black experiences. Education should include learning about different cultures and how societal oppression impacts groups of people (Gurung & Prieto, 2009). Institutions should develop curriculum highlighting the lives and stories of Black people. Black students benefit from material relevant to their experience and apply it to their lives (Bambara et al., 2009; Berry, 2021). Highlighting Black people's experiences, provides opportunities for faculty, staff, and administration to have more conversations around making the campus community more inclusive. When students feel included, they gain a sense of belonging and are motivated to persist (Tinto, 2017).

Institutions should also be mindful of equity gaps due to color blind practices and policies that may hinder student success even if unintended. Rather than looking at what is wrong with Black students, recognize their drive, dedication and look at what may be



roadblocks to success (Berry, 2021; Felix & Castro, 2018; Howard & Navarro, 2016). Mentorship opportunities from racially conscious staff can be an essential component in supporting Black students in a way that allows them to be their most authentic selves and understand that the educational space sees them and places value on their experience (Berry, 2021; Delpit, 2012). Building an improved rapport with Black students can make them more comfortable reaching out for help and feeling the institution is a safe space (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The legacy of community colleges has been at the nexus of expanding higher education and labor markets. Online learning has become a significant investment among community colleges as a cost-effective way to expand course offerings and reach a broader student body. Online learning continues to present more challenges in comparison to in-person learning. Among different groups of community college students, there is little research on Black students learning online, though shown in many studies as finding the least success compared to other student groups. This case study investigated the experiences of Black students while attending an English course online for the first time.

This study revealed that Black students approach their online courses with motivation, dedication, and a desire for the campus community and material relevant to their experience. They value their support systems, and that preparation is key to doing well. While school is a priority, they encounter challenges as they acclimate to the technology aspect of online courses and navigate a balance between work, life, and school. The Covid-19 pandemic brought these issues to the forefront in a unique way. For the first time in history, all students attended online courses regardless of course format preference. This challenged institutions at every level, including community colleges, to provide services and support virtually.

Based on these findings' institutions should continue to support Black students taking online courses. This effort begins with intentional preparation and virtual support initiatives that assist students with possible technology skills that need development or support navigating technology tools. In addition, helping students develop a sense of

belonging that extends to campus through one-on-one support from campus community members and incorporating students already existing support systems outside of campus. Equally as important is for Black students to have opportunities to provide feedback about their experience and be a part of making improvements to online learning practices. Lastly, students need to feel affirmed as a valued part of the campus community by delivering course content and campus interactions that include their history, experiences, challenges, and triumphs. Though American education has had a racist history of excluding Black people from educational spaces, Black students continue to defy odds and overcome challenges to strive for success. They have risen to the occasion and have remained steadfast in being one of the growing student populations within higher education. As educators and educational leaders, it is our responsibility to cultivate a space for these students to feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Protocol**

#### **Research Title**

Exploring Success and Challenges of Black Students Taking an English course Online at an Urban Community College

#### **Research Questions**

1. In one urban community college, what are Black community college students' experiences taking their first online course?
2. As a first-time online student, what are some of the initial beliefs, they have about their online learning experience?
3. According to students, what environmental factors shape the experience of Black students taking online courses for the first time at urban community colleges?
4. According to students, what on-campus supports contribute to student success in online courses?

#### **Introduction**

My name is Latoya Bond, and I am a current doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at Rowan University. I am conducting a case study for my dissertation under my dissertation chair Dr. Cecile Sam. Thank you for choosing to be a part of my study. This study aims to understand the experience of Black community college students taking an English course online. There are gaps in research about Black community college students, and your perspective is valuable, especially on your online course experience. These questions aim to understand further how you perceive your experience taking your English 098/099 or English 098/101 course online. Your participation is voluntary, and I am asking you to participate in up to two interviews. For your participation, you will receive a \$10 gift card.

#### **Video Recording**

I will conduct our interview on Zoom. Our meeting is password protected and is locked so that no one else may log on during our interview. With your permission, I would like to record our interview. The purpose of this is to go back if needed to make sure I have as much information as possible and focus on our dialogue. Our conversation will be confidential, and no discussions will take place outside of dissertation purposes. As an added measure, I will use a pseudonym to protect your identity. This interview may take up to 60 minutes, and you are free to answer these questions in whatever capacity you are comfortable. Before we move further, please let me know if you have any questions.



## **Interview Protocol**

Date:

Interviewee:

Time of Interview:

### **Interview Questions**

1. Housekeeping information (Gender, Age, number of semesters in school, course load)
2. What are your goals of attending CCP?
3. Would you have taken the class online under different circumstances? Why or why not?
4. How did you prepare to take the online course? Any resources used?
5. How would you say you felt when you started the online class in a few words or phrases? Was there anything about taking an online course that surprised you?
6. Describe the ideal online class experience.
7. Some say that online courses are more difficult than in-person courses. What would you say and why?
8. Suppose you had difficulty in class; how would you address that scenario or encourage a friend to address the problem?
9. Talk with me about your responsibilities outside of school? (Include broad categories- work, family obligations, volunteer, military service to probe).
10. Are there any things outside of class that you think make online courses a challenge or helps your success?
11. Are there any ways you would want to feel more support as a student taking an online class? (on & off-campus?)

## **Appendix B**

### **Document Protocol**

#### **Research Title**

Exploring Success and Challenges of Black Students Taking an English course Online at an Urban Community College

#### **Research Questions**

1. In one urban community college, what are Black community college students' experiences taking their first online course?
2. As a first-time online student, what are some of the initial beliefs, they have about their online learning experience?
3. According to students, what environmental factors shape the experience of Black students taking online courses for the first time at urban community colleges?
4. According to students, what on-campus supports contribute to student success in online courses?

Date:

Document:

#### **Document Questions**

1. Who created this document?
2. Who does the document serve?
3. What is the goal of this document?
4. How does this document support student learning?
5. What insight does it provide about the student experience in the online environment?
6. Does this document provide insight into student resources?
7. What does this document reveal about student success?
8. What does this document reveal about student barriers?
9. Does this document acknowledge any environmental factors outside of school?

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

This consent form will consist of two parts. One part will be for your consent to participate, and the second part will be your permission to record our interview. We will both have a copy of this form for our records.

This study aims to understand the experience of Black community college students taking an English course online. Should you have any questions regarding this study, you can contact me at 609-505-2790, or you can email me at langstln@rowan.edu.

**Research Title:** Exploring Success and Challenges of Black Students Taking an English course Online at an Urban Community College

I \_\_\_\_\_, give my full consent to participate in Latoya Bond's research study on the experiences of Black community college students taking an English course online.

I understand I will be answering questions about my perceptions of my online experience in my 098/099 or 098/101 English course.

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw myself from the study at any moment without penalty or retaliation. There is no known risk associated with my participation in this study.

I understand that my confidentiality is a priority, and to protect my identity Latoya Bond will use a pseudonym. Any information obtained from my participation will be securely stored electronically and locked with a passcode. Latoya Bond will not share my information outside of the purposes of the study.

I understand that my participation in this research will require participating in up to two 60-minute interviews. For safety during the pandemic, Latoya Bond will conduct this interview over Zoom. I may refrain from answering any question at any time during the interview without facing any repercussion.

I understand that I may be asked to provide documents associated with my class, such as my class syllabus, class emails, class announcements, or class assignments.

I understand that for my full participation, I will receive a \$10 gift card.

If I would like a copy of the study's findings, I can email Latoya Bond at langstln@rowan.edu.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Date:

## Appendix D

### Video Recording Consent Form

#### ROWAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM

You have already agreed to participate in a research study conducted by Latoya Bond. We ask for your permission to record our video interview as part of that research study.

You do not have to agree to be recorded to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for information gathering and analysis purposes only. Specifically, as the principal investigator, I will be transcribing the audio and then looking for emerging themes and patterns that come out of the interview.

The recording(s) will include your name and an audiovisual of you answering the interview questions. However, your identity will not be used during the analysis of data.

The recording(s) will be stored electronically on a personal laptop locked with a passcode. The recording will be retained until the end of the study. Once the study complete, I will be discarding the recordings.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

### Recruitment Flyer

**We are seeking student volunteers to share their experience taking an online English course at CCP!**

# Exploring Success and Challenges of Black Students Taking an English Course Online



### **TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY YOU MUST MEET THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA:**

- Be 18 years or older
- Identify as African American or Black
- Be currently enrolled in an asynchronous 098/099 or 098/101 English course
- Taking an online college course for the first time this semester

***Participation in the study will require access to the internet and a web camera***

***This study will require up to two 60 minute online interviews via zoom***

***Each participant will receive a \$10 gift card***



### ***For More Information***

*Please contact*

*Latoya Bond*

*Phone: 215-751-8159*

*Email: llangston@ccp.edu*

This study has been approved by Rowan University Institutional Review Board  
Study Number: PRO-2021-283  
Principal Investigator: Dr. Cecile Sam



## Appendix F

### IRB Approval



**DHHS Federal Wide Assurance Identifier:** FWA00007111

**IRB Chair Person:** Dr. Ane Johnson

**IRB Director:** Eric Gregory

**Effective Date:** March 8, 2021

#### Notice of Approval - Initial

**Study ID:** PRO-2021-283

**Title:** Exploring Success and Challenges of Black Students Taking an English course Online at an Urban Community College

**Principal Investigator:** Cecile Sam

**Study Coordinator:** Latoya Langston

**Submission Type:** Initial

**Submission Status:** Approved

**Approval Date:** March 6, 2021

**Expiration Date:** March 6, 2022

**Approval Cycle:** 12 months

**Continuation Review Required:** Yes

**Review Type:** Expedited

**Expedited Category:** 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

**Subjects:** 20

**Pregnant Women, Human Fetus, and Neonates Code:** N/A

**Pediatric/Children Code:** N/A

## IRB Approval

**Prisoner(s) – Biomedical or Behavioral:** N/A

**Protocol:** SBER Protocol.docx

**Recruitment Materials:** Research Recruitment Flyer.pdf

**Study Instruments:** Interview & Document Protocol

**Consent:** Informed Consent Form.pdf

**Study Performance Sites:** Community College of Philadelphia, 1700 Spring Garden St. Philadelphia, PA 19130

### **ALL APPROVED INVESTIGATOR(S) MUST COMPLY WITH THE FOLLOWING:**

1. Conduct the research in accordance with the protocol, applicable laws and regulations, and the principles of research ethics as set forth in the Belmont Report.
- 2a. Continuing Review: Approval is valid until the protocol expiration date shown above. To avoid lapses in approval, submit a continuation application at least eight weeks before the study expiration date.
- 2b. Progress Report: Approval is valid until the protocol expiration date shown above. To avoid lapses, an annual progress report is required at least 21 days prior to the expiration date.
- 3a. Expiration of IRB Approval: If IRB approval expires, effective the date of expiration and until the continuing review approval is issued: All research activities must stop unless the IRB finds that it is in the best interest of individual subjects to continue. (This determination shall be based on a separate written request from the PI to the IRB.) No new subjects may be enrolled, and no samples/charts/surveys may be collected, reviewed, and/or analyzed.
- 3b. Human Subjects Research Training: Proper training in the conduct of human subjects research must be current and not expired. It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator and the investigator to complete training when expired. Any modifications and renewals will not be approved until training is not expired and current.
4. Amendments/Modifications/Revisions: If you wish to change any aspect of this study after the approval date mentioned in this letter, including but not limited to, study procedures, consent form(s), investigators, advertisements, the protocol document, investigator drug brochure, or accrual goals, you are required to obtain IRB review and approval prior to implementation of these changes unless necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects. This policy is also applicable to progress reports.
5. Unanticipated Problems: Unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others must be reported to the IRB Office (45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment online  
at: <https://research.rowan.edu/officeofresearch/compliance/irb/index.html>

## IRB Approval

6. Protocol Deviations and Violations: Deviations from/violations of the approved study protocol must be reported to the IRB Office (45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment online at: <https://research.rowan.edu/officeofresearch/compliance/irb/index.html>
7. Consent/Assent: The IRB has reviewed and approved the consent and/or assent process, waiver and/or alteration described in this protocol as required by 45 CFR 46 and 21 CFR 50, 56, (if FDA regulated research). Only the versions of the documents included in the approved process may be used to document informed consent and/or assent of study subjects; each subject must receive a copy of the approved form(s); and a copy of each signed form must be filed in a secure place in the subject's medical/patient/research record.
8. Completion of Study: Notify the IRB when your study has been completed or stopped for any reason. Neither study closure by the sponsor nor the investigator removes the obligation for submission of timely continuing review application, progress report or final report.
9. The Investigator(s) did not participate in the review, discussion, or vote of this protocol.
10. Letter Comments: There are no additional comments.

**CONFIDENTIALITY NOTICE: This email communication may contain private, confidential, or legally privileged information intended for the sole use of the designated and/or duly authorized recipients(s). If you are not the intended recipient or have received this email in error, please notify the sender immediately by email and permanently delete all copies of this email including all attachments without reading them. If you are the intended recipient, secure the contents in a manner that conforms to all applicable state and/or federal requirements related to privacy and confidentiality of such information.**



## Appendix G

### Examples of Analysis

The data collected for this case study was analyzed using two coding cycles.

For the first coding cycle, in vivo coding was used and for the second, cycle pattern coding was used. Below are some example codes used in each cycle and a sample excerpt from the data that reflects the listed code.

#### **In-vivo Coding**

##### ***Technology Challenges***

“Sometimes my WIFI at home isn't so good. So, when I'm doing my assignments or taking a test, it will go slow or pause”

---

##### ***Preparation***

“My brothers are actually doing online schooling, and I just seen how they had it set up, and I just took tips off of that”

---

##### ***Family Responsibilities***

“My family comes first and me taking care of them”

---

##### ***Lack of College Knowledge***

“They probably have really great tutors, they probably have really great counselors, they probably have great daycare assistance, so a lot of times we don't even know about it because you don't really get the message or get the word out as often”

---

##### ***Desire for Support & Resources***

“More classes, not just about math, and none of them, but mental health.”

#### **Pattern Coding**

##### ***Positive Experiences***

“She'll post videos weekly of the content and she'll be happy in a video and positive about the work, it seems like she's someone that really wants to be doing what she's doing”

---

##### ***Support Environment***

“My family always ask to me about my classes, how it was going”

---

##### ***Campus Experience***

“Actually, she's been very, very helpful. I asked about the engineering thing, and she was the one who brought the biomedical side of engineering to me, I was like, wow, this is something that I think I really would like doing more so than mechanical engineering”

---

##### ***Initial Beliefs***

“When I started online class, I'm going to be honest, I was really excited 'cause it's like, Oh my God, I'm in college. I'm done with high school. This is a new step in my life.”

---

##### ***Racial Connection***

“Professors who are like you, like Black, like me, and can relate to what I've been through”