

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

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Title: "This Culture is Nurturing and Caring": An Ethnographic Account of a Campus Climate From the Perspective of African-American students.

Abstract approved

Signature redacted for privacy.

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Different racial/ethnic groups often perceive the realities of the campus environment differently: This difference in perspective and the attendant reactions can be a factor in student satisfaction or dissatisfaction. A quantitative survey administered in 1996 and 1999 revealed that African-American students on the campus of a diverse two-year community college were less satisfied with aspects of the campus climate than other student groups. This study responded to those findings. The purpose of this study was to discover how African-American students perceive and describe their experiences on that campus. The researcher sought to discover the sectors of the campus environment that contributed to their satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

The qualitative research paradigm provided the framework for this study. Data was collected from six African-American students utilizing multiple, open-ended, individual interviews, a focus group, and a campus audit. The sample was small and purposefully selected in accordance with the purpose of the study. The individual interviews were spaced from three to seven days apart, which facilitated them placing their experiences in the context of their life histories.

The analysis of the data revealed that although the informants recounted some experiences that made them feel disconnected from the campus, their predominant perception of the campus climate was that it was caring and nurturing. The informants shared experiences that were consistent with the literature on commuter students and retention. Primarily, their transactions with faculty members shaped their perceptions and made their educational experiences meaningful. They perceived the faculty as authentic and available to them. Consequently, they utilized them as informal mentors, friends, and confidantes. Such an environment allowed these students to be fully present as learners.

“This Culture is Nurturing and Caring”: An Ethnographic Account of a Campus  
Climate from the Perspective of African-American students

by  
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“This Culture is Nurturing and Caring”: An Ethnographic Account of a Campus  
Climate from the Perspective of African-American students

CHAPTER ONE  
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In Brown v. Board of Education (1954) the Supreme Court struck down the doctrine of separate but equal education, effectively changing the fabric of public education for African Americans and the nation, and foreshadowing the current diversity movement. However, the law that mandated integration failed to mandate the structural transformation that would enable the schools to be supportive and responsive to African American children.

Bennett (1995) reports that research by Sagar and Schofield on the newly desegregated public schools identified four ways that the host schools responded to minorities. The responses consisted of business as usual, assimilation, pluralistic co-existence, and integrated pluralism. The business-as-usual and assimilation responses resulted in feelings of alienation and rejection on the part of minorities. The pluralistic co-existence response inculcated fear and resentment in white students. Their research found that integrated pluralism is the optimal response and prepares both white and black children for engagement with a pluralistic society (a secondary outcome of Brown v. Board of Education, 1954).

Farrell and Jones (1988) posit that the current challenge for postsecondary institutions is to adjust their organizational and administrative structures and

practices to accommodate the diverse and complex needs of minority student populations, especially blacks, Hispanic/Latinos, and Native Americans. Recognizing the value of diversity for all of their students, postsecondary institutions have adopted practices and policies to strengthen and increase diversity in tandem with efforts to achieve an increased sense of community (Bennett, 1995). These colleges seek to create campus environments that are inclusive of all members and conducive to the academic success of all students.

### Statement of the Problem

Student satisfaction and success are inextricably intertwined with the campus climate and its manifold dimensions. The campus climate can either foster or impede these two (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Smith, Gerbick, Figueroa, Watkins, Levitan, Moore, Merchant, Beliak & Figueroa, 1997). Different racial/ethnic groups often perceive the realities of the campus environment differently. This difference in perspective and the attendant reactions can be a factor in student satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Oregon State System of Higher Education, 1997).

Knowledge of the perceptions of the campus climate of its multiple members and their concomitant level of satisfaction is a critical and fundamental responsibility of campus administrators and decision-makers. All too often, the extent of their knowledge in these domains is limited to “their personal experience

and intuition and those of the relatively few members of the campus community with whom they meet or communicate” (Baird, 1990, p. 35). Institutional decisions and actions based upon limited and anecdotal information can produce nocuous and fruitless effects.

In the fall of 1996 and fall of 1999, Seattle Central Community College (SCCC) administered the Community College Student Experience Questionnaire (CCSEQ) to randomly selected day and evening classes of students in academic and professional/technical programs. Three of the questions that the questionnaire posed focused on campus climate and student satisfaction. Students were asked their perceptions about the 1) friendliness of students, 2) the approachability of instructors, and 3) the helpfulness of faculty and staff. In the fall of 1996, the Asian/non-native and African-American students reported being less satisfied on all three dimensions than the Asian American students, white students, and students grouped in the “other”<sup>1</sup> category. Administrators and faculty informally expressed surprise at the reported responses of the Asian/non-native and African-American students. Although in 1999 the satisfaction reported by Asian/non-native and African-American students indicated some improvement along the three previously cited dimensions of the campus climate, administrators and faculty continued to

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<sup>1</sup> The other category was comprised of Hispanic/Latino students and students who failed to disclose their ethnicity. The reporting of Hispanic/Latino students was included in this category due to the small number of Hispanic/Latino students and in an effort to prevent skewing the results.

express surprise at the lower level of satisfaction expressed by these two student groups.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to discover how African-American students perceive and describe their experiences in the campus environment at a diverse two-year public community college. The researcher sought to view and to understand the campus climate from the perspective of African-American students and depict the landscape based upon their descriptions. This study also discovered the sectors of the campus environment that contributed to their satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Campus climate is defined as the current common patterns of important dimensions of organizational life or its members' perceptions of and attitudes toward those dimensions (Peterson & Spencer, 1990). The campus climate was assessed along the following dimensions:

- ◆ the physical,
- ◆ the human aggregate (the friendliness or cohesiveness of the student culture and the warmth or quality of faculty-student relations),
- ◆ organizational structures (support systems and freedom of expression),
- ◆ and the collective perceptions of the context and culture of the setting

(Baird, 1990; Banning, 1987; Banning & Hughes, 1986; Strange & Banning, 2001).

There is a myriad of variables related to each of these identified dimensions (Huebner & Lawson, 1990), which account for the complexity of the campus climate. However, focusing on these dimensions allowed parameters to be set and facilitated the conceptualization of the environment.

### Research Questions

Given the problem and purpose of this study, the following research questions provided guidance:

- ◆ How do African-American students perceive and describe their experience of the campus climate at Seattle Central Community College?
- ◆ What aspects of the student-environment transactions most inform their perceptions of the campus?
- ◆ What are the prominent themes that emerge from their descriptions of the campus environment?

### Rationale for the Study

Community colleges are the point of entrance to higher education for students unable or uninterested in gaining admittance directly into a four-year

institution. Although there is no one definitive mission for all community colleges (Bogart, 1994), most agree that the basic tenets include access and inclusion (American Association of Community Colleges, 1993; Bogart, 1994; Nora, 2000). Opening the door to those who desire to enter and then facilitating their success with responsive and supportive services and programs is central to the commitment of community colleges. However, in the absence of intentionally assessing student satisfaction and addressing the sources of dissatisfaction that are within institutional purview, the “open door” can become the revolving door.

At Seattle Central, diversity and responsiveness are two of the cornerstones of the institution’s mission statement. The recruitment, retention and success of all students and especially African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and Asian/Pacific Islander students are central to the college’s diversity goals and strategic planning for institutional effectiveness. Nonetheless, a campus cannot promote diversity without attending to the climate: To do the one and neglect the other is to invite alienation and division (Hasegawa, 1991; Wilds, 2000).

Although the literature is replete with studies related to the barriers to student success, it is incumbent upon the campus to engage in assessments, both generally and particularly of its climate. In 1992, the California Postsecondary Education Commission deemed that institutional effectiveness is inextricably intertwined with the ability of a college or university to provide an equitable educational environment for all students (Thomas, 1997). The Northwest



Association of Schools and Colleges, the accrediting body for Seattle Central, stipulates that “through its planning process, the institution asks questions, seeks answers, analyzes itself, and revises its goals, policies, procedures, and resource allocation” (1999, p. 26).

Community colleges assign a higher priority to teaching than research. However, this focus does not preclude assessment. On the contrary, assessing all facets of the organization – its programs, practices, interventions, activities, and curriculum – ultimately serves and reinforces instruction (Nora, 2000). Strange and Banning (2001) further caution that “educators must be particularly sensitive to any discrepancies between their views of the institution and those of students” (p. 105). It is only by assessing the campus environment that a college or university can know whether its institutional policies and practices are consistent with its rhetoric.

In American society, many issues are viewed through the lens of race and ethnicity. Because of the African American history in this country, the black experience is often used as a template for viewing and understanding the experiences of other racial minorities (Foner, 1999). Consistent with this proclivity, the actual experiences and perceptions of the campus environment of African-American students were explored. This exploration yielded a description of the campus environment and those elements that are bridges or barriers to student satisfaction and success. Furthermore, students’ actual experiences and perceptions rather than faculty and administrators’ expectations of and assumptions about those

experiences and perceptions are available as a resource to guide the development and delivery of appropriate programs and services.

### Significance of the Study

Student satisfaction with a diverse campus environment is a benchmark of the efficacy of the campus efforts to foster a social milieu in which students from diverse backgrounds cooperate, participate and frequently interact with each other and perceive themselves recognized and supported by the organizational structure (Banning, 1988). A supportive and responsive organizational structure is achieved by obtaining feedback from the multiple members about their experiences and perceptions of the campus.

This study provides the decision and policy makers at Seattle Central with in-depth information about the experience of African-American students with the services and programs and their interactions with faculty and staff. This information can serve as the basis for re-tooling programs, policies and services that support and facilitate the success of African-American students.

Smith, Garcia, Hudgins, Musil, Nettles, and Sedlacek (2000) indicated that research on campus climate is still needed and is critical to the work that needs to be done in the area of diversity. This study is responsive to that need. It contributes to the body of knowledge about campus environment and how it fosters or impedes the success of members of a group who have been the target of campus diversity

initiatives. It serves as the impetus for campus dialogs about the campus environment and the needs and perceptions of its multiple members.

### Delimitations and Limitations

This study was limited to interviewing African-American students on the campus of an urban, comprehensive, and diverse community college. The actual experiences and perceptions of African-American students of the campus environment were the foci of this study.

The sample size and the purposeful sampling strategy decrease the generalizability of the findings. The findings of this study are not generalizable to other community colleges and all African-American students, but are restricted to the particulars of this study. The description of the campus environment is limited to the extent that the informants experienced the campus and were willing to candidly and fully disclose. The researcher recognized that her biases had the potential to influence the interpretation of the data. Therefore, every effort was made to bracket preconceptions so as not to inject personal experiences into the study (Creswell, 1998).

## Definition of Terms

This study utilized the following terms:

Academic integration. A factor in the study of persistence and attrition that suggests that grades, attendance, intellectual development, and contact with faculty and students influence the dropout decision (Bean, 1982; Rendón, 1995).

Aphenphosmophobia. The fear of being touched (Culbertson, 1995)

Campus Ecology. The study of the relations between students and the campus environment (Banning & Hughes, 1986).

CCSEQ. The Community College Students' Experiences (CCSEQ) is a standardized self-report survey instrument that evaluates students' level of involvement in desired in-class and out-of-class learning activities and satisfaction with various aspects of the college (Friedlander, Murrell, & MacDougall, 1993).

Climate is the current common patterns of important dimensions of organizational life or its members' perceptions of and attitudes toward those dimensions (Peterson & Spencer, 1990). For this study the terms climate and environment are used interchangeably.

Community. A climate that is created in which individual and collective interests are recognized and valued (American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1988).

Culture is defined as deeply shared values, assumptions, beliefs or ideologies of members (Peterson & Spencer, 1990).

Diversity is the differences attributable to race/ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, physical ability, and religious preferences.

Ecosystem. A system in which there is a true transaction between mutually dependent partners, with the assumption that either may change so that mutual benefit may result (Banning & Kaiser, 1974).

Epochè is the ability of the researcher to introspectively become aware of personal bias and to eliminate personal involvement with the subject material (Patton, 1990).

Mattering. A motive: the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension which exercises a powerful influence on our actions. Rosenberg and McCullough as cited by Gossett et al (1996).

Perceived Climate. This term refers to the cognitive images that informants have of how organizational life actually does function and how it should function. The informants' perceptions define reality from their perspective with the accuracy or inaccuracy of those perceptions being immaterial (Peterson & Spencer, 1990).

Social Integration. A factor in the study of persistence and attrition that suggests that participation in extra-curricular activities, clubs, organizations, and faculty interactions influence the dropout decision (Bean, 1982; Rendón, 1995).

## Chapter Summary

This study consists of five chapters that present an exploration of the experiences and perceptions of African-American students on the campus of a diverse community college followed by the bibliography and appendices. Chapter one provides the introduction to the study, the background of the problem, the purpose of the study, significance of the study, research questions, and definition of terms. Chapter two presents a review of topic specific literature that frames, guides, and underpins this study. It focuses on three topical areas. The first area of the review focuses on the status of African-American students within higher education. The second topical area examines the theoretical perspective of interactionism and the transactional nature of the relationship between the student and the campus environment. The final area explores the topic of diversity in higher education, in general, and community colleges, in particular. Chapter two is concluded with a discussion of the findings and limitations of previous research. In Chapter three an explanation of the methodology and a description of the research design is presented. The study's findings are presented in Chapter four. Chapter five discusses the study, its implications, and makes recommendations for professional practice and future research.

## CHAPTER TWO REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In response to societal and global imperatives, postsecondary institutions have sought to increase the numbers of underrepresented populations on their campuses. Recognizing that representation cannot be an end in and of itself, their efforts have been coupled with endeavors to create campus environments that are inclusive of all of their members and conducive to academic success (Ross, 1999; Smith et al., 1997). However, campus administrators and decision-makers bear a responsibility to intentionally and periodically evaluate the impact of the campus environment upon its members and assess the efficacy of their efforts (Baird, 1990; Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, 1999).

This chapter presents a review of topic specific literature that frames, guides, and underpins this study, which seeks to explore how African-American students experience and perceive the campus environment at a diverse two-year community college. African-American students have been one of the ethnic groups that have contributed to the diversity of college campuses and impacted college environments. Consequently, the literature will be reviewed to determine how African-American students have fared on college campuses, the salience of the campus environment in student satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and the ramifications of diversity. The first area of the review focuses on the status of African-American students within higher education. The second topical area examines the theoretical

perspective of interactionism and the transactional nature of the relationship between the student and the campus environment. The final area explores the topic of diversity in higher education, in general, and community colleges, in particular. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings and limitations of previous research.

## Higher Education and African Americans

### The Status of African Americans

The extent to which individuals participate in postsecondary education circumscribes the degree to which they contribute to and benefit from the broader society. Studies and surveys show that educational attainment is associated with increased literacy, more civic involvement, better health, and greater earnings potential (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001).

Prior to 1976 a small number of African Americans were pursuing higher education but their enrollment was largely restricted to predominately black institutions of higher education: In 1965 six hundred thousand African Americans were in college and 65% of them were at on predominately black campuses. By 1980, the enrollment of African Americans had doubled to 1.2 million and only 20% were in predominately black institutions (Wilson, 1994). In 1995, the



enrollment of African Americans had further increased to 1.3 million and the two-year sector that consists primarily of institutions known as community colleges served 46% of them (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). Moreover, the community college gateway accounted for the access of more than half of the African Americans who initiated their postsecondary studies in that same year (Kojaku & Nunez, 1998). Nonetheless, the increase in the number of African-American students has not kept pace with the growing numbers of other underrepresented groups. From 1976 to 1995, the enrollment of all students of color increased at the undergraduate level from 17% of the total enrollment to 26% at all types of postsecondary institutions. This increase in the percentage of undergraduate students-of-color is due chiefly to the increase in the numbers of Asian/Pacific Islanders and Hispanic students. The enrollment for both groups increased by 4% while the enrollment of African Americans only accounted for an additional 1% between fall 1976 and fall 1995 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). The statistics posted for 1997 reflect the continuing trend of a lessening growth rate for African-American students. The enrollment for all students of color at the undergraduate level increased by 3.5 percent, while the rate of participation of African-American students only grew by 2.9 percent. This rate is the smallest increase of the four major ethnic groups (Wilds, 2000).

As the primary source of students for postsecondary education, high schools and the respective rates of completion of the different ethnic groups are central to

the efforts of postsecondary education. Although the high school completion rate of African-American students has fluctuated over the past twenty years, in 1990 it reached an all time high of 77 percent (Wilds, 2000). Despite this trend, fewer students exercised the option of going to college. Williams (1989/90) decried this development and admonished community colleges to become more proactive – to marshal their resources to engage and support African-American students. In 1997, the rate of high school completion for African Americans declined to 74.7 percent. Though the rate of high school completion may vary, the gap between the rate of completion for white students and African-American students remains constant (Wilds, 2000). This gap is a compelling incentive for higher education to view its mission beyond that of recruitment and enrollment. Statistics derived from longitudinal studies reflect the necessity for higher education to implement retention and attainment strategies for those African Americans who do complete high school and choose to further their education.

In 1998, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (Berkner, Horn, & Clune, 2000) assessed student effort and academic progress for those students who entered postsecondary education for the first time in 1995. The follow-up determined that 81% of the African Americans who entered postsecondary education in 1995 had not attained any type of a degree, 40% were still enrolled and 41% had either stopped out or dropped out. When scrutinizing the

efforts of the public “less than four-year institutions,”<sup>2</sup> the outcomes for African Americans in that sector were equally as poor. Eighty-two percent of them had not attained a certificate or degree with 52% of them gone from the system (Berkner et al.).

In comparison to their numbers in the broader society, African Americans continue to be underrepresented in higher education (Castenell, 1998; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). And the majority of this minority group who do seek access, seek access through the portal of community colleges (Kojaku & Nunez, 1998). Consequently, it is imperative that higher education in general and community colleges in particular deliberately monitor the factors and student experiences that are associated with retention and attrition.

### Factors Associated with Educational Attainment or Lack Thereof

The lack of educational attainment of any student is a source of concern for educators and researchers. Researchers have postulated theories and models in an effort to explain and predict attrition and persistence. These explicative models of student attrition depict academic integration and social integration as salient elements (Bean, 1982; Tinto, 1993).

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<sup>2</sup>Ninety-one percent of students who began their postsecondary education in the less than four-year institutions sector began at the schools known as community colleges (Berkner et al., 2000).

Tinto (1993) posited that colleges consist of academic and social systems. The academic system focuses on the intellectual development of students. The dimensions of this system consist of laboratories, classrooms, faculty, staff and grade performance. The social system consists of the informal interactions and transactions occurring among peer groups, faculty, and staff. Elements of both systems interact, overlap, and influence a student's commitment to his/her educational goals. Furthermore, the extent to which students fit-in and are congruent with these systems determines their commitment (or connectedness) to the institution, which in turn diminishes the likelihood of their dropping out (Bean, 1982; Rendón, 1995).

An examination of the academic integration and social integration elements reveals that environmental transactions figure prominently in the engagement of students with the campus (Bean, 1982; Rendón, 1995). A three-year study conducted by Richardson and de Los Santos (1987) of the achievement of Hispanics, blacks, and Native American students and a complementary follow-up done by Skinner and Richardson (1988) found that the success of underrepresented students is related to environmental factors. These factors included faculty support, the creation of zones of comfort that facilitated ethnic clustering, geographic location, and the concurrently addressing student development and institutional expectations. Study informants, regardless of their preparation for and orientation to college, benefited from institutions that addressed environmental barriers.

Fleming (as cited by Tinto, 1993) found that the persistence and intellectual development of black students are predicated on supportive relationships. Pascarella's model of the attrition process as cited by Bean (1982) situates informal student-faculty contact as influential and responsive to other college experiences and educational outcomes. Banning (1985) asserts that the faculty/student relationship is pivotal in the fostering of campus community in concert with diversity. For African-American students, it is even more essential for their support system and network to include faculty. In their study examining the persistence of African-American students at predominately black institutions and predominately white institutions, Himelhoch, Nichols, Ball, and Black (1997) found that faculty involvement took precedence over all study-identified factors in predicting the persistence of African-American students at the predominately white institutions. To be characterized as effective, the faculty contact cannot be superficial and solely in the context of the classroom. It is contact that is described as "encounters that go beyond the mere formalities of academic work to broader intellectual and social issues and which are seen by students as warm and rewarding" (Himelhoch et al., p. 7).

Campus climate and the degree of academic and social integration are intertwined. The perceived barometer of a campus' climate will reflect the degree that the student has been integrated into the academic and social systems. These interactive and dynamic elements either facilitate or impede a student's institutional

integration, progress, and attainment (Baird, 1990; Nealy, 1999). Consequently, it is incumbent upon higher education to monitor the factors that inhibit or promote the acclimatization of students.

### Higher Education's Response to the African American Presence

As a result of the political mobilization of African Americans and civil adjudication, since 1976, African-American students have entered higher education in increasing numbers (Kane & Spizman, 1994; Wilson, 1994). Consistent with the expectation that higher education facilitates the mitigation and mediation of the ills of the broader society, colleges and universities have been expected to model the management of diversity (Benally, Mock, & Odell, 1996; Thomas, 1997).

However, this influx of African Americans and other minority students has resulted in campus heterogeneity accompanied by intergroup tensions and campus turbulence (Hurtado, 1992; Marcus, 1990). Rather than downplaying reports of physical violence, racial slurs, and psychological intimidation as isolated occurrences, as some institutions have tried to do, racial incidents must be recognized as indicators of intercultural conflict and the impetus for organizational transformation (Hurtado, 1992; Marcus, 1990; Ross, 1999).

Some institutions of higher education have countered the intercultural conflict with efforts to recruit more students, staff, and faculty of color. This is a valid strategy. However, if done in a vacuum, it often only serves to exacerbate

tensions (Marcus, 1990). This strategy must be a component of a comprehensive institutional plan for diversity that encompasses organizational structure and administrative practices to encourage intergroup contact and meaningful interactions. Effective diversity results in cognitive, social, and personal benefits that accrue to the multiple members of the campus, both whites and people of color (Hubbard, 1998; Tatum, 1997; Wilds, 2000).

In a study of nine institutions that initiated substantive changes with exemplary diversity results, Gordon and Strode (1992) report that institutions that are committed to the access and attainment of minority students initiate a planning process and implement strategies that pervade the entire campus. They reorder financial priorities and allocate funds for diversity measures. These institutions do not relegate the perspective of students of color and other non-traditional groups to a few courses or an isolated department, but they infuse the curriculum with a multicultural perspective. The strategies encompass the extra-curriculum, the maintenance staff, campus governance, outreach programs to the community and trustee appointments.

The Presidents of these effectively diverse organizations are at the vanguard of the efforts. They proactively seize the reins of change (Gordon & Strode, 1992; Hubbard, 1998; Ross, 1999). Intentional efforts are made to engage the entire college community in conversation and positive intergroup contact in order to stimulate cognitive processes, challenge stereotypes, create a dynamic educational

environment, and foster student perceptions of acceptance and inclusion (Ross, 1999; Sugrue, 1999). These decision-makers are cognizant of the pivotal role of the campus environment.

## Environmental Impact

### An Overview

“Interactionism is a theoretical perspective that posits that behavior is best understood and predicted through the transactions of individuals and their environment” (Huebner, 1989, p. 165). A growing body of literature in the arena of campus ecology applies this theoretical perspective to the study of the relations between the campus environment and students (Banning & Hughes, 1986; Banning & Kaiser, 1974; Huebner, 1989; Wedge, 1983). Student behavior, whether it is “physical behavior, cognitive filtering of what they are experiencing, ...[or] their perceptions and attitudes toward the campus environment” (Williams, 1986, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph), is studied as a function of this transactional relationship. The relationship is characterized as transactional because student behavior is viewed as shaped and influenced by the multi-dimensional campus environment. Student behavior, in turn, shapes and influences the campus environment (Barratt, 1988; Huebner, 1989; Strange & Banning, 2001).



The attributes of an ecosystem best illustrate the utility of this metaphor. A biological ecosystem is dependent upon community, interdependence, and networks for sustainability (Capra, 1996). Critical to an ecosystem's viability and integrity are diversity, complexity, and variety, whereas homogeneity is antithetical to its vitality (Wedge, 1983). In addition, the campus and its inhabitants, from an ecological perspective, are recognized as interactive, mutually influential, and mutually adaptable (Banning & Kaiser, 1974; Huebner, 1989).

Traditionally, higher education's predilection for assisting students with maturing, changing, and adjusting to institutional characteristics and expectations has been the norm. In instances where the fit between student and institution is incongruent, student deficiency or maladjustment has been assumed (Banning & Bass de Martinez, 1983; Strange & Banning, 2001). However, the advocates of the ecological perspective assign a role to the environment that is co-equal with that of the student when studying student behavior. The student and the environment are both candidates for interventions and redesign, respectively. And, in some instances, it is institutional transformation that is more appropriate (Banning, 1983b; Banning & Bass de Martinez, 1983; Banning & Kaiser, 1974).

### The Campus Environment Deconstructed

The campus environment is a dynamic, complex, and multi-dimensional system. This study is considering the campus environment in terms of the following

dimensions: the physical, the human aggregate, organizational structures, and the collective perceptions of the context and culture of the setting (Banning, 1987; Banning & Hughes, 1986; Strange & Banning, 2001). There is a myriad of variables related to each of these identified dimensions (Huebner & Lawson, 1990), which accounts for the complexity of the campus environment. However, focusing on these four dimensions sets parameters and facilitates the conceptualization of the environment.

The geographical location of the campus, its parking lots, pathways, grassy spaces, architecture, signs, graffiti (illegitimate signs), and art constitute the physical dimension of the campus environment (Banning & Bartels, 1997; Huebner & Lawson, 1990; Strange & Banning, 2001). Campus planners and decision-makers should not overlook the potent impact that this dimension can exert on student behavior. Werhli (as cited by Banning & Canard, 1986) states, "When enlightened as to the effects of the physical environment upon behavior, [a campus planner] designs by intent; but when ignorant of these effects, he designs by default" (paragraph 2). Campus planners and designers can utilize the physical dimension of the campus environment to support and influence student growth and development. Deasy and Lasswell (as cited by Banning, 1991a) specify a typology of behaviors that can be influenced by the built environment. They are "(1) friendship formation; (2) group membership; (3) personal space; (4) personal

status; (5) territoriality; (6) communications; (7) cue searching; and (8) personal safety” (paragraph 5).

The synthetic aspects of the physical environment can have embedded messages that often transcend the planned functional and aesthetic purposes of the campus planners. The complexity of this single element can produce messages that are mixed, unclear, negative, or inconsistent with the institution’s mission, values and campus expectations with noxious effects (Banning, 1992; Banning & Bartels, 1997; Strange & Banning, 2001). A campus that values diversity may unintentionally convey messages of sexism and Eurocentricism by the displayed artifacts (Banning & Bartels, 1997). Decision-makers in concert with inhabitants must critically examine campus artifacts to ensure that the conveyed messages are the intended messages.

The second dimension of the campus environment and by which it can be qualitatively distinguished is the human aggregate (Dober, 1963; Huebner & Lawson, 1990; Strange & Banning, 2001). The collective characteristics of the human aggregate serve to project a facet of the institution’s image (Gottfredson, 1985). Student aggregates, a type of human aggregate, have been studied, described, identified, and classified in an effort to formulate models that facilitate the conceptualization and understanding of the campus environment in terms of its human aggregates.

Clark and Trow described four subcultures as academics, nonconformists, collegiate, and vocational based upon the degree that students identify with ideas and identify with their institution. Astin identified a typology of students (scholars, social activists, artists, hedonists, leaders, status strivers, and uncommitted), as well as a group labeled non-types, based upon their self-reported expectations, values, campus involvement, and behaviors. Kolb's theory of learning styles has been utilized to identify correlates between learning styles and educational majors in college. The hypothesis is that congruence is achieved when students select an educational specialization in which the characteristics of the dominant human aggregate match their learning style (Strange & Banning, 2001). Holland's typology of students is based upon their resemblance to six personality traits: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional (Banning, 1983d; Huebner, 1989; Strange & Banning, 2001). His human aggregate model of person-environment interactions also incorporates the constructs of differentiation and consistency (Huebner, 1989).

Differentiation refers to a campus environment being primarily defined by one student type. Consistency exists when the primary and secondary characteristics of the student aggregate are similar (Huebner, 1989; Strange & Banning, 2001). While an undifferentiated, diffuse environment may be more difficult to understand and may lack clarity of focus (Strange & Banning, 2001), it

is more accepting and tolerant “of a variety of inputs and influences” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 50).

The issue of differentiation and consistency of types has implications for a campus’ ability to foster a sense of inclusion and belonging for those individuals whose dominant characteristics do not match or fit the defining characteristics of the environment (Huebner & Lawson, 1990). A differentiated and consistent environment is challenging and is discouraging for any individual or group that is unlike the dominant group. Campuses dominated by any demographic or psychological identity are challenged to inculcate a sense of community or shared destiny amongst the disparate. However, these campuses can utilize their organizational structures to moderate the dominant campus characteristic(s) for those students who are not congruent with the differentiating trait(s).

Organizational structures determine how colleges and universities accomplish their goals and purpose. According to Strange and Banning (2001, p. 59) these structures “significantly shape and influence the behavior of... [its inhabitants]”. They affect how members interact with and respond to one another. The organizational structures that a college subscribes to essentially circumscribe the extent of its hierarchy and the degree of specialization and professionalization of its ranks (complexity). The organization structures determine the distribution of power within the organization (centralization) and the degree to which rules and regulations must be adhered (formalization). Stratification is the structure that can

either constrain or facilitate the upward mobility of personnel and the ability of students to develop relationship with faculty members while production and efficiency are tangible system indicators of an institution's vitality (Schneider & Reichers, 1983; Strange, 1981; Strange & Banning, 2001).

Organizations and settings that are characteristically hierarchical, centralized, stable, place high value on efficiency for the sake of productivity, and encourage uniformity are not receptive to diverse inputs. Conversely, organizations that are loosely organized, flexible, receptive to complexity and diversity, and are tolerant of ambiguity encourage the input of all stakeholders. Their lack of stratification facilitates community building among members (Strange & Banning, 2001).

The final dimension of the campus environment for this study is defined by Strange and Banning (2001) as the collective perceptions of the inhabitants of an environment. Although these collective perceptions may or may not reflect the experiences and perceptions of any one specific student (Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001), they are responsible for the overarching constructed perspective of the campus environment and can be attributed to the press, social climate, and culture of the institution.

Stern (as cited by Strange and Banning, 2001) defines the press of an institution as "the characteristic demands, features, or influence of the environment as perceived by those who live in that particular environment" (p. 88). Students are

usually attracted to an institution because the expected behaviors and attitudes of the inhabitants are congruent with their needs (their “organizational tendencies that seem to give unity and direction to a person’s behavior”) (Huebner, 1989, p. 169).

The social climate is linked with institutional press and further influences an individual’s adaptation and adjustment to the institution. This feature of the climate affects how individuals “see” their environment and the degree to which it is a factor in their adjustment is a function of their individual needs and personal preferences. In an effort to understand the relationship between personal preferences and environmental factors in a variety of contexts, Moos (1987) depicts social climate in terms of the categories of relationships, personal growth, and system maintenance and change. The relationship dimensions of involvement, affiliation, and teacher support that he identified in the context of school are consistent with the models, theories, and research findings pertinent to attrition. Supportive relationships with faculty and peers correspond to social integration and retention (Bean, 1982; Himmelhoch et al., 1997; Rendón, 1995; Tinto, 1993).

When students enter a new environment, they develop supportive social relationships as they identify with and become members of groups. To identify with and become invested with the group is to fully comprehend “what the group is about” – its purpose, attitudes, interactions, and events (Schneider & Reichers, 1983). According to Schneider and Reichers, this understanding results from the communication of significant symbols, gestures, and acts and helps the newcomer

make meaning of the culture (the artifacts, perspectives, values, and assumptions) or become acculturated.

The campus environment was analyzed in terms of four dimensions: the physical, the human aggregate, the organizational structures, and the collective perceptions of the context and culture of the setting. The deconstruction of the campus environment facilitates an understanding of its response to and influence on student behavior.

### The Transactional Nature of the Student-Environment Relationship

It has been shown that the campus environment consists of multiple complex elements that conjointly shape, mold, constrain, or afford the behavior of its inhabitants. However, this influence is not unidirectional. An environment and its inhabitants reciprocally shape each other. Huebner (1989) characterizes this relationship between persons and their environments as interactive, transactional, and sharing a mutuality of influence.

When considering the transactions between the physical dimension of the campus and students, Strange and Banning (2001) suggest that the physical environment exerts a greater influence on students than students do on it. However, Craik and McKechnie (1977) note that there are a host of behavior episodes “that are responsive to the physical environment *or* [italics added] consequential for it” (p. 159). Rapoport (1982) claims that it contains embedded messages that provide



cues for appropriate behavior, elicit affective and cognitive responses, and promote social interactions. The power of encoded messages in a behavior setting is demonstrated when a decorous ceremony is scheduled in a customarily raucous setting. Students may exhibit conduct inappropriate to the circumstances but appropriate for the setting. The influence of students on the physical environment is observed in the routine and unofficial modifications that they make to the physical environment to accommodate their needs (e.g., making new unintended pathways or rearranging furniture to satisfy a need for intimacy or solitude) (Strange & Banning, 2001). With intentionality, analytical observations, and input from inhabitants (Banning, 1983c, 1993; Banning & Canard, 1986), the environment should be revisited on an on-going basis to decipher and respond to the embedded responses of the inhabitants (Banning, 1983a). Monitoring the “dialogues” between the environment and its inhabitants can facilitate an optimal design or redesign of the physical environment.

The transactional nature of the environment and the human aggregate has important implications for retention, attrition, and the composition of the student body. Students as a human aggregate with a few dominant characteristics can shape the environment such that dissimilar students will either conform or become discouraged and drop out (Strange & Banning, 2001). The thesis that Schneider and Reichers (1983) advance about human aggregates and the environment is in the context of employment. However, their thesis is applicable to an academic

environment. They posit that conformity requires the newcomer or new student to change their social self and adopt the attitudes, behaviors, and values of either the dominant group or the sub-group to which he or she is trying to join. Sub-group membership results in the newcomer's perceptions being biased by that group. According to Holland's model of human aggregates (as cited by Gottfredson, 1985; Huebner, 1989; Strange & Banning, 2001), individuals with highly differentiated and consistent personalities in an environment that is highly differentiated and consistent but incongruent with their personality may be incapable or unwilling to conform. Dissatisfaction may attend the incongruence and may lead to attrition (Gottfredson, 1985).

The ecological perspective assumes organizational intervention or transformation in response to student characteristics. This perspective has ethical undertones and is prudent. The ethics of the paradigm are reflected in the prohibition of adherents objectifying students and regarding them as the "other" in need of redevelopment to better serve as the means to institutional ends (Williams, 1986). The stance is prudent because higher education's policies and practices have been formulated to support a traditional student. However, demographics indicate that the traditional student is rapidly becoming the "minority" student. Conversely, the racial and ethnic groups that have been labeled "minority" are growing and emerging to the extent that to label them as such is a misnomer (Justiz, 1994). If higher education is to retain its vitality, it must engage in the structural

transformation that is dictated by the demographics and needs of all of its students (Valverde, 1998). The transformed institution will enable informants to develop a heightened diversity consciousness that is defined by Bucher (2001) as “awareness, global workplace understanding, and skills in the area of diversity” (p. 1).

## Focus on Diversity

### African-American students – a Means of Diversifying a Campus

In response to judicial imperatives, governmental initiatives and societal pressures postsecondary institutions have sought to redress the historical legacy of exclusion by removing barriers to access for underrepresented groups (Smith et al., 1997; Smith, Wolf, & Levitan, 1994). Prior to the mid-80's, when institutions began to broaden the scope of their diversity efforts (Valverde, 1998) African-American students were simply admitted to predominately white institutions (PWIs) and expected to adapt and negotiate the campus systems as best they could (Powell, 1998). This access, in the absence of initiatives that address intergroup relations, inclusion, and the building of community, has made the persistence until degree completion problematical for African-American students (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999).

In an attempt to understand and explicate student attrition, models and theories have been formulated. Bean's (1982) synthetic causal model of attrition explains attrition in terms of background, organizational, environmental, attitudinal, and outcome variables. Tinto (1993) suggests that the difference in persistence between white and black students may be attributable to academic integration, social integration, incongruence with the institution, and/or finances. However, there is a growing body of literature that specifically focuses on the impact of the campus climate on the perceptions, adjustment, and success of African-American students in predominately white institutions (Cabrera et al., 1999; Chambers, 1991; Himelhoch et al., 1997; Nealy, 1999; Skinner & Richardson, 1988). The literature also looks at campus climate as a facilitating factor of diversity (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Hurtado et al., 1999; Oregon State System of Higher Education, 1997; Phillips-Morrow, Burriss-Kitchen, & Der-Karabetian, 2000).

It has been shown that individuals who belong to different racial and ethnic groups experience a campus' climate differently (Ancis et al., 2000; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). In a study conducted with 576 undergraduates, Ancis et al. (2000) found that African American and Asian students had perceptions of discrimination, unfair treatment by faculty, and pressure to conform to stereotypes. Conversely, white students reported "limited perceptions of racial-ethnic tensions and a university climate characterized by

respect for diversity” (p. 1). The differences in perceptions and sensitivity to nuances between minorities and whites may be a legacy of the history and status of minorities in the context of the dominant culture (Ancis et al., 2000).

Because of negative perceptions of the campus environment and inter-group tensions, African-American students often seek refuge and safety in ethnic clustering (Hurtado, Dey, & Trevino, 1994; Montero, 1995; Tatum, 1997). This response is often interpreted as alienating and counter productive to efforts designed to encourage meaningful inter-group interactions (Hurtado et al., 1994). However, Montero (1995) contends that the call for community and inclusion as a response to phenomena perceived as self-segregation may actually reflect a discomfort with different when different is manifested as a need for separateness. The call for community, in this instance, is inconsistent with the diversity rhetoric (e.g. celebrate the difference). Tatum (1997) suggests that the ethnic clustering is a coping strategy for minority students seeking their racial identity and may or may not be indicative of a “chilly” campus climate. Rather than focusing on such symptoms, institutions are behooved to address their structural properties that may be the root-cause for the behavior. Failure by decision-makers to couple their representation goals with assessments of the institutional climate can result in traditionally underrepresented students “feeling” unwelcome and unwanted (Skinner & Richardson, 1988).

### The Benefits and Challenges of Diversity

The growing diversity of American society and a global economy that requires interaction with other cultures and peoples “not like us” make it apparent that going to school with people “just like us” will be increasingly anachronous. As organizations become more diverse, employers expect higher education to produce prospective employees who not only demonstrate technical mastery, but are capable of handling the complexities of diversity as well as the vicissitudes of the world of work (Bucher, 2001; Cabrera et al., 1999; Smith et al., 1997).

Graduates will be employed in diverse organizations. They will lead groups composed of diverse individuals. They will supervise or be supervised by someone of another racial, ethnic, national, or gender group or someone physically challenged (Scott, 1992). Because of a diverse work environment, the individual who can understand how others think and function and is able to cope across the ethnic and racial divide is an asset to an employer (Bucher, 2001; Wilds, 2000).

In an effort to prepare students to meet these challenges, colleges and universities have striven to diversify their faculty members, staff and student bodies (Smith et al., 1997; Valverde, 1998). However, recognizing that it is not enough to just open the doors to our organizations and institutions to people who are “not like us” (Phillips-Morrow et al., 2000), in the mid 80’s, institutions began to broaden the scope of their diversity efforts (Valverde, 1998). They sought to go beyond mere representation of underrepresented groups to how the groups are affected and

how the affect extends beyond the groups. This expanded focus entails “studying institutional characteristics that affect the psychosocial environment and therefore may influence all students’ experiences, levels of involvement, and academic achievement” (Smith et al., 1997, p. 10). It demands implementing multi-dimensional diversity efforts that encompass access, campus climate and intergroup relations, curriculum and pedagogy, and comprehensive institutional transformation (Smith et al., 1997).

For some students a heterogeneous college campus may be their first exposure to individuals in significant numbers that are unlike them (Ross, 1999; Smith et al., 1997). A transformed institution has the requisite and comprehensive policies and practices to manage the potential intergroup tensions and culture shock for the underrepresented students as well as the white students (Hurtado et al., 1998). An effectively diverse institution manifests its recognition of, receptivity to, and the value assigned to the differences by its support, management, and utilization of diversity.

Diversity efforts have been assailed as divisive and counter to the goal of an inclusive campus community (Montero, 1995; Smith et al., 1997). These charges have countered with research, which indicates that all students benefit from an effectively diverse environment – those that are members of underrepresented groups as well as majority students (Astin, 1993; Phillips-Morrow et al., 2000; Smith et al., 1997). Students who attend diverse institutions report increased

satisfaction with college, higher grade point averages, and intellectual and cognitive growth. According to Astin (1993):

The findings present a clear-cut pattern: emphasizing diversity either as a matter of institutional policy or in faculty research and teaching, as well as providing students with curricular and extracurricular opportunities to confront racial and multicultural issues, are all associated with widespread beneficial effects on a student's cognitive and affective development. In particular, such policies and experiences are associated with greater self-reported gains in cognitive and affective development (especially increased cultural awareness), with increased satisfaction in most areas of the college experience, and with increased commitment to promoting racial understanding (p. 5).

Studies that have explicitly focused on white students and the effects of diversity have shown that their exposure to other cultures and interaction with underrepresented groups is associated with positive outcomes. Students self-report positive racial attitudes, an increased commitment to promote racial understanding, and increased overall satisfaction with college (Astin, 1993; Hyun, 1996; Maluso, 1992).

The reports and studies indicate that diversity works. It works for the underrepresented and the traditional student. It benefits employers and by extension the economic health of the nation which is intertwined with the educational participation and persistence of its citizenry, in general and people-of-color, in particular (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). These observations make it imperative that the issue of access (in concert with ancillary diversity initiatives) remains a priority. However, the selective admissions policies of the



four-year sector do not always accommodate the underrepresented students who desire access (a fundamental element of diversity). It is the existence of community colleges and their open access admissions policies that democratize education and provide opportunities for those who have potential but are under prepared (Cohen, 1998; Koltai, 1993).

### Community Colleges, Bellwether for Diversity (??)

The Commission on the Future of Community Colleges (American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1988) labeled community colleges as essential colleges in recognition of their commitment to meet the needs of those who might otherwise go unserved (Baker, Dudziak, & Tyler, 1994). In 1995, community colleges enrolled the highest percentage of minority students of all types of institutions of higher education (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). Many of these students arrive at the door of postsecondary institutions academically under-prepared. To accommodate these students, virtually all public two-year institutions offer remediation in reading, writing, and mathematics. In 1995, 74% of students entering public two-year colleges were first-generation and had from one to four or more risk factors negatively associated with persistence and attainment (Kojaku & Nunez, 1998). In addition, the constituents served by community colleges vary widely in age and socio-economic levels. Critics and supporters alike concede that community colleges make higher education a viable

option for many non-traditional students for whom higher education was not an expectation (Rendón, 1994).

Notwithstanding the challenge of meeting the needs of such a disparate student body, community colleges have as an element of their mission a charge to build community, in the broadest sense, beginning with these internal constituents and extending to external partners. The Commission on the Future of Community Colleges (American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1988) issued a mandate that is in accord with effective diversity: "The building of community, in its broadest and best sense, encompasses a concern for the whole, for integration and collaboration, for openness and integrity, for inclusiveness and self-renewal" (p. 7). In an attempt to gauge the barometer of the climate on the campuses of community colleges, the AACC surveyed college presidents (Kee, 1999). While 60% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the characterization of their campuses as harmonious (and this data is encouraging) it must be acknowledged that these are the perceptions of those individuals at the top of the hierarchy. The view of the landscape often appears different from such a lofty perch. This platform is conducive to a global perspective, but often too removed to cast a critical eye on particulars. It is the assessment of all facets of a community college and the systematic solicitation of feedback from informants that results in a responsive, supportive, and inclusive environment (Baird, 1990; Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, 1999).

In spite of lofty ideals and the achievement of access and representation, the stark reality of the statistics that denote persistence and attainment indicates that there is a problem (Nora, 2000). Consistent with Astin's (1999) involvement theory, Rendón (1994) contends that non-traditional students are better served when community college faculty, staff, and administrators validate and affirm these students in and out of the classroom. These students are more likely to become involved in academic and social life and, in turn, are more likely to persist. Others are harsher in their assessment of the source of the problem. Some charge that community colleges have been so focused on access that, contrary to embracing diversity, their failure to facilitate the educational attainment of their non-traditional students is tantamount to racism (Woodard, 1992). Still others offer that this sector is simply a structure by which class-based separation is maintained (Henriksen, 1995). Amidst these claims and counter claims, those invested in community colleges and the outcomes for nontraditional students must take the initiative for assessing the efficacy of their efforts and the institutional climate that either affords or constrains those efforts (Nora, 2000).

Clearly, community colleges are the portal to higher education for immigrants, the underprepared, the low income, and students of color. In light of their role, community colleges must not be content with just facilitating entrance. They must be concerned with the persistence and attainment of these students. They must allocate resources and efforts to determine the barriers to persistence

and the bridges to attainment (Justiz, 1994; Kojaku & Nunez, 1998; Koltai, 1993; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001; Williams, 1989/90).

### Discussion of Findings and Limitations of Previous Research

The literature that I have reviewed in this chapter clearly identifies that access, persistence, and attainment are problematical for African-American students. Statistics that reflect the high school completion patterns for African-American students indicate fluctuations. Nonetheless, increased rates of high school completion do not translate into increased rates of enrollment into postsecondary institutions. Those who do enroll, primarily enroll in the two-year sector where they languish, stop-out, or dropout with a relatively small percentage completing terminal degrees or transferring to four-year institutions.

The literature further indicates that persistence correlates to student satisfaction, which is a function of the interactions of the student and the multi-dimensional campus environment. The study conducted by Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) revealed that African-American students are more sensitive to the nuances of the campus environment, which tends to validate the ecological perspective. The research of Himelhoch, Nichols, Ball and Black (1997) demonstrates that at PWIs, meaningful interactions with faculty are pivotal to their sense of inclusion and connectedness.

The literature review recognizes the implications of diversity. There is a need for campuses to manage diversity, proactively and aggressively in order for the campuses and society to reap its benefits. Finally, there is a need to go beyond collecting quantifiable data and allow those who are the target of diversity measures to explain in their own words and from their perspective, how they experience the climate at a diverse, seemingly inclusive and caring community college. There is a need to give African-American students their “voice.”

### Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a review of topic specific literature that frames, guides, and underpins this study. It focuses on three topical areas. The first area of the review focuses on the status of African-American students within higher education. The second topical area examines the theoretical perspective of interactionism and the transactional nature of the relationship between the student and the campus environment. The final area explores the topic of diversity in higher education, in general and community colleges, in particular.

A synopsis of the key findings of the literature review is as follows:

- ◆ There continues to be a gap between the rates of access, persistence, and attainment of African American and white students.

- ◆ Community colleges enroll more African-American students than any other sector of postsecondary education.
- ◆ Student satisfaction, a dimension of student behavior, is a function of the interaction of the student with the campus environment.
- ◆ Faculty members play a pivotal role in facilitating the academic integration of students and especially African-American students at predominately white institutions.
- ◆ The representational aspect of diversity affects a campus environment and diversity initiatives must encompass curricula and pedagogy, campus climate and inter-group relations, and institutional transformation.
- ◆ It is incumbent upon community colleges to assess the efficacy of their efforts with nontraditional students.

The next chapter, chapter three, provides a description of the research methodology that was foundational for this study.

## CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY

In 1996 and 1999 Seattle Central Community College administered the Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CCSEQ). The CCSEQ is a standardized self-report, paper and pencil questionnaire that assesses students' level of involvement in and out of the classroom. According to Friedlander, Murrell and MacDougall (1993),

The CCSEQ has been shown to be a valid measure of quality of effort and an effective method of describing the experiences of community college students based on student involvement theory. It has been completed by over six thousand students in thirty-three community colleges (p. 197).

Data from this quantitative study indicated that African-American and Asian non-native students were dissatisfied with aspects of the campus climate at SCCC. The quantitative method had value and initially identified an area of potential concern. However, in an effort to further explore the campus environment, the researcher proposed a study employing the qualitative research paradigm. Phillips-Morrow et al (2000) state "although quantitative survey data can provide valuable information from a wide variety of respondents on numerous aspects of an issue, it should be complemented by in-depth qualitative methods" (p. 2). They further submit that qualitative research methods are an excellent vehicle to explore

phenomena related to cultural and ethnic issues. This is consistent with the goals and objectives of this study. Rather than trying to isolate and determine a causal/effect relationship between identified variables for predictive purposes, the researcher sought to explore social phenomena in its complexity and contextual embeddedness for descriptive purposes (Banning, 1991b; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Merriam, 1988). This paradigm allowed the informants to recount their perceptions and experiences on the campus of Seattle Central Community College from their perspective and in their own voices (Merriam, 1988).

The content of the previous chapters and this chapter is as follows. Chapter one identified the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, and the research questions. Chapter two reviewed the literature relevant to three topical areas. The first area focused on the status of African-American students in higher education. The second topical area examined the theoretical perspective of interactionism and the transactional nature of the relationship between the student and the campus environment. The final area explored the topic of diversity in higher education, in general, and community colleges, in particular. I concluded Chapter two by discussing the findings and limitations of previous research. Chapter three presents the rationale for choosing a qualitative paradigm and a background on ethnography and phenomenology, the particular traditions within the qualitative paradigm that serve as the framework for this study. This chapter



also describes the role of the researcher and the perspective and experiences the researcher brings to the study, a description of the setting for the study, and a review of the study's methods.

The following research questions guided this study:

- ◆ How do African-American students perceive and describe their experience of the campus climate at Seattle Central Community College?
- ◆ What aspects of the student-environment interactions/transactions most inform their perceptions of the campus?
- ◆ What are the prominent themes that emerge from their descriptions of the campus climate?

These questions are consistent with the criteria for research questions as postulated by Creswell (1994): They are focused enough to guide the study and broad enough not to constrain the researcher.

### Rationale for the Paradigm

The qualitative research paradigm has been used extensively in the human disciplines. It was initially employed in sociology and anthropology and then later utilized by other social science disciplines, including education, social work and communication (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). According to Locke (2000), qualitative research "is a systematic, empirical strategy for answering questions about people

in a particular social context” (p. 96). It is described as naturalistic inquiry: The quest is to obtain an understanding about a social or human issue from the perspective of the informants. The researcher seeks information about their feelings, experiences, and the meanings they attach to those experiences and does not attempt to manipulate the research setting, the phenomena, nor the informants (Creswell, 1994; Patton, 1990).

The strategic themes that characterize qualitative research distinguish this approach from the quantitative paradigm and inform all aspects of a study’s design (Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Patton, 1990). Below is a synthesis of the salient characteristics of qualitative research:

1. The researcher believes reality is subjective and consists of the multiple perspectives of the informants (Creswell, 1994).
2. To apprehend this subjective reality, the researcher seeks to learn how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and the structures of their world and the meanings they attach to them (Merriam, 1988).
3. In an effort to minimize the distance between the researcher and the informants, the researcher physically goes into the field, to the people, setting, site or institution and interacts with that or those under study (Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Patton, 1990).

4. The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection. He or she gathers words or pictures and analyzes them inductively (Creswell, 1994; Locke et al., 2000).
5. As the instrument, the researcher (rather than surveys, questionnaires, or inventories) mediates the data.
6. The inquiry is value-laden and biased and the researcher discloses his or her values and biases.
7. It is an in-depth inquiry that seeks to report phenomena holistically and in context, using detailed and thick description (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990).
8. The researcher adopts a literary style of writing; using a language that is personal, informal, and uses concepts and terms that are conventional to the tradition (Creswell, 1998; Locke et al., 2000; Patton, 1990).

### Role of the Researcher

One of the attributes of qualitative research is the role of the researcher. Patton (1990) stipulates that, “a qualitative strategy of inquiry proposes an active, involved role for the social scientist” (p. 58). Together, the researcher and informants explore and co-discover the findings through their interactions and dialogues as the study proceeds. The demographics and the personal histories of the

researcher and the informants mold the process (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). However, the researcher brackets his/her prejudgments (*epochè*) during data collection and analysis in order to gain a fresh perspective about the phenomena (Creswell, 1994, 1998; Patton, 1990).

As the primary instrument for data collection, the researcher conducts the interviews with the identified informants. As the conduit for the voices of those being studied, the researcher's values and perspectives must be disclosed at the inception of the study. Rather than encumbering the process and study, these values and perspectives can be expeditious, enabling the researcher to relate to and establish rapport with the informants (Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Patton, 1990).

My perspective on campus environments has been shaped by my experience at a private, liberal arts, and predominately white institution of higher education as an African American undergraduate and as a staff person on the campus of a two-year, diverse community college. I pursued my undergraduate studies on a campus where I initially perceived the climate as neither warm-and-inclusive nor "chilly". I perceived it largely as indifferent. These perceptions reflect experiences that Jackson (1998) describes as marginality. There were no support services designed to engage, connect, or retain students-of-color. I stopped out of college for a year and subsequently returned to the same university, determined to complete my

bachelor degree. During my year's absence, a minority student recruitment campaign had increased the number of students of color to a critical mass. In concert with the increase in students, there was a small increment in the number of staff and faculty of color. The hiring of a very visible Director of Multicultural Affairs along with the programs and services he initiated further increased my sense of connectedness. I felt as if someone was concerned about the obstacles and barriers to my educational goals: I mattered. Most of the black kids did sit together in the Chieftain, the campus cafeteria. In hindsight, I realize that although it was self-segregation, it did indeed foster a sense of belonging (Tatum, 1997).

As an undergraduate, I majored in psychology. That particular discipline and the research tradition I am using to guide this study align with my fascination with and quest to understand human behavior and the meanings people attach to and derive from their experiences.

My perception of the campus environment at Seattle Central Community College has been shaped by my employment at the institution for more than 20 years. I have been involved with structural planning, institutional assessments, and the implementation of programs and services intended to retain all students and especially at-risk, non-traditional, and students-of-color.

## The Setting

The setting for this study was Seattle Central Community College (SCCC). SCCC is an urban, public community college located on the periphery of the downtown corridor of Seattle, Washington. It is the senior institution in the three-college district of Seattle Community Colleges. The college delivers an array of support services, programs, and curricula designed to facilitate student retention and achievement, foster student engagement, and promote multiculturalism and global awareness.

Seattle Central is the flagship for diversity in the District and the Washington State system of thirty-four community and technical colleges. The mission statement and values of the college reflect a commitment to diversity and community. The student body at the college is comprised of students from the racial and ethnic backgrounds of Asian/Pacific Islander (14 %), African American (11 %), Native American (1 %), Latino/Hispanic (8 %), and white students (40 %). Seattle Central's international student population comprises 7 % of the student body and represents 64 different countries<sup>3</sup>. The faculty, staff, and administration mirror the diversity of the student body. The executive team of the campus is ethnically and culturally diverse.

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<sup>3</sup> Students who choose not to disclose their race/ethnicity account for 19 % of the student body.

The proposed study received the support and encouragement of the President of the college, Dr. Charles H. Mitchell, and the Director of Institutional Planning and Research, Ms. Christina Leimer. This study was viewed as an extension of previously conducted campus research. Consequently, the principal gatekeepers perceived a stake in the study. I received their blessings and the research was overt. These features overcame the main barrier to fieldwork, which is gaining access (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 1994).

Although Bogdan and Biklen (1992) dissuade researchers from situating their studies at sites in which they are personally involved, they do concede that successful studies have been accomplished by researchers under these circumstances. In addition, the selection of this site overcomes one of the handicaps associated with in-depth interviews – a potential gap between respondents' knowledge (as "information rich" informants) and that of the interviewer (Frechtling & Sharp, 1997). My role on the operational side of the institution enabled me to be privy to the institutional mission, intent, and anecdotal information about institutional disconnect with some students. This role afforded me intimate knowledge of the institution and yet enabled me to be relatively anonymous to the majority of students. This relative anonymity prevented an invitation to participate in the study from being perceived as coercive. In addition,

this role enabled the informants to view their participation as a means of providing meaningful input to the institutional decision-makers.

## Method

### Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences, and the meaning of those experiences, African-American students have at Seattle Central. Although African-American students often bring distinct patterns of behavior, customs, rituals, and ways of life to the campus, as a cultural group, they are not situated in a place for ethnographic study. Therefore, I interviewed students using a phenomenological approach to uncover their experiences and then asked them about the meanings they gave to those experiences. Fetterman (1998) argues that, “ethnography typically takes a phenomenologically oriented research approach” (p. 20). I was interested in the cultural features of their experiences (and their meanings) so I blended ethnography and phenomenology.

The ethnography label is often used to generically characterize qualitative research as well as to describe a specific approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 1998). Ethnography, which has its roots in anthropology and sociology,



seeks to study, understand, and describe a group or culture from the perspective of the informants (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Fetterman, 1998).

Phenomenology as a research tradition emerged from the philosophical perspectives of Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. The human sciences of psychology, sociology, and nursing, the health sciences and education have all utilized this approach. Phenomenology examines the concept that is the focus of the study, from the perspective of the informants in an attempt to understand their lived experience. It is a “deep” look at the experience (Van Manen, 1990).

According to Fetterman (1998), “fieldwork is the most characteristic element of any ethnographic research design” (p. 8). The phenomenological approach entails collecting data from a small number of informants through prolonged, intensive and extensive interactions, usually interviews (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). Multiple individual interviews with each informant and a focus group were my means of collecting data and were consistent with the design dictates of the two approaches.

### Data Collection

The questions that guided this study combined with the unit of analysis implied that interviewing (extensive and multiple interviews) was the appropriate data collection method (Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990). The ethnographic approach

and quest for a phenomenological understanding further encouraged employing this method since the researcher sought to understand how the informants organized and interpreted their world, how they experienced a facet of their world, and the meanings they attached to their experiences of that world. Finally, the complexity of the subject made interviews rather than observations or document and records analyses the method of choice (Creswell, 1994; Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990).

Data was collected utilizing open-ended, individual interviews with each informant. Seidman (1998) advises that exploring the meaning of a informant's experiences is best accomplished when the informant's perceptions, experiences, and behaviors are "placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them" (p. 11). Originally I planned to conduct a series of three separate interviews that were spaced from three to seven days apart with each informant to accomplish this contextualization. The first interview was to consist of questions that helped the informant to put the phenomena under study in the context of his or her life history. The format of the second interview was to encourage the informants to concentrate on the concrete details of their present experiences. In the third and final interview, the participants were to explore the meanings of their present experiences (Seidman, 1998). A pilot of the interview series was conducted to test the utility of the procedures and the generative value of the questions. I condensed the interviews into two interviews because of the feedback from the informant who

helped pilot the three interview series and the lack of informants willing to invest that amount of time. This modification to the design was accomplished by combining the questions for interview two and three and was consistent with the nature of qualitative research. The researcher as the instrument for data collection is flexible and responsive to circumstances encountered in the field (Fetterman, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988).

Open-ended interviews allowed the informants to share their personal perspectives in their own words and facilitated the bracketing of the interviewer's preconceptions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Patton, 1990). The *general interview guide* approach and the research questions shaped the interviews. This approach ensured that all relevant topics were explored with each informant but permitted flexibility by allowing the interviewer to adapt the wording and sequence of questions to each informant (Frechtling & Sharp, 1997; Patton, 1990). Patton (1990) states that "the interview guide helps make interviewing across a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored" (p.283). The questions that comprised the interview guides for this study are Appendix G.

I began the initial interview with each informant by introducing the purpose of the study and myself, and I shared the operative definition of campus climate for the study. The informants were encouraged to ask questions about the study. The

researcher explained the informed consent document, requested the informants to sign it (see appendix E) and complete a pre-interview questionnaire (see appendix F). This tool yielded a biographic sketch of each informant. The interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes with the goal of eliciting rich, detailed descriptions of the campus environment from the informants as they had experienced it (Creswell, 1998). The second interview with each informant was generally 90 minutes due to the modification that was previously explained. Audiotaping (with the informants' permission) was the method of choice for recording interview data, supplemented with interviewer notes. The taping freed the researcher to focus on the informant, responding appropriately to his or her cues and the tape recorder recorded all conversation, objectively and impassively (Frechtling & Sharp, 1997; Patton, 1990). During the interviews, I noted any extraneous data such as facial expressions or body language that the audiotapes could not capture, but which facilitated understanding the informants' verbal expressions and perceptions (Frechtling & Sharp, 1997). I employed these techniques to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the interview records since they were the basis for data analysis. In addition, my notes reflected tacit knowledge derived from the dialogue and observations of the informants. Nealy (1999) defines "tacit knowledge [as] knowledge based on feelings and intuitions...[and it] constitutes valuable data for processing and interpreting the findings of the study" (p 62).

A second stage of data collection employed a focus group interview with five of the informants who completed the interview series that I previously described. Personal problems precluded the involvement of one of the informants in this stage of the study. A focus group is an effective and efficient tool to collect qualitative data. In a discrete amount of time, the researcher was able to collect additional information from all informants who shared a common experience (Patton, 1990). According to Dreachslin, (as cited by Phillips-Morrow et al., 2000) focus groups permit interactions and exchanges that are powerful catalysts for additional insights. The five informants were unknown to each other. Therefore the researcher served an informal lunch to encourage dialogue and the development of relationship. This second layer also permitted me to again enlist the assistance of the informants.

- ◆ They assisted with interpretation of the preliminary findings,
- ◆ synergistically yielded new ideas and perspectives,
- ◆ filled in gaps and clarified constructs attributed to them by the researcher,  
and
- ◆ validated the recurring themes the researcher had identified in the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Frechtling & Sharp, 1997; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999; Patton, 1990).

Rather than audiotaping this interview, the researcher enlisted the assistance of a colleague to document the remarks of the informants. The researcher was concerned that the sharing of one microphone by multiple participants would prove to be distracting and/or inhibiting.

A third stage of data collection was added to the design. After entering the field and hearing the informants refer to the significance of the synthetic aspects of the environment, the researcher included a campus audit. I set aside my administrative perspective in an effort to view the physical aspects of the campus through the eyes of the informants. I wandered the corridors of the campus. I observed the interactions of the community members and examined the walls that serve as a backdrop for the “voices” of the campus inhabitants. I took photographs of the signage, posters, and pictures that had relevance for the African American experience. Again, this design adaptation was consistent with the essence of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988).

### Sample

Exploring, discovering, describing and gaining insight about a particular phenomenon rather than generalization is the goal of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990). Consequently, the sample was relatively small and the cases comprising the sample were purposefully selected on

the basis of shared attribute(s). The method utilized to identify informants is thus described as purposeful sampling. The logic and power of this sampling method lie in identifying informants who are “information rich,” that is, the informants can provide extensive information about the issues and questions that are central to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990).

For this study, I utilized a mixed purposeful sampling approach consisting of the homogeneous and snowball sampling strategies. Employing this approach ensured that all individuals being studied had perceptions borne of their experience of the concept, campus climate, which was the focus of the study (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). Ethnography facilitates studying the behavior of a culture-sharing group (Creswell, 1998) and seeks to gain an understanding of the culture from the perspective of the informants. This approach was consistent with my intention of describing the experiences and perceptions of African-American students who are a cultural group within a culture. In addition, I asked the initial informants to identify individuals who shared the characteristics identified below and would be effective informants. However, the informants that finally agreed to participate in the study were so far removed from the initial informants that those in the ultimate pool of participants were unknown to each other. I employed this snowball sampling strategy to obtain informants that were “information rich” and to obtain different perspectives of the campus climate.

I interviewed six African-American students. This small sample enabled me to be true to my quest for a phenomenological understanding that demands an in-depth “look” at a few information rich cases (Patton, 1990). The sample represented the larger population of African-American students in terms of gender and enrollment in academic and professional/technical programs. Before fall quarter 2002, I requested the Director of Institutional Planning and Research to produce a computer-generated report of African-American students who met the following criteria. The potential informants had to have completed at least 3 quarters of full-time study, be pursuing a program, and be at least 18 years of age. The length of attendance was an attempt to ensure that the informants had experienced the campus and interacted with members throughout the institution.

To solicit informants for this study...

- ◆ I posted and handed out flyers inviting participation.
- ◆ I visited the classrooms (with instructor permission) of instructors who were reputedly popular with African-American students to describe the study and invite participation.

Those who volunteered were cross-referenced with the computer-generated list to ensure that they met the criteria for participation.



### Data Analysis

With qualitative research, data collection and analysis are interconnected, interactive and concurring processes: The researcher, as the human instrument, has the ability to respond to whatever cues and prompts the setting and informants provide whenever provided. Analysis begins with the first collection of data as insightful notes are taken while informants recount their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). The researcher as analyst is collecting data AND looking for emerging themes, patterns and meanings during the interviews. To ultimately make sense of the data requires researcher flexibility and the ability to adapt the data analysis process to fit the specifics of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, the method herein described was a template to guide this aspect of the study, rather than a formal, systematic blueprint to which I rigidly adhered.

The process began with transcribing and reviewing the audiotapes after each interview. After all interviews had been completed I assembled and organized the transcripts and field notes into a case record for a collective review and notating. Patton (1990) cautions that researchers must review the raw data to ensure that it is complete and that it is data worthy of analysis.

Following those preliminary measures, I began the process of sifting through each interview to unitize the data, that is, to find the informants' substantial statements about the campus climate.

The substantial statements were read and reflected upon to eliminate redundancy and explicate meanings. It was in this interpretive phase that it was appropriate for me to utilize my perspective (Gall et al., 1999). With the assistance of a colleague who was familiar with this process, I clustered these meaning statements into meaning units according to emerging themes. Throughout this process, I visited and revisited the original descriptive statements, comparing them to the meaning statements and the meaning units to ensure congruence between them and the themes. Creswell (1998) describes this reductive typological process as winnowing and Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer it as a method to lend coherence, organization, and a sort to the data.

Ultimately, an encompassing description of the campus climate as an experience for these informants was extracted from the meaning statements (Creswell, 1998). In preparation for the outcome of the analysis – the narration of the meaning of the experience for the informants- this description was shared with the informants to verify that it captured and validated their experience of the campus climate.

This description of the data analysis process may suggest a linear approach. However, the nature of the data of a qualitative study imposed an approach that was relational, cyclical and interspersed with researcher reflexivity.

### Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the researcher is concerned with the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Patton (1990) notes that, “the findings must fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study” (p.372). Trustworthiness and consistency are to qualitative research as validity and reliability are to quantitative research (Merriam, 1988).

The results of the interviews constituted a major portion of the study’s data and as such were critical. I utilized several strategies to ensure the trustworthiness and consistency of the findings of this study. Before beginning the actual data collection, I conducted a pilot of the interview series to assess the potential reactions of the informants to the process and questions. Based on the pilot, I made indicated adjustments. The structure of an interview series over a period with each informant allowed me to check for internal consistency. I was able to determine if there were recurring “threads” interwoven throughout the series of interviews. Did the informants’ recounts “ring true” when holistically reviewed (Seidman, 1998)?

During the data collection phase, one of the threats to trustworthiness is researcher bias. Several strategies were employed by the researcher to minimize and negate this bias.

- ◆ I spent considerable time in the field in an effort to understand the informants' experiences and their perspective of the campus climate (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Fetterman, 1998; Guba, 1981).
- ◆ To ensure that I did not superimpose my bias upon the findings, the informants assessed whether my interpretations of their constructions were credible.

Throughout the study, I utilized "member checks". Locke et al. (2000) describe this strategy as returning to informants and allowing them to review the data. The informants were allowed to review the transcripts, the units of meaning and themes derived from their substantial statements about the campus climate to ensure accuracy, completeness, and plausibility.

I triangulated the data by employing multiple individual interviews with each informant, a focus group interview with those who completed the interview series, and conducting a campus audit. This strategy added rigor to the study, facilitated an in-depth understanding of the construct, and further ensured accuracy of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

The final litmus test of the trustworthiness of a study is in the narration. I provided the readers with enough detail, characterized by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as rich, thick description, to convince them that my findings about the campus climate are logical. According to Merriam, (1988) the insights must ring true and

be convincing enough to lead the readers to the same conclusions I drew. The picture of the African-American students' experience of the campus climate as painted by the study must "strike a chord" with the readers.

### Ethical Considerations

The nature of qualitative research implies a degree of intrusion in the lives of informants. The impact of the intrusion can be mediated by the ethical and moral conduct of the researcher in the field. Research involving human informants must always be predicated on the researcher's respect for and commitment to safeguard the informants' rights, privacy, and the negotiated concessions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Locke et al., 2000; Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990). To ensure that this study adhered to the guidelines espoused by the literature I took the following steps:

1. I submitted a description of my proposed study and the Application for Research Involving Human Informants to the O.S.U. Institutional Review Board.
2. Letters were sent to prospective informants describing the study; their role and approximate time involved; my name, telephone number, and role within the institution; and the name of my supervising instructor. They were assured that there would be no reprisals or penalties if they

chose not to participate. They were encouraged to call with questions about the study and their role.

3. The informants were eligible for their participation with the study to be documented on the Student Development Transcript.
4. Before the interviews with each informant, I informed them that the interviews would be recorded and secured their permission.
5. I assured the informants of anonymity: Each informant was assigned a code name that was used in lieu of the informants' actual names throughout the study. The tapes and transcripts from the interviews and interview notes were labeled with the code name.
6. The only individuals who have access to the legend identifying actual informants and code names is Loris Blue and Larry Roper.
7. The tapes used for the study, the transcripts from the taped interviews, the interviewer's/researcher's notes and the informed consent documents are stored at my home and will be destroyed three years after the study is completed.
8. Informants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time or decline to answer any questions I posed with no reprisals.
9. Informants were given the opportunity to receive a copy of the findings.

10. As a result of the extensive and intensive interactions, four of the informants have remained in contact with the researcher and the researcher has been available to them.

### Chapter Summary

This chapter provides an explanation of the methodology that was used for this study. The methodology consists of the rationale for using the qualitative paradigm, an explanation of the ethnographical and phenomenological traditions, the background of the researcher with a disclosure of the researcher's bias and a description of the study's setting. In addition, it provides a description of the study's method – its design, data collection, sampling strategy, and the methods of analysis. The strategies employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and the ethics guiding the study were also described.

## CHAPTER FOUR THE FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results of the analysis of the data that was collected to explore the experiences and perceptions of the climate of African-American students on the campus of a diverse two-year community college. The following research questions guided the study:

- ◆ How do African-American students perceive and describe their experience of the campus climate at Seattle Central Community College?
- ◆ What aspects of the student-environment transactions most inform their perceptions of the campus?
- ◆ What are the prominent themes that emerge from their descriptions of the campus environment?

The chapter begins with a description of the setting. Next is a description of the informants from whom the qualitative data were gathered, followed by the findings that were derived from the analysis of the data. This data was collected utilizing multiple individual interviews with each informant and a focus group. A campus audit was conducted by the researcher in response to comments made by some of the informants in an attempt to view physical aspects of the campus from



their perspective. The chapter concludes with a summary and the introduction to chapter five.

### The Setting

Seattle Central Community College is an urban, two-year, public, post-secondary education institution located on the periphery of the downtown corridor of Seattle, Washington. Diversity is both a hallmark of the institution and a cornerstone of its mission statement. The faculty, staff, and administrators are comprised of Asian/Pacific Islanders, African Americans, Latino/Hispanics, and whites (see appendix B). The student body reflects the same diversity of composition (see appendix A).

The college has an “open door” admissions policy with students only needing to be 18 years of age, a high school graduate, or have earned a General Education Diploma (GED). The larger population of students hears about and is encouraged to enroll by former students, friends, and/or relatives. For others, location and/or cost are important variables in their decision to attend. None of the students who participated with this study reported that they had chosen Seattle Central because of its reputation for diversity or academic excellence. The students’ motivations were pragmatic rather than selective.

The locality of the college both bounds and defines it. Unable to build outward, Seattle Central built upward. A five-story brick building is the hub of the college. The concentration of the campus inhabitants within one structure fosters contact and interactions. At peak times, the hallways and stairwells teem with students who jostle for position. It is no place for the apenphosmphobic.

Broadway Avenue borders the college on the east and, while this Broadway may not have the bright neon lights that the name can conjure, its casual visitors and denizens more than compensate for any lackluster. You can observe students who are hunched over their books as they either study in preparation for the next class or the next day. The scene has all the appearances of typical undergraduate behavior. It is only when you observe the nose rings, spiked Mohawks, fluorescent colored hair, and hear so many different tongues and dialects that one realizes that this is not the typical institution of higher education.

The college's mission statement reflects a commitment to diversity and academic excellence. This statement and the learning outcomes that have been embraced by the faculty are prominently displayed in the classrooms and the hallways. In addition to these officially sanctioned artifacts, the brick walls, some office windows, and stairwells are placarded with the many messages that members of the college community seemingly believe need to be shared. Posters and flyers proclaim a variety of ideologies, political agendas, and unequivocally endorse

diversity. The campus audit revealed messages that, although not orchestrated by campus planners, were clear and consistent with the institution's mission and values. Although campus planners might suggest that this plethora of signage is not consistent with good campus design, the students who participated in this study reported this phenomenon as validating.

### The Informants

Six African-American students agreed to participate with this study. Prior to beginning the interviewing process each informant was asked to complete a pre-interview questionnaire. These questionnaires were the source of the academic and demographic information that follows. Three of the informants were males and three were females. They ranged in age from 20 to 49. Three of the students were pursuing the transfer degree and three were pursuing professional/technical degrees. Only one of the six was involved with extra-curricular activities.

A sketch of each informant is provided to acquaint the reader with his/her background. These informants came to the campus with prior experiences and challenges that shaped their frames of reference, expectations, and consequently their perspective of Central's climate. Each informant was assigned a pseudonym to protect his/her identity. These pseudonyms are used in the narrative to identify their comments. Data derived from the focus group is so identified.

### Anastasia

Anastasia is a twenty-four year old female single parent who works part-time while pursuing a transfer degree on a full-time basis. Even though the combination of school, single parenting, and work is challenging, she shared that her parents ingrained in her the value of higher education.

*Well both of my parents went to college so they did stress the importance of going to college. It was just kinda [sic] a given. It's like when you go to the bathroom. You know to wash your hands. We were just raised to know that you go to college!*

Anastasia has been a student at three different community colleges. She began her post-secondary education at Seattle Central Community College. She departed Central and during her absence, she attended two other community colleges. Her experiences at the other educational institutions left something to be desired, to say the least. Her overall impression of those experiences was that they were “*like a tug of-of-war because you're always, you're constantly fighting the system because you're a minority.*”

However, those experiences did not extinguish her desire to further her education. On the contrary, fueled by the early values instilled by her parents, Anastasia ultimately returned to Seattle Central to finish her degree. Although Anastasia's personal responsibilities preclude involvement with extra-curricular

activities, she reported that she makes use of the institutional resources that facilitate academic success and proactively engages with faculty so that her educational needs are met. Anastasia shared:

*Like I said, I'm a student who... I like the student to teacher ratio to be very small so that I can get to know my instructors and get a feel for what kind of instructor they're going to be so that I know whether or not I will do well in the class. I make sure that I've developed [a] relationship so that they know who I am, where I'm coming from, and what I'm trying to do so that they can help me achieve those goals.*

This propensity for relationship made her interactions on the other campuses especially challenging. She observed that, “*You could pass your teacher[s] that you see everyday, going down the hall and they won't speak to you. They don't speak to you unless you're in their classroom and you have a question.*”

Anastasia, a persistent student who has attended many colleges, has managed to discover the interpersonal style that works for her.

### Bryce

Bryce is a 20-year-old student whose family immigrated to the United States from Kenya. He is soft-spoken with mannerisms that are reminiscent of an earlier genteel era. He speaks very slowly, each word measured, owing in part to

English being his second language but also to his thoughtful style of pondering over each interview question.

Seattle Central is the only post-secondary educational institution that Bryce has attended. He was encouraged to attend Seattle Central by his father and two older brothers. All three had attended Seattle Central at some point in their educational journey. Bryce began his studies at Seattle Central as a Running Start student and currently he is pursuing a degree in computer engineering. At the time of the study, Bryce was serving as president of the Black Student Union (BSU) and an active member of the African Student Union (ASU).

Bryce also reported parental encouragement of his pursuit of higher education. He shared, *“Well my parents are really glad about it. Growing up they emphasized that an education is better than things. We [he and his siblings] had a choice, either go to college or get out of the house.”*

Bryce, the youngest of the informants, with strong family support and the Running Start experience has been able to easily connect at Seattle Central.

### Calistra

Calistra is a 28-year-old single parent who works part-time while attending school full-time. She views education as her “ticket” to a better life even though her early educational experiences were discouraging. Calistra recounted that in her

hometown in Tennessee the students were separated into three levels, with the third level denoting giftedness. This particular classification was due in part to intellectual ability as well as race/ethnicity and socio-economic status. According to Calistra, *“That made kids like myself grow up thinking that they was [sic] inferior, that they couldn’t do college work and wasn’t college material.”* In addition, according to Calistra, the loftiest ambitions that Calistra’s parents held for her were: *“Just go to this factory and get a job and get an apartment and a car and get married and just call it a life.”*

She has pursued several programs of study at a number of post-secondary institutions. The most salient feature of those experiences was perceptions of being dismissed. Calistra shared,

*At [name of other school], I remember the instructor she said like a lot of things [such as] “Well you can’t type, uh, I’m sorry you have a handicap. You need to go to an easier program.” And I felt that wasn’t nice to say. She didn’t have to say anything like that. So I took that to heart and then I didn’t try to go back to anything for school for a long time because this was in ’97.*

Calistra is pursuing higher education despite discouragement by parents, peers, and former teachers. She is currently pursuing the two-year degree in the Social and Human Services program with plans to transfer to the Evergreen State College.

## Deanna

Deanna is a 49-year-old woman who is pursuing a degree in Social and Human Services. Deanna laughs easily, is outspoken, and wears an air of confidence to which one cannot help but be drawn. As a result of a spiritual transformation, she sees endless possibilities at this stage of her life.

Her early-life educational experiences were demeaning. She was raised in the south and the desegregation of the public school system occurred during her last year in high school. One year she was going to an all black school and the next year she was bused to a formerly all white school. The resulting turmoil and denigration precipitated her dropping out of school. Deanna lamented,

*The school was all black and in my senior year they moved us to an all white school. And I think that was a transition. Nobody wanted to go! And you always had to fight up there and it was always rioting up there and so it was just enough that I just didn't want to deal wit [sic] it!*

Deanna re-engaged with education with a decision to earn her General Education Diploma (GED). That experience was so positive and affirming that she decided to pursue college-level course-work.



### Evan

Evan is a 26-year-old East Coast transplant. He has been in this state for eight years and is pursuing a transfer degree. Evan is introspective and articulate. Similar to some of the other informants, his high school experiences were devaluing. Evan shared,

*I did not have any support from any of the teachers that I encountered. I was just telling the story to my current math teacher here at Seattle Central. I was telling her the attitude of a sophomore algebra teacher that I had. She [the high school algebra teacher] had no words of encouragement. I was interested in learning but became quickly disenchanted with the learning process. Particularly in mathematics, for me mathematics was challenging. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to access my teacher when we weren't in class. And, when we were there, you know, I felt a very cold shoulder from her, this math teacher in particular. The other ones had a very nonchalant, blasé attitude anyway, but hers was a little more overt. It was to the point where I felt like I shouldn't even bother. So, you know, and I would get, of course, in trouble with my parents because I wasn't bringing the grades home that they wanted at all, not anywhere near. So that sort of fostered my withdrawal into a shell and barely squeaking by.*

The messages that Evan's parents communicated about the pursuit of higher education were clear, unequivocal, and ultimately counterbalanced his high school experiences. Evan offered,

*My parents view education, higher education that is...To them it is of utmost importance. It's held in high esteem and there really is no other course of action once, uh, one of their children finishes high school.*

Seattle Central is the second institution of post-secondary education that Evan has attended in the state of Washington. Although Evan describes his experience at the other institution as painful, our conversation revealed that he has managed to put it in proper perspective and take responsibility for his role in what he concluded was an educational fiasco.

*At the [name of other school] most particularly because that was the biggest school I'd ever gone to, I felt like a number and I felt lost. The professors were absolutely... were not available for help. I don't even know how I got in [laughs] to be honest with you, in the first place.*

Some of Evan's educational experiences were clearly a mismatch but he now has focus and a plan to attain his educational goals.

### Franklin

Franklin is a single student who is in his mid-thirties and has intermittently been pursuing higher education. He is currently working full-time and pursuing his transfer degree by taking evening classes. He has attended four-year institutions as well as one other community college. Those experiences received mixed reviews.

However, at the secondary level his perceived self-efficacy negatively affected his motivation and educational achievement. Franklin's description of himself during this period in his life illustrates his hindsight.

*In high school I suffered so much from low self-esteem, not feeling like I was, uh, capable learning like other people. Umm, I, uh, did not perform up to my potential in high school. And, it was not because I was sociable and I had all these friends or just such a wonderful social life. It was that most of the time I felt lower and less than anyone in the class. I was always slower. I finished in the bottom as far as finishing my work. Uh, I was used to making B's" and C's and I just, uh, I just...my low self-esteem had a great impact on my education in high school.*

In the eleventh grade Franklin developed an affirming relationship with his English literature teacher. Consequential to this relationship was the development of his self-confidence and belief in his academic capability. Franklin shared,

*I believe her name was [name of teacher]...She had us write a paper and after she had us write the paper, she read the papers in her own time. After reading my paper, she held me after class and really began to build me up. She said that she recognized through my writing that I did not have much confidence in myself as far as really learning. And, she just began to tell me that I had great potential.*

Franklin's dogged pursuit of higher education is a testament to this teacher's encouragement and the high value that his parents assigned to education and managed to inculcate within him.

### The Findings

The experiences and perceptions of these six African-American students constitute the findings that presented in this chapter. Five prominent themes emerged from the informants' descriptions of their campus experiences and revealed the nature of the student-environment transactions that most informed their perceptions of the campus. The themes were Diversity does matter, Faculty members are key, There are systems of support, The College is a Safe Zone, and Disconnects Happen. The affinity diagram below depicts the themes of the campus climate.

#### An Affinity Diagram of the Themes That Depict the Campus Climate

##### **Diversity does matter**

- The rainbow of people is conducive to fitting-in
- It's open and inclusive
- The Black experience is acknowledged and appreciated

An Affinity Diagram of the Themes That Depict the Campus Climate (Continued)

**Faculty members are key**

- Authentic faculty members
- Accessible faculty members
- Faculty members as bridges

**There are systems of support**

- Assistance navigating the system
- I/thou relationships
- Friendships

**The College is a Safe Zone**

- A Home away from home
- Uncensored
- Meaning captured with metaphors

**Disconnects happen**

- Not consistent with my expectations
- Peer driven disconnects

### Diversity Does Matter

The experiences and perceptions recounted by the informants revealed diversity as a definitive element of the campus climate. The theme is further divided into sub-sections entitled The Rainbow of people is conducive to fitting in, It's open and inclusive, and The Black experience is acknowledged and appreciated.

#### The Rainbow of people is conducive to fitting-in

Five of the six of the students had attended educational institutions of higher learning, at one time or another, where they were very aware of their minority status and its accompanying baggage. They reported the climate at those institutions as unfriendly and unwelcoming and at times they perceived blatant racism. Although the students in this study originally selected SCCC for practical reasons, it was the extensiveness of the school's diversity of composition that impressed them. Excerpts from some of the interviews illustrate this:

*"I must applaud Central because it's a diverse school. It is a very diverse place here and because we're in the Pacific Northwest where there's diversity, the school tends to reflect that."* (Franklin)

*Being at Seattle Central Community College and being with this culture means that you're going to deal with blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, heterosexuals, homosexuals, [those that are] asexual, bisexuals, all the different religious people, students who believe in Christianity, people who are atheist. I mean you have the full spectrum within Seattle Central. (Anastasia)*

*"I have some white friends, I got some African friends, I got, you know, the Japanese. I got some Chinese and uh, we all get together and sit down and talk and just have fun." (Deanna)*

No one characteristic defines and dominates the student body at Seattle Central. The informants reported that this diffusion and lack of differentiation facilitated their comfort and fostered a sense of acceptance:

*Well, because you know, there [are] different people from different religions, walks of life, sexual orientation[s]...And, no one's coming right out and saying verbally what you are or to discourage you from being here. You know, it's just like, you know, everyone goes on what they believe in and no one's trying to put you down for what you are. (Calistra)*

*"There are a number of people who do not look like me and yet they 'get it'." (Evan)*

*“The rainbow of students is conducive to fitting in. The rag on your head is OK, maybe even a fashion statement!”* (Focus Group)

The diversity in representation and mentalities facilitated the adjustment and adaptation of these students.

### It's open and inclusive

These informants observed students who were comfortable with their respective cultures and used their persons to declare their pride and self-acceptance by wearing culturally significant trappings. However, the cultural pride did not translate into the denigration of other cultures. This signified to them a campus culture and inhabitants that were open-minded and who authentically embraced differences. Extrapolating from their observations, they concluded that they too were accepted.

*It seems, as though, I don't know how they are able to do it. I don't know how the administration of Seattle Central is able to do it but it seems as though they're able to bring in a large majority of people who are open-minded, tolerant, and who have been exposed to diversity before they even came here. So, they're not gawking at someone who doesn't quite talk like they do or look like they do.*  
(Evan)



*“And I see some of the students wearing attire and things that are from a different culture.” (Calistra)*

*Seattle Central is the first community college I've been to, I've been to others and it's a big difference – it's like culture shock. It's [Seattle Central] just very different. It's not even so much... of being the African American experience - it's the people in general. White, black, Asians, faculty, non-faculty, um administration, non-administration, are just generally more down-to-earth and more open minded, more than the other community colleges I've been to. (Anastasia)*

*“But, culturally I would say it's a good school. They try to embrace everyone and respect everyone.” (Calistra)*

*I feel like the majority because the Caucasian people that are going to school here if they are the majority and I just don't know about it, they're so used to seeing you or people like me that you think that you are the majority because nobody is staring at you, nobody is mocking you, nobody is ohhing and awed, amazed because they're used to... They grew up obviously in an environment where this was the norm. So, they think it is. And you're not uptight. In this environment Caucasian people are more accepting of who you are, as individuals. [Anastasia]*

These students were impressed with the absence of hostility and tensions between campus inhabitants on this compositionally diverse college campus. They perceived an inviting and inclusive milieu.

### The Black experience is acknowledged and appreciated

When the informants came to Seattle Central, they reported that seeing African Americans throughout the institution, from the custodial staff to the president was empowering. The students shared that it made them feel good about themselves as individuals and as African Americans to just be in an environment where they were reflected in the faces of staff, faculty, and administrators. Visual “signs” and cues indicated that there was no need to mount a campaign to have the black experience acknowledged.

*I really like Seattle Central Community College. And, when you walk into here to see...First of all, other African-American students and to walk into the offices and see African American staff it feels great because as I said previously, you always reach out to that which you can identify with. (Franklin)*

*“Seeing a lot of people that look like you helps you feel at home.” (Focus Group)*

*“I ‘picked up on’ the picture of Malcolm X on a white professor’s door and it blew me away.” (Focus Group)*

*“I experience my blackness, just being surrounded by ideas and the cultural markers throughout the environment.” (Evan)*

*"Poems, the images, important black people, it makes you aware of where you came from and realize that others are aware of it too." (Focus Group)*

*I didn't realize the outcome of it until I locked my hair and wow I see a whole different side of people. All those questions, other than that most people usually say, "Oh, it looks great." And, I think that's because of the fact [that] Seattle Central is located on Broadway and you have a whole lotta [sic] cultural diversity."  
(Bryce)*

*And then just because you have so many different ethnic backgrounds at the school, you know there's nothing wrong with the things that you say [and] that are contained more in your culture. As far as like being African American ebonics and the jive and hip hop and slang and the... Because nine times out of ten the majority of the students who are from a different ethnic background know about that part of your culture as well because nine times out of ten the students who go to Seattle Central already are culturally and ethnically diverse [literate]. If they're not, usually they're here because they're open and they want to learn about other cultures.  
(Anastasia)*

The physical environment was a potent medium for communicating value and appreciation for multiculturalism in general and the black culture in particular for these informants.

### Summary of Theme One

The diversity of Seattle Central shaped the informants' perceptions of the campus climate. They perceived that the school was comfortable with differences as evidenced by the composition of the staff, faculty, and student body. Consequently, they believed they would have no problem fitting-in and adjusting. They were validated by the informal and uncontrived displays of pictures and posters that reflected the black experience.

### Faculty members are key

The second prominent theme that emerged from the data was the role and import of the faculty. This theme is sub-divided into sections entitled Authentic faculty members, Accessible faculty members, and Faculty members as bridges.

#### Authentic faculty members

Some of the informants had heard from families and friends that community colleges focus on teaching rather than research. The syllabi of their instructors were consistent with good teaching, but the unanswered question was did the words of the faculty members translate into actions that would foster not just student success but also their success? Did their words transcend the contracts – faculty and syllabi

- and inform their actions? The informants' perceptions of the faculty members answered the question affirmatively.

*So, the teachers they truly are involved with the students and take pride in their teaching. You know, there [are] teachers who teach and there [are] teachers who teach like... They're not just teaching the material, they are teaching the material based upon how you will need it to be successful in the world, in your career, in your other relationships, in whatever you want to do. They relate [the curriculum] to society and what society wants. They apply it. They become applicational [sic] (Anastasia).*

*A teacher body that is also very tolerant and patient because this is something I hadn't really experienced at all prior to coming here. You know there's an old saying that 'Educators do not suffer fools' and I guess that means that they're not patient, that you have to know as much as they do. But, the teachers here are very patient. They're aware that we haven't been in their course of study for twenty years. (Evan)*

The reflections of these students revealed that the commonplace exchanges and interactions that faculty members take for granted were observed by the students and resulted in deposits into the credibility banks of the faculty members:

*"Another thing that you see at this school... You actually see faculty members talking [to each other] in the halls." (Anastasia)*

*“Instructors, you know, come to the graduations. And that’s important too. They encourage you.”* (Calistra)

*“There is a night and day difference between other schools and Central [SCCC]. The faculty members care.”* (Focus Group)

During the multiple interviews, all of the informants recounted educational life experiences that involved encounters that had negative racial overtones. These experiences left these African-American students with a heightened awareness and sensitivity to discrimination and its subtle nuances. However, these students reported that irrespective of the faculty member’s ethnicity, they related to them as humans.

*“Most of the instructors here are usually trying to help you and tell you, you can do it. Sometimes you feel that one of the teachers is too tough but that gives you the edge of having different experiences.”*  
(Bryce)

*“Well I feel like with the faculty from the SHS [Social and Human Services] program cause they’re more humane. They have more feelings for people because mostly, because they’re in that field and that’s what that field teaches you to be humane.”* (Calistra)

*“The teachers never make it seem like there’s this big power struggle or there’s this difference between me as the teacher and you as the student.”*

(Anastasia)

These students observed the faculty members with whom they interacted to determine if they actually “walked their talk.” They concluded that the rhetoric of their instructors was indeed congruent with their actions.

### Accessible faculty members

The faculty contract at Seattle Central typically stipulates that instructors must have designated office hours during which they are available to students in order to provide course-related assistance. However, the experiences that the informants shared indicate that their respective instructors were available to them beyond the parameters of their formal roles and contract specifications.

*I just spent about 20 minutes chatting with my math teacher in her office and her name is [name of instructor]. And, (laughs) I just, gosh, she’s so awesome. She is an amazing teacher and we were just talking about our histories and where she’s from and how long she’s been here. We were talking about family stuff. We kinda [sic] have similar family issues and things like that. (Evan)*

*I feel connected by being close to the instructors, getting to know them on a friendly level, and establishing relationship with them.*

*Some of my [former] instructors I still go see them sometimes if I'm on that floor. I'll say "How you doing, what's going on this quarter?" (Calistra)*

*When I was in English 096, [name of instructor] met you at the level that you [were] at. He would always come and talk positive things to you. "Deanna, if you need some help, come to me and I'll help you." You know he still tells me that right now [even though she is no longer enrolled in a class that he teaches]. "If you get in a bind Deanna, if you need help, come to me. I'll help you." (Deanna)*

Typical of older community college students, these students had multiple competing priorities. The one commodity that most despaired they would never have enough of was time. Consequently, the availability and accessibility of faculty was critical to their success:

*I really need good instructional teaching and the availability of the teachers to help me during their office hours. Me being able to walk up to them in the hall and even though I'm not in class, to be able to say "Hey do you have a minute, can I ask some questions?" "Oh sure, come by when class is over." [response of instructor]. (Anastasia)*

*Some teachers you see in the hallway a lot and you stop and talk to them. And if you had an extra question or something that was related to the subject that you were discussing in class [they take time to help you]. (Bryce)*



*“Faculty offer e-mail and home phone numbers. They go beyond the call of duty.”* (Focus Group)

The faculty of these students made themselves available to them in ways that transcended their contracts. Their availability fostered feelings of connectedness to the institution for the informants.

### Faculty members as bridges

Some of the informants experienced faculty members who extended themselves for students in an effort to help them reach their destinations and achieve their educational goals. They blurred the boundaries between the classroom and their personal time, between contractual obligations and functioning in the manner of the proverbial brother's keeper.

*One particular instructor I remember and it was one of my most challenging classes, which was math, we actually had her home phone number. If we got home after the class and there was a question we had concerning the homework, we could actually call her. And I've done it and received a great deal of help. Not only did I but other students had her home number, Certainly, it's something that they're not required to do. However, this particular instructor gave us her home number and would help us up until eleven o'clock at night with our homework. (Franklin)*

*So I couldn't exactly give the two hours per day for each class because when your child is little, your timetables are different. And my math instructor, once she saw that I was diligent about learning and was diligent about doing the homework and stuff, she would give me the assignments early. Like, she might give me a worksheet early because I might have an extra hour or two this weekend because my daughter might be somewhere else. This would give me a head start. Whereas if she waited to give it to me when she gave it to the rest of the class, my child might get sick and then I'm behind in the class. I explained to her [the instructor] what level I needed to get to. I said that's why I need to make sure that I get a good foundation. So she would give [me] extra assignments that weren't due but just to test my knowledge and see how well I comprehended. She would grade them for me. She didn't have to do that but she did it for me anyway because she saw I was serious about this and I had goals. So she took the extra time to look over my papers, not just give them to a grader and really help me understand the material to ensure that I was ready for the next level. I appreciated her for that. Because now I'm at the next level and everything seems to be going smoothly. (Anastasia)*

*[Name of instructor] is one of, I guess, the favorite instructors because he helped me through some times where I just wasn't gonna [sic] make it. I was just like tired. I didn't come to class. I was sick. I was going through some things. I don't know, I guess it was maybe like.... They say some people that go to college can have something similar to like a nervous breakdown or something. But you know he [the instructor] helped me through it. He was like, "Well just turn in your paper. Just turn it in. We'll see what you got and I'll work with you." And he kept encouraging me and giving me programs that I could, you know, take my daughter to and different people that I could call and talk to. (Calistra)*

These faculty members were not content with just delivery but focused on learning.

The faculty members, who these students described, facilitated connections that extended and challenged the informants.

*They're here to help mold you into what you need to be. That's what friends do. Friends help each other accomplish their goals. That's what the teachers here do. They're helping you along the way as a friend would do but through the role of being your teacher.*

(Anastasia)

*Another faculty member who I can say had a tremendous effect on me was [Name of instructor]. I took his class, he saw the potential in me and that I was pushing myself to the limit. The way he set up the classroom was students decided how they were going to be graded. And, when it came down, it was one of the worst grades I ever got but at the same time it was one of the most educational experiences for me. It opened my eyes to see a whole different perspective of how people think. (Bryce)*

*The instructors were more of the encourager of the study groups. Had they not encouraged it, I probably wouldn't have done it because I was just so busy outside of school. But, the instructors strongly encourage study groups is why we develop study groups. (Franklin)*

*In our ABE we had some of the best teachers. [Name of teacher], just love him. [Name of teacher] taught us math and we were doing [Name of teacher] class. When time to leave, we didn't want to leave. We like, "[Name of teacher] do we have to go?" Everybody in there, we didn't like to leave. I mean, he was just such an excellent*

*teacher. And he would explain things and we were learning and we just enjoyed it. (Deanna)*

The actions of these faculty members exceeded the parameters of their formal roles. These informants met them as instructors and connected as friends. They validated the college's recognition for teaching excellence.

### Summary of Theme Two

On any post-secondary campus, instruction is central to the mission and goals of the institution. In tandem with this centrality, faculty members play a pivotal role with integrating students academically. The informants' experiences show that Seattle Central faculty members have embedded the social system in the academic system in a way that engages students in the academy as a whole. This provided the optimum social engagement for these informants who had multiple priorities and competing demands for their time. Their experiences with faculty members also contributed to their characterization of the campus as a family-like environment.

### There are Systems of Support

The third theme illustrates the out-of-classroom relationships that were most salient for the informants. These non-faculty relationships facilitated their educational journey procedurally and emotionally. This theme is also divided into three subsections. They are Assistance navigating the system, I/thou relationships, and Friendships.

#### Assistance navigating the system

Four of the informants were first-generation college students. This coupled with the complexity of their lives made understanding educational jargon and mastering the processes, a challenge for them at best. Human compasses made the previously uncharted waters navigable.

*I feel as though here every step of the way, you're guided. You're not just left to figure things out on your own. In one of my classes, we've already had two representatives from the Career Center and then also from the Transfer Center. And they're telling you when you need to do these things and what you need to do. In one of my other classes we had someone come in and talk about [financial aid] awards. How to get more money for this school and for schools you would hope to transfer to. (Evan)*

*If you're not quite sure where to go, it doesn't matter what office you go into someone always directs you to the right place. It's not like "Well that's not here!" It's just that, I mean, they help you get*

*to where you're trying to go. They ask you what is it you're trying to do. What is it you're trying to find out? And they will give you what you need. If they can't answer your question, they will direct you to someone who can. They will direct you to the right office.*  
(Anastasia)

*One of the most important help that I needed here was being able to apply for financial aid. When I walked in the office, I remember that just a couple people in particular were able to assist me with that seemingly easy task for one that is used to doing it all the time but difficult for me who was not used to doing it. Just by them giving me that extra help and sitting down with me, that helped me to be able to get approved for financial aid.* (Franklin)

*"The staff tries not to 'ping pong' you."* (Focus Group)

Although faculty played a role, staff members engaged enough with these informants to help further integrate them in the academic system.

### I/thou relationships

Some of the informants recounted chance encounters as well as relationships with individuals who they perceived as relating to them not just as students but as individuals. This was in stark contrast to their experiences at larger post-secondary institutions.

*I got here right after, this is one day in particular, right after the cafeteria had closed and the lady that was preparing meals had already put up the closed sign. I didn't ask her, I just went in and she offered to fix me whatever I wanted anyway. So that was just very nice. It was incredibly meaningful for me. Cause, I just didn't see the closed sign and I just wandered in. But, that was very kind. It just sorta [sic] felt like family, you know. It felt like...It was almost as though she was identifying with me – "OK, he's probably hungry or whatever..." So... (Evan)*

*"[Name of counselor] has really helped me out by giving me information about upcoming events and she kinda [sic] gives me motivation boosts sometimes when I feel low." (Bryce)*

*She's always [saying], "You didn't come to see me today, I haven't seen you." But I be saying, "Ms. [name of staff person] I be so busy." But I be wanting to holler in there at her because she's very, uh, she's very willing to try to help you with your needs. So whatever it is, you know, cause sometime I be like, [name of staff person] I cannot get on the computer to get my thing. I need you to print this off for me right quick if you have the time. And she just do [sic] it. She won't change words. (Deanna)*

*I think it's been the faculty [informant is actually referring to staff] that's made me feel connected. Knowing different faculty members and being able to go to their offices and sit down and explain my problems. Me having issues and having situations that are self-created and I'm knowing that they're self-created. And they still be willing to help me through the problem has been the main factor of making me feel connected. Take for example, the Registrar, [Name of person], I am able to go in her office at any given time, if she's not busy, and lay my situation out before her. And she's always been willing and ready to help me even when it was my fault (laughs). (Franklin)*

The actions upon which the informants reflected were not monumental, life changing experiences, but small gestures that they perceived as emanating from the heart and which fostered a sense of connectedness.

### Friendships

While an extended network of friends is not feasible, these students shared that meaningful relationships with peers add a dimension to their educational experience.

*One of them I think is the most important is friends. If you don't have friends in the school, you always feel as if you want to go in, go out, go in, go out. Do what you have to get done and leave. When I first came here, I barely had any friends at this school and now I have a good amount of friends. (Bryce)*

*Well, I think we have, uh, whatcha [sic] call a friendship relationship on and off campus cause we, uh, call one another periodically and we talk and we just enjoy to sit down and talk and laugh sometimes. And you know, we, when it's (classes) all over we makin [sic] plans to meet and go out somewhere. (Deanna)*

Developing relationships is ancillary to the informants' educational goals and objectives. However, the curricula foster some connections and support systems. The institution has identified social interaction as a learning outcome.



Many faculty members achieve this end by incorporating group work into their curricula and encouraging the formation of study groups so that the teaching and learning extends beyond the classroom. These informants were cognizant of this institutional strategy, perceived it as aligned with their intentions and shared that they ultimately came to appreciate it.

*There's been a few [relationships]; there's been a few and probably because we got together in study groups and that was pretty good because we were able to go to the coffee shops and go to the different homes and really develop, you know, study habits and get assignments done. I actually love study groups because you just get a different flavor versus trying to do something on your own. And this has helped me develop friendships with some people at the school. (Franklin)*

*Like at Seattle Central, you get in class and within the first couple of days you're exchanging numbers with students because [you think to yourself] "Oh well, I might miss a day and I can get the homework from you or we can form study groups. (Anastasia)*

For those that can find the time to invest, acquaintances made in the classroom can blossom into friendships.

*So, it's basically meeting new people and um...I've met one really good friend. I wouldn't call her a friend yet, but we "click" and this is the second class we have together now. We talk about things outside of just "such and such" assignment. (Anastasia)*

*"I've made a, I've made two friends, uh, that are sorta [sic], one is pretty meaningful. In fact, I was invited to a wedding through this friendship."* (Evan)

*When I first came here, I barely had any friends at this school and now I have a good amount of friends. Not only are we friends at school but even out of school when certain events are occurring... There is a thing that we do with a couple of my friends at the end of the quarter. We get together at someone's house and we cook. We make dinner. Most of us are from different cultures, so you bring food from whatever culture you come from.* (Bryce)

This is a community college. The median age of the student body is 26. Five of the informants are older students with responsibilities that compete for their time, attention, and energies. Consequently, the formation of friendships can be difficult for commuter non-traditional students.

### Summary of the Third Theme

Four of the informants were first generation college students. A naiveté about educational systems/processes generally accompanies this status. Such was the experience of these students. Consequently, systems of support were vital for their connectivity and success. Their interactions with staff, who provided services and guidance, transformed a system into a humane and caring network. Forming friendships with their peers was problematical due to their off-campus

responsibilities. The connections they made with their peers ranged on a continuum from acquaintance to friend.

### The College is a Safe Zone

When sharing and reflecting on their campus experiences the informants described their encounters with phrases and terms that indicated they perceived the campus as a place where they felt that they fit. They could be authentic without putting themselves at risk. The underlying theme of their perceptions was the campus represented a zone of safety. This theme has sections designated as A Home away from home, Uncensored, and Meaning Captured with Metaphors.

#### A Home away from home

The traditional concept of family suggests a social group that typically has common goals and values. Ideally, it provides nurturance for all members and especially those who are most vulnerable. Throughout their interviews, these students related their on-campus experiences and framed them in terms that connoted a sense of family.

*“There’s certain staff and there’s certain teachers where you can feel the mother in them pushing you to be the best that you can be.” (Anastasia)*

*The relationships, the close familial relationships, and other relationships that I've had in the past have always been about understanding and care. You know the adage – It takes a village. Well, I find that here as well and it's helped me get a sense of fitting in more easily. So, that's one way that it's helped me to understand the environment that I'm in and adapt. And there has been little adaptation because it is familiar in a way, you know. It is a nurturing and caring environment much the same way as my family.*  
(Evan)

*From now on all my classes will be on the third floor. I don't have to bump into people. I don't have to deal with all these snobby stuck up people, you know. Everybody is more like a family on the third floor.* (Calistra)

Although not all of their on-campus contacts were affirming, family typified the informants' global perspective of their interactions.

### Uncensored

These African-American students were fully aware of the Emancipation Proclamation. However, their life experiences included incidents and circumstances that they perceived as oppressive and stifling. These informants euphorically described Seattle Central as an environment in which they felt free to “be” and free to express themselves with their style of dress, their style of hair, as well as verbally without fear of reprisals.

*It feels good not to have to put on a façade and a front that's not necessarily you, but you know that you have to in order to get what you need. So, it's nice to be able to just be yourself. To be happy to be big, to be skinny, to be dark, to be light and be accepted as you: for people to like you for you and not be judging you, not uptight with you. To be able to wear your hair in an Afro and not having them staring at you or coming up trying to touch your head.*  
(Anastasia)

*I don't feel the need to censor any of my thoughts when I'm talking with professors. I can, if I feel like something's from a racist viewpoint, I can say that and it will be accepted. An maybe someone will disagree with it but at least it's not completely squelched. You know, I'm at least able to put the idea out there.* (Evan)

*My culture, my upbringing, my teachings are OK to bring to the table. That I have just as much to bring to the table that I've learned through my culture, with my experience, as an Asian American student, as a Caucasian student, as anyone else here at this campus, that makes up this college. And, although my experience may be different, it does not mean that it's not okay to bring that...and my culture to the table and feel good about it and not put my head down.* (Franklin)

*"You can wear a head wrap and be taken seriously. In other places you need a coat and tie to be heard."* (Focus Group)

*"At this college there is a free exchange of ideas."* (Anastasia)

The experiences of these informants facilitated their perceptions of cognitive, physical, and cultural freedom.

### Meaning captured with metaphors

While recounting and reflecting upon their campus interactions and experiences the informants utilized metaphors to convey what the campus in toto meant to them. Their symbolic illustrations suggested a campus that represents a shelter from the demoralizing realities they encounter in the larger society.

*I have often passed other black men and other black women on the street and go to say hello or nod and there's no eye contact made. And that's something that is completely foreign to me. But, I must say that Seattle Central has been a **refuge** from that. Seattle Central has definitely been a **refuge** from that... (Evan)*

*"I don't have a disconnect not from the school because I think for me the school is **one of my shields**. I must be here. And if I'm not, it feels like I'm missing something." (Deanna)*

***Homey**, I mean you can be like who you are and not feel like you're going to be judged or feel like I'm less of a person. You don't feel like I'm not gone fit in because I'm white. I'm not gone fit in because I'm black or I'm not gone fit in because I'm thick. It really doesn't matter who you are or what you are. It's just about going to school and getting an education. (Anastasia)*

The utilization of metaphors succinctly captured the essence of the campus for these informants. The campus signified protection against the harsh realities of their lives.

### Summary of Theme Four

The campus environment was an empowering element in the lives of these informants. Their experiences caused them to attribute to the campus characteristics typically associated with home and family. Seattle Central Community College represented a place where they felt safe, free to express themselves, and free to be whatever “being” meant to them. They experienced the campus as a safe zone.

### Disconnects Happen

Seattle Central Community College is no utopia. Despite its efforts to build community and achieve cultural pluralism, experiences that made these informants feel disconnected did happen. Not everyone, who traverses the campus, whether resident or visitor shares the values of the organization. Hence, interactions with these individuals may result in experiences that are antithetical to the mission and values of the institution. This theme was generated by the informants’ descriptions of such encounters.

### Not consistent with my expectations

Students come to campus with expectations of all facets of the college experience. When their expectations were not met, the informants reported feeling disconnected from the college. These informants described disconnects that emanated from a number of sectors.

*I needed help from an instructor and this particular instructor had a doctorate. I went up to her and she was not able to give me the help that I needed. And, she really didn't want to give me the help that I needed. That made me feel real disconnected from the college. But, that was just that experience with that particular teacher. (Franklin)*

*I guess some teachers have different amounts of work or something like that. So they don't have as much time to talk to the students or come down to the students at a table and discuss things. (Bryce)*

*The college had a job fair here and there were two representatives from this particular company. I had my résumé on me and I asked one of the representatives, "Can I give this to you?" and he said, "Oh you know, apply on-line." Moments later, another student who was white, spoke to the other representative and gave him his résumé. I was not two feet away when this happened. The other guy was already talking with someone else. So, he wasn't aware that I was observing this. I just felt like, "whatever". That was wrong. (Evan)*



*And my advisors...I advise anyone, don't let your advisors pick your classes for you. They did that for me and that's how I got a messed up schedule my first quarter at Central. (Calistra)*

*There's not a lot of information for African-American students. I feel they need more information about what's going on. Then, if they don't act on the information, it's up to them. You can hold the person responsible, but as far as the information goes... Even the Black College Fair, I didn't really know we had a college fair, the Black College Fair coming up until about two weeks before it happened. (Bryce)*

*I don't always feel as though there is a great, um, crusade, I would say for lack of a better word, of encouraging students of color or particularly African Americans to go above and beyond and to excel and that they [humans as resources] are here for them on this campus. I think what I get now from it [the college] is because I am pretty much of a go-getter as far as seeking out staff. However, I do not see staff and faculty seeking me out or us out as African-American students. (Franklin)*

Some of the dissonance that these informants experienced was attributed to the gap between their expectations and institutional performance in certain sectors.

### Peer driven disconnects

Some of the informants encountered students who they perceived had preconceived notions about them and their abilities. Consequently, they sensed that some students did not accept them. Some of the disconnects with their peers were

a consequence of being commuter and/or older students with competing responsibilities.

*Group work is fine but I hate it when I'm in a group with a bunch of youngsters, people under 21 that don't know nothin [sic] about life. They think everything is about havin [sic] fun and stuff. And I used to tell [name of instructor] that, "you know, I don't think my group members care for me." Especially that one lady, I think she lived somewhere in the north-end. (Calistra)*

*Unfortunately, I've had limited interactions with the students just because, uh, I work...the other interactions I've had are just mere acquaintances. Unfortunately, I'm unable to cultivate that to something more just because of time constraints. [Evan]*

*It's the same way with students when you have a class together then the next quarter you don't see them as much then somehow you're not as much friends or the friendship kind of breaks away because of differences in schedule and time and all that. [Bryce]*

Although the informants recounted affirming experiences with faculty who are affiliated with the instructional discipline housed on the fifth floor, they expressed a consensus that the fifth floor and the students who frequented the floor had negative vibes for them.

*I felt uncomfortable getting off the elevator to the fifth floor because other students look at you like "what you doing on the fifth floor,*

*you [aren't] supposed to be on the math and science floor. Go back down to the third floor or the fourth floor."* (Calistra)

*I had some of those experiences sitting on the fifth floor. I never got to see a lot of African Americans there and for myself that's when I started noticing it. Every time I started asking help of one of the other students, it's not that they wouldn't help me but you can see when they're stuck and you can tell they're stuck. But, they don't want to come to you to ask for help. They rather wait for their friends to come out of class. Then, go ask them for help and you're doing the same subject.* (Bryce)

*It wasn't so much that it was uninviting, there just wasn't a lot of bonding on the fifth floor. No touchy, feely [sic] on the fifth floor. You better come on with it. You better know what you need to know up there or beat it back down [to a lower floor].* (Focus Group)

*You feel culturally unsafe on the fifth floor. You don't feel like you fit in. It's cliquish on the fifth floor. Even though the school is diverse, its mostly Asians and whites on the fifth floor. It feels very competitive up there.* (Anastasia)

The diverse student population consisted of individuals who the informants perceived as incongruent with the overarching attributes of inclusion and acceptance of the campus climate.

### Summary of Theme Five

This theme was generated by the frustrating and unexpected experiences of the informants. The alienating perceptions stemmed from interactions with peers and with those individuals who were expected to be resources. Although they were noted and reported they did not define the campus climate for the informants. It seemed to the researcher that the positive experiences mediated the negative ones.

### Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the results of the qualitative study of the campus climate of a diverse two-year public community college. The findings were derived from analyzing the data collected from six African-American students who participated in multiple individual interviews and a focus group. The campus audit, which I discuss in more detail in chapter five, corroborated the themes that emerged from the interviews.

The institution's engagement with diversity validated their ethnicity as well as enabled them to adjust more easily. The constructs and metaphors that the informants used when describing the environment suggests a place perceived by them as a haven. Albeit the informants did report experiences that made them feel disconnected, the collective perceptions of the informants of the campus environment depict a nurturing, caring, and supportive environment.

A further discussion of these results along with implications and recommendations for further research and practice is presented in chapter five.

## CHAPTER FIVE DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the results of the study that were presented in chapter four. The chapter begins with an overview of the study consisting of a synopsis of the purpose, the research questions, and the methodology. Next is a discussion of the findings and the themes in the context of the identified dimensions of the campus climate and the literature review, followed by a discussion of the implications of the study and recommendations for practice. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research.

### Overview of the Study

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions that African-American students have of the campus climate on the campus of a diverse two-year community college. This study sought to discover the dimensions of the campus environment that contribute to their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. To that end, the following research questions guided the study:

- ◆ How do African-American students perceive and describe their experience of the campus climate at Seattle Central Community College?
- ◆ What aspects of the student-environment transactions most inform their perceptions of the campus?
- ◆ What are the prominent themes that emerge from their descriptions of the campus environment?

### Research Methodology

Using a research approach that is a blend of phenomenology and ethnography, the researcher collected qualitative data by conducting multiple individual interviews with six informants, a focus group with five of the informants, and a campus audit. The phenomenological orientation dictated multiple individual interviews to place the informants' behaviors and perceptions of their current educational environment in the context of their life histories (Seidman, 1998). The interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to uncover the informants' experiences and discover the meanings they attached to them. A pilot of the interview series was conducted to test the utility of the process and the generative value of the questions. On the basis of the pilot and the difficulty encountered trying to recruit students who were willing to invest four and one half

hours in this first phase, I condensed the three interviews to two interviews that were spaced from three to seven days apart. These interviews were taped and transcribed. The informants reviewed their transcripts to ensure that the researcher had accurately captured their statements and meanings.

The second phase of data collection consisted of a focus group in which five of the informants participated. This phase allowed the informants to further expand upon their insights and the researcher to verify the trustworthiness of the themes emerging from the individual interviews.

The final phase of data collection consisted of a campus audit. In response to substantive statements made by the informants about the visual cues and cultural markers of the campus environment, the researcher added this phase of data collection while in the field. The researcher canvassed the hallways and stairwells, closely noting the signs and artifacts utilized by the faculty members to decorate their office windows and proclaim their beliefs and values to the casual on-looker.

The data from the individual interviews was analyzed for themes that characterized the campus climate and the meanings the informants attached to their experiences and perceptions. Meaningful statements about the campus climate were unitized and then clustered into meaning units according to emerging themes.

Five themes emerged from the data. They were:

1. Diversity does matter,



2. Faculty members are key,
3. There are systems of support,
4. The College is a safe zone, and
5. Disconnects happen

Quotations from the informants were used to illuminate the themes.

Following is a discussion of the results from this study.

## Discussion

Campus climate is partly determined by student perception. These informants judged the climate through their perceptions about what it meant to be a part of this particular community. Their experiences shaped and continue to shape their perceptions of the campus climate. Yet, individuals from different racial/ethnic groups experience a dimension or aspect of a campus climate differently. Such variability challenges policy makers who want to create a climate hospitable to all campus members. Just appealing to ideals such as inclusiveness, diversity, and hospitality is not enough. Students register how all members of an educational institution treat them.

In comparison to their numbers in the broader society, African Americans continue to be underrepresented in higher education (Castenell, 1998; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). In addition, once enrolled their outcomes

in the public “less than four-year institutions” are disappointing. In 1998, the NCES found that of the African-American students who entered in 1995 with the goal of earning a certificate or associate degree, 82% had not accomplished their educational objectives with more than half of them gone from the system. When assessing the factors that contribute to the attrition of African-American students, the literature clearly shows that enabling access must be accompanied by strategies to create campus climates that are inclusive and supportive.

How this group of African-American students experiences the climate of a diverse two-year community college may provide valuable insights about the nuances of a campus’ climate and how the perception of those nuances can either facilitate or hinder student success. These insights may be instrumental in the development and delivery of appropriate programs and services.

Part of the framework that guided this study was the theory of interactionism. Interactionism posits that the environment and individuals are in a transactional relationship, each shaping and influencing the other (Huebner & Lawson, 1990). Ergo, the informants’ experiences and perceptions of the campus climate were a function of the transactions between them and the campus environment. The findings and themes are discussed in the context of the dimensions of the campus environment and the literature review. The identified dimensions of the campus environment were the physical, the human aggregate, the

organizational structures, and the collective perceptions of the context and culture of the setting.

### Diversity Does Matter

The literature clearly shows that diversity does matter. There is a societal expectation that diversity literacy is just one of the competencies that will be achieved by those who participate in higher education (Bucher, 2001; Cabrera et al., 1999; Smith et al., 1997; Wilds, 2000). Although the literature posits that diversity initiatives must address more than just representation (Cabrera et al., 1999) when students initially come to campus one of the first campus attributes they often note is the composition of the campus inhabitants. Likewise, the composition of the Seattle Central's campus community made a powerful "statement" and impact on the students who participated with this study.

### The Rainbow of people is conducive to fitting-in

The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (1991) cite a number of characteristics that institutions should review when assessing campus climate for the barriers and bridges to the success of students of color. They suggest that an institution's hiring practices should reflect the institution's commitment to multiculturalism. They further argue that a diverse campus

workforce and student body fosters a hospitable campus environment for minority students, which is consistent with the experiences of the informants.

The informants shared that they had no foreknowledge of the school's diversity and consequently had no pre-conceived expectations about their ability to fit in. Nonetheless, they reported that to be able to walk into offices, meander the hallways, and see their ethnicity mirrored in the faces of their peers as well as those in official capacities made them feel comfortable and at ease. According to Evan, *"It is a feeling of being around a significant number of people who look like me and people who are also tolerant."* Anastasia offered, *"The reason why it's nice being an African American coming to this school, it's just the demographics and geographics [sic] of where this school is."* Franklin shared a like perspective:

*This is similar in a way, um, where I can walk in the offices and find African American staff here at this college and [name of other college] where I was able to walk in there and see, you know, the African American staff and get that help from them. It wasn't as diverse as Seattle Central, however, the excitement and energy level is pretty much the same."*

Strange and Banning (2001) proposed that a diffuse and undifferentiated student aggregate fails to project a sharp and easily defined campus culture. However, Seattle Central has managed to employ the nebulous, kaleidoscopic aspect of its human aggregate as a positive and distinguishing feature. The fact that no one type of students dominates the campus culture made the informants

anticipate their acceptance. A comment in the focus group about the student body summarily captured the perceptions of the informants about the significance of the extensiveness of the college's diversity; "*The rainbow of students is conducive to fitting in.*"

### It's open and inclusive

The informants came to the post-secondary educational environment academically and informationally underprepared. These attributes can be deterrents to academic engagement and success. Before coming to Seattle Central Community College, several of the informants had transiently attended public research universities. Public research universities present a reality that is a better fit for students who are attuned to an autonomous and competitive culture (Lee, 1999). A culture of this nature can be especially problematical for African-American first-generation college students (as were four of the six students who participated with this study). The informants' perceptions of inadequate support and lack of community at the previously attended institutions precipitated their dissatisfaction and subsequent withdrawal. Evan described his experience at a four-year institution:

*The experiences there were less about the student and the individual and not knowing that and now being in an environment where that is the case, namely Seattle Central, I'm able to see that.*

Although Anastasia's other educational experiences were at community colleges she fared no better. She said,

*As far as other students, the one campus that was similar, the same size as Seattle Central, I'd say you just had cliques. You know if you didn't know anybody, it wasn't like people welcomed you with open arms.*

Against a backdrop of unmet educational needs, five of the informants matriculated into Seattle Central.

Tinto (1993) cited Seattle Central for developing a collaborative learning model. Through its Coordinated Studies Program, the college encourages collaboration and community rather than competition. While not all students have been the beneficiaries of this particular pedagogy, the faculty members have so embraced the concept that even those who have not participated in this type of instructional delivery borrow and utilize some of the strategies. At their inception, the administration was fully persuaded that learning communities had great potential to build a spirit of community amongst the students. Although initially the learning communities were under-enrolled, the college matched budget allocations

to this institutional priority and subsidized them. The outcome has validated the investment; student and faculty feedback attribute the positive campus climate in part to this strategy.

The overarching collective perceptions of these informants of Seattle Central being open and inclusive were borne of their experiences with faculty, support staff, and their peers. It is common knowledge that community college faculty members focus on teaching rather than research. However, this bland epithet neither captures nor conveys the dedication of some of the faculty members that the informants experienced and described. The accommodations that the faculty members extended to the informants reflected their commitment to these students and their success. The actions of support staff that the informants described mirrored the same commitment. The majority of the interactions with their peers that the informants described indicated a level of acceptance such that the informants thought that competency with diversity had been a criterion for their peers' admission to the college.

### The Black experience is acknowledged and appreciated

The history of African Americans in this country reflects problematical race relations. The legacy of that history is that African Americans report perceptions of incidents that reflect a heightened sensitivity to and awareness of racism and a

societal stance of either denigrating or apathy towards the black culture (Ancis et al., 2000). The informants reported racially tinged incidents that they experienced at the secondary and post-secondary level in institutions that were either predominately white or the authority figures were white. Anastasia explained,

*It wasn't just the testing office [at another community college] there were a number of offices, if you were black you were treated completely different. Like the bookstore, because at the bookstore everybody has to take off their backpack but let you be black and have a larger purse... "Oh, can you check your purse please?" You're not making those Asians...Asian women carry big Gucci's and Louis Vuitton bags all the time and I didn't see them checking their purses. So...*

Similarly, Deanna's traumatizing experiences were a result of feeling singled out, in her case a result of the desegregation efforts in the South. She shared,

*We [were] all black basically because everybody was black. But when we transferred over it was a different thing because, you know, you had the students calling us the "N" word, you know. So, nobody wanted to go through all that. I think a lot of us dropped out because of that because nobody wanted to go through all the turmoil and that kind of stuff.*



These experiences made the prospect of further engagement with educational systems loom difficult and cumbersome.

Five of the informants shared that they had no a priori expectations of anything different from their previous educational experiences, but they elected to come to Seattle Central for very practical reasons. Bryce shared, *"It's close to home and I can go to work."* Franklin was explicit about his initial motivations: *"Money girl, money! It was a money issue. It was cheaper to come here than it was to go or to try to bust into the University of Washington."* And her brother explained the pragmatic aspects of attending Seattle Central to Calistra:

*Well when he told me that because I was living like on 39<sup>th</sup> avenue which is just a few blocks from here, he said it was closer by bus because going to [the name of other school] was three buses. If I went to Seattle Central there wouldn't be none [sic] of those issues.*

Although initially motivated by pragmatism, once on the campus the physical environment engaged them.

The synthetic aspects of the physical dimension of the campus climate proved to be a potent medium for conveying tacit and unexpected messages to the informants. Banning (1992), Banning and Bartels (1997), and Strange and Banning (2001) caution that this aspect of the physical environment can often convey messages that contradict the institution's stated mission and values. Nevertheless,

the campus audit revealed that the official and sanctioned signs and posters are asexual and racially and culturally neutral. The artworks purchased with capital set-aside funds are abstract, leaving their interpretation open to the perceptions of the beholder. The wording of official signage has been stripped of subtle and unintended messages of gender bias.

Faculty offices have large windows that front the corridors. The faculty members have used posters and pictures to secure some privacy and promote an appreciation of multiculturalism. There is such a preponderance of these displayed artifacts that one might think that observers being bombarded by so much would see nothing. On the contrary, the unofficial artifacts resonated with these African-American students. Four of the informants reported that these displays caught their attention as they navigated the crowded corridors. The observation of Evan, one of the informants, was quite sophisticated and insightful about their impact. He shared, *"I experience my blackness, just being surrounded by ideas and the cultural markers throughout the environment."*

The acknowledgement of the contributions of other ethnic/racial groups to U.S. history and culture was made the more graphic by its diametric contrast to the curricula that five of the informants had experienced in their K-12 education. One of the informants shared in the focus group the futile struggle that her Black

Student Union (BSU) had engaged in to have black history introduced into the curricula in her high school:

*We got a petition together. We had to have so many kids sign it who were predominately black. And, we still didn't get it! So as far as it relates to being an African American in a predominately white school, everything was a battle and a struggle. (Anastasia)*

This recount made Seattle Central's seemingly natural acknowledgement and inclusion of multiple perspectives all the more significant for the informants.

The unofficial displays are consistent with the institution's efforts to achieve a higher level of diversity -- multiculturalism. The informants interpreted the member-constructed messages as valuing diversity. They shared that the displays acknowledged the existence of a black culture and validated the contributions of African Americans, which made the informants feel recognized and appreciated.

### Faculty Members are Key

The academic and social integration of students plays a pivotal role in the dynamics of the collegiate experience. At the core of Tinto's (1993) theoretical retention model is the process of integrating students academically and socially into the fabric of campus life. This integration shapes student perception of the campus

climate (Baird, 1990; Nealy, 1999). However, the significance of the impact of either of these systems is relative to the particular student and the realities of his/her life (Lee, 1999).

### Authentic faculty members

The students who participated with this study were able to develop informal mentoring relationships with some of their faculty members. According to Lee (1999), mentors and protégés are usually matched on similar characteristics. This strategy is believed to foster relationship. Race, as the most salient characteristic, is regarded as a substantive basis for the trust and the bond that are requisites for effectual mentoring relationships. However, the relationships that the informants described did not always involve an African American faculty member. Lee's study on the effects of race on the mentoring relationship found that "faculty race was not as important in a faculty/minority student mentoring relationship as the quality of the interaction" (p.39). The students in Lee's study were able to bond with faculty members irrespective of race when they perceived such faculty to be patient and sincerely interested in the student. Deanna's perceptions and experiences with faculty members at Seattle Central mirror Lee's findings:

*I guess because when I come into an environment of teachers and as before like I said, I had been cast down by teachers and principals*

*in my younger years. Then I come in my kinda [sic] middle years and find that there are some teachers that care! Then that really makes me connect. That makes me forget about all this other stuff.*

The African American culture values authenticity. Young African Americans caution their peers to “keep it real.” This cultural expression reflects this value. The fact that the informants in this study regarded their faculty members as sincere and authentic enabled them to engage with faculty irrespective of race or ethnicity and to develop quality relationships.

### Accessible faculty members

For the informants, the formation of a relationship that was meaningful for them (informal, non-classroom contact) with just one faculty member made them feel connected to and valued by the institution. The interactions and conversations they reported having with the faculty members were consistent with the type of contact that Himelhoch et al. (1997) characterize as effective and going beyond the mere formalities of academic work. Excerpts from the interviews of some of the informants illustrate their perceptions.

*There's some [faculty members] that have said, “These are my office hours. However, I'm gonna extend this for you and you can come in during this time and I'll help you.” (Franklin)*

*They really...It's as though they want to...They strive to connect to the student and they have all the time in the world. And, that has been my experience. (Evan)*

The quality of their involvement with faculty members and their perceptions that faculty members sincerely cared took precedence over any negative interactions and inattention that they inevitably experienced with others on campus.

The informants did not have time to develop extensive networks of friends and their pre-interview questionnaires reflected minimal to no involvement with campus activities or student life. Four of the informants reported receiving either no encouragement from their families to pursue higher education or only verbal encouragement. The encouragement did not translate into tangible means to accomplish their educational goals. One of the informants shared that while his family valued higher education their relationship was tenuous and strained due to other issues. Given these realities, the academic system and the role of faculty became highly influential on the integration of these students into the college and their commitment to their goals (Pascarella and Terenzini as cited by Lee, 1999).

### Faculty members as bridges

The critical role that faculty members play in students' academic, and to a lesser degree, social integration has been well documented (Bean, 1982; Rendón,

1995; Tinto, 1993). For commuter students especially, the classroom, ipso facto, the faculty members are central to their experiences and perceptions (Banning & Hughes, 1986). Commuter students comprise the student bodies of most community colleges and likewise for Seattle Central Community College. This status as a commuter poses challenges for the student and the institution.

According to Banning and Hughes (1986), "the diversity of the commuting student is quite notable, but there is the tendency for them to be independent, older, and part-time" (p.18). Banning and Hughes further offer that the collegiate experience of commuting students is often time-constrained and largely curricular. This description is apt for five of the informants except that four of the five were enrolled full-time. Because of these parameters, the informants were myopic when considering their available options. It was an efficient use of their limited time to utilize the faculty members as instructor, friend, and confidante. With their minimal integration into the social fabric of the college, the faculty members' bridging role in satisfaction and retention of the informants became even more consequential. It is fortunate that the institution has intentionally limited class capacity so that the average class size is 22 students. The small class size predisposes faculty members to be available to their students.

## There are Systems of Support

### Assistance navigating the system

Higher education can appear to be a closed system to the uninitiated. Its jargon, rules and regulations can be intimidating and pose as barriers to the first-generation college student. Inadequate information is typical of this status (Lee, 1999). Four of the informants were first-generation college students. They did not have family members who could provide information about college life or coach them about negotiating the system. Although the informants came to rely on their faculty members, there are aspects of an educational system such as enrollment policies and procedures and securing financial aid that are as foreign to the faculty members as they are to students. Consequently, campus climate, student success, and student retention cannot solely be the responsibility of any one constituency on campus. They are college-wide challenges. It is staff persons who traditionally assist students as they attempt to accomplish the processes that enable them to become bona fide students and persist until program completion.

Because all students have to go through these processes, staff persons can become jaded from the sheer numbers and come to regard students as interruptions and burdens. Although this study's informants primarily interacted with their respective faculty members, they did relate experiences that involved personnel



other than faculty. The experiences that they described that involved staff positively shaped their perceptions of the campus climate. Some of the staff came to “know” the informants and went beyond their job descriptions to assist them. Consequently, the perceptions of the informants of their transactions were characterized by warmth and caring.

Administrators and leaders at Seattle Central have tried to create a caring environment. They also value organizations that are dynamic as opposed to static. The behavior of staff members lends credence to their efforts and values. The organizational structures that define Seattle Central are such that, staff members feel empowered enough to operate beyond the constraints of their job descriptions when serving students. Their behavior is typical of that which would be associated with a dynamic organization (Strange & Banning, 2001).

### I/thou relationships

Martin Buber described I/thou relationships as relationships predicated upon openness, participation, and empathy. Individuals do not objectify the other (Creswell, 1998). The reflections of the informants about their faculty members clearly indicate that the faculty members valued their interactions with the students. However, faculty members spend concentrated amounts of time with students and it is natural and expected that they recognize their personhood. The empathetic

service that staff provided the informants, even though their associations were transitory, was especially meaningful.

A criterion for participating with this study was at least three quarters of full-time attendance. The duration of their enrollment at a two-year institution suggests that these informants are committed to their studies and feel connected to the institution. It also suggests that they have developed relationships that are consistent with Fleming's (as cited by Tinto, 1993) findings. He found that the persistence and intellectual development of black students are predicated on

Bean (1982) and Rendón (1995) posited that the social system, which consists of the informal interactions and transactions occurring among peer groups, faculty, and staff (Tinto, 1993), at a college or university also influences a student's connectedness. Although faculty played a primary role, staff members engaged enough with these informants to further integrate them in the academic system. The character of the transactions between the informants and the staff was such that the informants viewed the staff as supportive. They also described the transactions using terminology that implied they saw themselves being in relationship with the service providers.

*It's just a great feeling walkin [sic] through here and feelin [sic] like the staff care about you and feel like that they want to help you make it and that has been my experience here at Seattle Central.*  
(Franklin)

*There's certain people planted throughout this school where when you come into contact with them that mother or that father comes out of them, where you know it's gonna be OK. Sometimes you may not be having even an educational problem. You might be having a problem outside of school that's conflicting with you going to school and you can tell them about it. And, they may have had a past experience that can help you, where they can relate and help you deal with your situation. So, it's certain people, where they can...It just goes beyond school and they make you feel like you're not so much connected to the school, but you're connected to them and since they're a part of the school, it provides that connection.*  
(Anastasia)

*Down there in Admissions, Ms. [name of staff person] she always tells us. "If you need any help, come to me." You know, so yeah, and I think that is literally a good thing, you know.* (Deanna)

The environmental transactions that involved individuals other than faculty helped to shape their perceptions of the institutional climate.

### Friendships

Often non-traditional students were not fully invested in their education while in high school. Maturation and a realization of the value of an education prompt them to return to school, usually at a community college. However, older students sometimes feel they are playing "catch-up" which precludes them from wasting time on non-essentials: That is any activity not perceived by them as facilitating their educational success. Four of the informants believed their personal

commitments and responsibilities constrained extensive and meaningful interactions with their peers. Franklin's comments typified their actions:

*However, very few times have I developed life-long friendships with people in my classes as much as a "people person" as I am. It just has not been...I've had people here as far as my fellow students, you know, that if I see them and when I see them, I smile, and "how you doing and where are you" as far as education is concerned but there's been few, only a few [that] I've developed life-long relationships or friendships with.*

Although the informants clearly saw the value in those interactions, it seemed to the researcher that investment beyond the stipulations of a syllabus meant compromise in some other area of their lives. The diffuse and undifferentiated student aggregate at Seattle Central allows students like the informants to coexist with students who are unlike the informants. According to Huebner and Lawson (1990) a student aggregate that is not narrowly defined by a particular demographic or psychological identity is inclusive and more accepting "of a variety of inputs and influences" (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 50). As Anastasia observed

*It makes me know that this is the environment that I choose to be in because to be in another environment if you have too many people being close-minded and not accepting, very judgmental, you can't grow. You lose track of what you're trying to do. Instead of thinking about your education, you're trying to figure how you can get certain persons to accept you.*

The informants were able to devote their creative and intellectual energy to the academic content rather than being hyper vigilante. They did not share any experiences or perceptions that indicated they did not “fit” the mold of a Seattle Central student. On the contrary, they had a sense of inclusion though most chose to remain aloof.

It is fortunate that the faculty members efficaciously utilize the curricula to encourage interactions and engagement in and out of the classroom. This strategy surmounted the mindsets of the informants. These informants shared that the student body’s awareness and cultural sensitivity made friendships possible – both same race and interracial. Developing relationships was only limited by the time availability of the informants.

### The College is a Safe Zone

#### A Home away from home

When a newcomer enters an established environment, it is incumbent upon him or her to make the necessary adjustments (adapt) in order to connect and become a viable part of the larger community (Cheek, 2000). However, in the case of people-of-color, adaptation has usually meant assimilation. Jackson (1999)

found that as early as the ninth grade, African-American students understand that they must have two identities in order to be successful. "That is, they have to learn and act in two different worlds: one is white and foreign to them, and the other is black and feels like home" (p. 16). In a clinical setting, this adaptation of African Americans that is induced and sanctioned by society would be diagnosed as a disorder. For those African Americans who have embraced their ethnicity, adaptation/assimilation often signifies "selling out". As colleges and universities have sought to diversify, African Americans have rejected assimilation in favor of multiculturalism. They have taken the position that campus culture needs to be redefined to incorporate their legitimate customs, traditions, insights, and experiences (Castenell, 1998). Collectively, the informants shared observations that indicated they did not view the college as a different world that they had to navigate. "*When I'm here, I am the same person here that I am at home*" (Focus Group).

Five of the six informants shared that their decision to attend Seattle Central was pragmatic with no prior knowledge about the school's culture. Life in general had made them aware of the influential and pervasive dynamics of the dominant culture. In addition, their earlier educational experiences had tacitly shaped their expectations. The observations and experiences that the informants shared reflected a reality that did not bear out their expectations. The informants related experiences

at Seattle Central and perceptions borne of those experiences that indicated they felt free to be themselves. The freedom to be and express themselves that they described encompassed the physical, verbal, and mental realms.

### Uncensored

The dominant culture's standards of beauty are pervasive throughout western society. The physical attributes of African Americans, especially the women, are not congruent with these standards. Calistra was sensitive to this and offered the following observation:

*People judge you by your body size and, you know, the color of your skin, your hair. What's the texture of your hair, how long your hair is. All that stuff! I've seen that they really judge people by these things.*

Two of the three female informants made repeated references to their comfort with their physical attributes, which was induced by the campus climate. They did not feel the need to re-engineer themselves in an attempt to emulate a particular standard of beauty. One of the male informants shared that it was the college's

climate of acceptance of differences that gave him the courage to lock<sup>4</sup> his hair (although he felt he had to hide his evolving identity from his parents during the early stages).

The informants felt comfortable expressing their ethnicity with their hair (natural and locked) and their apparel. Their comfort was owing to the modeling and unconventionality of the faculty, staff, administration, and their peers, which was attested to in the focus group. As one participant put it, *"I have seen some of the smartest, blue hair wearing, white people. There's a teacher here with blue hair!"* The garb of personnel runs the gamut from power suits to casual and from western to the ethnic.

The apparel of the students ranges from the conservative to the bizarre. In this environment, the informants did not feel the need to physically redefine themselves in order to fit-in.

*Knowing that you don't have to give in to the social stereotypes of what it means to be pretty... you [don't have to] give up who you are and your culture. ...Able to wear an Afro, being able to put my lipstick on and not try to make my lips look smaller. Just little things like that. You know, not afraid to wear bright red lipstick or not trying to stick with a neutral color because you want to blend your lips in and hide them and so forth. Just dressing, you know, not afraid to put on some African attire when you feel like it. (Anastasia)*

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<sup>4</sup> Locked hair is a hairstyle that is achieved by twisting the hair into small uniform sections. The sections are not combed or brushed. Consequently, the hair eventually locks into these sections.



Academe has long been associated with freedom of thought and expression. Seattle Central has acquired a reputation as a bastion for activism. There is a contingent of faculty members who serve as advisors to student groups and encourage the students to critically think and question the established view. The informants related that their campus experiences empowered them to freely share unpopular views without fear of reprisals. *“You don’t feel like a minority here. There’s no threat of repercussions when you speak up for yourself.”* (Focus Group)

### Meaning captured with metaphors

If the headlines of most major newspapers are true, if the six o’clock news is a barometer of society, then it is a “jungle out there,” one in which only those who are fit survive. Juxtaposed against these realities and the realities of their previous educational experiences, the reality of Seattle Central for the informants presented a diametrical contrast. The informants used metaphors to describe Seattle Central that collectively constructed an overarching perspective that belied the experiences the informants described as disconnects.

According to Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates (2001) the collective perceptions are not always congruent with the experiences of the individual but are generated by the press, social climate, and culture of the institution. The press of an institution is defined by Stern (as cited by Strange & Banning, 2001) as the

“characteristics, demands, features or influences of the environment as perceived by those who live in that particular environment” (p. 88). The social climate is depicted in terms of the categories of relationship, personal growth, and system maintenance and change (Moos, 1987). Schneider and Reichers (1983) define culture as the organization’s artifacts, perspectives, values, and assumptions. The informants’ descriptions of their experiences and perceptions of the campus environment reflect an institution that has a press, social climate, and culture that is supportive, validating, accepting, inclusive, and embraces diversity.

Although all of the informants spoke highly of the campus environment, it was Deanna and Evan who attributed personal changes that were tantamount to transformations borne of their experiencing Seattle Central. *“I feel a sense of energy coming from everywhere to strive to be the best. So, I feel encouraged, emboldened, ready to tackle things that come my way.”* (Evan)

*To be real to me [in this environment] means I’m free. I don’t care what goes on around me and what goes on, I’m free. I’m as free and spiritually liberated to do whatever in the normal realms and the statutes of the law. It’s like you’re locked up in a box, you’re trying to find your way out, but once you get out, you’re gonna stay free. You not gone be locked up in that box no more. Just say, I been let out the cage [she laughs] like the eagle, you know, you wanna [sic] soar.* (Deanna)

The metaphors the informants utilized to describe Seattle Central indicated they associated the school with safety, family, and shelter.

### Disconnects Happen

The informants generally had positive perceptions of the campus environment. Therefore, when they encountered a situation or individual who was not consistent with their expectations, it or the person stood out in stark relief against a backdrop of caring interactions. All of them related such experiences, albeit they were the exception rather than the rule.

### Not consistent with my expectations

The overarching perceptions of the campus environment that the informants had constructed predisposed them to positive expectations. One of the characterizing features of Seattle Central that emerged from the descriptions of the informants was the institutional support. Support was provided for them in and out of the classroom. When informants needed help to extricate themselves from self-created problems, support was forthcoming. Support was provided when they had personal issues. This translated into an institutional press that characterized Seattle Central as nurturing for these informants. Consequently, when an instructor was diffident, an advisor inept, or administration failed to provide information about a

program that specifically targeted African-American students, these students noted the incidents. The incidents ran counter to their characterization of the organization and were inconsistent with their expectations.

### Peer driven disconnects

The transactions that occur among peers is an element of the social system (Tinto, 1993) which overlaps and interacts with the academic system. Both systems influence a student's commitment to a college and his or her educational goals (Bean, 1982; Rendón, 1995). As older non-traditional students four of the informants believed their personal responsibilities limited the time they could invest in meaningful relationships with their peers. Although on the cognitive level they recognized the responsibility they bore for this void, it appeared to the researcher that on the affective level they realized the importance of this element and consequently made it a subject for the discussion.

Faculty members often utilize the curricula to encourage peer interactions for example they require group work. The same heterogeneity that the informants presupposed as facilitating their acceptance into the larger environment posed problems in a smaller group setting. According to Schneider and Reichers (1983), to identify with and become invested with the group is to fully comprehend "what

the group is about” - its purpose, attitudes, interactions, and events. Calistra insightfully identified the problem:

*And basically when we weren't discussing an assignment they were just talking about what they did on the weekend and where they were going and where they were going on spring break. "Nate's going to Jamaica, Mike's going to Mexico, I'm going to London." You know, stuff like that. That's what they talked about, things like that. So I felt that it was like more of a class than a race thing.*

The distancing experienced by Calistra was borne of differing socio-economic statuses. However, the informants also described disconnecting experiences that were associated with locale and were threatening to their sense of competency.

The Science and Math instructional division is housed on the fifth floor of the college. The informants described the students who frequent the fifth floor as competitive and aloof. Calistra's observations summarily captured their sentiments.

*But when you go to the fifth floor it's just mostly, it's all about math and science degree or something like that and being more competitive and making, you know, making your green. Making your money, not worrying about anybody else, not caring about whose toes you step on to make it to the top and what you have to do.*

A competitive and aloof environment is a feature that Lee (1999) ascribed to the culture at public research universities. Lee maintains that such a culture is not

congruent with the heritage of African-American students and often results in them feeling marginalized. Lee's postulates are consistent with the experiences and perceptions of these informants in reference to the students on the fifth floor. The students and the location came to represent a source of alienation for them. The fifth floor represented an isolated and atypical experience for these informants. They had faculty members and other areas that (in their words) "*they could beat it back down to*" for nurturance.

### Summary of the Discussion

The impetus for this study were the results of a questionnaire, the CCSEQ, that was administered in the fall of 1996 and 1999 to randomly selected day and evening classes of students in academic and professional/technical programs. Three of the questions that the questionnaire posed focused on campus climate and student satisfaction. Students were asked their perceptions about the 1) friendliness of students, 2) the approachability of instructors, and 3) the helpfulness of faculty and staff. In the fall of 1996 the Asian/non-native and African-American students reported being less satisfied on all three dimensions than the Asian American

students, white students, and students grouped in the “other”<sup>5</sup> category. In 1999 the satisfaction reported by Asian/non-native and African-American students indicated some improvement but these two groups still expressed a lower level of satisfaction than other student groups. Consequently, the researcher undertook this qualitative study in an effort to apprehend the subjective reality of the African-American students who are participating in the diversity experience at Seattle Central. The researcher sought to obtain an understanding of the campus climate from the perspective of these students.

Despite some experiences that caused them to feel disconnected from the college, the informants generally perceived the campus as a positive environment. Their perceptions and descriptions of their experiences indicated that the press, social climate, and culture of the college are conducive to their persistence and success. In their words...

*It takes you to go to Seattle Central for a quarter and really be focused on what you're trying to do to realize that this is where I should be. This is where the cultural experience and learning can really truly take place and where you'll find the best instructors. Instruction relates to things that are going on in the real world. It*

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<sup>5</sup> The other category was comprised of Hispanic/Latino students and students who failed to disclose their ethnicity. The reporting of Hispanic/Latino students was included in this category due to the small number of Hispanic/Latino students and in an effort to prevent skewing the results.

*all blends in and overlaps each other so that you can get the most from your experience. (Anastasia)*

*The teacher and student relationship, the student to student relations...The way the school is set-up it gives you a sense of real life, where you meet people and there is an exchange. Whatever you have to offer and whatever they have to offer you. (Bryce)*

*It was a lot easier and then I like the flexibility because if I got sick, Seattle Central - it's OK if I missed a day. I remember out of my year and a half that I'd been there I've missed a week of class but the instructors were willing to work with me. (Calistra)*

*I know this is no plaything here. I know this is a place of learning and getting the skills you need to go back out there where you can use 'em. What I came up here to do is get my education and how I perceive Seattle Central, it's the number one college. So, therefore I cannot sit here and think bad things about it because all I've accomplished is good stuff from it. (Deanna)*

*As far as I can see it's very nurturing. Everything from the schedule time with tutors free of charge, things like that...And of course it goes without saying that it's a very culturally diverse environment with your teachers and your students. And it's significant for sure. I feel it's very nurturing. (Evan)*

*What does it feel like to be me as an African American student at Seattle Central Community College? It actually feels pretty good. Um, on top of me feeling good about being an African American and then being an African American student makes me feel even better.*



*Knowing that people have bled and died and have been beaten and may sacrifices have been made in order for me to walk the campus as a free young man and to be afforded the opportunities, educationally as anyone else. It makes me feel good. I feel good. I carry myself... When I come to school I dress up. I don't come in saggy jeans or wrinkled clothes because I feel good about being a student at this school and I want to give that presentation to people around me. (Franklin)*

The findings from this study indicated a high level of satisfaction with the campus climate of the African Americans who participated with this study. They reported experiences that led to perceptions of a warm and nurturing campus climate. Although the findings are a sharp departure from those in 1996 and 1999, they are consistent with the findings of another agency of the institution that administered a parallel quantitative survey.

### Study Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The literature clearly shows that the campus climate has an impact on the adjustment and retention of African-American students. The students who participated in this study had realities beyond their race and ethnicity that shaped their educational experiences. They were also commuter and non-traditional. These characteristics combined to shape the findings and consequently the implications of the study. The recommendations emanate from the situations and circumstances that made the informants feel disconnected from the institution.

1. All of the students who participated in this study were receiving financial aid. The institution's financial aid philosophy stipulates that no student will have 100 percent of his or her need met. This strategy enables the institution to fund more students. However, this strategy requires students to commit a considerable amount of their out-of-classroom time to employment. They must choose between extracurricular involvement and working (to cover their unmet need). Commuter students are already predisposed to non-involvement with extra-curricular activities. The institution needs to reassess its awarding philosophy from the perspective of optimal and holistic student development.
2. The literature clearly demonstrates that academic integration and social integration are factors in the retention and success of students. As older, non-traditional, and commuter students, social integration was not a priority for these informants. However, their faculty members played a pivotal role in their adjustment and engagement with the institution. These African-American students critically evaluated their faculty members based on the faculty members' expertise as well as their interpersonal skills and sincerity. However, the students who participated with this study did not have an extensive network of supportive faculty relationships. The study suggests that one truly caring and meaningful relationship can characterize a campus as a caring environment. In

recognition of this, the litmus test that the institution utilizes in its hiring decisions must factor in more than just discipline knowledge and classroom delivery but the ability to relate to and willingness to build relationships with students as well.

3. Five of the six informants reflect the characteristics of the typical community college student. As non-traditional students, they had multiple priorities and no time for extra-curricular activities. The one informant who was young and came to Seattle Central directly from high school was involved with student government and the Black Student Union. Because of his involvement, he observed that the school did not fully exploit its diversity. He was perturbed that there was such a great and heretofore missed opportunity to involve students with multicultural issues and promote cross-cultural dialogues and understandings. A younger, more traditional student body has implications for the college's diversity efforts. The institution needs to consider strategies and initiatives that enhance and promote cross-cultural AND intra-cultural understandings. The Seattle Central experiment affords campus members a unique diversity experience. The organization must not take its diversity for granted but rather build on the experiment, especially in light of the successful challenges to diversity efforts.

4. Initially, the researcher experienced great difficulty trying to recruit informants. The feedback from the student who participated with the pilot interviews was that students were busy and reluctant to invest the 4 ½ hours. The researcher altered the study's design and the interviews were reduced to two. However, once the interviews began and the informants became familiar with the researcher, they were willing to invest the time required to fully disclose their views and experiences. This suggested to the researcher that these students were willing to make an extensive time commitment only if a prior relationship existed.
5. The literature posits that the collegiate experience of commuting students is often time-constrained and largely curricular. These are the same realities for the students who participated with this study. Two of the informants complained about the failure of the institution to proactively disseminate information that would promote the success of African-American students. This was in contrast to the other informants who lauded the school's aggressive efforts to share information about available support services. The students who had kudos for the college had experienced faculty members who made presentations by Career Services teams a part of their curriculum. We know our students need the information but are "time-challenged". We also know that a

curricular approach is effective. This suggests that instruction should consider systemically incorporating this approach.

6. Although Seattle Central is an urban community college, its geographic location does not presuppose a community college with only poverty level inhabitants. The college's diversity is due to its manifold socio-economic statuses as much as to its diversity of races and ethnicities. Students and staff come from a variety of communities in Seattle and the islands (Bainbridge and Vashon). One of the informants shared a group experience in which she perceived the socio-economic level of the informants to be upper middle-class. Their discussions of their travels during the quarter's break made her feel like an outsider. Three months of group activities failed to help her overcome her perceptions as an outsider.

Cross-cultural exchanges and dialogues are often the focus of an organization's energies. However, diversity stemming from socio-economic levels can create chasms between individuals as deep as those stemming from race and ethnicity. These differences are opportunities for the institution to initiate conversations about privilege and social justice.

7. The fifth floor of the institution houses the Math and Science instructional division. The informants perceived the students who frequented this floor as competitive and aloof. The experience of the informants on the fifth floor and their perceptions of the white and Asian students as unfriendly was a refrain that was echoed in the focus group discussion. The campus audit revealed that this area of the college was notably devoid of any artifacts, official or unofficial, that validated any race or ethnic group. It was largely sterile with posters denoting equations or some other utilitarian message. The only poster that represented any life form was one of two mice that were white. This area was in such stark contrast to the rest of the institution that I suspect the setting contributed to the informants discomfort and perceptions of alienation from the white and Asian students on this floor. There are cultural aspects of mathematics. The institution can celebrate diversity even in this location by utilizing posters that proclaim the contributions of a variety of races/ethnicities to the disciplines of science and mathematics.
8. Most organizations only aspire to the level of multiculturalism that Seattle Central has achieved. However, the college must not become complacent with its success. Those involved with strategic planning must continuously assess their diversity efforts to prevent plateauing. The staff, faculty, administration,

and students must be vigilant about setting new goals and striving to meet them. Diversity competence is a shifting target as a result of the changing demographics of this nation.

### Recommendations for Further Research

Initially the informants wanted to begin the first interview with a discussion about the oversights or failing of a particular person at the college. It was the process of contextualizing their on-campus experiences in terms of their life histories that helped them gain additional insights and a broader perspective. The in-depth interviews provided the informants an opportunity to ponder and reflect upon the ecologically acculturating relationship between them and the environment.

The forum that the study provided for the informants allowed them to develop their “voice” and articulate their campus experiences. They were able to focus on the aspects of the campus environment that were meaningful to them as well as those that were barriers. With the researcher, the informants sifted through those experiences and perceptions, determining the experiences that were more salient, and ultimately crafting an account of the campus climate that allowed them to appreciate the experiences afforded by the campus.

1. Consequently, the researcher sees the value in conducting this study with other groups of students-of-color. People-of-color have a history in this country of disfranchisement. Allowing students to tell their stories is a means of empowerment. It is another strategy for facilitating the development of the self-efficacy of learners.
  
2. Often research that has any implication for diversity focuses on students-of-color. The largest student group at Seattle Central is white students. The fact that white students are the dominant group on this campus was not apparent to all of the informants. One of the informants made a remark that indicated that he thought the administration uses recruiting strategies to attract students who are comfortable with diversity. Research needs to be conducted with white students to determine their issues and concerns as they relate to campus climate and diversity.
  
3. The findings from this research supported the theory about the role of faculty members in the academic system and in the adjustment of students to college. Since faculty members play such a pivotal role at this diverse two-year college, research exploring their experiences with and perceptions about diversity is warranted.



## Conclusion

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

- ◆ How do African-American students perceive and describe their experience of the campus climate at Seattle Central Community College?
- ◆ What aspects of the student-environment transactions most inform their perceptions of the campus?
- ◆ What are the prominent themes that emerge from their descriptions of the campus environment?

In an effort to explore the campus climate in its complexity and understand it from the perspective of the informants, the researcher used a research approach that was a blend of phenomenology and ethnography. The researcher collected qualitative data by conducting multiple individual interviews with six informants, a focus group with five of the informants, and conducting a campus audit. The information that the informants shared about their perceptions, experiences, and the meanings they attached to those experiences yielded findings that addressed the research questions.

Although the informants recounted some experiences that made them feel disconnected, their predominant perception of the campus environment was that it was warm and nurturing.

In response to the second research question, “What aspects of the student-environment transactions most inform their perceptions of the campus?” the informants shared experiences that were consistent with the literature on commuter students and retention. Primarily, their transactions with the faculty shaped their perceptions and made their educational experiences meaningful. They perceived the faculty members as authentic and available to them. Consequently, they utilized the faculty members as informal mentors, friends, and confidantes. The warmth and caring of non-faculty was also pivotal in their assessments of the campus climate. Finally, the diversity of the campus community engendered feelings of acceptance and inclusion.

The third research question that guided this study was “What are the prominent themes that emerge from their descriptions of the campus environment?” The analysis of the data yielded the following themes:

Diversity does matter:

- The Rainbow of people is conducive to fitting-in
- It’s open and inclusive
- The Black experience is acknowledged and appreciated

Faculty members are key:

- Authentic faculty members
- Accessible faculty members
- Faculty members as bridges

There are systems of support:

- Assistance navigating the system
- I/thou relationships
- Friendships

The College is a Safe zone:

- Familial connotations
- Uncensored
- Meaning captured with metaphors

Disconnects Happen:

- Not consistent with my expectations
- Peer driven disconnects

Seattle Central Community College still has challenges in the area of diversity. Achieving multiculturalism is an on-going endeavor. However, from the perspective of these informants the environment on this campus has allowed them to self-actualize and facilitated their educational progress.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
STUDENT ENROLLMENT BY RACE/ETHNICITY FOR FALL  
2002

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**Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity for Fall 2002**


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<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Asian/Pacific Islander	1499	14%
African American	1159	11%
Native American	114	1%
Latino/Hispanic	843	8%
<b>Total Students of Color</b>	<b>3615</b>	<b>34%</b>
White	4325	40%
International Student	709	7%
Other & unreported	2072	19%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>10,721</b>	<b>100%</b>

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 Information from the office of Institutional Planning and Research

APPENDIX B  
FACULTY/STAFF DEMOGRAPHICS 2001-02

**Faculty/Staff Demographics 2001 - 02**


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<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Employee Type</u>			<b>Totals</b>	<b>%</b>
	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Administrators</b>	<b>Classified</b>		
<b>Asian/Pacific Islander</b>	64	11	63	138	15.1%
<b>African American</b>	49	12	44	105	11.5%
<b>Native American</b>	7	1	2	10	1.1%
<b>Latino/Hispanic</b>	23	2	13	38	4.2%
<b>Total faculty &amp; Staff of color</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>291</b>	<b>32.0%</b>
<b>White</b>	<b>462</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>619</b>	<b>68.0%</b>
<b>Unspecified</b>	2	0	1	3	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>607</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>913</b>	

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Information from the office of Institutional Planning and Research

APPENDIX C  
LETTER OF APPROVAL FROM SEATTLE CENTRAL  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

**Letter of Approval from Seattle Central Community College**

September 4, 2002

Loris A. Blue  
Enrollment Services  
BE 4180M

Dear Loris,

This letter is in reference to your request to conduct research on the campus of Seattle Central Community College. You have indicated that the focus of the research is the experiences and perceptions of African-American students of the campus climate at Seattle Central Community College. It is my understanding that this research will entail the cooperation of the Institutional Planning and Research department. The scope of the involvement of the Director of Institutional Planning and Research will be to provide you with a list of the African-American students who meet the criteria for your study.

I understand that you will recruit students by posting and handing out flyers and visiting the classrooms (with instructor permission) of instructors who are reputedly popular with African-American students to describe the study and invite participation.

You have assured me that the confidentiality of the students will be safeguarded. This study should provide some insight into the data of previously conducted research on this campus. Consequently, I endorse your study and approve of you conducting research on this campus and with our students.

Sincerely,

Dr. Charles H. Mitchell, President  
Seattle Central Community College

CHM: lab

APPENDIX D  
APPLICATION FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN  
INFORMANTS



**APPLICATION FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN INFORMANTS****Principal Investigator:** Larry D. Roper      **E-mail:** [larry.roper@orst.edu](mailto:larry.roper@orst.edu)**Department:** Education      **Telephone:** 541-737-2759**Project Title:** "This campus is nurturing and caring": An Ethnographic Account of  
a Campus' Climate from the Perspective of African American  
Students**Type of Project:** Student Thesis**Student Researcher:** Loris A. Blue535 So. 51<sup>st</sup> Court Renton, WA 98055Telephone: 425-2274542      E-mail: [loblue@sccd.ctc.edu](mailto:loblue@sccd.ctc.edu)**Type of Review Requested:** Expedited**External Funding:** Yes**If yes, Sponsor Name:** Seattle Community Colleges**Project Start Date:** August 15, 2002 (or as soon as approval is granted by IRB)**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_      **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator

**1. Brief Description.** This study is utilizing a qualitative approach to discover how African-American students experience and perceive the campus environment at a diverse two-year public community college. We would like to understand why these students are less satisfied with aspects of the campus environment than students belonging to other ethnic groups and races as indicated by the data that was collected from a survey administered by the institution. Research in the area of campus climate indicates that the campus climate is critical to the retention and attainment of African-American students. The researcher is conducting a qualitative study to understand this phenomenon because the qualitative tradition enables researchers to understand the perceptions, feelings, and knowledge of people through in-depth, intensive interviewing. The lessons learned from this study will be available as a resource to the college to guide in the development and delivery of appropriate programs and services.

**2. Informant Population.**

- ◆ The sample will consist of six informants who will be 18 years of age or older.
- ◆ The informants will be drawn from the African American Student population since these students reported being less satisfied with aspects of the campus environment than students belonging to other ethnic groups and races.
- ◆ A report of all African-American students who have attended at least three quarters as full-time students, are pursuing a program of study and are at least 18 years of age will be requested from the Director of Institutional Planning and Research at Seattle Central Community College. Flyers

inviting participation will be posted throughout the campus and handed out by the researcher in the college cafeteria and activity center. The researcher will visit the classrooms of consenting faculty to invite participation. Prospective informants will be sent a letter describing the study; their role; approximate time involved; benefits of participation; my name, telephone number, and my role within the institution. This letter will invite them to participate in the study and assure them that they will suffer no reprisals or penalties if they choose not to participate. I will begin the serial interviews with three of the students who agree to be interviewed. At the conclusion of the first interview in the series, these initial informants will be asked to identify as possible informants, individuals who meet the previously described informant criteria and whose views of the campus environment differ from theirs (in an effort to obtain different perspectives on the environment).

- ◆ A mixed purposeful sampling approach consisting of homogeneous and snowball sampling strategies will be utilized. Focusing on African-American students is the utilization of the homogenous strategy. Having informants identify other additional informants is utilization of the snowball strategy.

3. **Methods and Procedures.** This study will begin with identifying the population of informants and inviting them to participate. Those who are invited to participate and decline will not suffer any penalties or reprisals. Loris A. Blue will conduct a series of three open-ended interviews using a general interview guide approach with each informant. The interviews will be spaced from three days to one week apart, depending upon the availability of the informant. The interviews will be approximately 90 minutes, audiotaped with informant permission, and the informants may request that the taping be suspended at any time. Loris A. Blue will transcribe the interviews. If a informant declines to be tape recorded, Loris A. Blue will utilize a computer to take notes. Loris A. Blue will also note extraneous data such as facial expressions or body language that the tape recorder (if being used) cannot capture, but will facilitate understanding the informants' verbal expressions and perceptions.

A second stage of data collection will employ a focus group interview, which will not be tape-recorded but notes will be taken, with the six African-American students who have completed the interview series. The focus group process will take up to two hours. Focus groups permit interactions and exchanges that are

powerful catalysts for additional insights. This second stage also permits triangulation of the data.

Loris Blue will return to informants to allow them to review the transcripts and/or notes for accuracy and to ensure that they are consistent with the informants' perceptions and experiences. Throughout the study Loris A. Blue will return to informants to allow them to validate the substantial statements and recurring themes that she has identified.

The data will be analyzed using a reductive typological process to identify units of meaning and themes. Tapes and/or notes ensuing from the interviews and the transcripts of the taped interviews will be stored at the home of Loris A. Blue and will be destroyed three years after completion of the study. These interviews will be conducted from mid October through the end of January.

4. **Risks.** Loris Blue's role on the operational side of Seattle Central Community College affords her knowledge of the institution and yet enables her to be relatively anonymous to the majority of students. This relative anonymity should prevent an invitation to participate in the study from being perceived as coercive. In addition, her role will enable informants to view their participation as a means of providing meaningful input to the institutional decision-makers. Consequently, the risks to the informants are minimal.
5. **Benefits.** This study will allow the informants to share their experiences, feelings, and insights and have their opinions about their experiences and the campus environment heard: This study will give them "voice".
6. **Compensation.** Students may have their participation in the study documented on the Student Development Transcript.
7. **Informed Consent Process.** A copy of the informed consent document is attached. When a student agrees to participate in the study, a time and place for the initial interview will be arranged. The informed consent document will be explained to the student at the first meeting and the student will be given an opportunity to ask questions about the study. The interview will begin only after the student's questions have been answered and the informed consent document signed.

- 8. Anonymity or Confidentiality.** Each informant will be assigned a code name, which will be used in lieu of the informants' actual names throughout the study. The tapes, notes, and the transcripts will be labeled with the code name. The only individuals who will have access to the legend that identifies actual informants and assigned code names will be Loris Blue and Larry Roper. The tapes, notes, transcripts, and informed consent documents will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.
- 9. Attachments.** The following documents are attached:
- ◆ Recruitment materials;
    - ◆ A copy of the memo to the Director of Institutional Planning and Research requesting a computer generated report of African-American students who are potential informants.
    - ◆ A copy of the flyer that will be posted throughout the institution and handed out to students, inviting participation in the study.
    - ◆ A copy of the e-mail to instructors requesting permission to visit their classrooms to invite participation in the study.
    - ◆ A copy of the letter to the students inviting them to participate in the study.
    - ◆ Script for informed consent document.
  - ◆ Informed consent document.
  - ◆ The General Interview Guide.
  - ◆ A copy of the letter from the President of Seattle Central Community College granting approval for the study to be conducted.

APPENDIX E  
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

School of Education  
Oregon State University  
Corvallis, OR 97331

### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

- A. **Title of the Research Project.** This Culture is Nurturing and Caring": Understanding a Campus' Climate from the Perspective of African-American students
- B. **Investigators.** Dr. Larry Roper, Professor; and Loris A. Blue, Doctoral Student. Loris A. Blue is also the Vice President for Enrollment Services at Seattle Central Community College.
- C. **Purpose of the Research Project.** The purpose of this study is to discover how African-American students experience and perceive the campus environment at a diverse two-year public community college. We would like to understand why this group of students is less satisfied with the campus environment than students belonging to other ethnic groups and races as indicated by the data that was collected from an earlier survey administered by the institution. Research in the area of campus climate indicates that the campus climate is critical to the retention and completion of African-American students. The researcher is conducting in-depth, intensive interviews to understand the perceptions, feelings, and knowledge of African-American students about the campus environment. The lessons learned from this study will be available as a resource to the college to guide in the development and delivery of appropriate programs and services.
- D. **Procedures. I understand that as a informant in this study the following things will happen:**
1. **Pre-informant Selection.** I understand that I was initially recruited because I am an African American student. I have been further identified as a possible informant because I am an African American Student who has been enrolled full-time for at least three quarters, I am pursuing a program and I am at least 18 years of age.
  2. **Interview Process.** Loris Blue will conduct three interviews with me. I understand each interview will be spaced from three days to one week apart,

depending upon my schedule and will be 90 minutes in length. I understand that she will ask me a variety of questions about my perceptions, experiences and relationships in and out of the classroom with other students, faculty, staff, and administrators. The interview will take approximately 90 minutes and will be scheduled at my convenience. The interviews will be tape recorded, unless I request that it not be. I may request at any time to stop the tape and it will be stopped. I may request at any time to end the interview and it will be ended. I may choose not to answer any questions that I wish. I will be contacted to review the transcript and/or notes from the interview for accuracy and to ensure that they are consistent with my experiences and understandings.

3. **Focus Group Process.** Loris Blue will conduct a focus group. I understand that she will lead a group of the 6 African-American students who completed the interview series in a discussion of the campus climate of Seattle Central Community College and how African-American students experience it. The questions will be determined from information gathered from the prior individual interviews with African-American students. The focus group will not be audio taped. The focus group will take up to two hours and will be scheduled when it is convenient for all informants. I understand that I will be contacted and allowed to review the substantial statements and themes as identified by Loris Blue.

E. **Risks and Benefits.**

1. ***Foreseeable risks or discomforts.*** There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts.
2. ***Benefits to be expected from the research.*** This study will allow me to share my experiences, feelings, and insights and have my opinions about my experiences and the campus environment heard.
3. ***Compensation to be expected from the research.*** I can have my participation in this study noted on the Student Development Transcript.

- F. **Confidentiality.** Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with me will be kept confidential. If I am interviewed and audio taped, a code name will be used to identify the tape and/or notes from my interview. Loris Blue will transcribe the tape recording. The code name will be used to identify this transcript as well. Neither my name nor any information from which I might be identified will be used in any data summaries or



publication; my real name will appear only in this document. The only individuals who will have access to the legend that identifies actual informants and assigned code names, and the tapes, notes, transcripts, and the informed consent documents will be the investigators. The tapes, notes, transcripts, and these informed consent forms will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

- G. **Voluntary Participation Statement.** I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and is in no way required by Seattle Central Community College. I may either choose not to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am entitled as a student. I understand that if I withdraw from the study before it is completed that I will not have my participation documented on the Student Development Transcript. I understand that if I withdraw from this study before it is completed all information that I have individually provided will be destroyed.
- H. **If You Have Questions.** I understand that any questions I may have about the research study or specific procedures should be directed to Loris Blue at 206-587-5480 or Dr. Larry Roper at 541-737-2759. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I should call the Institutional Research Board Coordinator, OSU Research Office at 541-737-3437.

My signature below indicates that I have read and that I understand the procedures described above and give my informed and voluntary consent to participate in this study. I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form.

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**Signature of informant**

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**Date signed**

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**Informant's printed or typed name**

APPENDIX F  
PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

**Pre-Interview Questionnaire**

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**Student Name**

---

**Student Code Name**

---

**S.I.D**

---

**Gender**

---

**E-mail**

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**Program of Study**

---

**Tel. No. (for follow-up questions)**

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**Best time to contact:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Bad time to contact** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Student Address**

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**Extracurricular Activity Involvement**

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**Best times for interview:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Possible dates for interview:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Possible places for interviews:** \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX G  
GENERAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

## **General Interview Guide**

Below are the tentative interview topics. These topics are consistent with the research questions and are designed to encourage the students to reflect on their experiences at Seattle Central Community College that shape and inform their perceptions. These topics may be changed depending upon the outcome of the pilot interviews.

### **Interview Number One**

The purpose of this interview is to put the informant's experience of the phenomena under study (campus climate) in the context of their life history.

1. Describe how your family views higher education and in particular your pursuit of higher education?
2. Describe how your friends view higher education and in particular your pursuit of higher education?
3. Has the church played a role in your life? If so, in what ways was it educational?
4. Describe your educational experiences when you were in high school?
5. How did you experience your African-Americanness in high school?
6. Describe your educational experiences at other colleges before coming to Seattle Central?

7. How did you experience your African-Americanness at [name of other college, if informant attended another college]?
8. What strategies do you use “to make it” in life as an African American?
9. Describe how it feels to be in an environment that is not diverse and there is not a significant African American presence?
10. What motivated you to come to Seattle Central?

### **Interview Number Two**

In this interview the researcher and informant will concentrate on the concrete details of the informant’s present experience of the campus climate and the meaning of those experiences.

1. How would you describe the environment of Seattle Central?
2. Discuss how the environment of SCCC differs from or is like those at the previous educational institutions that you have attended.
3. Describe your interactions with faculty.
4. Describe your interactions with other students?
5. What are the things that contribute to your feeling connected to this school?
6. Share with me an experience when you felt particularly connected?
7. What are the things that contribute to your feeling disconnected to this school?
8. Share with me an experience when you felt disconnected.

9. What does it feel like to be you, an African American, in this environment?
10. When do you feel culturally safe?
11. When do you feel culturally unsafe?
12. How do your experiences with family help you to understand Seattle Central's culture?
13. How do your experiences with friends, and anyone who is a part of your support system help you to understand Seattle Central's culture?
14. How do your previous experiences with educational institutions help you make sense of this environment?
15. What does it mean to you to be able to be "real" as an African American in this diverse environment?