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**Impact of Targeted Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Initiatives on the Retention and Graduation Rates of Students of Color at Community Colleges**

**By**

**Momoh Sekou Dudu, B.A., M.B.A.**

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Business at Hamline University in partial fulfillment of requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Management & Public Service**

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**Hamline University**


December 2022

# Impact of Targeted DEI Initiatives on Retention and Graduation



January 23, 2023

Momoh Dudu has successfully defended his Dissertation, *Impact of Targeted Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Initiatives on the Retention and Graduation Rates of Students of Color at Community Colleges* and should be recommended to the Dean of the School of Business to receive the degree of PhD in Management and Public Service.



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Kristen Norman, PhD, chair



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Brett Devine, PhD

IMPACT OF TARGETED DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION (DEI) INITIATIVES  
ON THE RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR AT  
COMMUNITY COLLEGES

ABSTRACT

In the United States of America, students of color (SOCs) encounter significant barriers when they seek higher education. As a result, many institutions of higher learning pursue diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives to enhance these students' chances at social and academic attainment. For community colleges across the nation, because they enroll a disproportionately large number of SOCs due to their combination of open enrollment policies, low tuition and geographic proximity, targeted DEI initiatives are a strategy of choice in dealing with their abysmal retention and graduation rates among this student demographic. This dissertation, anchored in sociological-based theoretical frameworks—specifically William G. Spady's Undergraduate Dropout Process Model and Vincent Tinto's Institutional Departure Model, explores the relationship between targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at two Minnesota Community Colleges and their SOCs propensity to reenroll in school and to graduate from their academic programs in prescribed time.

The dissertation utilizes the mixed methods approach to collect, analyze, and interpret qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data describing how educational personnel at ARCC and at NHCC are engaged in deliberate, targeted DEI initiatives to improve retention and graduation rates of SOCs were collected through interviews conducted to a purposively selected sample of students of color at both colleges. In addition, quantitative data was collected via a 25-

## Impact of Targeted DEI Initiatives on Retention and Graduation

Item, 5-point Likert Scale Survey administered to study participants at the two focal institutions. Additional retention and graduation rate data for SOCs were pulled from the study's focal institutions, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and Minnesota State Performance Metrics (MnSPM) system. Pearson r Correlation tests and multiple regression analysis were performed to ascertain correlations between community colleges' targeted DEI initiatives and the propensity for their SOCs to reenroll and to graduate from their academic programs on time.

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**KEY WORDS:** community colleges; students of color; retention and graduation rates; diversity, equity, and inclusion.

**DEDICATION**

To my family, for loving me for who I am; and for teaching me the value of perseverance and the importance of life-long pursuit of knowledge.

To my students, past and present, for challenging me, always, to engage more, and to think a bit deeper each time.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I thank God for his protection and guidance upon me and for imbuing me with the courage and knowledge to begin and complete this doctoral journey. An undertaking of this magnitude does not happen without the support and encouragement of so many special people. In that light, I'd like to thank, first, my wife, Mamasu Komara-Dudu, for her unwavering belief in my capacity to pursue this course of study. Her support and frequent nudging helped me to stay on course especially during those moments when I felt overwhelmed by the demands of juggling family life, work, and school. Second, I thank my parents. My late father, Chief Alhaji Sekou Dudu, for instilling in me the desire for continuous learning. My mother, Moinjama Sheriff, for her always nurturing ways.

Next, I am indebted to Dr. Kristen Norman, my dissertation committee chair. Her willingness to listen, to encourage, to offer constructive criticisms, and to be a general sounding board for my many (sometimes not-so-great) ideas, made this process a whole lot bearable. For that, I extend my deepest thanks and appreciation. I also am deeply indebted to Dr. Brett Devine for his effort invested in my doctoral sojourn. His pointed observations, comments, and suggestions for improvements in the quantitative phase of my study were invaluable. Last but not least, I am grateful to Dr. Craig Waldron for his willingness to serve on my dissertation committee and for his thoughtful feedback all throughout the process.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

*“Gaps in college access and opportunity to complete a degree have contributed to diminished social mobility across generations within the United States, particularly for people of color. These gaps in college opportunity are influenced by disparities in students’ experiences before graduating from high school; and these experiences for students of color, in turn, intersect with the experiences of low-income and first-generation college students.” (U.S. Department of Education (DOE) 2016, p.10).*

### Chapter Overview

This chapter contains the background of the study, the statement of problem for the study, the purpose of the study as well as the research questions. In addition, this chapter presents a discussion of the significance of the study, establishes a theoretical framework for the study, outlines the study’s limitations and declares the researcher’s positionality.

### Introduction

In the United States of America, racial and ethnic differences in academic performance are a prevalent and troubling feature of the higher education system (Hanselman, Bruch, Gamoran, & Borman, 2015). College retention and graduation rates in the nation, especially, continue to be disproportionately a function of race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family history in higher education (Johnson, Sprowles, Goldenberg, & Castellino, 2020). For community colleges across the nation, the focus of this study, the achievement gaps, and differences in attainment rates between students of color and their White peers are well documented (Cooper, 2010). This unfortunate disparity is mostly attributed to several obvious

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variables among which are family income, parental education, and strength of secondary school preparation. Beyond these readily identified variables, however, “there remains keen interest in what explains the rest” (Downey, 2008, p.108) of this problematic reality. In that vein, studies have pointed to a more nuanced adversary worsening the problem: a feeling, on the part of students of color, of not belonging in the learning environment (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Hurtado, 1992; Ma & Baum, 2016).

In fact, “the literature regarding opportunity gaps in higher education tend to revolve around issues of racism as contributing to feelings of loneliness, disengagement, and, more specifically, as a barrier to retention and graduation rates for students of color” (Banks & Dohy, 2019, p.2). As Tinto (1975) found, students persist in school, or stop attending, based on the level to which they interact with the academic and social aspects of an institution. Further, Tinto (1975) suggested that the academic and social components help a student form: (a) a commitment to completing their degree and (b) a commitment to the educational institution itself.

This study, therefore, investigates the impact that more targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives will have on improving the learning and outcomes for students of color at community colleges because, as Cooper (2010) observed, as a consequence of the persistence and attainment gaps outlined above, greater attention is directed toward the “services, functions, and outcomes of community colleges, particularly as they affect student persistence and completion” (p.22). This research will fill a knowledge gap in the literature about educating community college educators of barriers to equity and inclusion for their students of color to improve educational attainment for this underserved and underrepresented group.

### **Background of Study**

Research shows that acquiring a college education confers extensive benefits on an individual (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Over the working life of the average United States citizen or resident, high school graduates earn an average of \$1.2 million; associate degree holders earn about \$1.6 million; and bachelor's degree holders earn about \$2.1million (Day & Newburger, 2002). College graduates also enjoy increased job security and employment opportunities. More than these economic benefits, college completion has also been found to have enormous nonpecuniary benefits for individuals and society. For example, college graduates have been found to be more open-minded, more cultured, provide an improved quality of life for their offspring, make better consumer decisions, and engage in more hobbies and leisure activities (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998). Also, studies have found a positive correlation between higher educational attainment and an individual's likelihood of volunteering, having greater civic engagement and participation, as well as enjoying increased overall physical and mental health (Baum et al, 2013).

In pursuit of this end, many students of color enroll at community colleges. This is not by accident. The combination of low tuition, open admissions policies, and geographic proximity at community colleges enable these institutions to enroll a larger proportion of low- income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students. Thus, these two-year colleges serve a disproportionate number of students who have faced constant disadvantage and inequality throughout their educational trajectory (Ma & Baum, 2016; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). In fact, most students of color choose to attend community colleges, not by choice but as a necessity. As Francisco C. Rodriguez, Chancellor of the Los Angeles Community College District (LCCD) affirmed in his 2015 article, *Why Diversity and Equity Matter: Reflections from*

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*a Community College President*, “The American community college system is the most egalitarian system of higher education in the world. We accept the top 100% of every high school graduating class, all of them without exception and without apology. We accept learners of all ages at any point in their life. Our colleges are beacons of hope and opportunity. For some, they are the first chance to go to college, and for others, the last and only chance” (p.17).

Community Colleges, therefore, play a critical role in providing access to a college education for students of color (Margarit & Kennedy, 2019; Mungo, 2017). According to McClain & Perry (2017), in fact, community colleges, like all institutions of higher learning across the United States, are embracing diversity on their campuses. As this is happening, these colleges are struggling to retain and graduate their students of color (Mungo, 2017). As Stephens & Townsend (2013) explained, the abysmal retention and graduation rates for students of color is attributable, in part, to the fact that most of these students come from families without college educated parents and are therefore unlikely to have been exposed to family discussions about what it means to attend college or what they need to do to be successful there. “As a result, these students may be less certain than continuing-generation students about how to choose a major, plan their class schedules, and interact with professors” (Stephens & Townsend, 2013, p. 4).

To harness the transformative power that comes with diverse student populations requires an inclusive and equitable learning climate. In fact, many scholars have studied the impact of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs on the retention and graduation rates of students of color at community colleges (Howard, 2016; Wood, 2019). In these times of ‘evidence-based’ practice, efforts aimed at identifying areas for improvement to achieve education goals for an increasingly diverse student body has evolved beyond simply diversifying the student body



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through numbers to include strategically building equity and inclusion in the fabric of the institution (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008).

As Arnett (2018) suggested, scholarly research has the potential to counteract disparity in resource access by uncovering how institutions can gain the benefits and minimize the costs of DEI. To that end, this dissertation contributes to the existing literature on DEI in educational settings by highlighting pathways to achieving parity in retention and graduation rates between students of color and their White peers at community colleges. In view of this, in 2015, the administration at Anoka Ramsey Community College (ARCC) established a committee of students, faculty, staff and administrators to work on a Strategic Diversity and Inclusion Plan (SDIP) with an aim to “assert the value of inclusion as an ethical imperative and as a necessity for academic rigor, student success (re: retention and graduation) and life-long learning” (SDIP-ARCC, 2021, p.3). Specifically, SDIP goals included: Ensuring a supportive, inclusive, and empowering environment; Making recruitment processes equitable and inclusive; Increasing retention through equitable student support; Promoting equity practices in and out of the classroom. Table 1.1 below presents specific targeted DEI initiatives being taken at ARCC.

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**Table 1.1: Anoka Ramsey Community College’s Targeted DEI Initiatives**

Initiative	Description	Intended Benefits
<b>The Mosaic Cultural Center</b>	A space to study, relax, check email, meet new people and learn more about others to increase cultural awareness and to celebrate the rich contributions of all cultures to our world.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Fostering domestic and global awareness within the college community through educational programming and cultural activities.</b></li> <li>✓ <b>Creating an environment that is welcoming and accepting of differences at the college.</b></li> <li>✓ <b>Examining and implementing best practices in regard to recruitment, retention and success for all students, staff and faculty.</b></li> </ul>
<b>Bias Response Team</b>	The mission of the Bias Response Team is to receive, review and respond to incidents of bias as well as promote a safe bias-free campus environment through collaborative educational outreach.	
<b>Conversation Partners</b>	A program that pairs people for weekly cross-cultural conversations.	
<b>Latinx Club</b>	The mission of the Latinx Club is to bring students together to share Latin culture on campus.	
<b>Hmong Club</b>	The mission of the Hmong Club is to bring students together to share Hmong culture on campus.	
<b>Multicultural Club</b>	The mission of the multicultural club is promoting cultural diversity and creating a welcoming environment for students of diverse cultures. Meets and discusses issues related to a variety of cultures and cultural experiences.	

Source: <http://www.anokaramsey.edu/campus-life/clubs-organizations/>

Similarly, in its Strategic Plan (2018-2023), North Hennepin Community College (NHCC), proclaims its goal of diversity as “fostering an inclusive, collaborative and equity-minded teaching and learning environment that is reflective of the diverse students we serve and focused on student success (i.e., retention and graduation) and closing the opportunity gap” (Strategic Plan 2018 -2023, NHCC, p. 3). In furtherance of this proclamation, the college’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion office has launched several on-campus initiatives to actualize its DEI goals. Among these initiatives is a diversity blog which showcases student-written pieces,

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information on accessing support services, self-care tips, etc. Also, there are racial healing initiatives like ‘Conversations on Race and Equity (C.O.R.E)’, ‘Let’s Talk About Race’, and ‘Racial Healing Circles’. For these and other initiatives, the college recently received the Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) award for 2021 from INSIGHT Into Diversity magazine. This award is a national honor recognizing U.S. colleges and universities that demonstrate an outstanding commitment to diversity and inclusion. Table 1.2 below presents specific targeted DEI initiatives at NHCC.

**Table 1.2: North Hennepin Community College’s Targeted DEI Initiatives**

Initiative	Description	Intended Benefits
<b>The Black Men Leadership Movement (BMLM)</b>	BMLM is committed to carrying on MLK’s legacy. We are doing this by being academically successful and supporting our brothers’ and sisters’ academic success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Connection to faculty and staff</b></li> <li>✓ <b>Opportunity to be mentored</b></li> <li>✓ <b>Connections to community leaders</b></li> <li>✓ <b>Connections with other students</b></li> <li>✓ <b>Learn to set-up milestones</b></li> <li>✓ <b>Give back to your community</b></li> </ul>
<b>Latino Success Initiative (LSI)</b>	LSI embraces the legacy and contributions of past Chicano/a and Latino/a leaders in the Americas. In honoring the past contributions of these heroes and heroines, we support students to envision and create their success, both at NHCC and in the community at large.	
<b>Global Salaam Initiative (GSI)</b>	GSI’s mission is to encourage people to build worldwide peace. We try to expand our knowledge of social norms in different cultures and nationalities.	
<b>Asian Heritage Initiative (AHI)</b>	AHI is an opportunity for students of Asian Heritage to come together to support each other and to develop leadership skills. There will be Asian speakers and opportunities for students to share their experiences with each other.	
<b>The American Indian/Indigenous Education Initiative (AIIC)</b>	AIIC is committed to a campus environment that is supportive of American Indian/Indigenous students by creating an atmosphere that is welcoming, culturally sensitive, and encouraging of student success.	

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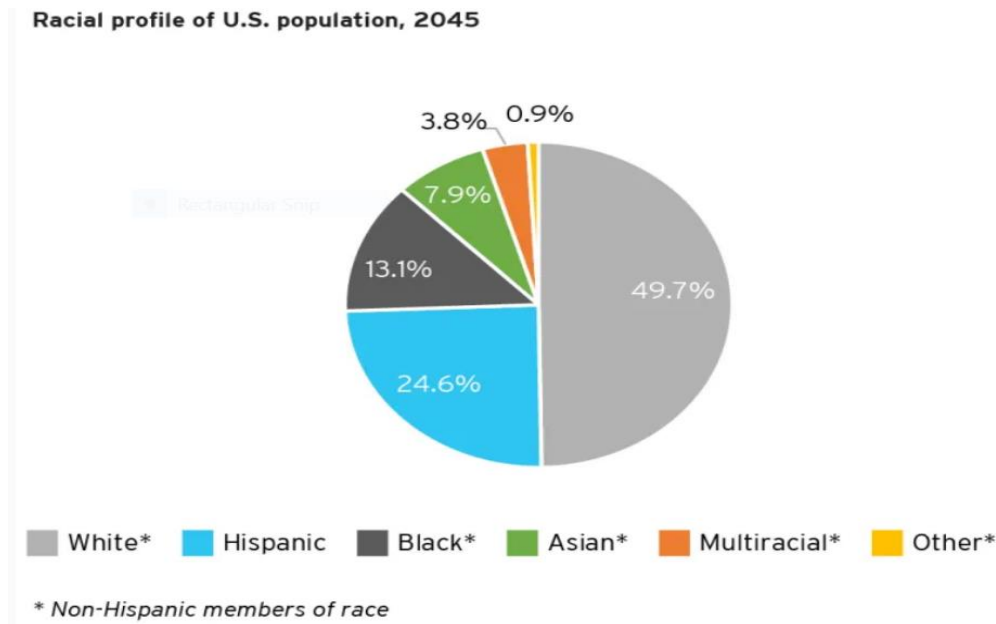
<b>Conversations on Race and Equity (CORE)</b>	Student forum to engage in critical dialogue on issues relevant to race, equity and advocacy. The goal is to serve as a springboard for civic engagement and to empower the next generation of change advocates.	
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Source: <https://www.nhcc.edu/about-nhcc/diversity-equity/>

### Statement of Problem

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the United States of America is projected to be a minority majority country by 2045. This demographic change has made diversity, equity, and inclusion a critical project for many institutions (Oliha, 2010). Already, across community college campuses in the nation, “a multitude of races, ethnicities, nationalities, and religious affiliations come together to form a microcosm of the global society. Despite appearing diverse on the surface, many such institutions exhibit covert microaggressions and controlling images that provoke attrition among students of color” (McClain, & Perry 2017, p.1). In fact, “retaining and graduating students of color is a problem endemic to higher education across the United States” (Mungo, 2017, p.1). Stephens and Townsend (2013) found that “students who are low-income, first generation, or underrepresented racial or ethnic minorities receive lower grades, take longer to graduate, and drop out at higher rates than high-income, continuing generation, or White students” (p.1). So, while access to college for students of color has improved significantly, “many of these students experience differential retention rates and inequities in academic achievement” (Williams, Berger, & McClendon, 2005, p.vii).

**Figure 1.1: Racial profile of U.S. Population, 2045**



Adapted from Brookings (2018). Retrieved August 1, 2021 from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects/>.

At Anoka Ramsey Community College (ARCC) and North Hennepin Community College (NHCC), the campuses of focus of this study, this disparity in retention and graduation rates among students of color and their White peers is evident. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), for the 2016 cohorts (which this study utilizes as baseline statistics), graduation rates for White Students are 29% and 26% respectively for ARCC and NHCC. These are in comparison to 10% and 6% for Blacks or African Americans, and 16% and 13% for Hispanics or Latinos at the referenced institutions. Similarly, data from Minnesota State Performance Metrics (MnSPM), retention rates for White students at ARCC and NHCC, by the second Spring semester of initial enrollment are 52.7% and 50.1% respectively compared to 45.5% and 48.4% for students of color.

**Table 1.3: ARCC and NHCC 2016 cohort Graduation rates by race/ethnicity**

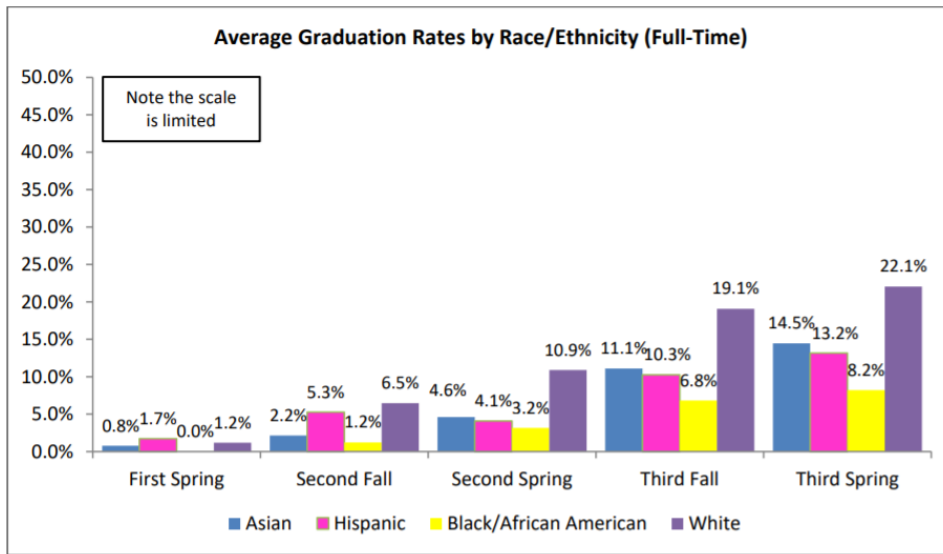
<b>Graduation rates of full time, first time, degree/certificate-seeking undergraduates within 150% of normal time to program completion by race/ethnicity: 2016 cohort.</b>		
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>ARCC</b>	<b>NHCC</b>
Total:	26%	17%
White	29%	26%
Black or African American	10%	6%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%	0%
Hispanic or Latino	16%	13%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0%	0%
Two or more races	34%	13%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics Retrieved June 24, 2021, from

<https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/institutionprofile.aspx?unitId=172963>

These numbers indicate disparities in persistence and graduation rates that contribute to disparities in educational attainment and, eventually, disparities in socioeconomic outcomes between students of color and their White peers. A failure to mitigate this problem will exacerbate the issue of diminished social mobility across generations of people of color in the United States (United States Department of Education (DOE), 2016). It is this apparent correlation between campus DEI atmosphere and dismal retention and graduation rates of students of color that this study will investigate further.

**Figure 1.2: NHCC Average Graduation Rates by 3<sup>rd</sup> Spring Semester**



Adapted from NHCC <https://www.nhcc.edu/about-nhcc/policies-procedures-disclosures/disclosures> as sourced from: Minnesota State EPM11/Accountability Framework/Student Persistence and Completion Analytic Tool Note: Average calculated using most recent five entering student cohorts with data extending to third spring.

As shown in Table 1.3 and Figure 1.2 above, at the focal institutions for this study, graduation rates by the second fall semester of enrollment and beyond is highest among white students and lowest among black students.

**Purpose of Study**

As higher education continues its focus on improving retention and graduation rates across all spectrums of their student populations, research on college students of color is particularly important because it will provide a better understanding of how to serve this vulnerable student population as they are at the lowest rung of the “differential retention rates and inequities in academic achievement” (Williams et al., 2005, p. vii). The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the relationship between targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at two Minnesota Community Colleges and the retention and graduation rates of their students of color. As Tinto (1993) social and academic conceptual framework suggested,

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the more a student is connected to his or her educational institution socially and academically, the greater their commitment to persist to graduation. Similarly, Braxton (2000) found that social assimilation mostly and academic integration, to a lesser degree, are the keys to understanding reasons why students leave college before they complete their studies. In the context of students of color attending community colleges across the United States, this is even more salient. This dissertation, therefore, examines how targeted DEI programs initiated at ARCC and NHCC have impacted the retention and graduation rates of students of color.

This is especially relevant due to, as Aguirre & Martinez (2002) found, the significant shifts in the demographics of the United States over the past several decades which have resulted in changes to the landscape of higher education. Aguirre & Martinez (2002) further suggested, in fact, that within the next few decades, students from racial and ethnic groups currently underrepresented in the post-secondary arena will be majority of traditional-aged college students nationally. Given the aforesaid, where students of color are concerned, community colleges must understand that implementing strategies to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion requires targeted approaches aimed not just at the overt symptoms of the problem but, more importantly, at mitigating root causes.

Accordingly, community colleges must listen to, engage with through trusted relationships, and pay strong attention to the experiences of their students of color. Throughout the United States, community colleges are making efforts to do just that. In fact, the diversity, equity, and inclusion focus is becoming the driving force of strategic planning in the field of education and is engendering systemic reform because, as Stewart, Tuitt, & Haynes (2016), suggested, there must be changes in the learning environment to create inclusive pedagogies. Also, for entire institutions to be both equitable and inclusive, all stakeholders must have a voice



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(Holt, 1974). Participants at all levels of the college hierarchy must consider their environment, evaluate their resources, and create long term goals (Kotler & Murphy, 1981). Achieving this successfully will be critical for community colleges to not only reap the benefit of having racially and ethnically diverse campuses, but also to ensure that their students of color are retained and graduated on par with their White counterparts (Seidman, 2005).

### **Research Questions**

This study poses one overarching question: How do targeted diversity, equity and inclusion programs impact retention and graduation rates of students of color at Anoka Ramsey Community College (ARCC) and North Hennepin Community College (NHCC)? This primary question is supported by three sub-questions to guide the inquiry:

1. How do students of color attending ARCC and NHCC perceive the diversity, equity, and inclusion culture on their campus?
2. What do students of color attending ARCC and NHCC perceive as their faculty role in developing and sustaining a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus?
3. What experiences of students of color at community colleges contribute to their persistence?

### **Significance of the Study**

Many more students are enrolling in college than ever before. However, large numbers of students do not return after the first year and an even substantial proportion also leave school before attaining a degree (Horn, Berger, & Carroll, 2005). Students of color are particularly vulnerable to this problem. Martinez and Fernandez (2004) found that 70% of all students in higher education in the United States are enrolled at community colleges, and even though

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students of color make up only 21% in higher education they constitute 60% of community college enrollment. The significance of this study, therefore, is rooted in the need for community colleges across the United States, because of this overrepresentation, to improve the retention and graduation rates among students of color in line with their White peers.

To do this, this study seeks to show that more often than not, the issue of educational achievement gap for students of color is more about opportunity than it is about achievement. As Rodriguez (2015) observed, not every student starts at the same place and we, therefore, cannot expect the same outcomes to occur for there is a “disproportionate impact on access and outcomes for those who are poor, those who are first generation, and those who are known as linguistic minorities, among other underrepresented groups” (p.20). Community colleges, in creating fair access to educational opportunities must be motivated by more than their compliance obligations to federal and states educational statutes. In recognition of their diverse student populations, community colleges must resist treating every student equally for to do so is to ignore the indisputable differences that exist among their students which require support in different ways because, as Margarit and Kennedy (2019) found, for students of color, “access alone is not enough” (p.97).

As Rendón (1994), found, “Today's model of education forces students to assimilate, to compete against each other, to think only in abstract complex ways, and to believe that cultural separation leads to academic power. For many minority and nontraditional students, this traditional model is inappropriate. It results in many first-generation students being told that they are ‘not college material,’ and consequent feelings of doubt, fear, and frustration when entering college” (p.33). Many such first-generation students are of color and face the added complication of not having the middle-class cultural capital or ‘rules of the game’ for how to most effectively

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negotiate college settings (Kim & Sax, 2009). This is because, as Stephens et al. (2012) observed, these students are mostly socialized in working-class contexts, so they consider these middle-class cultural norms institutionalized at colleges as “cultural mismatches” or as signs that they do not fit in college settings. Such internalized negative feelings, in turn, “can diminish their sense of comfort, render academic tasks difficult and undermine their academic performance” (Stephens & Townsend, 2013, p.4).

To mitigate this, this study proposes an alternative approach: community colleges must forge a path of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) insofar as acknowledging that each student has different needs, experiences, and opportunities. In doing so, and consistent with the ‘Equity Action Agenda for Community College Governance (2018)’, it is, in fact, “the responsibilities of community college trustees and college’s leadership to promote policies that support access, affordability, equity and completion for all community college students. College diversity, equity, and inclusivity policies facilitate academic progress and economic and social mobility for all” (p.1). Similarly, Chen (2017, p.20) concluded that:

If institutional leaders are truly committed to enriching students’ learning experiences, they must meaningfully engage in developing educational policies and teaching practices that foster diversity and are expected to incorporate diversity into curriculum in order to develop students’ psychosocial skills.

In sum, to achieve DEI, college leaderships must be visibly involved. Strong and assertive leadership is a powerful way to achieve sustainable change across an institution. College leaders must, therefore, take the lead in openly identifying the issues associated with racial and ethnic bias on the campuses, admit the negative consequences for the entire community and initiate complete and strategic change initiatives. When they initiate a rigorous

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scrutiny of themselves as an academic body, meticulously identify the gaps, promote empathetic listening to their students of color and implement interrelated, college-wide systemic changes, they better position their institutions to achieve sustainable diversity, equity, and inclusion (Hanselman et al., 2015). They will, as a result, create a better, more conducive campus climate for all, and for their students of color in particular.

As Aguilar (2017) argued, it is not useful to ask students of color to morph to a culture put in place by centuries of White academics which is the current status quo. Instead, consistent with the stance of Williams et al. (2005), “to create a ‘culture of inclusive excellence,’ higher education leaders must consider how their campus environments can adapt to meet the needs of today’s highly diverse entering students, rather than beginning with the assumption that diverse students must assimilate into existing environments with relatively narrow measures of quality” (p.9). This is because ‘belonging’ is nurtured by connections, mutual respect of positionality, and recognition of the contribution of each person’s unique history to the new student community (O’Keeffe, 2013).

For students of color, it is imperative that colleges send an authentic message of welcoming and actively avoid campus cultures that suggest a need for them to assimilate (Hurtado et al., 2008). For, as Rendón (1994) pointed out, the principal obstacle to a sense of belonging is a perceived need to “fit in.” As targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives take hold on community college campuses, students of color feel a sense of belonging to their educational environment. Over time, the resultant culture of diversity, equity and inclusion optimizes the colleges’ ability to retain and graduate students of color on relative par

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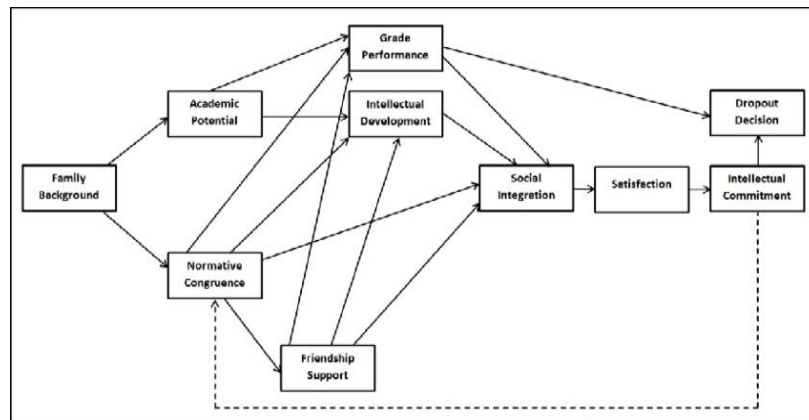
with their White peers. Diversity, equity, inclusion, and success for all students are, therefore, key goals for the nation's community colleges.

### Theoretical Frameworks

Maxwell (2005) defined theoretical framework as “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research” (p. 33). Similarly, Merriam (2009) referred to it as “the underlying structure, the scaffolding or frame of the study” (p.66). Merriam (2009) added that “the framework of the study will draw upon the concepts, terms, definitions, models, and theories of a particular literature base and disciplinary orientation” (pp.67).” There are several theories in the existing literature related to the impact of DEI on persistence, retention, and graduation rates. This dissertation, however, is anchored in the sociological-based theoretical frameworks. Specifically, it is undergirded by William G. Spady's Undergraduate Dropout Process Model and Vincent Tinto's Institutional Departure Model.

*Description of Conceptual Models.* These two models are closely aligned in their observations about student persistence or attrition. In fact, Tinto's Institutional Departure Model “is mainly based on Spady's views of interaction between students and the academic and social systems of their institutions” (Aljohani, 2016, p.6).

**Figure 1.3: Spady's Undergraduate Dropout Process Model**

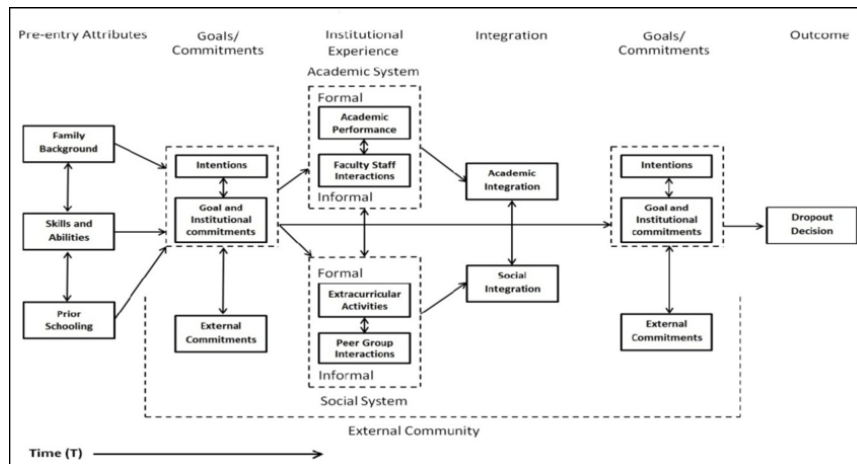


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Adapted from Aljohani, O. (2016). A Comprehensive Review of the Major Studies and Theoretical Models of Student Retention in Higher Education. *Higher Education Studies*, 6(2), 1–.

Spady’s model postulates that institutions have a significant role to play in student persistence, and that rather than just one, there are two systems that could affect whether a student would stay at an institution: academic and social. Further, for each of the two identified systems, the model assigns at least two associated factors that influence student persistence or drop out decision: grade and intellectual development for academic, and friendship and normative congruence for social.

**Figure 1.4: Tinto’s Institutional Departure Model**



Adapted from Aljohani, O. (2016). A Comprehensive Review of the Major Studies and Theoretical Models of Student Retention in Higher Education. *Higher Education Studies*, 6(2), 1–.

Similarly, Tinto’s Institutional Departure model, building on Spady’s but placing a little more accountability on the student as they build a relationship with the college, has as its central tenet, the notion of ‘integration.’ Other scholars in the field, for example, Payne (2003), agree with Tinto that “we can neither excuse nor scold [students] for not knowing; as educators we must teach them and provide support, insistence, and expectations” (p.11). Aljohani (2016) presented Tinto’s model thus:

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This model posits that colleges consist of two systems: academic and social. Students need to be integrated into both systems to persist in their academic institutions. Academic integration can be measured by the students' grade performance and intellectual development, while social integration is measured by students' interaction with college society (peers and faculty). The model suggests that a student enters college with some goals and commitments. The student's pre-entry attributes, which include the student's family background, skills and abilities and prior schooling, shape these initial goals and commitments. According to the model, the student's experience at college (academic and social integration) will continuously modify (weaken or strengthen) his or her level of initial goals and commitments. The model suggests that the subsequent (modified) level of goals and commitments affects the student's decision to stay in or leave the college. The main amendment Tinto added to his model was the suggestion that the level of the student's external commitments, such as family and job commitments, affects both the initial and subsequent level of his or her goals and commitments.

As these frameworks make clear, for institutions, like community colleges, that attract students of color to settings unlike that of their families, fostering social and academic integration to a new campus home while honoring connections to familial homes is especially important but also very challenging (Garcia, 2019).

*Justification for Chosen Frameworks.* As established earlier, Spady's Undergraduate Dropout Process Model and Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure agree in most respects. And, according to Aljohani (2016, p.7):

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Tinto's model has been subject to extensive testing and examination over the last four decades and has been cited in many studies investigating the attrition problem in which the constructs, hypotheses and postulations of the models were empirically used, tested and critiqued. These studies adopted and tested Tinto's model in different college systems and environments, giving the model more credibility and validity.

It is on the strength of such rigorous examination of credibility and validity that this study is grounded in these frameworks.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study is limited in three ways. First, it places a major focus on the impact of targeted DEI initiatives on retention and graduation rates to the exclusion of transfer rates. This focus ignores the importance of transfer as an aspect of community college mission. The relationship of DEI initiatives and successful transfer of students of color from community colleges to bachelor's degree programs is an important topic for future research. Second, data for the study was derived solely from the two referenced community colleges. As a result, the scope of this study is limited to providing an understanding of ways in which the campus climate for DEI impacts retention and graduation rates of students of color at these two institutions. Generalization of the experience or perception may not be relevant for all community colleges across the United States. However, given that the student demographic composition at ARCC and NHCC are considered relatively highly diverse with 33% and 56% of students of color respectively (NCES, 2019), this study is intended to provide a foundation of understanding, fill in a gap, and expand the DEI literature on community colleges. Third, the fact that participation in the study is entirely voluntary, it is possible that participants with positive experiences will be



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more likely to respond to a survey about campus DEI climate than those with negative opinions or vice versa.

Specifically, participants may engage in providing acquiescence responses (ACQ)—agreeing with research questions/statements without the action being a true reflection of their own position or the question/statement itself. Also, they could supply socially desirable responses (SDR)—responses that may be viewed favorably by others (Kreitchman, et al., 2019; Larson, 2019). To mitigate possible biases that may result due to these tendencies, the names of volunteer interviewees and survey respondents will be kept anonymous so as not place undue pressure on them to respond in acquiescent or socially acceptable ways. Second, the participants will be provided only a brief overview of the study at the outset. As Steenkamp, De Jong, & Baumgartner, (2010) noted, this strategy will help circumvent pointing respondents in directions of answering in particular socially acceptable ways but still afford them the opportunity to explore their values and priorities unconstrained, before homing in on the core topic of interest. While recognizing that a possible occurrence of the biases discussed herein would not necessarily negate the study’s findings, it implies a need for further research to replicate the study at other community colleges.

### **Researcher’s Positionality**

A researcher’s world view concerns ontological assumptions, epistemological assumptions and assumptions about human nature and agency. These assumptions, of course, “are colored by an individual’s values and beliefs that are shaped by their political allegiance, religious faith, gender, sexuality, historical and geographical location, ethnicity, race, social class, and status, (dis) abilities and so on” (Holmes, 2020, p.2). Therefore, said world view or bias, influences both how research is conducted, its outcomes, and results (Rowe, 2014). In that

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context, it is important to declare such world view and identify mitigating factors for possible implicit bias.

For this study, the researcher's interest in DEI and its impact on the retention and graduation propensities of students of color at community colleges stems from two sources: (a) the experience of having been a student of color attending various institutions of higher education throughout the completion of his educational journey; (b) a background of teaching for many years in higher education (part of that time at community colleges) and delivering supportive services and programmatic efforts to underserved, diverse populations. It is acknowledged that the researcher's experiences (of many struggles to find a campus environment that was a "fit" for not only degree interests, but also that allowed growth and personal development), and his expertise as faculty and administrator gained through serving and contributing to efforts aimed at meeting institutional commitments and implementation of Strategic Plan DEI initiatives are beneficial to furthering the understanding of this specific topic. It is further acknowledged that these experiences also present a potential for researcher bias toward advocacy, access, retention and graduation rate issues for students of color.

Such potential for bias, however, is mitigated through the utilization of the lens of Spady's and Tinto's sociological-based frameworks, which allow the experience of the researcher to be useful in effectively viewing and/or assessing the lived experience of participants within the campus climate for DEI of the study's referenced higher education institutions. Additionally, in order to limit potential researcher bias, a quantitative phase is included in the study's methodology for understanding the campus climate for DEI as it impacts retention and graduation rates of students of color.

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Chapter Overview**

Chapter two presents a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the impact of DEI initiatives on the educational attainment—specifically the retention and graduation rates, of students of color at community colleges. This exercise provides an understanding of the prevalent debates relative to the impact of DEI on the community college experiences of students of color.

### **Purpose of Literature Review**

The literature on DEI and its impact on the retention and graduation rates of students of color at community colleges is scant. Notable studies on DEI in higher education: Astin (1993), Chang (1999), Gurin (1999), Hurtado (2001), and Nelson Laird (2005) each appear to exclude community colleges from their samples (Jones, 2011). This literature review, therefore, synthesizes the available literature and identify gaps therein that this study will strive to fill. In line with the purpose of the study, the synthesis will concentrate on the following specific areas: Institutional commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion; the complexity of the concept of diversity; the relationship between diversity, equity and inclusion; inclusion as a new diversity construct; the relationship between DEI and student success; community college retention and graduation rates; students of color and the issue of identity threats; incentivizing DEI practices; the faculty-student interaction dynamic; and building DEI supportive structures.

### **Institutional Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

Higher education faculty and leadership, for a long time, have been conditioned to view student success as solely a function of students' effort, resolve, and engagement divorced from the environment in which they are educated (Mungo, 2017; Wood, 2019). The onus of student success, therefore, is placed on the students themselves as opposed to on the institutions and the

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personnel who educate them (Kuh, 2003). As a result, Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper (2003) reported that many students of color have learned to accept the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the dominant group of their culture and ethnicity. The danger of this, Bandura (1982) found, is that negative internalized messages can affect student success because how one sees him, or herself can alter self-efficacy and future performance.

In recognition of this reality, over the last decade across the United States, community colleges, and institutions of higher learning in general, in their mission statements, have heralded their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion on their campuses (Garcia et al., 2021). Mission statements, of course, are often considered guiding documents, which is why these institutions proudly share them and higher education leaderships claim to use them as blueprints for strategic planning (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). In short, these mission statements proclaim a shared commitment to student learning and holistic development that aligns with the colleges' vision and therefore offer clarity and guidance on curricular priorities for faculty and administration (Coomes & Wilson, 2009; Taylor, 2019). This is especially so in the face of dismal retention and graduation rates of students of diverse ethnicities as compared to their White counterparts attending these colleges. Accordingly, positive affirmation and validation are fundamental to improved retention and graduation rates of students of color (Barnett, 2011; Nieto, 1996; Rendon, 1994; Torres, 2006). In fact, Stephens & Townsend (2013), suggested that students of color who were able to appreciate and maintain their culture were more likely to be academically successful, develop their networking skills, and deal with barriers effectively.

Carlson et al. (2020) reported that the gaps in graduation and retention rates between ethnic groups continue to be a foremost focus at community colleges across the United States of America. Jaeger et al. (2015) documented that the focus on diversity, equity and inclusion at

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educational institutions is the belief that injecting an understanding of these issues will lead to more inclusive services, outreach, and practices. Carlson et al. (2020) concluded that to eradicate these gaps “it is uniquely appropriate for the higher education environment to evolve from ‘discussion’ of the barriers to fully engaging the entire college community in meaningful action-oriented strategic planning” (p. 1).

### **Diversity: A Complex Concept**

Even as the higher education arena in the United States is becoming increasingly diverse, colleges and universities are struggling to meet increased demands to support diversity, equity, and inclusion (Iverson, 2012; Roper, 2014). This situation stems, in part, from the complexity of diversity as an operational concept. In the higher education context, there are several notions of diversity. Principally, however, there is the notion of the compositional structure of diverse individuals at an institution and the notion related to diversity in the core curriculum (Hurtado, Clayton-Pedersen, Allen, & Milem, 1998). As Hughes (2013) stated, “the term ‘diversity’ itself is part of the problem, used as it is variably to refer to racial differences, people of color, the totality of human differences, the array of niche demographic markets, or those differences that shape patterns of social inequity” (p.128). Similarly, Vickers & Un (2019), pondered how diversity can be balanced with the imperatives of sustaining social cohesion and questioned whether there are circumstances in which diversity “can become divisive, threatening sustaining development rather than promoting it” (p.159). DiTomaso, Post, & Parks-Yancy (2007) also noted that rooted in social structures and institutions, the term diversity, presents an imbalance among groups that perpetuates potential conflict.

Therefore, Vickers and Un (2019) suggested that recognizing the fluid, complex and multi-layered nature of identity is vital to the essential health of any society. But they also

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cautioned that “when diversity discourse is treated as a crude exercise in labeling, it can instead serve to shore up the boundaries of a monolithic, exclusive sense of selfhood, exacerbating social division and fueling intolerance” (p.161). In the higher education setting in the United States, all of the aforementioned drawbacks of the complexity of diversity as a concept, are worsened by the fact that many institutions, despite their more diverse populations now, continue to operate within cultures typically based on dominant privilege and hegemonic systems (Hughes, 2013).

For this study, the meaning of diversity focuses on access and inclusion of diverse people from underrepresented and historically marginalized groups. For, as Williams & Wade-Golden (2013) noted, access and equity of diverse individuals is a salient matter and that “every institution’s diversity effort must begin by engaging the historic and ongoing imperative to achieve access and equality for racially and ethnically diverse individuals, women, economically vulnerable communities, and other historically excluded groups” (p. 6).

### **The Relationship between Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

Student populations in higher education are rapidly diversifying (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). The resultant increasing minority populations have allowed for greater understanding of issues surrounding higher education persistence factors (Gloria & Ho, 2003; Guiffrida, 2006; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). For community colleges, the recognition and embracing of this diversity—the range of differences among their student, staff, and faculty populations, is foundational to improving their retention and graduation rates. For such positive transformation to happen, however, the focus needs to shift from ‘Diversity’ alone to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (Gill, et al., 2018, p.196). When these schools employ effective strategies that engage students “in ways that position them as actors rather than objects” in the learning

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process, they progress to equalizing access to educational attainment (Felten, et al., 2019, p. 194).

To achieve this, community colleges must acknowledge the hard lines that demarcate diversity, equity, and inclusion. While these concepts are understandably fused, they are also conceptually different and achieving one to the exclusion of the other two, is not enough and does not ensure the desired end. Equity differentiates from inclusion in that “it places the outcome at the system or organizational rather than the group or individual level. Equity calls for the righting of systemic and structural injustices. To achieve equity and other benefits of inclusion, it is important to discuss and elevate practices that can move us from diversity to equity” (Bernstein, et al., 2019, p.396).

### **Inclusion as a New Diversity Construct**

Inclusion represents a powerful viewpoint on diversity, with a growing body of research (Bernstein, et al., 2019). Inclusion differs from diversity in focusing not only on the compositional mix of people, but also on involving every member into organizational processes and culture. The RBC Diversity and Inclusion Blueprint 2020 makes the distinction thus:

Inclusion is a state of being valued, respected and involved. It is how diversity is put into action. It’s about recognizing the needs of each individual and having the right conditions so that each person has the opportunity to achieve their full potential. Inclusion is reflected in an organization’s culture and practices, in addition to its programs and policies...In simple terms, diversity is the mix, and inclusion is getting the mix working well together. We believe diversity is a fact and inclusion is a choice we make as individuals and as leaders (RBC, p. 5).

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In fact, Barak et al. (2016) found that efforts promoting inclusion are consistently related to positive outcomes, whereas efforts promoting diversity alone are associated with both positive and negative outcomes. Similarly, Nishii (2013) noted that diverse representation is limited to producing assimilation to the dominant culture, while inclusion characterizes the multicultural organization. Often, by focusing on the advantages of diversity mainly, there is a tendency to ignore the dynamics and consequences of the lack of inclusion (Roberson, 2006).

In the higher education setting, in order to foster pedagogical innovation in relation to the development of inclusive climates, professional dialogue must take place and must be encouraged at the same time. In fact, Kreshner (2016) noted that the only way inclusion policy can be successful is if it is promoted through dialogue that challenges faculty's thinking and fosters the introduction and implementation of new practices. Collaborations and shared visions among educators not only stimulate inclusion, but also work to make students feel that they belong, and further enhances their sense of community as an institution.

### **The Relationship between DEI and Student Retention and Graduation Rates**

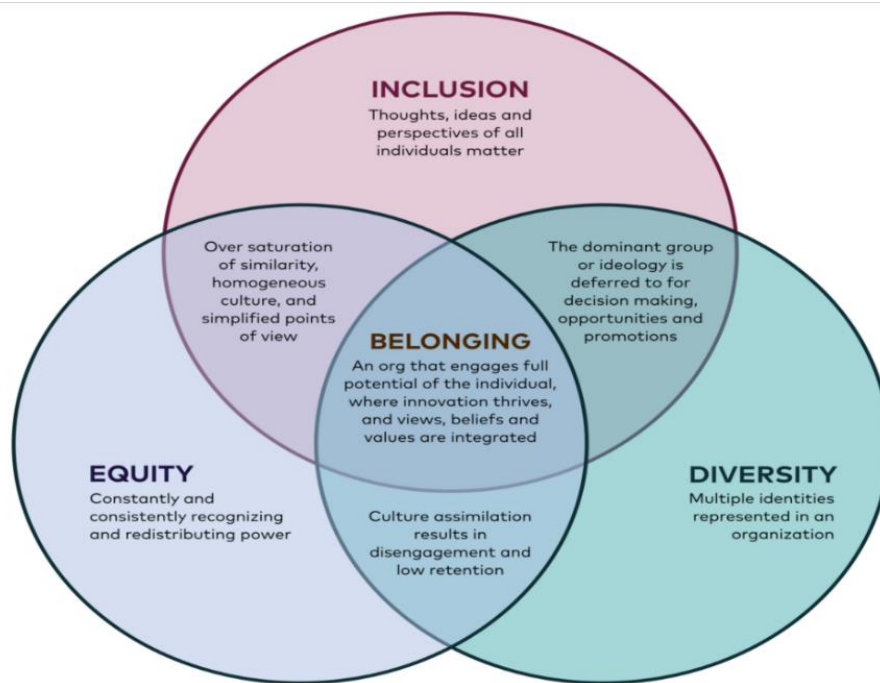
Student retention and graduation rates are primary concerns for community colleges in the United States. This is a big challenge because, as Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker (2014) noted, retention and graduation rates at the community college level are markedly lower than at the four-year universities. This is partly because community colleges have long been highly regarded for their open-door policy, which accepts students regardless of their previous academic challenges (Goldbrick-Rab, 2010). Further, as Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker (2014) explained, unlike at four-year universities where students' lives frequently revolve around meeting academic goals and maintaining a social life, attendees at community colleges often struggle to meet educational requirements due to their work and familial commitments.



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The lower retention graduation rates at community colleges are even more pronounced among students of color. As Mungo (2017) noted, retaining and graduating students of color is a problem endemic to higher education across the United States. As established earlier, while several characteristics including gender, race, SAT scores, and socioeconomic status have significant impact on the likelihood of a student dropping out of college (Jones, 2011), for students of color, a second motif, best described as the student-institutional fit is also particularly critical. This motif views persistence decisions as primarily the end-product of the interaction between a student and his/her college (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Tinto, 1993).

**Figure 2.1: Practicing DEI Full Circle**



Adapted from: Burnette, Krys (Adidas): Belonging: A Conversation about Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.

<https://medium.com/@krysburnette/its-2019-and-we-are-still-talking-about-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-dd00c9a66113>

As shown in figure 2.1 above, each DEI element represents a unique slice of the full human experience. Addressing only one or two of these elements falls short on gaining that full human experience, that intersecting point of the three elements— a sense of belonging. It is

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critical, therefore, that community colleges, in their quest to improve retention and graduation rates for students of color, practice DEI initiatives aimed at making students of color feel a sense of belonging to the educational community. This is especially important because, the bulk of the literature regarding opportunity gaps in higher education tend to revolve around issues of racism as contributing to feelings of loneliness, disengagement, and, more specifically, as a barrier to retention and graduation for students of color (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

### **Identity Threats**

As alluded to above, the college enrollment, retention, and completion gaps between students of color and their white peers are well-documented and bemoaned by most who value higher education. Among many explanations for this is that the people within higher education setting (professors, administrators, staff) have bias toward low-status groups (in the case of this study: students of color). However, even when colleges and universities make strides to reduce bias and prejudice, inequalities in students' daily experiences and their downstream outcomes social and academic outcomes persist (Murphy & Destin, 2016).

To get a deeper understanding of disparities in experiences of college among students of color, and how diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives on community college campuses can help in mitigating same, one must first understand how college contexts and societal stereotypes shape students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Murphy & Destin, 2016). When the college environment fails to promote a sense of inclusion, support, and identity safety, identity threats that contribute to attrition of students of color results. Like other social groups that are historically negatively stereotyped, students of color are attentive to situational cues and messages from institutions, faculty, and peers that signal whether they are valued, included, and respected (Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007). In fact, Murphy, et al. (2007) found that when

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situational cues in the college environment suggest that it is possible one might be viewed through the prism of a negative stereotype, stereotype threat is triggered. According to Schmader, Johns, & Forbes (2008), such trigger weakens academic performance because it consumes mental resources required for academic performance and increases anxiety and physiological stress, distracting students from the intellectual challenge before them.

Conversely, recognizing racial identity as an asset that helps students of color to negotiate exposure to risk associated with racial injustice, community colleges can point these students to using said identity as a protective and promotive factor of achievement-related outcomes (Zimmerman et al. 2013). One way to do this is by acknowledging the socio-political and historical role that race has played in the United States in general, and in its higher education system, in particular. In sum, by understanding the role of racial identity and academic identity in the lived experiences of students of color, community colleges can recognize the underlying mechanisms between motivation, engagement, and academic attainment and also reduce bias in the classroom and on their campuses (Stephens & Townsend, 2013).

### **Incentivizing DEI Practices**

Stephens & Townsend (2013) suggested that, perhaps, incentives can help decrease the prevalence of negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination encountered by disadvantaged students in college settings. Such incentivizing strategy can include all constituent members of the college community so that they behave in ways that promote the virtues of diversity, equity and inclusion. For college leaderships, for example, funding models for their institutions which had historically been tied to the number of students served upon enrollment, are now shifting away from just access to student success and the importance of creating equity in student outcomes (Lumina Foundation, 2021). For student groups, they “could be incentivized to

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promote a culture of tolerance and inclusion among their members (e.g., additional funding to hold events promoting awareness and acceptance of cultural differences)” (Stephens & Townsend, 2013, p. 5). Among students of color, “incentives might be effective in promoting a sense of belonging (e.g., vouchers to cover the costs of participating in extracurricular activities), which may help them to overcome the downstream consequences of negative stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination” (Stephens & Townsend, 2013, p. 5).

For faculty of color, the issue of incentivizing their efforts in the DEI revolution on college campuses is made clearer when one examines the additional responsibilities they are often asked to take on. Nunes (2021) referred to this as the ‘minority tax’—the burden of extra responsibilities placed on underrepresented faculty in the name of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Institutions of higher learning must factor in that faculty of color are “often asked to be official and unofficial mentors to students of color [and] to be sounding boards by their White colleagues about issues of racial equity. For these, they must be recognized, valued, and compensated in a formal way” (Nunes, 2021, p3).

Incentivizing strategies to promote DEI, however, must be undertaken with caution for a couple of reasons. First, incentives may not mitigate prejudices that are implicit and operate outside individuals’ awareness and control (Howard, 2016). Second, any incentivizing strategy “would need to be mindful of students’ awareness of any prejudice-reducing incentives, because awareness could heighten the perception that prejudice is a significant issue on campus and could therefore have the paradoxical consequence of amplifying its pernicious effects” (Stephens & Townsend, 2016, p.6).

### **The Faculty-Student Interaction Dynamic**

In dissecting the conundrum that is DEI's impact on retention and graduation rates of students of color at community colleges, the role of faculty, specifically the faculty-student interaction dynamic is central. This interaction has been found to be integral to college student development and achievement (Astin, 1993; Suen, 1993; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1999). Such interactions, in fact, have been shown “to positively influence students' degree aspirations, self-efficacy and esteem, academic success, satisfaction, goal development, and adjustment to college” (Chang, 2005, p.2). Drawing upon his long experience of consulting with colleges interested in promoting student retention, Lee Noel (1978) offered the following observation:

It is increasingly apparent that the most important features of a “staying” environment relate to the instructional faculty. Students make judgments about their academic experience on the basis of such factors as quality of instruction, freedom to contact faculty for consultation, availability of faculty for consultation, and faculty involvement outside of the classroom (pp 96-97).

Similarly, Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell (2002) reflecting on best practices that appear to facilitate student success at community colleges, extolled the benefits of faculty-student interaction. The first of their ‘ten commandments’ for student success, they wrote, was “to encourage faculty-student interaction; recruit instructors who offer time, attention and resources to facilitate student development; and include student interaction in the faculty reward system” (p.5). For students of color, the distance—gap between students and faculty members that thwart communications and close relationships—experienced within the social geography may be complex and heightened when considering the racial dimensions of the climate of the campus.

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Recognizing the effect of race in society overall and within the United States' higher education settings, the climate of a campus unavoidably takes on racial overtones (Chang, 2005).

Even with that, the communication and relationship gap between students and their faculty members narrows when students perceive their faculty members to be approachable and concerned about their learning (Chang, 2005). Wood & Turner (2010) identified five key faculty-initiated elements that enable such narrowing and that when taken together, they argued, serve as a foundation for healthy faculty-student engagement: “(a) faculty were friendly with students from the onset; (b) checked in on student academic progress; (c) listened to student concerns; (d) proactive in addressing performance issues; and (e) encourage students to succeed” (p.143). In other words, validation is an important strategy for faculty to employ in affirming the presence, contributions, and abilities of students of color (Wood, 2019). Because, as Rendon (1994, p.45) observed:

Expecting students to involve themselves with the social and academic infrastructure of an institution will work only for students who have the skills to gain access to these opportunities. Clearly, some students will be able to get involved on their own. But merely offering opportunities for involvement will not work for passive students or for those who do not know how to take full advantage of the system. What is needed is the active academic and interpersonal validation of these students—a process that affirms, supports, enables, and reinforces their capacity to fully develop themselves as students and as individuals.

### **Bringing It All Together: Implementing DEI Supportive Structures**

The educational value of diversity has long been extolled. An expert report by scholars from the University of Michigan provided for two lawsuits that challenged the university's use of affirmative action in admissions, offered a, "theoretical model that explained how a diverse student body within an institution can produce far-reaching educational benefits for all college students... students in diverse educational environments learn more and are better prepared to become active participants in a pluralistic, democratic society when they leave higher education" (Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2011, p. 44). The report was instrumental in the U.S. Supreme Court's decision that ruled, "the educational benefits of diversity 'are not theoretical but real' and that diversity is a compelling interest in higher education" (p. 44). Similarly, Chen (2017) in underscoring the urgency for colleges to strategize around effective DEI initiatives, surmised that "the need to educate students in an environment that reflects the diversity of the country and the global society in which tomorrow's college graduates will be living and working is paramount" (p.17).

In this connection, Jayakumar (2008) categorized four types of campus initiatives to properly address DEI: structural diversity, interactional diversity, curricular diversity, and campus racial climate. Converging areas of scholarship on the DEI dynamic in higher education underscore how the first three categories: structural diversity, interactional diversity, and curricular diversity are all influenced by and contribute to the fourth category: campus climate. Several scholars have also argued that when these four efforts are initiated and implemented on college campuses, students of the dominant white culture gain leadership skills and a pluralistic orientation, or the aptitude for civic engagement in a diverse society that may otherwise not be cultivated (Hurtado, 2007; Soria, Snyder, & Reinhard, 2015). This aligns with the socially just

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and democratic educational environment idea heralded by advocates of diversity in education which, according to Hurtado (2007), builds self-efficacy and encourages responsibility in students as they move past their own self-interests to notions of a greater good. Across all of these four categories, Aguilar (2017) suggested, institutional “leadership sets the tone” (p.11) as a lack of leadership on issues of DEI has affected the performance of students of color leading to their educational outcomes remaining largely unchanged for the better part of three decades (Rodriguez, 2015). Therefore, Aguilar (2017) recommended, higher education leaders must include diversity topics in resources and training, recruit diverse new leaders, and insist on senior-level leaders have, as part of their responsibilities, addressing diversity issues, concerns, and opportunities.

*Structural Diversity.* Otherwise called compositional diversity, structural diversity is the representation of racial and ethnic groups among the campus community (Nguyen, Chang, Nguyen, & Teranishi, 2018) or simply, the quantitative measure of racially diverse students on campus (Gurin, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). When students from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds are present on campus, it provides the opportunity for students to experience the relational discontinuities and the cognitive dissonance critical to cognitive development (Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004; Gurin et al., 2002). Understanding that in isolation, even a high headcount of ethnically diverse students is not an adequate barometer of DEI success on college campuses, Jayakumar (2008, p.643) offered that:

The legal and educational discourse about the diversity rationale (i.e., that numerical diversity renders educational benefits) must be augmented to include the requirement that institutions move beyond “aesthetic” goals to addressing the legacy of past discrimination and its current manifestation. While



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increasing the number of students of color on campus is an important goal by itself, structural diversity alone will not lead to educational gains for all students. The benefits of structural diversity entirely depend on fostering a positive racial climate.

In addition to recruiting a diverse student body, there should also be a focus on recruiting people of color in college leadership and faculty positions. This is because educators of color in leadership positions at colleges often serve as mentors for faculty of color on their campuses and guide said faculty who are considering the administrative pathway. In turn, faculty of color serve as role models for students of color (Gutierrez, Castañeda, & Katsinas, 2002) and encourage them to succeed academically as well as facilitate their career aspirations (Cole & Barber, 2004). As is reflected, even when structural diversity is achieved, it must go hand in hand with efforts to eliminate microaggressions and other associated policies that might alienate students of color.

*Interactional Diversity.* As Casillas Arellano, Torres, & Valentine (2009) described it, interactional diversity is “the informal discussion that students have on the way to classes, in residence halls, in classrooms before or after class, during social activities, or at campus work sites” (p. 284). Jayakumar (2008) extolled the benefits of students’ quality engagement in academic and campus activities between those with different racial and ethnic backgrounds because, as Gurin et al., (2002) affirmed, positive cross-racial interactions within classrooms and on campuses can compel students to examine their values, their own self-concept, and their capacity for critical thinking.

*Curricular Diversity.* Also referred to as classroom diversity, curricular diversity speaks “to institutionally sponsored activity—classes, workshops, meeting—that provides students with formal opportunities to learn about and/or interact with diverse populations” (Casillas Arellano,

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et al., 2019, p.284). Reducing students' intergroup bias is one of the primary goals of curricular diversity (Denson, 2009). In fact, several studies have emphasized the efficacy of such interventions as multicultural course interventions, diversity workshops or training interventions, peer-facilitated interventions, and service interventions as vehicles for reducing student's racial bias (Denson, 2009). An important dimension in this regard, is content integration for, as Motaleb (2017) observed, "students of color are often obligated to read, analyze, and respond to texts written by authors and about characters that do not necessarily speak about, or reflect any aspect of their lives" (p.43). As Foster, Lewis, & Onafowora (2003) found, educators can improve the academic outcomes of students of color by working to, in some ways, reflect in the curriculum and instructional strategies, these students' out-of-school cultural experiences.

Therefore, the value of capturing the voices and perceptions of students of color in the design and implementation of curriculum cannot be overstated. Faculty must be intentional about the extent to which they use examples and content from a diversity of cultures and groups to demonstrate crucial ideas, philosophies, and models. As Gay (2000) suggested, faculty must, in a proportionate manner, use cultural knowledge, frames of reference, and performance styles of students of color to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.

*Campus Climate.* Hurtado (1992) defined campus climate as the real or perceived quality of interpersonal, academic, and professional interactions on a campus. Rankin & Reason (2008) focusing more on the underrepresented populations on college campuses, defined campus climate as the "current attitudes, behaviors, and standards/practices that concern the access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential" (p.264). These scholars noted that a multiplicity of factors, both internal and external, have the potential to facilitate or undermine efforts related to learning and experiences at institutions of higher

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learning. According to Schuh et al., (2011), the “key external forces that shape campus climate include governmental policies, programs, and initiatives, as well as sociohistorical forces” (p.46). Hurtado, et. al. (1998) also cited financial aid policies and programs, affirmative action, state and federal policies, access and equity court decisions in higher education, and the way that states provide for institutional differentiation within higher education as external factors that can influence campus climate.

Internally, among factors that influence campus climate are, inter and intra group relations, curriculum and pedagogy, and institutional policies and services (Rankin & Reason, 2008). Relevant to these internal forces, as it has already been made clear, only diversifying the student body “without educationally purposeful interventions to improve intergroup relationships likely will result in increased tension” (Rankin & Reason, 2008, p.267). Subsequently, educational and programmatic interventions that encourage intergroup interactions, especially around social justice issues are necessary to alleviate tensions and result in learning (Chang, 2002; Rankin & Reason, 2008, Zimmerman, Stoddard, Eisman, Caldwell, Aiyer, & Miller, 2013). In addition, intragroup interactions, which are usually ignored (Rankin & Reason, 2008) must also be encouraged. “Functioning student groups, formal or informal, around social identities, provide visible support for students of color” (Rankin & Reason, 2008, p.267).

Overcoming these forces, especially the internal ones, requires visible and strong leadership. Institutional leaders must be bold in tackling racial inequities especially those reflected by relevant features of their institutions that are amendable to policy interventions They must take the lead in openly identifying the issues associated with bias on their campuses, admitting the negative consequences for the entire community and striving for complete and strategic change initiatives (Hanselman et al., 2014). As this review has shown, when senior

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college leaderships are prepared to conduct a rigorous scrutiny of themselves as an academic body, scrupulously identify the gaps, promote empathetic listening to their students of color and to implement interrelated, college-wide systemic changes, they better position their institutions to achieve sustainable diversity, equity, and inclusion. They will, as a result, create a better, more conducive campus climate for all, one that is more welcoming to students of color and values diversity, equity and inclusion and will, therefore, not only enhance the experiences of students of color but will also help others on campus to increase their understanding and awareness of diverse populations.

In sum, this literature review affirmed, among many things, the persistent area of controversy and complexity in the study of DEI and its impact on student attainment in higher education: the difficulty in conceptualizing and operationalizing race and ethnicity. Notwithstanding, the review also provides several points of agreement such as the necessity for robust involvement by college leadership and faculty, as well as general consensus on a direct relationship between DEI and student success. This study will use this information as impetus to investigate the correlation between specific DEI initiatives and the retention and graduation rates of students of color at community colleges. The study's multivariate regression procedures will provide evidence or the lack thereof, of direct correlation between unique DEI practices at ARCC and NHCC and retention and graduation rates of their enrolled students of color. Such new knowledge would provide baselines for future scholarly work in the field.

## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

### **Chapter Overview**

Chapter three recaps the research questions guiding the study, identifies and describes the methodology employed in the study, discusses the rationale for the chosen methodology, describes the employed MMR design, offers an evaluation of the chosen methodology and indicates its inherent limitations. Further, the chapter describes the data collection techniques, the population samples, and instrumentation for both qualitative and quantitative phases of the study. Finally, the chapter presents the researcher's hypotheses, provides contextual definitions of key terminologies used in the study, and discusses ethical considerations observed by the researcher in the course of the study.

### **Recap of Research Questions**

The primary research question at the core of this study was: How do targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs impact retention and graduation rates of students of color at ARCC and NHCC? To further guide the inquiry, this primary question is buttressed by three sub-questions:

1. How do students of color attending ARCC and NHCC perceive the DEI culture on their campus?
2. What do students of color at ARCC and NHCC perceive as their faculty role in developing and sustaining a DEI culture on their campus?
3. What experiences of students of color at community colleges contribute to their persistence?

### **Description and Rationale for Mixed-Method Choice**

This study, in its investigation, aimed to not only describe, but also understand the relationship, if any, between targeted DEI practices initiated at the two focal institutions and the retention and graduation rates of their students of color. In that connection, the study focused deeply on the experiences of individual students of color. To accomplish this, the study utilized the mixed methods approach to collect, analyze, and interpret quantitative and qualitative data. As Schoonenboom & Johnson (2017) suggested, “the number of possible purposes for mixed-method research design is very large and increasing; hence, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive list” (p. 111).

For purposes of this study, however, the rationale for choosing the mixed-method approach was threefold. First, it was influenced by the fact that, used alone, quantitative methods have the potential to “strip away the context” (Attinasi, 1989, p.250) of students’ decisions. Second, most of the quantitative models used to study retention and graduation rates, Spady’s and Tinto’s included, were designed around the experience of ‘traditional’ college students (i.e.- young white men) who attended full-time at residential institutions (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Therefore, adding a qualitative aspect can allow for the return of student voice and perspective (Attinasi, 1989). This, in turn, will offer invaluable insight into the reasons behind trends in attrition, retention and graduation rates revealed through quantitative analysis.

In addition, as Mertens, Bledsoe, Sullivan, & Wilson (2010) suggested, examining retention and graduation rates quantitatively and thereafter, engaging students of color who have been marginalized in higher education, through qualitative interviews, may produce powerful anecdotes that can inform higher education practices and programming within community colleges. Third, Echols (1998) noted that qualitative research based in the experiences of racial

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minorities and other underrepresented and underserved student populations has the potential to add significantly to the literature. This is important, in particular, because the voices of students of color have rarely been used to inform the understanding of college attrition, retention, and graduation rate issues (Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas, & Thompson, 2004). As Harper & Nichols (2008) observed, where they have been sparingly utilized, students of color in higher education have been routinely approached as a monolithic or homogeneous group ignoring their differences and complexity.

### **Procedure**

The researcher found, after a thorough review of the different designs that could be utilized in mixed-methods studies, that for the purposes of this particular study, the concurrent triangulation strategy was the best fit. This strategy was beneficial because both quantitative and qualitative aspects were assigned equal priority. Also, according to Creswell (2003), the concurrent triangulation strategy can be used “to offset the weaknesses inherent in one method with the strengths of the other method” (p. 217). In addition, Baxter and Jack (2008) touted the enhanced data credibility that results from the practice of data collection from a variety of sources. They furthered, in fact, that this strategy leads to a “holistic understanding of the phenomena being studied” (p. 545).

As illustrated in Figure 3.1 below, this strategy permits the simultaneous or concurrent collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The capitalization of both methods indicates that the quantitative and qualitative phases are given equal emphasis—neither phase has a greater priority, even during the analysis stage of the study (Creswell, 2003).

**Figure 3.1: Selected Mixed-Methods Design Concurrent Triangulation Strategy**

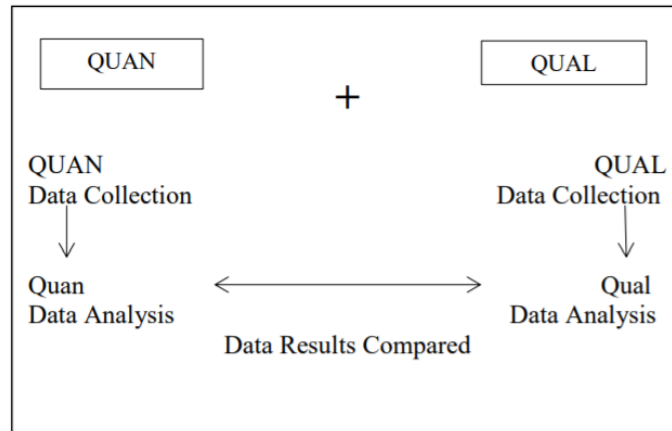


Figure 3.1: Concurrent Triangulation Strategy. A “+” indicates a simultaneous or concurrent form of data collection. Arrows indicate a sequential form of data collection. Capitalization indicates an emphasis or priority; in this study, both methods are equal. Adapted from Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches, by J.W. Creswell, 2003, p. 214.

### Qualitative Phase

*Description:* Qualitative research is utilized to “understand the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). As Zamani-Gallaher and Choudhuri (2016) suggested, “in order to give agency, expression, and voice, qualitative research approaches are well suited for research exploring the experiences of marginalized groups” (p. 50). This study focused on collecting data that would help in understanding the DEI experiences to which students of color attribute their continual enrollment and progress to graduation at their community college and what these experiences mean to them. Therefore, qualitative data describing how educational personnel at ARCC and at NHCC are engaged in deliberate, targeted DEI initiatives to improve retention and graduation rates of students of color was collected via surveys administered to purposively selected students of color at the two institutions.



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*Sample:* For the qualitative phase of this study, purposive sampling was used. This is a technique in which the researcher chooses the sample with a purpose in mind. In other words, the researcher usually would have one or two predefined groups they are seeking for their sample. For this study, students of color interviewed were selected from a small pool of participants identified at the two focal institutions by the researcher. As Creswell (2012) explained, this sampling technique allowed the researcher to select people who could “help us best understand [the] phenomenon” under study and “might give voice to ‘silenced’ people” (p. 206). To maintain the confidentiality of the interviewees, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to each of the qualitative phase participants.

*Collection of Data:* Prior to starting actual data collection, the researcher emailed official letters to the diversity, equity, and inclusion administrators as well as to administrators at the office of institutional research at the two focal community colleges. The letters provided information about the study and extended an invitation to participate. Next, approvals were sought from the Institutional Review Board committees at Hamline University, the doctoral degree-granting institution, and from the two focal institutions: ARCC and NHCC. After IRB approvals were secured and consents obtained from the participating parties, the researcher emailed requests to the participating institutions to schedule times and dates for conducting the study.

### *Instrumentation- Participant Interview Protocol:*

For this qualitative phase, the researcher developed and will administer interviews (see Appendix A) to selected study participants to understand fully their perceptions of, and involvement with DEI activities on their campus and how, if at all, that has translated into a deeper engagement with the social and academic fabrics of the focal community colleges. As

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Blackstone (2012) affirmed, interviews have an advantage over surveys because “with a survey, if a participant’s response sparks some follow-up question in your mind, you generally don’t have an opportunity to ask for more information. What you get is what you get. In an interview, however, because you are actually talking with your study participants in real time, you can ask that follow-up question. Thus, interviews are a useful method to use when you want to know the story behind responses you might receive in a written survey” (p.108).

An open-ended interview format with standardized questions was used. The questions followed the guidelines for standardized open-ended interviews. Each interview question was designed with the purpose of obtaining information on the impact of DEI initiatives at the focal institutions on the retention and graduation rates of their students of color. As Creswell (2003) acknowledged, using open-ended standardized questions reduces disparity in the questions that are asked of interviewees. The open-ended questions were worded carefully with the aim of asking each interviewee questions using the same words for, as Merriam (2009) noted, having the same questions asked by the same interviewer adds validity and authenticity when collecting data.

### **Quantitative Phase**

*Description:* The goal of multivariate descriptive statistics is to portray accurately and succinctly data from multiple variables (Green & Salkind, 2011). A quantitative component to this study, therefore, bodes well because each participant has scores on multiple DEI factor variables and two dependent variables: *reenroll* and *graduate on time*. To investigate and measure the relationship between targeted DEI initiatives as represented by the predictor variables and SOCs propensity to reenroll or graduate on time, the study will utilize a quantitative, nonexperimental, ex post facto research design (McMillan, 2011).

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*Collection of Data:* For this phase of the study, archival data was pulled from the two focal community colleges, both federal and Minnesota State sources such as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and Minnesota State Performance Metrics (MnSPM) on DEI and Retention and Graduation Rates at the two focal community colleges. In addition, a 25-item, 5-point Likert Scale survey questionnaire was used.

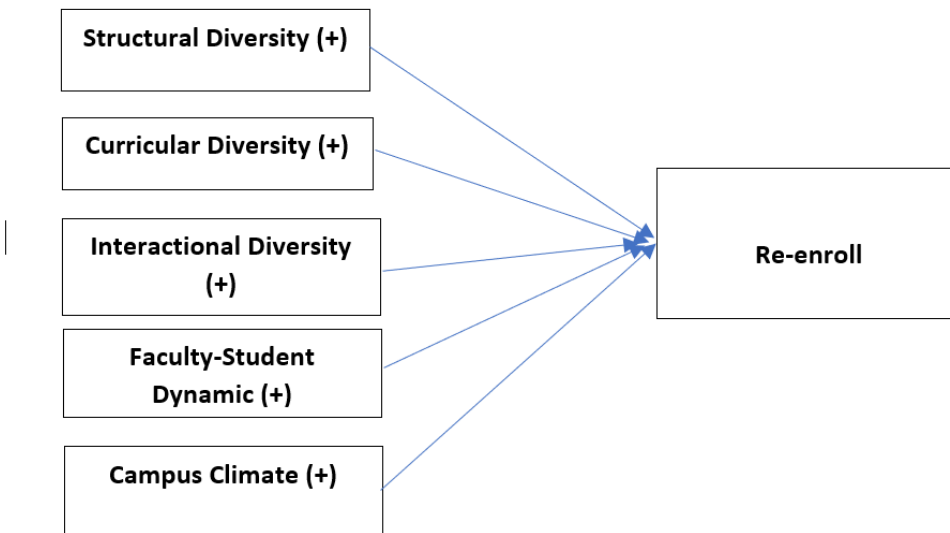
*Instrumentation:* A 25-item, 5-point Likert scale community college DEI campus climate survey developed by the researcher (see Appendix B) was administered to students of color chosen for the study at the focal institutions. The questionnaire developed in the mode of one developed by the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS), covered the following general areas: focal campuses' overall campus climate, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, and students of color retention and graduation propensities. These areas are expanded to gauge participants' perceptions of campus climate, perceptions of institutional support for DEI, and perceptions of participants' engagement with the social and academic structures of the focal institutions. Responses are anonymous; participants' personal/identifying information were not included in summary writeups or findings.

*Hypotheses:* In order to accurately assess the relationships between each of the study's predictor variables and dependent variable 1: *Re-enroll* and dependent variable 2: *Graduate on Time*, the predictor variables were classified into the following DEI-related parameters:

- Structural Diversity
- Curricular Diversity
- Interactional Diversity
- Faculty-Student Interaction Dynamic
- Campus Climate

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Figure 3.2: Diagram of hypothesized relationships between dependent variable 1- reenroll and predictor variables.



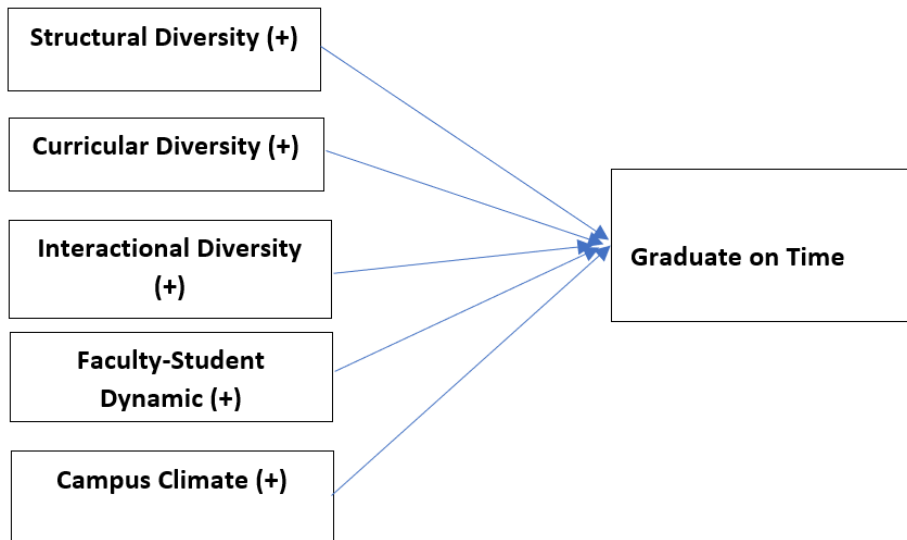
As shown in diagram 3.2 above, for dependent variable 1: *Re-enroll*, the researcher hypothesized as follows:

- *H1A*. Structural diversity has a positive relationship with SOCs responding that they would likely reenroll.
- *H1B*. Curricular diversity has a positive relationship with SOCs responding that they would likely reenroll.
- *H1C*. Interactional diversity has a positive relationship with SOCs responding that they would likely reenroll.
- *H1D*. Faculty-student interaction dynamic has a positive relationship with SOCs responding that they would likely reenroll.

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- *H1E*. Campus Climate is positively related to SOCs responding that they would likely reenroll.

Figure 3.3: Diagram of hypothesized relationships between dependent variable 2/ Graduate on Time and predictor variables.



Similarly, as shown in Figure 3.3 above, for dependent variable 2: *Graduate on Time*, the following hypotheses were made:

- *H2A*. Structural diversity has a positive relationship with SOCs responding that they would likely graduate on time.
- *H2B*. Curricular diversity has a positive relationship with SOCs responding that they would likely graduate on time.
- *H2C*. Interactional diversity has a positive relationship with SOCs responding that they would likely graduate on time.
- *H2D*. Faculty-Student Interaction Dynamic has a positive relationship with SOCs responding that they would likely graduate on time.

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- *H2E*. Campus Climate is positively related with SOCs responding that they would likely graduate on time.

*Statistical Procedures - Measuring Hypothesized Relationships:* Pearson r correlation tests were conducted to examine the relationships between each predictor variable and each of the two dependent variables.

To examine *H1A*, that there is a positive relationship between structural diversity and SOCs responding that they would likely reenroll, a Pearson product moment r correlation test was conducted on the Likert Scale survey items measuring *structural diversity* and *reenroll*.

To examine *H1B*, that there is a positive relationship between curricular diversity and SOCs responding that they would likely reenroll, a Pearson product moment r correlation test was conducted on the Likert Scale survey items measuring *curricular diversity* and *reenroll*.

To examine *H1C*, that there is a positive relationship between interactional diversity that and SOCs responding that they would likely reenroll, a Pearson product moment r correlation test was conducted on the Likert Scale survey items measuring *interactional diversity* and *reenroll*.

To examine *H1D*, that there is a positive relationship between faculty-student interaction dynamic and SOCs responding that they would likely reenroll, a Pearson product moment r correlation test was conducted on the Likert Scale survey items measuring *faculty-student interaction dynamic* and *reenroll*.

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To examine *H1E*, that there is a positive relationship between campus climate that and SOCs responding that they would likely reenroll, a Pearson product moment  $r$  correlation test was conducted on the Likert Scale survey items measuring *campus climate* and *reenroll*.

To examine *H2A*, that there is a positive relationship between structural diversity and SOCs responding that they would likely graduate on time, a Pearson product moment  $r$  correlation test was conducted on the Likert Scale survey items measuring *structural diversity* and *graduate on time*.

To examine *H2B*, that there is a positive relationship between curricular diversity and SOCs responding that they would likely graduate on time, a Pearson product moment  $r$  correlation test was conducted on the Likert Scale survey items measuring *curricular diversity* and *graduate on time*.

To examine *H2C*, that there is a positive relationship between interactional diversity and SOCs responding that they would likely graduate on time, a Pearson product moment  $r$  correlation test was conducted on the Likert Scale survey items measuring *interactional diversity* and *graduate on time*.

To examine *H2D*, that there is a positive relationship between faculty-student interaction dynamic and SOCs responding that they would likely graduate on time, a Pearson product moment  $r$  correlation test was conducted on the Likert Scale survey items measuring *faculty-student interaction dynamic* and *graduate on time*.

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To examine  $H2E$ , that there is a positive relationship between campus climate and SOCs responding that they would likely graduate on time, a Pearson product moment  $r$  correlation test was conducted on the Likert Scale survey items measuring *campus climate* and *graduate on time*.

### **Summary: How the two phases are fused.**

The two phases converge in a final step: interpreting how the qualitative findings explained and informed the quantitative results. Together, the qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed to provide context to the impact targeted DEI initiatives are having on the retention and graduation propensities of students of color at the two institutions. Specifically, a Pearson's  $r$  correlation and a multiple regression analysis were conducted to test the significance of associations between the targeted DEI-related predictor variables and SOCs feelings about reenrolling and graduating on time from their academic programs.

### **Contextual Definition of Key Terms**

The following terms are defined for the purpose of this dissertation:

*Campus Climate:* The perceived level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential reflected in attitudes, behaviors, and standards of the college community.

*Community College:* Sometimes known as a junior college, it is a higher education institution that provides a two-year curriculum that can lead to an associate's degree. Other programs in place include a transfer program towards a four-year degree and occupational programs, one and two-year programs of study.

*Continuing-generation student:* A college student who has at least one parent with a bachelor's degree or a higher level of educational attainment.



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*Curricular Diversity:* The concept of a curriculum that is inclusive of the experiences and histories of those with protected characteristics, and often seeks to erase barriers in society through fairer and more equitable distribution of curriculum content.

*Diversity:* Individual differences (e.g., personality, learning styles, and life experiences) and group/social differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, and ability as well as cultural, political, religious, or other affiliations).

*Equity:* refers to all students having access to the right resources they need at the right moment in their education, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, language, religion, family background or family income.

*Equity (Ethnically Diverse Students Focus):* The creation of opportunities for historically underserved and underrepresented populations to have equal access to and participate in educational programs that can close the achievement gaps in student success and completion.

*Faculty-Student Interaction Dynamic:* The faculty-student interaction related to and outside of coursework. This measure includes activities such as faculty taking a personal interest in student, faculty considering student's feelings, faculty helping the student when he/she is trouble with the work, and faculty talking to with the student.

*First-generation student:* A college student whose parent(s)/legal guardian(s) have not completed a recognized bachelor's degree at a four-year college or university.

*Graduation Rate:* The percentage of a school's first-time, first-year undergraduate students who complete their program within 150% of the published time for the

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program. For example, for a two-year degree program, entering students who complete within three years are counted as graduates.

*Inclusion:* The active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity—in the curriculum, in the co-curriculum, and in communities (intellectual, social, cultural, geographical) with which individuals might connect in ways that increase awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions.

*Interactional Diversity:* The opportunity to interact with students from diverse backgrounds in the broad, campus environment.

*Retention Rate:* The percentage of a community college's first-time, first-year students who continue at the college the next year.

*Structural/Compositional Diversity:* the numerical and proportional representation of different groups of people within the campus environment. This includes diversity within both faculty/staff and student populations.

*Students of color (SOCs):* Students who identify as Black or African American, Latinx, Asian, Native American and/or multiple of the above-mentioned racial identities.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Bloomberg & Volpe (2008) cautioned that researchers are morally bound to conduct research in a manner that minimizes potential harm to those involved in the study and therefore should be concerned with producing an ethical research design. Similarly, Creswell & Poth (2018) suggested that “an ethical study involves more than simply the researcher seeking and obtaining permission of the IRB committees or boards; the researcher should consider and

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address all anticipated and emergent ethical issues in the study” (p. 48). Thus, ethical issues must be addressed in every aspect of the research design, especially in relation to methods, goals, research questions, and the conceptual framework.

In consonance with the above, all interactions with participants in this study and collection of data followed requirements of the Hamline University office of IRB approval. Each participant received consent documentation provided by the researcher indicating that the research process and data collection would be free of unethical treatment (see Appendix C). In addition, all identifying information were removed to protect identity of individuals who participated in the study.

## **CHAPTER IV: DATA/FINDINGS**

### **Chapter Overview**

Chapter four presents the study’s data and findings in a logical sequence without bias or analysis. In addition to interview and survey results, this section also provides a correlation matrix, output for Cronbach’s alpha, outputs for Pearson r correlations, and outputs for regression analysis performed to test the hypothesized relationships between the five predictor variables and the two dependent variables.

### **Overview of Quantitative Findings**

For the quantitative portion of this study, 40 purposively selected<sup>1</sup> SOC’s currently enrolled at the two focal institutions: Anoka Ramsey Community College (A.R.C.C.) and North

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 3, p.45

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Hennepin Community College (N.H.C.C.) were recruited to complete a 25-item, 5-point Likert Scale survey questionnaire.

For this study, the students of color surveyed were selected from a small pool of participants identified at the two focal institutions by the researcher. As a drawback, “the subjectivity and non-probability-based nature of purposive sampling means that it can be difficult to defend the representativeness of the sample” (Rai & Thapa, p.10). This critique notwithstanding, as Creswell (2012) made clear, purposive sampling technique allows the researcher to select people who could “help us best understand [the] phenomenon” under study and “might give voice to ‘silenced’ people” (p. 206).

The specific criteria for participants to qualify for the study were as follows:

- Be a person of color.
- Be at least 18 years of age.
- Be currently enrolled at A.R.C.C. or N.H.C.C.
- Is participating now or had participated in the past in a campus DEI-initiative.

The pool of SOCs who met all of the above-listed criteria and responded to the survey recruitment flyers posted across the campuses of the two focal institutions were shortlisted. At this stage, a total of 70 students were shortlisted (35 each from A.R.C.C. and N.H.C.C.). The final selection of the actual 40 participants from the shortlisted candidates were then randomized by the researcher. The names of the 35 identified candidates from each college was put in a box and the researcher randomly picked 20 names from each box to finalize actual study participants list.

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The survey questions were broken down into three categories: SOC Perception of General Campus Climate; Targeted Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives on Campus; and SOC Retention and Graduation Propensities. All 40 participants (20 from each focal institution) completed the survey during onsite visits by the researcher over a five-day period.

The quantitative method utilized for the study is a two-tailed Pearson  $r$  correlation test. The Pearson correlational analyses were performed to determine if there existed a likely direct relationship, an inverse relationship, or no relationship between the two dependent variables (*Reenroll and Graduate on Time*) and the five predictive variables (*Structural Diversity; Curricular Diversity, Interactional Diversity, Faculty-Student Interaction Dynamic, and Campus Climate*) as measured by the Likert scale survey responses. The Pearson's correlation coefficients ( $r$ ) were used to measure the strength of any linear associations between each of the two dependent variables and each of the five predictor variables. Tables 4.2 and Table 4.3 below present Pearson  $r$  Correlation test outputs on the following hypothesized relationships:

### **Dependent Variables**

- I. ***Dependent Variable 1: Reenroll.*** The construct labeled *Reenroll* was the first dependent variable for this study. This variable was operationalized by participants responses to one survey statement: "*It is likely I will reenroll at this college next semester.*" The statement was measured on a five-point scale (5 Strongly Agree, 4 Agree, 3 Neutral, 2 Disagree, 1 Strongly Disagree). The hypotheses regarding this variable were as follows:
  - *H1A.* Structural diversity is positively related with SOCs responding that they will likely reenroll.

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- *H1B*. Curricular diversity is positively related with SOCs responding that they will likely reenroll.
- *H1C*. Interactional diversity is positively related with SOCs responding that they will likely reenroll.
- *H1D*. Faculty-student interaction dynamic is positively related with SOCs responding that they will likely reenroll.
- *H1E*. Campus Climate is positively related with SOCs responding that they will likely reenroll.

II. ***Dependent Variable 2: Graduate on Time.*** The construct *Graduate on Time* was the second dependent variable for this study. This variable was operationalized by participants responses to one survey statement: “*I will graduate on time from this college.*” As with the first dependent variable, this statement was measured on a five-point scale (5 Strongly Agree, 4 Agree, 3 Neutral, 2 Disagree, 1 Strongly Disagree).

The hypotheses regarding this variable were as follows:

- *H2A*. Structural diversity is positively related with SOCs responding that they will likely graduate on time.
- *H2B*. Curricular diversity is positively related with SOCs responding that they will likely graduate on time.
- *H2C*. Interactional diversity is positively related with SOCs responding that they will likely graduate on time.
- *H2D*. Faculty-student interaction dynamic is positively related with SOCs responding that they will likely graduate on time.

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- *H2E*. Campus Climate is positively related with SOCs responding that they will likely graduate on time.

### **Predictor Variables**

The five predictor variables were derived as follows: Predictor variable 1, Structural Diversity was derived using responses to survey item 2 on part II: *“Recruiting and retaining students and faculty of color is an institutional priority.”* Predictor Variable 2, Curricular Diversity was derived using survey item 7 on part II, *“There is adequate representation of multicultural materials in my courses/curriculum.”* Predictor Variable 3, Interactional Diversity was derived using survey item 4 on part II, *“I am very comfortable interacting with people who have a racial/ethnic background other than my own.”* Predictor Variable 4, Faculty-Student Dynamic was derived using survey item 12 on part I, *“I feel that faculty take their time to regularly interact with me on campus.”* These statements were measured on a five-point scale (5 Strongly Agree, 4 Agree, 3 Neutral, 2 Disagree, 1 Strongly Disagree).

For predictor variable 5, *Campus Climate*, individual survey responses for questions 1 through 11 were averaged as an aggregated<sup>2</sup> response to overall campus climate<sup>3</sup>. Thereafter, a Cronbach’s alpha test was conducted on the 11 items to assess their internal consistency. The computed value of 0.952 indicates an excellent internal consistency among the 11 items (see Table 4.1).

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<sup>2</sup> To achieve this aggregation, the researcher first reverse coded the only negatively directional item, question 10, *“I have been discriminated against or harassed on campus due to my race/ethnicity.”*

<sup>3</sup> Question 12 was excluded as it had already been used to construct predictor variable 4.

**Table 4.1: Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for Predictor Variable 5**

	<i>SOCs Perception of General Campus Climate</i>
<i>Number of Items</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Sum of Item Variances</i>	<i>10.640</i>
<i>Variance of Total Scores</i>	<i>79.040</i>
<i>Cronbach’s <math>\alpha</math></i>	<i>0.952</i>

**Table 4.2: Pearson’s  $r$  for Dependent Variable 1 - Reenroll and the five Predictor Variables.**

	<i>Compositional/ Structural Diversity Efforts</i>	<i>Curricular Diversity Efforts</i>	<i>Interactiona l Diversity Efforts</i>	<i>Faculty- Student Dynamic</i>	<i>Perception of General Campus Climate</i>
<i>Coefficient</i> ®	<i>0.174</i>	<i>0.437</i>	<i>0.411</i>	<i>0.500</i>	<i>0.529</i>
<i>T Statistic</i>	<i>1.090</i>	<i>2.994</i>	<i>2.778</i>	<i>3.561</i>	<i>3.840</i>
<i>p Value</i>	<i>0.860</i>	<i>0.005</i>	<i>0.008</i>	<i>0.001</i>	<i>0.005</i>
<i>N</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>DF</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>38</i>

First, as shown in the Pearson  $r$  output presented in Table 4.2 above, the correlation between *structural diversity* and *re-enroll* is  $r(38) = 0.17, P = .859$ . That is, the number of SOCs enrolled at a community college as a percentage of the overall number of students enrolled has a likely statistically very weak positive relationship to SOCs responding that they would reenroll at their institution. Specifically, there isn’t enough evidence of a relationship to reject the null hypothesis of zero correlation.



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Second, for the correlational relationship between *curricular diversity* and SOCs responding that they would reenroll, Table 4.2 reports  $r(38) = 0.44, P = .005$ . That is, SOCs who believe that course content is integrated to reflect aspects of their lived experiences are also statistically more likely to answer that they intend to re-enroll at their institution.

Third, the Pearson's  $r$  output presented in Table 4.2 shows that there is a likely strong positive statistical correlation between interactional diversity and SOCs responding that they would likely re-enroll at their college,  $r(38) = 0.41, P = .008$ . That is, community college SOCs who engage more frequently with diverse peers outside of class, in informal settings, are statistically more likely to also answer that they intend to re-enroll at their institution.

Fourth, the Pearson's  $r$  output presented in Table 4.2 above shows that there is a likely strong, statistically significant positive correlation between *faculty-student interaction dynamic* and SOCs responding that they would re-enroll,  $r(38) = 0.50, P = .001$ . That is, SOCs who believe that faculty make cautious efforts to engage SOCs (i.e.- through quality of instruction, freedom to contact faculty for consultation, availability of faculty for consultation, and faculty involvement outside of the classroom) are also significantly more likely to answer that they intend to re-enroll at their community college.

Fifth, as is reflected in Table 4.2, *campus climate* and the likelihood of SOC's responding that they would reenroll were found to be strongly positively correlated,  $r(38) = 0.53, P = .004$ . SOCs who have higher positive perception of general campus climate will also more likely answer that they intend to re-enroll at their college.

**Table 4.3: Pearson’s *r* for Dependent Variable 2 - Graduate on Time and the five Predictor Variables.**

	<i>Compositional/ Structural Diversity Efforts</i>	<i>Curricular Diversity Efforts</i>	<i>Interactional Diversity Efforts</i>	<i>Faculty- Student Dynamic</i>	<i>Perception of General Campus Climate</i>
<i>Coefficient</i> ®	0.163	0.570	0.550	0.531	0.470
<i>T Statistic</i>	1.020	4.234	4.037	3.860	3.331
<i>p Value</i>	0.316	0.001	0.003	0.004	0.002
<i>N</i>	40	40	40	40	40
<i>DF</i>	38	38	38	38	38

First, Table 4.3 above shows the correlation output for *structural diversity* and the likelihood of SOCs responding that they feel they will graduate on time as,  $r(38) = 0.16, P = .32$ . This indicates a likely very weak positive statistical correlation between the number of SOCs enrolled in proportion to the overall student population and SOCs responding that they feel they will graduate on time. Specifically, there is not enough evidence of a relationship to reject the null hypothesis of zero relationship.

Second, from Table 4.3, the Pearson Correlation output shows the statistical correlation between *curricular diversity* and SOCs likelihood of responding that they feel they will graduate on time as,  $r(38) = 0.57, P = .001$ . That is, course content integration to reflect aspects of their lived experiences have a statistically significant positive relationship with SOCs likely responding that they feel like they will graduate on time.

Third, for the statistical relationship between *interactional diversity* and SOCs likelihood of responding that they feel like they will graduate on time, Table 4.3 shows a Pearson

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correlation output of  $r(38) = 0.55, P = .002$ . That is, SOCs who engage more frequently with diverse peers outside of class, in informal settings, are statistically more likely to also answer that they intend to graduate on time.

Fourth, Table 4.3 shows that there is a likely strong positive statistical correlation between *faculty-student interaction dynamic* and SOCs responding that they feel like they will graduate on time,  $r(38) = 0.53, P = .004$ . That is, SOCs who are satisfied with the extent to which faculty make deliberate efforts to engage with them (i.e.- through quality of instruction, freedom to contact faculty for consultation, availability of faculty for consultation, and faculty involvement outside of the classroom) are also more likely to answer that they feel like they will graduate on time.

Fifth, as shown in Table 4.3, *campus climate* and SOCs responding that they feel like they will graduate on time have a likely strong positive statistical correlational relationship,  $r(38) = 0.47, P = 0.002$ . That is, SOCs who have higher positive perception of general campus climate will also more likely answer that they feel like that they will graduate on time.

### Relationships Among Study's Variables

Figure 4.1 below presents correlations among the study's variables. It is important to understand these relationships among the predictor variables before drawing conclusions about the apparent relationships of each, in isolation, to the dependent variables. As can be seen from the matrix, across the board, there are positive correlations among all of the predictor variables<sup>4</sup>. The correlation coefficients range from 0.46 between the predictor variables structural diversity and interactional diversity to 0.66 between the predictor variables campus climate and faculty-student dynamic. This fact points to the likelihood that each predictor variable has a positive

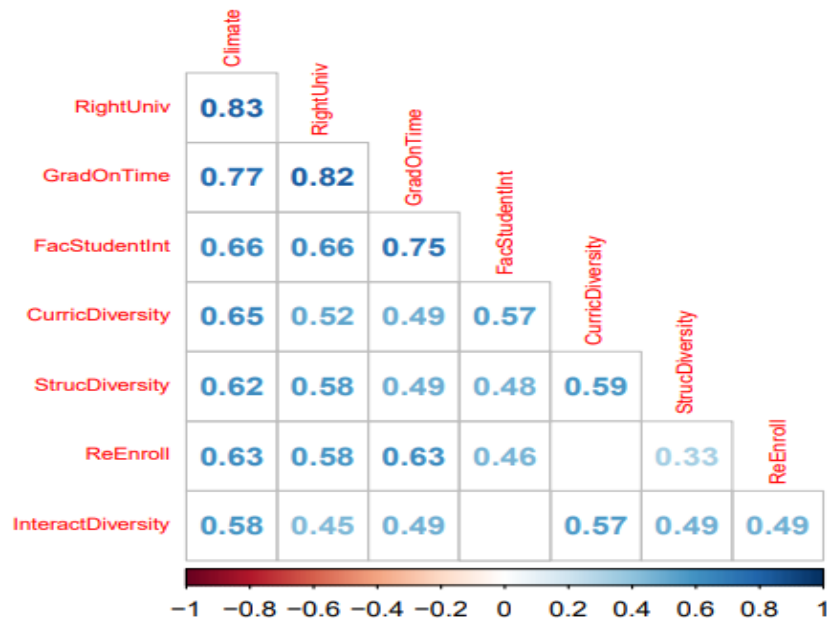
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<sup>4</sup> Each square in the matrix performs a Pearson correlation test. The actual correlation number is shown if it's significant at a 0.05 level. The cells that are blank represent tests that are not significant at a 0.05 level.

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influence on the others. The researcher’s evaluation of the importance of these statistical relationships to the study’s findings is presented in Chapter 5 under the ‘Discussion’ section.

**Figure 4.1: Correlation Matrix for Study’s Variables**



### Unique Institutional Characteristics

In view of the correlational relationships among the study’s variables presented in Figure 4.1, a regression analysis was conducted to assess the relationships among the variables across the two focal institutions (see Table 4.4). It appears, from the t-test coefficients, that the overall effect of the various diversity dimensions on the propensities for SOCs to reenroll and to graduate from their academic programs in prescribed time, may be contingent also, on unique institutional characteristics. Such possible institutional characteristics are presented and expanded on in chapter 5 under “Discussion.”

**Table 4.4: Regression Analysis of Predictor Variables and Dependent Variable 1&2: Re-enroll and Graduate on Time**

Variable	Dependent Variable	
	Re-enroll Coefficient (Std Error)	Graduate on Time Coefficient (Std Error)
Intercept	0.80 (0.770)	2.95*** (0.262)
NHCC (= 1 if College = NHCC)	-0.02 (0.061)	-0.28*** (0.018)
Structural Diversity	0.09 (0.126)	-0.08 (0.051)
Curricular Diversity	-0.07 (0.142)	-0.14*** (0.008)
Interactional Diversity	-0.01 (0.164)	0.14** (0.049)
Faculty-Student Interaction	0.14*** (0.008)	0.12+ (0.064)
Campus Climate	0.62** (0.225)	0.29*** (0.004)

Signif Codes: '\*\*\*' p<0.001, '\*\*' p<0.01, '\*' p <0.05, '+' p<0.1

Robust, clustered standard errors in parentheses. SE's clustered by school.

## Qualitative Results/Findings

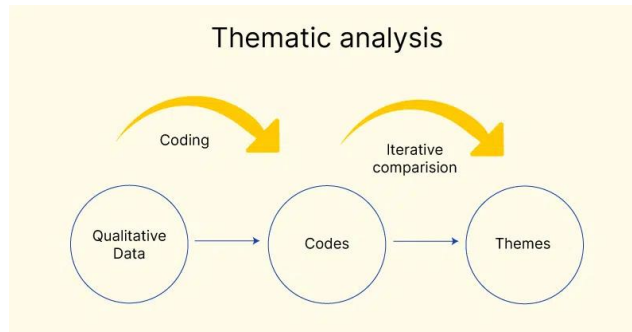
### Overview of Qualitative Findings

For the qualitative aspect of the study, utilizing a portable audio recorder, 20 purposively selected students of color were interviewed at the two focal institutions in one-on-one, face-to-face, 25 minutes sessions. The interview tapes were listened to several times, transcribed, and coded by the researcher over several hours. Emerging themes across responses from the participants were then identified. Interview questions (see Appendix A) were predetermined open-ended questions that allowed for follow-up questions or the seeking of further clarification.

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This approach permitted for a variety of answers as some study participants elaborated more on their thoughts and perspectives during follow-up.

**Figure 4.3: The Thematic Analysis Process**



Adopted from: <https://www.voxco.com/blog/thematic-analysis>

This qualitative aspect of the study gave the researcher a deeper, contextual understanding of the perceptions of the participants beyond the statistical measures gained from the quantitative analyses. It provided an opportunity to hear directly from SOCs about their lived experiences on their campuses. As studies suggest, qualitative interview environments promote trust and openness, allowing the participants a chance to express their views, emotions, and perspective freely, without bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fraenkel, et al., 2012). Overall, in fact, a growing body of literature points to the potential value of interviews as opportunities for self-reflection, appraisal, catharsis, being listened to, responded to empathetically, and to being validated (Birch and Miller, 2000; Campbell et al., 2010; Clark, 2010).

The findings from the interviews showed the various ways in which targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives on community college campuses can promote a wholesome sense of belonging and leads to academic success amongst students of color.

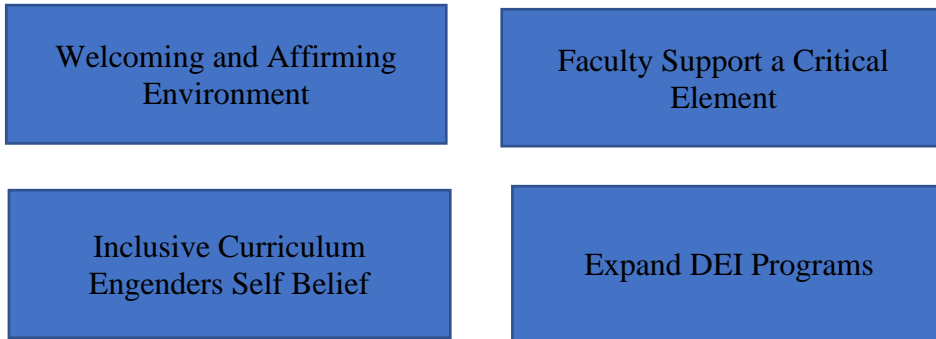
From the interviews, four major themes emerged. These themes included:

1. Welcoming and Affirming Environment
2. Faculty Support is Critical Element in SOCs Academic Pursuit

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3. Inclusive Curriculum Engenders Self-Belief
4. Need to Expand DEI Activities on Community College Campuses

**Figure 4.4: Emergent Themes**



### **Theme I: DEI Programs Create an Affirming Environment:**

A welcoming and affirming environment was among the major themes that emerged from the participant interview sessions. Participants shared that as members of DEI organizations or activities that involved other SOCs, they can afford to be themselves without fear of being judged. These associations provide for SOCs a space where they find themselves represented and reflected, and where they understand that all people are treated with respect and dignity. In that respect, participant NHAK said:

Sometimes I don't feel as comfortable interacting with Caucasian students because I am afraid of being judged. It is just a different situation one finds themselves in; Over time, however, as you get to know the campus better, as you identify those programs that bring you together with other students with common backgrounds like yourself, things begin to feel better. It can be so liberating when you have study groups or close friendships with others that have an appreciation for your story, those that truly know what you have been through or is going through at that moment. I will definitely

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say this has helped me stay at this school and is a big reason I feel I am on track to graduate on time.

Participant NHJY elaborated on this same point further. She said:

When the majority of the students are white, you feel a little bit out of place. Sometimes you wonder if you really belong on campus. I think in a way, this has a negative effect on how successful you can be in your academic work. But then you find your voice and your place when you begin to explore and engage with campus organizations full of other students that look like you and share some of your challenges.

Participant ARJN said he is convinced that the community college community can be great for everyone but with a caveat. He said:

I think this college can be great as long as people stop trying to make it great while at the same time trying to keep it as white as ever. There has to be an appreciation for diversity, equity, and inclusion in a way that promotes social justice for all students and employees. That begins with encouraging more programs and groups that are not all about White culture. The more we as minorities can see examples of ourselves...be it through our faculty or through initiatives that promote our way of life, the more we feel connected to campus life. When I feel connected to the college, why would I want to leave before I finish what I started?



## **Theme II: Faculty Support is a Critical Element**

The second theme identified was the critical nature of faculty support in the promotion of retention and graduation rates of students of color at community colleges. When faculty members are intentional in deploying practices that holistically integrate students of color into the learning environment, they can tap more deeply into these students' skills and cultural wealth for academic success. It is important for faculty to validate, show care, and demonstrate belief in the abilities of students of color to succeed in their academic work. Participant NHKY spoke to how essential faculty and staff support has been in her ability to stay at her college and have success in her academic work. She said:

My faculty advisor has been very understanding of my cultural dictates especially regarding funerals, so he has often coordinated with other faculty and staff so that they work with me when the need arises, so I don't get in trouble with financial aid or with my courses. This has really helped me to keep pace with my studies here at the college.

Similarly, participant ARIO said:

When a faculty member just walks over to me and makes small talk or asks about my wellbeing beyond what is going on in the classroom you know.... how I'm doing and things like that, it really tells me a lot. I know then that the faculty member cares about me as a person. It tells me I can trust them to be fair when I have an issue in their course. I will be more willing to reach out to that faculty if I ever need to.

Participant ARJJ elaborated on the nature of faculty interaction with students of color on her campus as follows:

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The level of faculty interaction with me and others that look like me depends on individual faculty members. Some are really openminded while others are not so welcoming. I don't know what is really responsible for that... I can't for sure say it is all related to issues of racism even though I feel that is a part of it. It wouldn't hurt how I feel about the college if there were more care by faculty beyond the classroom.... they just being a little concerned about me as a person.

Participant ARPB, in agreement, added:

I think most faculty try their best; I just hope that their effort would come organically without a push from peers or administration. That would feel a lot more natural and help ease tensions students like myself feel on campus. I hope that faculty would be more inclusive and mindful about how they talk about students. Sometimes, it feels like I am walking on eggshells around my professors. I don't want to seem needy to them. I don't want to reinforce any stereotypes they may have about me.

In the same vein, participant NHAA said:

The truth is most of us are eager and willing to learn. All someone like myself need is clarity and support from our faculty. When they make themselves available and are willing to say what the expectations are in ways that make sense, that makes a big difference in how I do in my classes. It is a hit and miss thing. Some faculty are more willing to give of themselves than others.

Participant ARDW took this theme further when he said:

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Absolutely, more faculty that look like me in my classrooms here will definitely make me more confident in my own abilities. For one thing, I would have a point of reference to say if they, as people of color, can make it this far, there is no reason I too can't.

### **Theme III: Inclusive Curriculum Engenders Belief in Self:**

The third theme identified was the need for an inclusive curriculum. Throughout the interviews, participant after participant stressed how important an inclusive curriculum would be to their overall mindset, sense of belonging to the college community, and academic success. They all, in a variety of ways, agreed that community colleges and their faculty must find ways to make a connection to students of color lived experiences, history, and culture through course materials selected, assignments created, and examples cited in class. Such efforts would be an intentional way to engage these students as well as acknowledge systemic issues, including racism, that disproportionately affect this underrepresented student population. Participant NHMA said:

There isn't much reference to my culture across the curriculum. Such representation would make a world of difference for me. It would make me feel like I am important and not just being tolerated here to satisfy some statistics purpose for the college. It does wonders for your self-esteem when you know you are seen, heard, and supported.

Participant NHRM added:

I would 100 percent like to see my cultural background and life experiences and things like that reflected in my courses and across the curriculum. For instance, if my instructors' in-class examples speak to my life experiences,

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or things I can relate to, they would be easier to digest and make sense of.

There is no question in my mind, that such reality would improve my academic performance. Unfortunately, all I see and hear and experience in the classroom is about White culture and experiences. To say the truth, most of those things challenge me because they are so abstract.... I just can't relate to them; they don't exist in my world.

Participant NHMT agreed: She said:

Um, believe me.... I feel a lot at ease when faculty assign homework or readings that relate to different racial identities not just white identity. That can be empowering...it makes me feel competent, like just being able to make a practical sense of what I am reading.

### **Theme IV: Need to Expand DEI Initiatives on Campus**

The fourth theme identified was an agreement on the need to expand DEI initiatives. Students of color thrive and achieve more at higher educational institutions where there are deliberate efforts made to provide diversity, equity, and inclusion activities. In such environments, these students can connect with people from different races and orientations, as well as feel seen, heard, and valued and tend to improve their critical thinking skills, awareness of social problems, academic engagement, and overall satisfaction with their educational experience. This need for more DEI activities on community campuses was highlighted in the results from this study's interview sessions. For instance, participant NHNP said:

Even though I feel that I am treated with respect, there is still much to be desired. I will graduate a whole year late due to the language barrier I struggle with. I definitely would need more time to complete assignments

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and quizzes but am usually turned down because my language barrier is not a documented disability. I wish they could really see my problem for what it is...I am different, I am really learning the English language as I go through school.

Participant ARME had a vision about one way DEI activities can be expanded on her campus. She said:

There is a need to hire more faculty of color at the college. I just don't see examples of what I can become when all I see is White men and White women teaching all of my courses. The more I see faculty of color, it helps me to see the possibilities for my own future. Through these faculty of color, I can see myself...their being here helps me to see beyond the excuses that kind of keeps me down because if they can make it this far, there is no reason why I can't succeed too. So, yes.... hiring more people of color across different positions on campus will be really empowering for someone like myself.

Participant NHYG agreed. She said:

For me, I am in the sciences so I really don't know how faculty can talk about examples in my courses that reflect my culture...I think my culture is not much in those areas. But then again, when you think about it, we Asian people have been around just as long as any other race. So, if faculty really want, they can show a representation of me and my culture in their lessons.

Similarly, ARKM stated he came to his community college hopeful for a true community feel but found there's still work to be done to get there. He said:

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First off, I came here because they talked so much of the culture of diversity and inclusion. But then I got here and sometimes, to be honest, I feel lost; I go through moments as a person of color questioning sometimes, my self-worth, you know.....stuff like that. It's like.....do I really belong?

### **Summary**

The qualitative portion of this study, through individual, face-to-face interviews, explored the perspectives of 20 purposively recruited students of color currently attending the two focal institutions to examine the predictive impact of targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives on their intention to remain enrolled and to graduate from their academic programs in the prescribed time. The major themes to emerge from the participant perspectives were affirmative of the findings of positive correlational relationships (to different degrees) obtained from the quantitative analysis between each of the study's predictor variables and SOCs intention to reenroll and to graduate in prescribed time.

## **CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Chapter Overview**

Chapter five provides a brief summary of the study's key findings and relate same to the assumptions the researcher made prior to embarking on the research. Also, it presents the conclusions drawn as a result of the research on the significance of the associations between DEI initiatives and SOCs perception about whether or not they would re-enroll or graduate on time from their academic programs. Additionally, this section reiterates why the study is important for researchers and practitioners alike and makes recommendations for future research.

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Table 5.1 below summarizes the relationships between the dependent variables and each of the predictor variables as established by the measures used in the study.

**Table 5.1: Positive Relationships between ‘Re-enroll’ & ‘Graduate on Time’ and each predictor variable as confirmed or rejected by each measure**

Hypothesis	Supported by Pearson Correlation Test	Supported by Qualitative Interview	Supported by Regression Analysis
<b>Reenrollment</b>			
H1A (Structural D)	NO	NO	NO
H1B (Curricular D)	YES	YES	NO
H1C (Interactional D)	MARGINALLY	YES	NO
H1D (Fac-Student Interact)	YES	YES	YES
H1E (Campus Climate)	YES	YES	YES
<b>Graduate on Time</b>			
H2A (Structural D)	NO	NO	NO
H2B (Curricular D)	YES	YES	NO
H2C (Interactional D)	YES	YES	YES
H2D (Fac-Student Interact)	YES	YES	MARGINALLY <sup>5</sup>
H2E (Campus Climate)	YES	YES	YES

### Discussion

First, as shown in Table 5.1 above, all three measures used in the study indicate that structural diversity efforts do not appear to influence the perceptions of SOCs about re-enrolling or graduating on time from their academic programs. This finding aligns with the prevalent literature. Even though the connection between a diverse undergraduate student body and positive educational outcome is well established (Gurin, 1999; Milem, 2003), structural diversity, while a necessary component of the mix, in isolation, is not sufficient to promote SOCs retention and graduation propensities. In fact, as Hurtado (1999) found, just “increasing the

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<sup>5</sup> Regression coefficient is 0.06. Since this is very close to 0.05, researcher chose for purposes of this study to include it as significant.

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racial/ethnic diversity on campus while neglecting to attend to the racial climate can result in difficulties for students of color as well as for white students” (p.6).

Further, of the existing literature comparing structural diversity of students to retention and graduation rates, only Koch and Zahedi (2018) attempted to control for factors other than diversity that may explain retention and graduation rates. They used financial factors such as college costs and eligibility for Pell grants as covariates. They also included a geographic measure, urbanicity, and the percentages of students and service area residents as institutional characteristics (Koch & Zahedi, 2018). Denson and Chang (2009) did not find that a higher percentage of minority students had a statistically significant effect on the student outcomes they studied. The findings in this study related to structural diversity and SOC's perception about re-enrolling at the colleges and graduating on time are, therefore, not unique. The literature suggests that positive student learning outcomes, including likelihood of reenrollment and graduation are more closely related to the quality of interactions a student has with diverse others. In light of this, community college leaders must be mindful of the delicate balance for, as Chang (1996) and Hurtado et.al. (1998) cautioned, growth in structural diversity without intentional planning for the increased interracial contact can be harmful to students and institutional climate. Chang (1996) & Lee (2000) noted, therefore, that although increased student diversity leads to a greater chance that students will interact with diverse others, community college leaders cannot leave the important business of student learning and academic attainment to chance. As Kendi (2019) sadly put it, “there is no neutrality in the racism struggle” (p. 9).

Second, results from both Pearson's  $r$  and the qualitative interviews indicate that *curricular diversity*, and *interactional diversity* appear to be positively related to SOC's perception of re-enrolling into their college and graduating on time. However, after controlling



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for *faculty-student interaction dynamic* and *campus climate* in the multiple regression analysis, these positive relationships were no longer apparent (see Table 5.1). This study seems to suggest, therefore, that *campus climate* encompasses the overall culture and ethos of an educational institution. So, community colleges must still take deliberate steps to foster curricular inclusivity and interactional diversity recognizing that each is a prominent contributing feature to their overall campus climate. The urgency in this regard is real, as higher education institutions, community colleges included, are currently failing many students of color who remain silent with their experiences.

This study underscores the significance of educators' role in providing a sense of belonging through positive faculty-student interactions, curricular inclusivity, and interactional diversity efforts, as without these, college-wide initiatives, no matter how well-intentioned, will remain disconnected to students' daily lives. Specifically, Nelson Laird, (2005); Pascarella, et al, (2001) found that these aforementioned campus climate features, especially higher levels of interactional diversity, have been associated with increased intellectual and social self-confidence (Lopez, 2004), correlated same with increased critical thinking skills (Antonio, 2001), greater cognitive and affective development (Denson and Chang, 2009), increased cultural knowledge and (Astin, 1993), more positive intergroup attitudes.

Third, the statistically strong, positive relationship between *faculty-student interaction dynamic* and SOCs feelings about reenrolling and graduating on time was confirmed across the study's three measures even after controlling for '*Campus Climate*' in the regression analysis. This finding has significant implications for higher education leaders charged with improving persistence and success of all students, especially those that are historically more likely to not complete a bachelor's degree. Administrators and faculty must always remain aware that

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students, especially students of color, have ongoing, personal lives which they cannot just pack away while they pursue a college education. So, as they strive to enhance the critical thinking of their students of color, they must be flexible and imaginative in the way they teach; they must adapt their skills to the students' needs--not the other way around for, the best faculty are those who are always in a learning mode; they are the faculty who influence their students toward feeling a connection to their institution, staying in school, and completing their academic programs in prescribed time.

It is important to understand that it is not an impossible challenge for faculty to care in this way. As SOCs in this study shared in their interview perspectives, it is clear faculty do not require a lot in order to show their signs of caring. For example, SOCs shared their appreciation for simple gestures of acknowledgement, such as greeting them outside of class or engaging them in conversations beyond course topics. In addition, consistent with Ladson-Billings' (1994) definition of a "caring" faculty, SOCs' description of faculty caring did not need to fit within one specific personality type (i.e.-the warm nurturing faculty). In fact, some SOCs actually valued a faculty who held strict standards with all of his students but who also showed flexibility in accommodating student needs as they arose, providing timely, critical feedback, and providing guidance in and outside of the classroom.

Fourth, *campus climate* is shown across all three measures used in this study to have a positive relationship with SOCs feelings of reenrolling at their college and graduating from their academic program on time (see Table 5.1). This finding affirms the prevalent literature which suggests that understanding the conditions that contribute to SOCs retention and graduation requires accounting for the unique campus environments that serve as the backdrop for students' experiences (Reason, 2009). *Campus climate*, in fact, has been theorized as having direct effects

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on students’ psychological processes and outcome (Johnson et al. 2014). In light of the aforementioned, community college leaderships must be vigilant about the following retention principles adapted from the Noel-Levitz National Center for Enrollment Management (summarized in Table 5.2 below) to improve their retention rates and overall academic success especially for their SOCs.

**Table 5.2: Retention Principles**

<b>Retention Principles</b>	
1	The ultimate goal of a retention effort is improved educational experiences for students, rather than retention per se.
2	Improving the quality of student life and learning is a continuing and important priority for all institutions of higher education.
3	Engaging in a quality of student life and learning (retention) improvement process should provide an approach to organizing a systematic effort, while at the same time enhancing overall institutional quality, effectiveness, and student success.
4	Increases in retention rates are a function of the current state of efforts to improve the quality of educational programs and services. Most institutions engaging in a systematic and comprehensive retention effort should be able to expect, over time, a “lift” in cohort graduation rates between 10 and 20 percent and improvements in annual retention rates of 2 to 5 percent.
5	Improving retention is a complex task; retention and attrition are multi-variant phenomena and are not subject to “quick-fix” strategies.
6	Retention tools, systems, staff development activities, computer software, and professional consultation can make a significant contribution to an organized retention effort.
7	Retention strategies already in place can serve as an excellent foundation for developing and on-going, more systematic approach to improving the quality of student life and learning (retention).
8	Retention is a key component of a comprehensive enrollment management program.
9	Some attrition is inevitable and acceptable.
10	Attrition is expensive, and improvements in retention rates can add to the annual operating budget.
11	Attrition is a problem for which there is a solution, and retention is one aspect of an enrollment management program over which an institution can exert considerable influence and control.
12	Single casual factors of student attrition are difficult to ascertain.
13	Some attrition is predictable and preventable by focusing special efforts on selected target groups of students.

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14	Effective retention strategies are comprehensive focusing on improving campus programs, services, attitudes, and behaviors that result in quality educational experiences for all students.
15	Educational programs and services cannot compensate for the absence of competent, caring, and conscientious faculty and staff.
16	Key to improving the quality of student life and learning (retention) are student-centered policies, procedures, and programs.
17	Persistence depends upon the extent to which an individual has been integrated and engaged in the academic and non-academic components of the campus community.

Adopted from Noel-Levitz National Center for Enrollment Management (2022).

### *Relationships among Predictor Variables*

It is important to understand the effects of the relationships shown among the predictor variables as shown in Figure 4.1. In fact, the coefficients from the regressions in Tables 4.4 are instructive in this regard as they make clear the apparent relationships each predictor variable, in isolation, has with the dependent variables. For example, the effects on the campus climate and, by extension, SOC's feelings about academic attainment appears to depend on the nature and quality of interactions rather than merely on the quantity of said interactions. The intersectionality of these various dimensions of campus climate underscores the tall challenge policymakers and community college leaders have in not only conceptualizing but most importantly, practicalizing what factors contribute most to SOC's reenrollment/retention and graduation propensities.

### *Impact of Institutional Characteristics*

As shown in Table 4.4, there are slight variations in how SOC's from the study's two focal institutions feel about their propensity to reenroll and graduate from their academic programs on time. For example, compared to ARCC, SOC's at NHCC who believed that course content is integrated to reflect aspects of their lived experiences (*curricular diversity*) agree, on average, to a lesser degree, that they feel like they will reenroll at, or graduate from their college on time. Conversely, compared to ARCC, SOC's at NHCC who believe that faculty make

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cautious efforts to engage them (*faculty-student interaction dynamic*) agree, on average, more strongly that they feel like they will reenroll at or graduate from their college on time.

The prevalent literature suggests that these variations may be explained by unique institutional characteristics. Among these characteristics, according to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), are the size of the college; tuition levels; the use of part-time faculty; overall expenditure per student; the distribution of those expenditures among possible functions such as instruction, administration, and student services; the extent to which the college focuses on certificates as opposed to degrees; and the level of financial aid. Kuh (2010), for instance, found that an increase in the percentage of part-time faculty at a college, results in decreased students' persistence and levels of learning gain. Additionally, Kuh (2001) identified the way an institution deploys its resources to induce students' participation in campus activities as critical to helping them reach desired outcomes such as persistence and graduation.

### **Limitations:**

The results from this study indicate different paths that could be followed in future studies. First, of primary interest is whether this study can be replicated with a different population sample attending different community colleges. Also of interest, is whether these findings would still be supported if specific academic discipline areas or majors were included in analyses. For example, do students from the subgroups of interest in my study respond at the same rates if they are majoring in the sciences, or within the departments of business, or if they are as yet to decide on a major? Do findings differ within and between these groups across a single community college, or within and between a group of community colleges across the nation, as was sampled in my study? Replicability of findings, therefore, is of great interest.

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Second, composite measures for majority of the predictor variables for the study contained only one item; composite measures with additional items would undoubtedly strengthen the predictive power for future analyses and subsequent inferences.

Third, this study places a major focus on the impact of targeted DEI initiatives on community colleges' students of color retention and graduation propensities to the exclusion of transfer rates<sup>6</sup>. This focus ignores the importance of transfer as an aspect of community college mission. The relationship of DEI initiatives and successful transfer of students of color from community colleges to bachelor's degree programs is, therefore, an important topic for future research.

Fourth, data for this study was derived solely from the two referenced community colleges: Anoka Ramsey Community College and North Hennepin Community College. As a result, the scope of this study is limited to providing an understanding of ways in which the campus climate for DEI impacts retention and graduation propensities for students of color at these two institutions. Generalization of the experience or perception may not be relevant for all community colleges across the United States. However, given that the student demographic composition at Anoka Ramsey Community College (A.R.C.C.) and North Hennepin Community College (N.H.C.C.) are considered relatively highly diverse with 33% and 56% of students of color respectively (NCES, 2019), this study is intended to provide a foundation of understanding, fill in a gap, and expand the DEI literature on community colleges.

Fifth, another source of sample bias relates to the fact that all participants surveyed and interviewed for this study are currently enrolled at the two focal institutions. This could indicate

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 1, p.20

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that they are less disaffected by the colleges' DEI culture than those who had already given up and dropped out.

Sixth, given the fact that participation in the study was entirely voluntary, it is possible that participants with positive experiences were more likely to respond to a survey about campus DEI climate than those with negative opinions or vice versa. Specifically, it is possible some participants could have engaged in providing acquiescence responses (ACQ)—agreeing with research questions/statements without the action being a true reflection of their own position or the question/statement itself. Also, they could have supplied socially desirable responses (SDR)—responses that may be viewed favorably by others (Kreitchman, et al., 2019; Larson, 2019).

To mitigate possible biases that may result due to these tendencies, the names of volunteer interviewees and survey respondents were kept anonymous so as not place undue pressure on them to respond in acquiescent or socially acceptable ways. Second, the participants were provided only a brief overview of the study at the outset. As Steenkamp, De Jong, & Baumgartner, (2010) noted, this strategy helps circumvent pointing respondents in directions of answering in particular socially acceptable ways but still afford them the opportunity to explore their values and priorities unconstrained, before homing in on the core topic of interest.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Much was learned from this study regarding the impact of DEI initiatives on community colleges' SOC's intentions toward academic and social attainment. Notwithstanding, many questions remain and more can still be learned about the problem. As national attention focuses on the role that community colleges can play in advancing society, additional research on DEI initiatives as vehicles to promote SOC's retention and graduation at community colleges would

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be beneficial. This is especially so given the identified limitations of the current study. While these limitations would not necessarily negate the study's findings, it implies a need for further research to replicate the study at other community colleges. Specifically, a future study could include SOCs transfer rate from community colleges to bachelor's degree programs as a third dependent variable (in addition to reenrollment and graduation intentions) to measure SOCs propensity for academic attainment in light of the importance of transfer rates as an aspect of community colleges' mission.

Further, a future study could test whether the findings would still be supported if specific academic majors were included in the analyses. That is, would students from the subgroups of interest in this current study respond at the same rates if they are majoring in the sciences, or within the departments of business and arts, or if they were, as yet undecided about a major? Or would the findings differ within and between these groups across a single community college, or within and between a group of community colleges across the United States? Also, a future study could include, as interview subjects, former SOCs who already dropped out of the colleges, persons of color within the ranks of staff, faculty, and administration for additional perspectives beyond those of currently enrolled SOCs.

### **Recommendations for Community College Leaders**

#### *Recommendation 1: Cultural Competence Training for All Faculty*

This study affirms the importance of faculty's active engagement in creating inclusive curricula and classroom environment. In the absence of this, the community college culture can perpetuate negative experiences for students of color in terms of white-centric curricula, unacknowledged or badly addressed racial microaggressions in the classroom, as well as general feelings of exclusion and lack of belonging due to marginalizing college culture. In line with



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studies that found colorblind ideology (CBI) among white educators in the US (Lewis, 2001; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013; McCoy, Winkle-Wagner, & Luedke, 2015; Ohito, 2016;), perspectives provided by SOCs in this study described race-avoidant faculty tendencies.

Therefore, my first recommendation is for community colleges to introduce training protocols that address fears and anxiety individuals can have when engaging in race conversations; training that addresses cross-cultural understanding and communication skills. This type of training can provide increased awareness and understanding of racial and ethnic differences and thereby help to counteract a colorblind environment as well as influence positive SOCs retention and graduation propensities.

### *Recommendation 2: Make Concerted Efforts to Diversify Faculty Ranks*

In the United States, White students account for 46% of the community college student population while 56% are ethnically diverse students of color. Comparatively, as of 2016, 75% of community college faculty were White while only 25% were ethnically diverse (American Association of Community Colleges [AACCC], 2018). As the prevalent literature suggests and this study affirms, this lack of diverse faculty of color has negative implications for SOCs. Conversely, the presence of faculty of color on campus facilitates greater responsiveness to academic support needs for students of color and their ability to persist and achieve (Carter, 1994; Kirkpatrick, 2001; Laden, 2004). In light of all this, my second recommendation is for community college leaderships to prioritize the proactive hiring of more faculty of color on their campuses.

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### *Recommendation 3: Be Intentional about Curricular Inclusivity*

The findings in this study underscore the value of promoting, enhancing, and facilitating curricular diversity as a prominent feature of overall campus climate. Therefore, my third recommendation is for community college leaders to institute intentional strategies to foster curricular diversity at their colleges. When community colleges are intentional about curricular diversity, it helps SOC students see that all walks of life, including their own, are pertinent and important, and that they are in a safe environment where they are just not simply tolerated, but also recognized and celebrated.

Curricular diversity ensures that SOC students are exposed not only to the viewpoint, culture, and identity of the dominant racial group but others as well. It connects them more to course materials and keeps them better motivated to learn independently. This helps to keep SOC students in school and pursue higher educational attainment instead of dropping out because they feel estranged from the curriculum and, by extension, from their college. In the words of Armstrong and Stewart-Gambino (2014), intentional effort toward curricular diversity and inclusion “enables us to re-imagine a curriculum as, in fact, a highly textured, asymmetrical phenomenon shaped by structural differences in disciplinary norms, institutional power structures, and social identities that exist, interact, and help explain the uneven and/or weak results produced on any given campus” (p.4).

### *Recommendation 4: Expand DEI Initiatives on Campus*

The fact that community college students self-select colleges which are geographically close to them has been linked to the self-perpetuation of sameness and many times, segregation on their campuses. Research has found that student demographics on many community college

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campuses mimic the communities they serve (Hubbard-Jackson, 2021). The resultant lack of diversity in most community colleges' student demographics and viewpoints, as this study and many others show, negatively impact SOC's sense of belonging and academic performance at these colleges. So, my fourth recommendation addresses the critical need for community colleges to work to counteract the self-perpetuation of sameness on their campuses by expanding diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

### **Conclusion**

Although the issue of retention and graduation rates of students of color in higher education have been studied broadly, this study adds to the literature by keying in on the importance, specifically, of creating targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at community colleges to positively influence retention and graduation rates for this underrepresented population. Notwithstanding the volumes of diversity, equity, and inclusion research in higher education, more work is needed to foster effective DEI initiatives among students at all sectors of higher education, especially at community colleges. Because the community college has played a critical role in bringing together persons from diverse backgrounds, "retention of these students through program completion is an increasingly important challenge" (Lovell, Alexander, and Kirkpatrick, 2002, p. 8). For, a community college is "not just a place to learn; it is a place that matters...because the community college represents hope, opportunity, and for many ... students, one last chance to succeed" (Rendon, 1993, p. 4).

I hope that this study can contribute in a meaningful way to illuminating a clearer path for policy and research related to how DEI initiatives at community colleges across the nation can positively impact the academic and social attainment of students of color.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Participant Interview Protocol

Welcome and thank you for your time today; I truly appreciate your participation. I will share information about my research, and I am hoping to have an informal conversation around your experience with the diversity, equity, and inclusion climate on your community college campus. I would be happy to share the results of the study once it is completed. So, now if I may, let me ask about your engagement with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives on your campus.

1. What attracted you to be involved with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiative(s) on your campus?
2. How has being involved with a campus DEI initiative helped you to stay engaged with the campus community?
3. How would you describe the general climate on campus concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion?
4. Describe your interaction with your faculty in and outside of the classroom setting.
5. How would you describe your interaction on campus with students from ethnic/racial groups other than your own?
6. How do you see your experiences or background reflected in the classroom, courses, and curriculum at your college?
7. Thinking back over your experience in the diversity, equity and inclusion initiative that you are a part of, what experiences stand out as “defining moments” resulting in your commitment to the initiative and to the college?
8. Please describe what you feel is the impact, if any, of your involvement with the DEI initiative on your continued enrollment and academic achievement at the college.
9. Think back over your participation in the initiative, what were factors that helped you in your participation and involvement?



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## Appendix B: Campus DEI Climate Survey Questionnaire

For purposes of this survey, campus climate, diversity, equity, and inclusion are defined as follows:

- Campus Climate:** The perceived level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential reflected in attitudes, behaviors, and standards of the college community.
- Diversity:** Individual differences (e.g., personality, learning styles, and life experiences) and group/social differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, and ability as well as cultural, political, religious, or other affiliations).
- Equity:** all students having access to the right resources they need at the right moment in their education, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, language, religion, family background or family income.
- Inclusion:** The active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity—in the curriculum, in the co-curriculum, and in communities (intellectual, social, cultural, geographical) with which individuals might connect in ways that increase awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions.

**Part I: General Campus Climate** - Please rate each question according to how strongly you agree or disagree.

**SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree**

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
I feel comfortable on campus					
I feel totally welcomed on campus					
I enjoy being a student on campus					
I feel a sense of belonging or community on campus					
I am treated equitably on campus					
I feel very included in the campus community					
I feel that college leadership understands my needs as a student					
I feel that my opinion is valued within the campus community					
This campus is welcoming to students from all backgrounds					

## Impact of Targeted DEI Initiatives on Retention and Graduation

I have been personally discriminated against or harassed on campus due to my race/ethnicity					
The campus environment is free from tensions related to individual or group differences					
I feel that faculty take their time to regularly interact with me on campus					

### Part II: Campus Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
The campus values diversity					
Recruiting and retaining students and faculty of color is an institutional priority					
College leadership demonstrates a strong commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion					
I am very comfortable interacting with people who have a racial/ethnic background other than my own					
I would like to see more diversity within the faculty ranks on campus					
I would like to see more diversity within the student body on campus					
There is adequate representation of multicultural materials in my courses/curriculum					
I feel that there is a need for diversity, equity, and inclusion training for faculty and staff on campus					
I feel that there is a need for more targeted activities on campus that encourage students from various walks of life to interact with each other					
I am aware of the diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives on campus					

### Part III: Retention & Graduation

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
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Impact of Targeted DEI Initiatives on Retention and Graduation

I will graduate on time from this college					
I am confident that this is the right college for me					
It is likely I will reenroll at this college next semester					

**Appendix C: Hamline University’s Approved Participant Informed Consent**

*Hamline University*  
 Institutional Review Board has approved this consent form.  
 IRB approval # 2022-05-186-ET  
 Approved: 05/23/2022  
 Expires one year from above approval date.



***Informed Consent to Participate in Research***

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The student researcher or faculty researcher (Principal Investigator) will provide you with a copy of this form to keep for your reference and will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions.

This form provides important information about what you will be asked to do during the study, about the risks and benefits of the study, and about your rights as a research participant.

- If you have any questions about or do not understand something in this form, you should ask the research team for more information.
- You should feel free to discuss your potential participation with anyone you choose, such as family or friends, before you decide to participate.
- Do not agree to participate in this study unless the research team has answered your questions and you decide that you want to be part of this study.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time.

**Title of Research Study:** The Impact of Targeted Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives on the Retention and Graduation Rates of Students of Color at Community Colleges.

**Student Researcher and email address:** Momoh Sekou Dudu;  
[mdudu01@hamline.edu](mailto:mdudu01@hamline.edu)

**Faculty Advisor:** Kristen Norman, Ph.D. Professor of Public Administration; phone: (612) 523-2814; email address: [knorman06@hamline.edu](mailto:knorman06@hamline.edu)

**1. What is the research topic, the purpose of the research, and the rationale for why this study is being conducted?**

- **Research Topic:** The Impact of Targeted Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives on the Retention and Graduation Rates of Students of Color at Community Colleges.
- **Research Purpose:** The purpose of this research study is to explore the relationship between targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at NHCC and ARCC and the retention and graduation rates of their students of color.
- **Rationale:** The rationale for this study is rooted in the documented need for community colleges across the United States to improve the retention and graduation rates among students of color in line with their White peers.

**2. What will you be asked to do if you decide to participate in this research study?**

If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be required to complete a 22-item online Likert Scale survey questionnaire as well as meet with the researcher for a 30-minute face-to-face or virtual interview. The interview protocol contains 9 questions focusing on your involvement with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives on your community college campus. The interview session will be audio recorded.

**3. What will be your time commitment to the study if you participate?**

If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be expected to commit at least 1 hour of your time to completing the online survey questionnaire and participating in the face-to-face or virtual interview session.

**4. Who is funding this study?**

This study is being conducted without funding.

**5. What are the possible discomforts and risks of participating in this research study?**

By participating in this study there is a small chance of you feeling uncomfortable answering the researcher's questions as well as with the loss of confidentiality during the interview session.

Steps will be taken to minimize these risks. In addition, there may be risks that are currently unknown or unforeseeable. Please contact me at via email at [mdudu01@hamline.edu](mailto:mdudu01@hamline.edu) or via phone at (763) 464-2634 or my faculty advisor Kristen Norman, Ph.D. at (612) 523-2814 or via email at [knorman06@hamline.edu](mailto:knorman06@hamline.edu) to discuss this if you wish.

**6. How will your privacy and the confidentiality of your data and research records be protected?**

The recorded interviews, transcriptions and written materials will be held in confidence, and kept in a secure and locked cabinet in the researcher's home. Only the researcher will have access to the materials. Data files on the researcher's computer will be password protected. Moreover, to ensure confidentiality, the participants' names will not be collected or recorded. Participants will be represented by codes instead. The institutions' names will be substituted with pseudonyms.

**7. How many people will most likely be participating in this study, and how long is the entire study expected to last?**

It is anticipated that between 20 -25 students of color will participate in this study. Participants' time commitment will be at least 2 hours (for survey and interview aspects).

**8. What are the possible benefits to you and/or to others from your participation in this research study?**

The possible benefits you (and others) could get from your participation in this study include beneficial information you will learn about diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and how they impact retention and graduation rates of students of color at your community college. In addition, you (and others) could benefit from eventual policy changes around diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives on your campus if, a result of the published/presented findings from this study, such policy actions are implemented.

**9. If you choose to participate in this study, will it cost you anything?**

If you choose to participate in this study, other than your personal time commitment, it will cost you nothing else.

**10. Will you receive any compensation for participating in this study?**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will not receive any compensation for doing so.

**11. What if you decide that you do not want to take part in this study? What other options are available to you if you decide not to participate or to withdraw?**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate in the study, and your refusal will not influence your current or future relationships with Hamline University, Anoka Ramsey Community College or with North Hennepin Community College. In addition, if significant new findings develop during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to continue participation, we will provide that information to you.

**12. How can you withdraw from this research study, and who should you contact if you have any questions or concerns?**

You are free to withdraw your consent and stop participation in this research study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits for which you may be entitled. If you wish to stop your participation in this research study for any reason, you should tell me, or contact me at [mdudu01@hamline.edu](mailto:mdudu01@hamline.edu) or (763) 464-2634, or my Faculty Advisor, Kristen Norman, Ph.D. at [knorman06@hamline.edu](mailto:knorman06@hamline.edu) or (612) 523-2814. You should also call or email the Faculty Advisor for any questions, concerns, suggestions, or complaints about the research and your experience as a participant in the study. In addition, if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board at Hamline University at [IRB@hamline.edu](mailto:IRB@hamline.edu).

**13. Are there any anticipated circumstances under which your participation may be terminated by the researcher(s) without your consent?**

Your participation may be terminated without your consent for your failure to complete the Likert Scale Campus Climate Questionnaire two weeks after you receive it or for your failure to show up, at the agreed upon time and place for the face-to-face or virtual interview with the researcher.

**14. Will the researchers benefit from your participation in this study?**

The researchers will gain no benefit from your participation in this study beyond the publication and/or presentation of the results obtained from the study, and the invaluable research experience and hands-on learning that the students will gain as a part of their educational experience.

**15. Where will this research be made available once the study is completed?**

This research study is public scholarship; the abstract and final product will be cataloged in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository. Also, this research study may be published or used in other ways, such as in conference presentations or published in research journals.

**16. Has this research study received approval from Anoka Ramsey Community College and North Hennepin Community College where the research will be conducted?**

Anoka Ramsey Community College has deferred IRB approval to Hamline University on the condition that Hamline University's IRB approval and supporting documentation be forwarded to its office of Institutional Effectiveness for their records (see email attached from Nora E. Morris, Dean of Institutional Effectiveness). North Hennepin Community College has requested an application to their internal IRB which is being done concurrently with Hamline University's (see email attached from Daniel de Moraes, Chair, Institutional Review Board).

**17. Will your information be used in any other research studies or projects?**

It is possible that identifiers (information that could identify you) might be removed from your private information and that, after such removal, the information could be used for future research studies, or possibly given to another researcher for future research studies, without additional informed consent from you or your legally authorized representative.

**PARTICIPANT COPY**

**Signatures:**

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature and printed name of person obtaining consent      Date  
(Student researcher or PI)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Title of person obtaining consent

You have been informed about this study’s purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this Form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator or Faculty Advisor      Date



**INVESTIGATOR COPY**  
**(Duplicate signature page for researcher's records)**

**Signatures:**

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature and printed name of person obtaining consent      Date  
(Student researcher or PI)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Title of person obtaining consent

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this Form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator or Faculty Advisor      Date

**Appendix D: Hamline University's IRB Approval Letter**



***Institutional Review Board***

Hamline University  
1536 Hewitt Ave  
Saint Paul, MN 55104-1284  
IRB Chair: Lisa Stegall  
[IRB@hamline.edu](mailto:IRB@hamline.edu)

**May 23, 2022**

**To: Momoh Dudu, Student Researcher**

**CC: Kristin Norman-Major, Faculty Advisor**

**Protocol title:** The Impact of Targeted Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives on the Retention and Graduation Rates of Students of Color at Community Colleges

In accordance with Federal Regulations for review of research protocols, the Hamline University Institutional Review Board has reviewed the above referenced protocol and made the following determination.

***Your protocol has been approved on May 23, 2022.*** This approval is under Expedited Category 7.

The IRB approval number that should be noted in your written project and in any major documents alluding to the research project is:

**2022-05-186-ET**

Please use this [approved informed consent document](#), which has the approval number and date on the document.

***Your IRB approval expires one year from the date above.*** The IRB would like to stress that subjects who go through the informed consent process are considered enrolled participants and are counted toward the total number of subjects, even if they have no further participation in the study. If you desire an increase in the number of approved subjects, you will need to make a formal request (submit an Amendment Form) to the IRB.

As the principal investigator of this project, you are required to:

(1) Inform the IRB of any proposed changes in your research that will affect human subjects. This is done by submitting an Amendment Form, which is found on the IRB

website, to the IRB Chair at [IRB@hamline.edu](mailto:IRB@hamline.edu). Changes may not be initiated until written IRB approval is received.

- (2) Report any unanticipated problems and adverse events to the IRB as soon as they occur.
- (3) Report any significant findings that become known in the course of the research that might affect the willingness of subjects to continue to take part.
- (4) Ensure that only persons formally approved by the IRB enroll subjects.
- (5) Use only the currently approved consent form.
- (6) Protect the confidentiality of all persons and personally identifiable data and train your staff and collaborators on policies and procedures for ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of participants and information. This includes requiring that all individuals who recruit subjects, obtain informed consent, and/ or participate in data collection or analysis complete the Hamline IRB Training Module.
- (7) Submit a Closure Report form to notify the IRB when the study has been completed.
- (8) Note that Continuing Review is not required for protocols approved under the expedited review procedure.
- (9) Please help us help you by including the above protocol number on all future correspondence relating to this protocol.
- (10) Notify us of any changes in your contact information.

I wish you success with your project. If you have any questions, you may contact me at [IRB@hamline.edu](mailto:IRB@hamline.edu).

Sincerely,



Lisa Ferguson Stegall, PhD, FACSM  
Hamline University Interim IRB Chair

**Appendix E: Anoka Ramsey Community College's IRB Reliance Letter to Hamline University's IRB**



Anoka-Ramsey Community College  
11200 Mississippi Blvd.  
Coon Rapids MN 55403

Lisa Ferguson Stegall, PhD, FACSM  
Hamline University Interim IRB Chair  
Institutional Review Board  
Hamline University  
1536 Hewitt Ave, MS-B1807  
Saint Paul, MN 55104-1284

Dear Dr. Ferguson Stegall,

I am writing to let you know that Anoka-Ramsey Community College is happy to partner with Mr. Momoh Sekou Duda on his research project entitled 'The Impact of Targeted Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Initiatives on the Retention and Graduation Rates of Students of Color at Community Colleges'. Although our institution has a review board, we will rely on the IRB at Hamline University as the IRB of record to provide oversight for this project. Work on this project can begin at Anoka-Ramsey once I receive the approval letter and all supporting documents from your IRB.

Sincerely,

*Nora Morris*

Nora Morris Ed.D.  
Chair, IRB  
Anoka-Ramsey Community College

CAMBRIDGE CAMPUS  
300 Spirit River Dr S, Cambridge, MN 55008  
763-433-1100 • 763-433-1841 FAX

[WWW.ANOKARAMSEY.EDU](http://WWW.ANOKARAMSEY.EDU)

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COON RAPIDS CAMPUS  
11200 Mississippi Blvd NW, Coon Rapids, MN 55433  
763-433-1100 • 763-433-1521 FAX

**Appendix F: Anoka Ramsey Community College's IRB Permission to Conduct Research Letter**



Anoka-Ramsey Community College  
11200 Mississippi Blvd.  
Coon Rapids MN 55403

Mr. Momoh Sekou Dudu  
Anoka-Ramsey Community College

Dear Mr. Sekou Dudu,

I am writing to let you know that I have received the appropriate documents from the review board at Hamline University. You are now approved to begin your research project, 'The Impact of Targeted Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Initiatives on the Retention and Graduation Rates of Students of Color at Community Colleges', at Anoka-Ramsey Community College. The college will rely on the IRB at Hamline University as the IRB of record to provide oversight for this project. However, you will need to notify me if any research participants at Anoka-Ramsey Community College experience adverse impacts from involvement with this project. Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

*Nora Morris*

Nora Morris Ed.D.  
Chair, IRB  
Anoka-Ramsey Community College

CAMBRIDGE CAMPUS  
300 Spirit River Dr S, Cambridge, MN 55008  
763-433-1100 • 763-433-1841 FAX

COON RAPIDS CAMPUS  
11200 Mississippi Blvd NW, Coon Rapids, MN 55433  
763-433-1100 • 763-433-1521 FAX

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## Appendix G: North Hennepin Community College's IRB Approval Letter



North Hennepin  
Community College  
A member of Minnesota State

*Engaging students, changing lives*

### Notification of Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

Date: 05/06/2022  
Researcher name: Momoh Sekou Dudu  
Researcher email: [Momoh.dudu@anokaramsey.edu](mailto:Momoh.dudu@anokaramsey.edu)

Project Title: The Impact of Targeted Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives on the Retention and Graduation Rates of Students of Color at Community Colleges  
NHCC IRB #: (220506\_dudu)  
NHCC IRB Review Date: 05/05/2022  
Effective Date: 05/06/2022  
Expiration Date: 06/06/2023  
IRB Review Action: Approved

Dear Momoh,

On May 6<sup>th</sup> 2022, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for North Hennepin Community College (NHCC) has approved the above-referenced research project submission.

Please be aware that the approval for this project expires on May 6<sup>th</sup> 2023. Should you need to continue data collection after that date, you should contact the NHCC IRB and request a renewal for your project. You can reference the NHCC IRB number provided above in your request.

This approval includes all of the documents submitted in your request from April 2022, in the format that they were submitted.

Please contact Daniel de Moraes at [ddemoraes@nhcc.edu](mailto:ddemoraes@nhcc.edu) or 763-488-0222 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

*Daniel de Moraes*

NHCC IRB Chair