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Do I Belong? Underrepresented
Students Sense of Belonging
by Delaney Deisig
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Master's Project
Submitted to the College of Education
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In partial fulfillment of the
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Abstract

Increasing literature suggests that lower levels of sense of belonging among underrepresented college students could be a contributing factor to their comparatively lower rates of persistence and retention than those of their non-underrepresented peers. This project explores the barriers underrepresented students face during their first year of college and the opportunities colleges and universities have to increase diverse efforts to foster positive perspectives of sense of belonging among underrepresented students. An effective program must acknowledge the differing needs of students at various points in their college career and must diversify beyond a traditional framework that caters to the needs of students from non-underrepresented backgrounds. A professional development series for academic advisors at the City College of New York will address the barriers, challenges, and adversities underrepresented students face and present opportunities for academic advisors across the institution to engage with and become educated on the varying needs of underrepresented students. Together summative and formative components of evaluation will be employed to measure the efficacy of the program and areas of improvement.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

Underrepresented and traditionally underserved college students (first-generation, Black, Hispanic, and Native) who do not foster a strong sense of belonging to their institution often deviate from the institution before fulfilling their academic goals. In a nationally representative survey, the *2011-2012 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study* found that on average, first-year students moderately agreed they felt a sense of belonging to their institution, however, students who identified with minoritized racial or ethnic backgrounds or first-generation students had lower feelings of belonging compared to their peers (Aud et al., 2012). While institutions emphasize the significance of diversity, inclusion, and equity, they often fail to foster campus climates inclusive of students from underrepresented groups (Duran & Jones, 2019).

Research indicates that integration and a sense of belonging are fundamental to student success (Appleton, et al, 2006; Astin, 1984; Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 1994, 1975). Correlational (Strayhorn, 2012) and experimental (Yeager et al., 2016) studies have found that students with a greater sense of belonging are more willing to seek out and utilize campus resources and build relationships with faculty, staff, and peers which in turn impacts motivation and desire to persist to college completion. Tinto's (1994) model of student integration asserts that academic and social integration along with institutional support are critical

determinants of academic persistence. Enhancing opportunities for successful integration across these spheres seeks to increase students' sense of belonging resulting in greater student persistence and lessening the likelihood of student withdrawal.

Importance and Rationale of the Project

Research continues to show low student retention and persistence rates at colleges and universities (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020). This project uses retention to refer to the rate at which students consistently re-enroll at one institution through degree completion and persistence as the rate at which students successfully satisfy program requirements leading to graduation at any given institution. Increasingly, student retention and persistence to graduation are key indicators for assessing student success, often using first-year, underrepresented students as the focus of study. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center *Persistence and Retention (2020)* report found that of the 2.6 million first-year students enrolled in fall 2018, 75.9% persisted in college while only 67% continued at their beginning institution with limited improvement of this crucial early success indicator for the past several years (The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020).

Despite numerous studies on student persistence and retention, institutional success in achieving higher retention rates has been minimal (Tinto, 2006, 2012). Barriers such as race, gender, career goals, socioeconomic status, and family

commitments have been the primary focus of research surrounding student success and retention (Tinto, 2012). While external factors hold great significance to student success and retention, institutions have little to no ability to change these factors. Tinto (2012) asserted that institutions should place more focus on factors they can control to increase student engagement in campus events and support services and increase students' overall success. Additionally, an institution that understands the students' attitude towards the importance of persistence and success is likely to foster a campus culture that will encourage and engage students to persist to completion (Tinto, 2012). Students' sense of belonging plays an important role in their motivation to persist to completion, specifically their sense of belonging in their first year of college (Strayhorn, 2019). Increasing literature indicates that social and academic sense of belonging along with institutional support is fundamental to student success, overall retention and graduation rates, and successful transition periods (Jorgenson, 2018; Schreiner et al., 2012).

Low rates of retention and persistence to graduation come with consequences for the individual student, the institution, or the society at large. Occupational, financial, and societal rewards are, to a great extent, contingent on earning a college degree. Earning a degree provides more opportunities for individuals to climb the socioeconomic ladder while those without are more likely to stay stagnant in their career (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2019). College Board's *Education Pays* (2019) report found that in 2018 those who have earned a

bachelor's degree had median earnings of almost $25,000 more than individuals without (Ma et al., 2019).

Students are not the only constituents who may face financial burdens due to withdrawing from the educational setting. Colleges and universities are subject to significant financial loss with every student departure; in a study including 1,669 four-year colleges and universities, Raisman (2013) found that nearly $16.5 billion was collectively lost in the 2010-2011 academic year due to low retention rates. In addition to potential individual and institutional consequences, low retention rates largely impact economic loss, decreasing employment rates, and the highly skilled workforce needed to effectively promote global competition (Koropeckyj, Lafakis, & Ozimek, 2017). With many factors in play, understanding how to increase underrepresented student persistence and retention rates is important in many respects.

Background of the Project

Literature conveys that first-generation and minoritized racial-ethnic students experience a lower sense of belonging and increased doubts about their ability to succeed in college compared to students from non-minoritized backgrounds (Gopalan and Brady, 2020; Strayhorn, 2012). Furthermore, literature indicates that retention rates of historically underserved and underrepresented students are lower than those of non-minoritized student populations supporting cultural and social inequities (Knekta & McCartney, 2021). Through social

structures and societal norms entitling familial status to be passed down via lineal descent, the foundation of the United States has been built on the premise of racialized inheritance and inequality (Ditz, 2014). By way of inheritance, white settlers were able to better the economic potential of their progeny through property ownership; however, Indigenous people who co-owned that land and the enslaved Black people who were oppressed and extorted to build infrastructure on that same land were prevented from constructing comparable livelihoods to pass on to their children (Rasmussen, 2010; Shammas, 1987).

Alongside property ownership, higher education has evolved into a racialized agency for social mobility thus restricting generational affluence and social positioning to an elite class of white men and their children. College admittance, and the increased employment opportunities and potential wealth accumulation associated with it, are catalysts to cultural capital either promoting or impeding on graduate's opportunity to provide generational capital to their progeny. The accumulation of race, education, and inheritance positions higher education to either provide or prevent educational achievement and cultural capital that will have lasting effects on generations to follow (Rasmussen, 2010). Because the foundation of the United States has been built on racialized inheritance, minoritized racial-ethnic college students do not have the same opportunity as their white peers to acquire and bequeath educational capital to their children (Knekta & McCartney, 2021). For decades, researchers have highlighted the importance of

social and academic integration on college student persistence rates. Students from underrepresented and underserved backgrounds are no longer directly barred from higher education; however, access only offers admission, not necessarily a sense of belonging on campus. Higher education institutions may be more inclusive of *who* can attend college, however, engagement for underrepresented students is frequently insignificant.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this project is to develop and evaluate a professional development series designed to provide academic advisors with support mechanisms to implement when working with underrepresented students. Tinto's (1994) model of integration and Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement will be used as theoretical frameworks to examine the experiences, barriers, and challenges that first-year underrepresented, and historically underserved students face in college during key transitional periods and the impact these experiences have on their integration to campus, sense of belonging, and college persistence. The series seeks to create awareness and educate academic advisors on the various barriers underrepresented students face and how their experiences impact their ability to belong on campus.

Objectives of the Project

The study of student retention is an institutional-wide phenomenon and the pursuit to advance practices that support student success continues to be a goal for

institutions of higher education. In an attempt to improve student graduation rates, City University of New York (CUNY) implemented the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) which is built on the premise that student success is comprised of the student's sense of belonging, access to support services, and capacity to foster strength and drive in their academic endeavors (Kolenovic, 2013). Despite the degree of college preparation, underrepresented students may face barriers that impede academic persistence. ASAP attempts to help students overcome these barriers by providing them with academic and social support.

To enhance the support ASAP provides CUNY students, a professional development series exploring the barriers underrepresented students face will be implemented for academic advisors across the institution. By bringing awareness to the common barriers, challenges, and adversities underrepresented students face and strategies to overcome them, the objective of the proposed professional development series is to equip academic advisors at CUNY to be a support mechanism and resource for underrepresented students undergoing such challenges and ultimately enhance their social and academic sense of belonging.

Definition of Terms

The definitions of the key terms utilized in this project are provided to assist in uniformity and common understanding. The terms have been reviewed by scholarly works and are expressed as follows:

- *Attrition* refers to a students' complete withdrawal from higher education before degree completion (Hundrieser & Voigt, 2008).

- *Cultural Capital* is defined by Lamont and Lareau (1998) as "institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high-status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion" (p. 156). Cultural capital refers to a competence one obtains that indicates social prestige and provides social privilege (Roose et al., 2020).

- *Cultural Integrity* refers to maintaining one's cultural identity by engaging with cultural values, traditions, and beliefs (Oxendine, 2015).

- *Persistence* is the phenomenon whereby students successfully satisfy program requirements leading to graduation at any given institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020).

- *Prematriculation* is the process of enrolling at an institution, before beginning (Yeager et al., 2016).

- *Retention* is the phenomenon whereby students consistently re-enroll at one institution through degree completion (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020).

- *Sense of Belonging* refers to students' perceived support on campus and feelings of connectedness, acceptance, value, and importance to the campus community, faculty, staff, and peers (Strayhorn, 2012).

Scope of the Project

Fostering an inclusive academic and social environment on campus along with promoting a strong commitment to institutional support is the foundation of effective retention (Tinto, 1994). This project confronts the needs of first-year, traditionally underserved, and underrepresented minoritized racial-ethnic students (first-generation, Black, Hispanic, and Native) who lack a sense of belonging and integration to their institution. However, this project does not examine common barriers that second-, third-, and fourth-year underrepresented students experience. Additionally, this project does not examine the barriers alternative underrepresented student populations face including transfer students, international students, and adult learners.

The first year of college consists of many transitions for underrepresented students and has been positively correlated with heightened feelings of not belonging, declining contentment with campus connection, and increased feelings of isolation and apprehension (Jorgenson, 2018). Underrepresented students and students who have historically been underserved by institutions of higher education are constantly navigating transitions as they continue to find their place in varying subcultures and environments on campus (Schreiner et al., 2012). These students are often faced with social, cultural, and familial detachment, racial-ethnic microaggressions, and navigating unfamiliar institutional practices (Convertino & Mein, 2020; Tachine et al., 2017).

This project was designed for implementation at CUNY which is a public, four-year institution and the nation's largest urban university. CUNY is acknowledged as one of the leading higher education institutions in diversity and is well equipped and motivated to implement the proposed professional development series although it could easily be modified for implementation at a 2-year or private institution (The City University of New York, Diversity & Inclusion, 2012). The goal of this professional development series is to educate academic advisors on ways to support underrepresented students; however, it is not guaranteed that underrepresented students undergoing such challenges will seek support from their academic advisors.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Social advancement is commonly achieved through college completion; consequently, "inequality in the rates at which qualified students from different racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds complete college threatens the ideal of meritocracy and undermines both individuals' life prospects and national economic growth" (Yeager et al., 2016, p. E3346). For decades, researchers have highlighted the importance of social and academic integration on college student persistence rates. While institutions emphasize the significance of diversity, inclusion, and equity, they often fail to foster campus climates inclusive of students from underrepresented groups (Duran & Jones, 2019).

Tinto's (1994) model of integration and Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement will be used as a theoretical framework to examine the experiences, barriers, and challenges that first-year underrepresented students face in college during key transitional periods and the impact their experiences have on their integration to campus. The underrepresented student populations examined include minoritized racial-ethnic students as well as first-generation students. Additionally, these theoretical frameworks will be used to examine the importance of academic and social integration among underrepresented students and the impact of institutional support on underrepresented students' academic persistence.

Theoretical framework

Student Involvement

Alexander Astin's (1984) student involvement theory examines the factors contributing to student persistence in college and asserts that academic and extracurricular involvement and peer, faculty, and staff relationships will result in greater academic and personal development and lead to increased student persistence to educational goal completion. Astin's (1984) theory is formulated on five key components, the first stating that involvement is a continuous phenomenon and will look different for each student depending on the space and time. Additionally, the theory contends that the degree of involvement is built on students' physical and mental interaction on campus which can either be generalized to the comprehensive student experience or specified to engagement such as studying for an exam or meeting with an academic advisor; therefore, involvement can be measured quantitatively and qualitatively (Astin, 1984). For example, the extent of a student's involvement with their academic advisor can be measured quantitatively by the number of times the student is meeting with the advisor and qualitatively by the degree of comprehension the student has for the information the advisor is providing. Furthermore, the degree of students' quantitative and qualitative involvement with campus life, programs, and services is directly associated with academic and personal development (Astin, 1984). Astin (1984) concludes the five components of involvement theory by stating, "The

effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (p. 519).

Central to Astin's theory is the degree of students' desire for campus involvement and efforts to actively participate in their own developmental process. Astin (1984) defined an actively involved student as one who engages in campus activities and student organizations, commits time and dedication to their studies, and builds valuable connections with faculty, staff, and students. Research continues to support Astin's theory of involvement and the positive correlation between student involvement and advantageous outcomes.

Through prematriculation social belonging lay theory interventions, presenting the barriers underrepresented students may face in the transition to college as recurrent and not a reason to question one's belonging and ability, students from minoritized racial-ethnic backgrounds and low socioeconomic backgrounds were empowered to foster a stronger sense of social and academic belonging by utilizing campus support resources and building relationships with their peers, faculty, and staff (Yeager et al., 2016). Increased GPAs, full-time enrollment rates, and a reduction in the excessively higher proportion of underrepresented students who were amid the bottom 20% of class rank were achieved by bringing awareness to the challenges students may face, why they are experiencing them, and that these experiences are not indicators of lack of intellectual ability or belonging on campus (Yeager et al., 2016).

Astin's (1975) theory of student involvement was developed in part by a longitudinal study of over 200,000 undergraduate students who withdrew from college. In an effort to determine common barriers college students face that affect their educational persistence, Astin found that nearly every barrier could be tied to student involvement. Students who enhanced their involvement by residing on campus, participating in extracurricular activities and organizations, frequently interacting with faculty and staff, and holding on-campus jobs were more likely to persist in college than those who lacked involvement. Additionally, Astin (1991) advanced the inputs-environment-outcome (I-E-O) college impact model of change. The model asserted that student outcomes (e.g., persistence, goal completion, and graduation rates) are significantly impacted by inputs and environments. Inputs include gender, age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and year in college while environment includes faculty, staff, and peer interactions, student involvement, use of campus support resources, and extent of active learning.

Many researchers have used Astin's I-E-O model as a theoretical framework to examine the relationship between underrepresented college students' social and academic sense of belonging and persistence rates (Cole & Espinoza, 2008; Heaney & Fisher, 2011). Using Astin's I-E-O model, Heaney and Fisher (2011) examined student inputs (e.g. standardized test scores, age, gender, residency, citizenship, first-generation status, ethnicity, high school GPA, ACT

score, and financial aid eligibility) and environmental influences proposed by Astin

(e.g., faculty relationships, and academic and social integration) on conditionally-

admitted first-year students persistence (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). Using Astin's I-

E-O model as a theoretic framework, results found that social and academic

integration was positively correlated with increased persistence rates among

conditionally admitted first-year students (Heaney & Fisher, 2011).

Student Integration Theory

The emergence of Vincent Tinto's (1975) student integration theory

established what is now an extensive phenomenon of examining undergraduate

student retention and persistence rates at colleges and universities. The model

postulates that academic and social integration and institutional support are critical

determinants of students' commitment to an institution (i.e., remaining at the

institution and not transferring to a new institution) and academic persistence

(Tinto, 1975). Tinto asserted that the degree to which a student integrates

themselves is positively correlated with student success which in turn impacts

institutional commitment and persistence towards academic goals.

Tinto has revisited and amended his model numerous times since the

original publication over four decades ago. In the development of the student

integration theory, Tinto (1994) recounted the importance of quality support

services and resources institutions offer and connecting students' desires to the

institution's mission. Additionally, Tinto (1994) identified the transitions students

undergo during their first year as a critical time for social and academic integration and distinguished that underrepresented students such as racially-ethnically minoritized, socio-economically disadvantaged, and first-generation students come to college with distinctive backgrounds and experiences that prescribe individualized interventions.

First-generation students and students who identify with minoritized racial-ethnic backgrounds are subject to group-related stereotypes regarding their intellectual potential and inadequate representation on campus (Yeager et al, 2016). Such adversities have the ability to obstruct students' social and academic integration, cause students to question their intellectual ability and belonging on campus, and negatively impact their educational persistence (Yeager et al, 2016). Due to the barriers that underrepresented students may face, individualized interventions allow student affairs practitioners the space to focus on the specific barriers underrepresented students are facing and provide resources specific to their needs.

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Research/Evaluation

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Underrepresented Students' First-Year Transition

The first year of college consists of many transitions for students. Students shift away from the structured environment of high school and home life and emerge into an environment with overwhelming options and possibilities, are introduced to varying viewpoints and ways to conceptualize their surroundings, and

are faced with new responsibilities, expectations, and independence. Transitional periods have the opportunity to provide positive experiences that lead to student development and success but can also initiate negative experiences and adversities that lead to low persistence rates (Schreiner et al., 2012). First-year transitions have been positively correlated with students' heightened feelings of not belonging, declining satisfaction with campus connection, and increased feelings of isolation and apprehension (Jorgenson, 2018). Underrepresented students and students who have historically been underserved by institutions of higher education are constantly navigating transitions as they continue to find their place in varying subcultures and environments on campus (Schreiner et al., 2012). These students are often faced with social, cultural, and familial detachment, racial-ethnic microaggressions, and navigating unfamiliar institutional practices (Convertino & Mein, 2020; Tachine et al., 2017).

Cultural Congruence

A growing literature supports that culture has a significant impact on students' sense of belonging especially as students are transitioning to new and unfamiliar campus culture environments (Museus & Maramba, 2011). In addition to maintaining family and cultural relationships, Native American and Latino/a students identified cultural support centers as a crucial element to their college transition as well (Hurtado and Carter, 2021; Tachine et al., 2017). It is imperative that students who undergo these experiences have access to support services that

will cater to the unique barriers impeding on their sense of belonging as the current climate of available campus services and resources, such as racial-ethnic centers, only provide localized support and not institutional wide support (Tachine et al., 2017).

Traditionally, college campuses place a heavy focus on on-campus events, activities, and services during the first few weeks of the school year to prevent feelings of isolation and loneliness and encourage student engagement (Tachine et al., 2017). For underrepresented students, the feeling of isolation goes beyond loneliness and is enhanced by the separation from their cultural beliefs and practices (Tachine et al., 2017). Through compelling comprehensive expressions, twenty-four first-year Native American students at a four-year institution, where Native American college students historically fall in the bottom percentile of persistence rates and college matriculation, participated in *sharing circles* which is a contextual framework consisting of open dialogue and storytelling traditionally practiced in Tribal culture (Tachine et al., 2017). Participants described their unfamiliarity with the predominant campus culture and ways of doing, inabilities to practice traditional ceremonies, encounters with microaggressions, and separation from their families which lead to feelings of social isolation and disconnection from their Native communities (Tachine et al., 2017).

Campus environments that are not inclusive of varying cultures cause underrepresented students to commit "cultural suicide", or the act of disengaging

from their traditional cultural customs, in order to socially and academically

succeed (Museus & Maramba, 2011). Tachine et al. (2017) concluded that while

the institution did offer a Native student center this resource only offered a

temporary, localized sense of belonging as the overall culture of the institution

continued to undermine the holistic identity of Native American students (Tachine

et al., 2017). Museus and Maramba (2011) infer that the environment within

campus cultural centers conveys how, and with whom, students develop a sense of

belonging and that underrepresented students may not have the opportunity to

interact with their traditional heritage as they navigate their new cultural

environment. To best engage underrepresented students, campuses must

incorporate cultural differences in educational and social programming (Museus &

Maramba, 2011).

Institutional Protocols and Practices

In addition to the new perspectives, responsibilities, and expectations

students are introduced to during their first year of college they are also tasked with

navigating institutional protocols and practices. Despite students' degree of

preparation for college, the digital learning tools students must interact with can

present challenges during student transitions (Convertino & Mein, 2020). In a case

study examining the barriers students face during transitional periods, two first-

year, first-generation Latinx students at a four-year institution recounted their

experiences within the first few weeks of college. The unfamiliarity with the

institutional practices that students interacted with on a daily basis instantly presented itself as a barrier to a positive transition to college (Convertino & Mein, 2020). Despite the students' degree of preparation, limited knowledge on how to utilize institutional-wide technological platforms can present a barrier to students' initial progress (Convertino & Mein, 2020). Institutions must not neglect the importance of students' ability to interact with the institutional practices that are directly related to student learning.

Possessing cultural capital, or the ability to successfully navigate an environment has been shown to impact barriers to student success (Convertino & Mein, 2020). Cultural capital appears to have a significant impact on first-generation students as their family members are often unable to provide the level of academic support needed as they are unfamiliar with college-related experiences (Schreiner et al., 2012). Through interviews and reflective journals four first-year, first-generation, racial-ethnic minoritized students on academic probation exhibited the fundamental need for cultural capital in navigating the campus environment (White et al., 2020). Many of the challenges these students faced were a result of lacking a foundational knowledge of how to navigate the institution and not understanding the university practices and procedures (White et al., 2020). Coming to college, these students did not have any prior knowledge on course policies such as course forgiveness or repeats, how to register for courses and determine degree requirements, course GPAs and cumulative GPAs or how to calculate them, how to

communicate with faculty and staff electronically, how to access and utilize campus support services, and how to utilize technological resources and learning systems (White et al., 2020).

When first-year college students face barriers during these transitional periods it often impedes their sense of belonging due to poor academic performance, social and academic integration, and decreased peer, faculty, and staff relationships (Jorgenson, 2018). To best accommodate the needs of first-year students during critical transitional periods extensive intervention strategies encompassing social and academic factors such as first-year series, faculty, and staff mentoring, student orientation experiences, and engagement with campus activities are positively correlated with student persistence (Davis et al., 2019). Positive experiences during transitional times are critical for first-year students to persist and succeed in college and it is imperative that institutions of higher education acknowledge that support and integration have the potential to positively impact first-year students' transitions in college (Jorgenson, 2018).

Sense of Belonging and Underrepresented Students

In a nationally representative survey, the *2011-2012 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study* found that on average, first-year students moderately agreed that they felt a sense of belonging to their institution, however, students who identified with minoritized racial-ethnic backgrounds or first-generation students had lower feelings of belonging compared to their peers

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). First-generation students and students who identify with minoritized racial-ethnic backgrounds experience barriers that have the ability to diminish feelings of belonging such as the pressure to neglect their cultural values and beliefs, racial-ethnic microaggressions, questioning their intellectual ability, and navigating unfamiliar institutional practices (Convertino & Mein, 2020; Museus & Maramba, 2011; Tachine et al., 2017). These barriers that underrepresented students encounter often obstruct their social and academic integration and can negatively impact their educational persistence.

Cultural Congruence

Students' sense of belonging has been conceptualized to overlook the cultural perspectives and lived experiences of underrepresented and underserved students suggesting that all students should adapt to the dominant culture; however, sense of belonging for underrepresented students is often perceived differently than it is for students from non-minoritized backgrounds (Oxendine, 2015). Native scholar Oxendine (2015) defined cultural integrity as "the ability to maintain a strong cultural identity through engaging one's culture as an anchor...cultural integrity calls on students' racial and ethnic backgrounds as ways to enhance learning" (p. 11). Oxendine (2015) concluded that among 514 Native students attending NonNative Colleges and Universities (NNCU), institutional

acknowledgment and integration of cultural integrity helped Native students achieve a sense of belonging.

The traditional constructs of belonging such as faculty, staff, and peer relationships are still prevalent in the way underrepresented students make meaning of belonging (Fong et al., 2019). However, Fong et al. (2019) concluded that compared to their non-Indigenous peers, Native-specific constructs of belonging such as cultural integrity and family and community relationships were much more salient and continuously corresponded with Indigenous students' achievement of educational goals and increased GPAs (Fong et al., 2019). Minoritized racial-ethnic students' sense of belonging is positively correlated with continued engagement of their cultural values and practices and the cultural incongruence between students' identified culture and the campus culture can give rise to many barriers that impede on students belonging and overall success (Museus & Maramba, 2011).

Peer Engagement

Increasing literature demonstrates the importance of cultural congruence on underrepresented students' sense of belonging (Fong et al., 2019; Museus & Maramba, 2011; Oxendine, 2015). Further contributing to students' sense of belonging is peer support and respect of their cultural values, engagement with peers of the same racial or ethnic background and feeling a sense of community on campus (Oxendine, 2015). When students experience positive engagement with their peers' surrounding topics such as culture, opinion, values, and beliefs,

students are more likely to build meaningful relationships and feel a sense of belonging to peers and campus (Cole et al., 2020; Hurtado & Carter, 2021). Additionally, academic peer interactions (e.g., students' discussions of course content, class assignments, academic issues, and participating in class study sessions) are strongly and positively associated with students' sense of belonging (Cole et al., 2020; Hurtado & Carter, 2021). These findings show that when peers show support, respect, and interest in students' personal values, beliefs, academic achievements, and despondencies students feel a sense of belonging and mattering (Cole et al., 2020; Oxendine, 2015).

Faculty and Staff Engagement

While peer relationships are an important factor contributing to students' sense of belonging, faculty and staff play an imperative role in fostering an inclusive campus environment and establishing the necessary conditions for student success and belonging. Students who interact with faculty and staff through academic advising or continuous academic tasks and who find a mentor within a faculty or staff member are "encouraged directly or indirectly to reflect on their own values, consider the opinions of others and adapt to new situations more often than their counterparts who engage with faculty less frequently" (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 11). Furthermore, students who were actively engaged in their educational experiences were found to develop to a deeper degree than students who were unengaged (Davis et al, 2019).

Through comprehensive college transition programs (CCTPs) aimed to provide support services for first-year historically underserved students including those from minoritized racial-ethnic backgrounds, low-income, and first-generation students, Cole et al. (2020) found that staff respect, support, and encouragement were positively associated with students' sense of belonging and mattering. Faculty and staff who value students' presence and perspective, value meaningful engagement and interactions, and care about their success and accomplishments is significantly correlated with students' perception of sense of belonging (Newman, 2015; Oxendine, 2015).

Furthermore, interpersonal validation among faculty and staff has been shown to be positively associated with students' sense of belonging (Hurtado et al., 2015; Newman, 2015). Interpersonal validation occurs when faculty and staff are actively involved in students' adjustment to college, personal, social, and academic development, accrual of social capital, and convey that they understand the students' perspective (Museus & Neville, 2012). Interpersonal faculty and staff validation has been shown to be significantly associated with students' sense of belonging as such interactions palliate the results of bias and discrimination underrepresented students may encounter (Hurtado et al. 2015). These findings suggest that faculty and staff have a significant impact on the degree to which students feel they matter and belong on campus. Furthermore, an increase in

diverse efforts among faculty and staff presents the opportunity to foster positive perspectives of sense of belonging among underrepresented students.

Summary

Research indicates that social and academic sense of belonging along with institutional support is fundamental to student success, overall retention and graduation rates, and successful transition periods. Astin's (1984) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1975) student integration theory are two of the most commonly drawn on student development theoretical views. Astin's (1984) involvement theory contends that peer, faculty, and staff interactions along with increased academic and extracurricular involvement will result in greater academic and personal development and lead to increased student persistence to educational goal completion. In a study of undergraduate students who withdrew from college within their first year, Astin (1984) concluded that student involvement is directly correlated with first-year students' changing characteristics. Drawing on this notion, it is imperative that institutions of higher education acknowledge that support and direction have the potential to positively impact first-year students' transition to college. First-year college students' often face barriers impeding their degree of sense of belonging such as the transformation of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, poor academic performance, and building new relationships which have been associated with increased levels of anxiety and feelings of isolation. To best accommodate the needs of first-year students during critical transitional periods,

Davis et al. (2019) administered a predictive index that would identify first-year

students that are encountering barriers to their success and found that extensive

intervention strategies encompassing social and academic factors are positively

correlated with student persistence.

Tinto's (1975) student integration theory asserts that institutional support,

academic integration, and social integration are significant determinants of

institutional commitment, student success, academic persistence, and goal

completion (Tinto, 1975). In an expansion of the theory, Tinto (1994) identified

that underrepresented students (e.g., first-generation, minoritized racial-ethnic,

socio-economically) come to college with distinctive backgrounds and experiences

that necessitate individualized interventions. Underrepresented students are subject

to group-related stereotypes regarding their sense of belonging, cultural fit,

intellectual potential, and are inadequately represented on campus. These barriers

have the potential to impede students' social and academic integration, cause

students to question their intellectual ability and belonging on campus, and

negatively impact educational persistence rates. Yeager et al. (2016) employed

three randomized experiments to test the effects of social belonging lay theory on

students' sense of belonging to bring awareness to the challenge's students may

experience, why they are experiencing those challenges, and formulate a foundation

for making meaning of these experiences. By acknowledging the challenges

students may face and that these experiences are not indicators of lack of

intellectual ability or belonging on campus, students believed they could succeed. Results from the prematriculation lay theory interventions increased a sense of social and academic belonging by empowering students to utilize campus support resources and building relationships with their peers, faculty, and staff (Yeager et al., 2016).

Conclusion

First-year, underrepresented students' social and academic integration has been positively associated with retention and overall success. Utilization of campus support resources and increased faculty and staff interaction have all correlated to an increased sense of belonging, increased GPAs and perceptions of intellectual abilities, and academic goal completion (Astin, 1984; Davis et al, 2019; Strayhorn, 2008; Yeager et al., 2016). Student interactions with peers, faculty, and staff, and campus support services greatly influence the sense of belonging a student has to their institution which leads to higher persistence rates and greater goal completion. It is essential that students construct meaningful relationships with peers, faculty, and staff and actively interact with their campus.

Increasing literature suggests that college campus environments play a significant role in shaping students' sense of belonging and positively or negatively impacting their persistence (Convertino & Mein, 2020; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus & Maramba, 2011; Tinto, 1994). Greater attention must be paid to underrepresented students' individual perspectives of sense of belonging on

campus, critical periods when students' sense of belonging is challenged most, and supplemental ways of understanding underrepresented students' college experience. Tinto (2004) asserts that institutions of higher education must eliminate cultural barriers to provide underrepresented students a greater opportunity for campus integration. Furthermore, it is critical for institutions to offer such opportunities early on in a students' academic career. Intervention strategies that promote student-faculty engagement beyond mere interaction (e.g., research projects, academic advising, and curriculum development) support students to further integrate into their campus community.

Chapter Three: Project Description

Introduction

In an attempt to improve student graduation rates CUNY implemented the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) which is built on the premise that student success is achieved through the students' sense of belonging, accessibility to support services, and the capacity to foster strength and drive in their academic endeavors (Kolenovic, 2013). Despite the degree of preparation for college, underrepresented students may face barriers that can impede on their academic persistence, and ASAP attempts to help students overcome these barriers by providing them with academic and social support. CUNY is acknowledged as one of the leading higher education institutions in diversity and an agent for social mobility (The City University of New York, Diversity & Inclusion, 2012). To uphold the historical university mission statement to "provide a public first-rate education to all students, regardless of means or background", the following proposed professional development series will be provided to CUNY academic advisors across the institution to ensure that meaningful relationships with underrepresented students are achieved (The City University of New York, About CUNY, 2012).

Barriers such as race, gender, career goals, socioeconomic status, and family commitments have been the primary focus of research surrounding student success and retention (Tinto, 2012). While external factors hold great significance

to student success and retention, institutions have little to no ability to change these factors. Tinto (2012) asserts that institutions should place more focus on what factors they can control to increase student participation and overall success. Additionally, an institution that understands students' perspectives of persistence and success is likely to foster a campus culture that will encourage and engage students to persist to completion. While there are various factors impeding on students' persistence that institutions have no control over, they can attempt to control students' degree of sense of belonging. Students' sense of belonging has been conceptualized to overlook the cultural perspectives and lived experiences of underrepresented and underserved students suggesting that all students should adapt to the dominant culture; however, sense of belonging for underrepresented students is often perceived differently than it is for students from non-minoritized backgrounds (Oxendine, 2015). To enhance the support that ASAP provides CUNY students, a professional development series for academic advisors will be implemented in an attempt to increase their levels of understanding regarding the experiences of underrepresented students and their sense of belonging on campus.

To initiate increased understanding, it is essential that academic advisors acknowledge the factors that are impeding underrepresented students' sense of belonging. A growing literature supports that culture has a significant impact on students' sense of belonging especially as students are transitioning to new and unfamiliar campus culture environments (Museus & Maramba, 2011). It is

imperative that students who undergo these experiences have access to support services that will cater to the unique barriers impeding on their sense of belonging as the current climate of available campus services and resources, such as racial-ethnic centers, only provide localized support and not institutional wide support (Tachine et al., 2017).

Belonging is greatly influenced by a student's understanding of their lived experiences and relationships with others. Strayhorn (2019) defined belonging as the degree to which students feel socially and academically supported on campus, the notion of students' connectedness to campus, and positive engagement with faculty, staff, and peers who provide feelings of acceptance, importance, and respect. A constructive relationship with an academic advisor is one of many ways' students can socially and academically integrate to campus and enhance their sense of belonging and educational persistence (Strayhorn, 2008). Furthermore, Strayhorn (2008) found that students who interacted with staff through academic advising and continuous academic tasks were more likely to reflect on their beliefs and values and better adapt to new environments and circumstances than their peers. In addition to assisting students with mapping out degree requirements and successful progression towards graduation, academic advisors act as a resource for students to successfully navigate the institution and address various concerns they may have (Astin, 1984). Additionally, academic advisors have the opportunity to provide a space where students can be their most authentic selves and feel

comfortable doing so (Eatin, 2020). Strides must be made to foster campus environments where underrepresented students feel they can express their true selves and not be subject to ridicule or judgment but be supported and encouraged as they navigate this new territory.

Project Components

The following proposed professional development series is constructed specifically for undergraduate academic advisors at CUNY who are commonly working with first-year students. The series seeks to bring awareness to academic advisors on the various experiences, challenges, and barriers underrepresented students face during their first year of college. By educating academic advisors on such experiences and strategies to overcome them, the objective of this professional development series is to equip academic advisors to be a support system and resource for underrepresented students and ultimately enhance their social and academic sense of belonging. To increase the level of understanding academic advisors have for underrepresented students' experiences, this professional development series will include multiple sessions throughout the fall semester that aim to optimize academic advisors' degree of awareness of the experiences first-year underrepresented students are facing and gain skills and tools to best support them. Sessions surrounding the institution's mission, student motivators to persist in college, students' experiences, barriers, and challenges during their first year, and the importance of continuing education will be discussed. The professional

development series moderators are CUNY's Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (AVC) and Deputy to the Vice-Chancellor for Student Affairs (DVC). The AVC and DVC were chosen as moderators due to their active role in ASAP and other institution-wide programming that supports the success, access, and persistence of CUNY students. Plans for implementation and evaluation of the professional development series will be discussed.

Five Foundational Factors

Academic advisors have the ability and opportunity to contribute to students' sense of belonging through the magnitude of support they provide (Strayhorn, 2008; Astin, 1984). This professional development series is built on the five factors Eaton (2020) proposed academic advisors must employ to foster a strong sense of belonging. The first factor is sincerely caring for the success of their students (Eaton, 2020). The degree to which academic advisors display care and support is positively associated with students' sense of belonging and mattering (Cole et al., 2020). To encourage a strong sense of belonging, academic advisors must convey that they hold their students' progression and success to a high level of regard and importance. Cole et al. (2020) concluded that the extent to which academic advisors display feelings of concern and support towards their students significantly impacts students' sense of belonging and their belief that they matter and belong on campus. According to Eaton (2020), showing concern or interest in students' success must be present in the subsequent factors to effectively employ

them. The second factor is understanding student motivation to persist towards academic and personal achievement and the third factor focuses on having open communication about how their educational efforts contribute to these goals (Eaton, 2020). Finally, the fourth factor is to determine the barriers and adversities students' may be facing and the fifth factor is to discuss ways to confront and overcome those barriers.

Professional Development Series

Prior to the start of the fall semester, an email will be sent to all academic advisors across the institution inviting them to participate in the professional development series. The electronic invitation will provide an overview of the subject matter and will emphasize that the focus of the series will be placed on first-year, underrepresented, and historically underserved students. Prior to the first session, participants will be asked to complete a brief survey to assess their current level of understanding of the topic (see Appendix A).

Session 1: Introduction and Institution Mission Overview

The first session of the series will be an introductory session focusing on the purpose of the professional development series and will be implemented on the first Friday of September. Co-moderated by the AVC and DVC, this session will explain the importance of creating awareness surrounding the barriers first-year, underrepresented students' face and the impact on their sense of belonging, the series objectives, and will connect the importance of this topic to the institution's

mission, "provide a public first-rate education to all students, regardless of means or background" (The City University of New York, About CUNY, 2012).

Session 2: Underrepresented Student Motivators

The second session will be moderated by the DVC and will be centered around CUNY students underrepresented and traditionally underserved students' motivators to persist in college. Tinto (2016) emphasized the importance of understanding how student backgrounds and experiences shape their motivation to persist in college and by recognizing the motivators, academic advisors are able to provide constructive support and enhance their motivation. This session will be implemented on the first Friday of October. Campus cultural centers will promote and encourage the opportunity for students to share their experiences at the professional development series. Student volunteers who identify with minoritized racial-ethnic backgrounds, socio-economically disadvantaged, and/or first-generation students will open the series by giving testimonials about the importance of college and their motivation to persist. Students' motivation to attend and persist in college varies greatly based on individual student identities (Oxendine, 2015). Prior to exploring the barriers underrepresented students may face, it is important for academic advisors to build rapport and demonstrate empathy by understanding the individualism of each student. Following the testimonials, participants will be provided with a list of questions that can help stimulate conversations and build connectedness between advisors and students (see appendix B).

To begin the interactive portion of the session, participants will be given various scenarios of student responses to the questions listed in Appendix B. Examples include:

Q1: Why have you decided to pursue college at this point in your life? What drew you to this institution specifically?

A1: No one in my family has gone to college and it was my goal to be the first one. I chose CUNY because it is close to home and also because it is known for the diversity on campus, but I've been here for a few weeks and it feels like the campus is predominantly White, middle-class students.

Q2: What is motivating you to persist through college?

A1: My family is so proud of me for getting into college and I don't just want to "get by" I want to perform really well in my classes, so I've been seeing a tutor and an academic success advisor to achieve that. I know a college education and good grades will help me secure a good career and will allow me to be able to provide for my family.

Q3: What are your goals? Academically and personally?

A1: I'm majoring in business because my parents told me that I should, but I don't really like my classes. I don't know what I want to change my major to, and I don't know how to tell my parents that I don't want to major in business. Personally, I want my parents to be proud of me and want them to approve of my career choices. Academically, I want to figure out what careers interest me and figure out what major to declare.

Q4: College can present unique challenges, what is going to keep you going (to continue schooling)?

A1: College has been hard for me so far and I have been so tempted to quit, I'm not sure if I'll be able to keep going next time, I'm presented with a big challenge, but I keep trying to tell myself that the challenges will be worth the rewards.

Q5: What are some of the biggest changes you have experienced transitioning to college? What do you miss most about home that you don't have access to here?

A1: I came to college and I'm no longer surrounded by community and culture and I think that's what is really tough because that was such a big part of my life. In my

family, we always ate traditional Indian dishes, and I don't have those options in the cafeteria here.

Participants will then be paired and will exchange dialogue in a mock advising series. The goal of this activity is for participants to respond to the scenarios and stimulate two or three key points to address how student efforts contribute to their overall academic and personal goals. The series moderator will then ask participants to volunteer to share any of the key points that they devised. This exercise aims to create conversations academic advisors are likely to have with students and prepare them on how to support and/or challenge students' motivators. Effective dialogue will include words of encouragement, support, reassurance providing available resources, providing available resources, empathy, the importance of a growth mindset, and accomplishing short-term and long-term goals.

Session 3: Underrepresented Student Experiences

The third session will be moderated by the AVC and will be centered around CUNY underrepresented and traditionally underserved students' experiences, challenges, and barriers to sense of belonging. This session will be implemented on the first Friday of November. Campus cultural centers will promote and encourage the opportunity for students to share their experiences at the professional development series. Student volunteers who identify with minoritized racial-ethnic backgrounds, socio-economically disadvantaged, and/or first-

generation students will open the session by giving testimonials on the preconceived barriers they anticipated they would face due to their identity, the challenges and barriers they actually faced, and if/how they overcame the challenges and barriers.

Participants will be seated at various tables and each respective table will receive a case study (see appendix C). The case studies will be supplemental stories told by underrepresented students who are currently experiencing a challenge or barrier during their first year of college. Participants will be tasked, as a group, to come up with two to three strategies to present to these students to overcome said challenges and barriers. The AVC will then invite participants to briefly describe the scenario they had and two to three strategies they would present to the student. Following, examples of additional strategies will be provided (see appendix D).

Session 4: Book Review

Moderated by both the AVC and DVC, the final session of the series will highlight the importance of continuing to educate oneself of the experiences of underrepresented and traditionally underserved students. This session will be implemented on the first Friday of December. When participants RSVP for the professional development series, they will receive an itinerary for the semester as well as a downloadable version of the audiobook *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man* by Emmanuel Acho. In this text, Acho presents and divulges a series of uncomfortable questions centered on racism, the history behind systemic

racism, what we can do to educate ourselves on the matter, and ways we can advocate for racial justice and equality. Acho provides a space of respect and understanding surrounding an issue that typically falls short in both aspects and offers a great opportunity to face and explore these difficult but critical topics.

Project Evaluation

Evaluation of this professional development series will be conducted on both the academic advisor and student level. Prior to attending the series, academic advisors will complete a brief survey to measure their knowledge and experience with underrepresented students and the barriers that impede their success. Six months following the series academic advisors will be asked to complete a follow-up survey to indicate if and how they have implemented the strategies provided in the series. This survey will ask academic advisors to recount their experiences and interactions with underrepresented students and describe how they applied what they learned during the series to practice.

Additionally, students who identify with a minoritized racial-ethnic background, are socio-economically disadvantaged, and/or are first-generation and who interact with academic advisors who have attended the series will be asked to provide feedback. The purpose of gathering student feedback is to determine if their interactions with academic advisors are enhancing their sense of belonging and degree of connectedness or taking away from it. Questions such as, "Was your advisor able to relate to your experiences?", "Did you feel comfortable discussing

personal/sensitive matters with your advisor?", "What do you wish your advisor knew about your experiences in college?", and "What could your advisor do differently to make you feel more comfortable/connected to them?". In addition, the students who participated in the professional development series and narrated their stories and experiences will be asked to provide feedback to determine if participating in the series had an effect on their sense of belonging and connectedness to the campus.

Project Conclusions

Students' degree of belonging is viewed and achieved in different ways due to varying experiences, cultures, and identities, especially for students from underrepresented backgrounds. Academic advisors have the opportunity to create a space for students that fosters a sense of connection and enhances their social and academic sense of belonging. Through this professional development opportunity, academic advisors will be introduced to and educated on the challenges and barriers underrepresented students face and strategies to help them overcome them.

Plans for Implementation

To stay abreast of the changing campus environment and student experiences, it would be beneficial to gather feedback from students and academic advisors for new and/or additional information to be implemented in the proceeding series. Follow-up surveys should be administered to participants six months following each series to gather feedback on any challenges, barriers, and/or topics

presented during student appointments that were not considered in the professional

development series. Additionally, feedback should be gathered from

underrepresented students regarding racial, ethnic, and cultural topics they wish

their academic advisors were aware of, could relate to or understand, and could

offer guidance for.

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Appendix A
Pre-Series Survey

Cultural Competence Self-Survey
The following self-assessment can assist student affairs practitioners in identifying areas in which they might improve the quality of their services to culturally diverse populations.

Directions: Please rate each item listed below.

1. I display pictures, posters, artwork and other decor that reflect the cultures and ethnic backgrounds of clients served.
   ☐ Frequently   ☐ Occasionally   ☐ Rarely/Never   ☐ NA

2. I ensure that magazines, brochures and other printed materials in reception areas are of interest to and reflect the different cultures of individuals and families served.
   ☐ Frequently   ☐ Occasionally   ☐ Rarely/Never   ☐ NA

3. I avoid imposing values that may conflict or be inconsistent with those of cultures or ethnic groups other than my own.
   ☐ Frequently   ☐ Occasionally   ☐ Rarely/Never   ☐ NA

4. I intervene in an appropriate manner when I observe other staff or clients within my program or agency engaging in behaviors that show cultural insensitivity, racial biases and prejudice.
   ☐ Frequently   ☐ Occasionally   ☐ Rarely/Never   ☐ NA

5. Even though my professional or moral viewpoints may differ, I accept students as the ultimate decision makers for services and supports impacting their lives.
   ☐ Frequently   ☐ Occasionally   ☐ Rarely/Never   ☐ NA

6. I am aware of the impact of the social context on the lives of culturally diverse population, and how power, privilege and social oppression influence their lives.
   ☐ Frequently   ☐ Occasionally   ☐ Rarely/Never   ☐ NA

7. I am aware of how my cultural perspective influences my judgement about what are 'appropriate', 'normal', or 'superior' behaviors, values, and communication styles.
   ☐ Frequently   ☐ Occasionally   ☐ Rarely/Never   ☐ NA

8. I am confident in my ability to provide students with cultural support resources on campus and engage in conversation around cultural experiences that differ from my own.
   ☐ Frequently ☐ Occasionally ☐ Rarely/Never ☐ NA

9. I avail myself to professional development and training to enhance my knowledge and skills in the provision of services and supports to culturally, ethnically, racially and linguistically diverse groups.
   ☐ Frequently ☐ Occasionally ☐ Rarely/Never ☐ NA

10. I am aware of my discomfort when I encounter differences in race, color, religion, sexual orientation, language, and ethnicity
    ☐ Frequently ☐ Occasionally ☐ Rarely/Never ☐ NA

11. I am aware of the assumptions that I hold about people of cultures different from my own.
    ☐ Frequently ☐ Occasionally ☐ Rarely/Never ☐ NA

12. If I am a White person working with a Native American person or Person of Color, I understand that I will likely be perceived as a person with power and racial privilege, and that I may not be seen as 'unbiased' or as an ally.
    ☐ Frequently ☐ Occasionally ☐ Rarely/Never ☐ NA

How to use this checklist
This checklist is intended to heighten the awareness and sensitivity of personnel to the importance of cultural and linguistic competence in higher education settings. It provides concrete examples of the kinds of beliefs, attitudes, values and practices that foster cultural and linguistic competence at the individual level. There is no answer key with correct responses. However, if you frequently responded "rarely/never," you may not necessarily demonstrate beliefs, attitudes, values and practices that promote cultural and linguistic competence within health care delivery programs.

Based on the results of this assessment, if you could change two things in the coming year, what would they be?

1.

2.

Adapted from the Greater Vancouver Island Multicultural Society Cultural Competence Self-Assessment Checklist and Georgetown University Child Development Center

Appendix B
Questions for Students: Goals and Motivators

1. Why have you decided to pursue college at this point in your life? What drew you to this institution specifically?
2. What is motivating you to persist through college?
3. What are your goals? Academically and personally?
4. College can present unique challenges, what is going to keep you going (to continue schooling)?
5. What are some of the biggest changes you have experienced transitioning to college?
6. What do you miss most about home that you don't have access to here?

Appendix C
Case Studies: Students' Challenges and Barriers

Am I Invisible?
When assigned to work in groups, I'm often ignored in class, regardless of how well I know the topic. A few weeks ago, I was assigned to work with three other students in an English class. They had a little triangle discussion where nobody was looking in my direction. I just stopped talking, because my input was not even considered. They just wouldn't listen to me. -*Markus, Black undergraduate student*

Hard Pill to Swallow
I am experiencing a sort of socioeconomic shock, confused and frustrated by how expensive it was to not only go to college but to be in college. In addition to the financial strain and stress that these unexpected fees cause me, I am experiencing some emotional turmoil and loneliness as well. Watching others contact a mentor or older sibling to lean on for help highlighted how I have to navigate my college experience alone. I don't have the option to call a family member or trusted advisor to ask for guidance on which philosophy class to take to fulfill a certain credit or to get advice on how to approach a TA about a grading question. Recognizing that I am not as well-equipped to excel as my peers is a hard pill to swallow. -*Alexis Kinlaw, first-generation student*

Do I belong here?
One time I was just studying in the lounge and there were probably around seven or eight people; they were White men and women talking in the lounge. They were talking about minorities and getting financial aid and how the only reason we're able to afford it is because we get handouts. They were just saying, "Yes you have to be piss poor or a minority to get any money. You basically have to be dead broke." I don't think they really cared that I was there, and I think they were just having their own conversation; they were going to talk about whatever they want to talk about no matter who is in the room. I think it made me question: Do I belong here? -*Shawna, Black undergraduate student*

Singled Out
I was one of the few minorities in that specific class. They were just talking about the different Hispanic demographics [and] the rising rate of obesity and how community really influences people's health. The professor said, "Can you speak about that?" I was just taken aback. No one else was asked about White America. It was weird because then all eyes are on me again and that's too much pressure for me. Literally, the whole entire class turned to me, and they're just expecting me to give them the information. -*Sasha, Hispanic undergraduate student*

Racism or Something Else?

I have never witnessed direct or blatant discrimination but as an Asian-American, I feel subjected to microaggressions daily. White students assumed that I only associated with other Asians, asked where I was "from," and if I was "North or South Korean." Black students told me I did not count as a student of color and questioned if Asians even had the right to participate in diversity initiatives due to the "model minority" stereotype. Korean international students let me, and other Korean Americans like me know they did not consider us Korean or Asian enough. In short, racial conflict became such an ingrained part of my college experience that it became difficult for me to discern when people were behaving or addressing me in certain ways because of race as opposed to another motive. *-Hannah, Asian-American undergraduate student*

Appendix D
Strategies to Overcome Barriers

1. *Connect with a peer mentor*. Connecting with a student who has experienced some of the same barriers and challenges can show students that these barriers do not define the student, can be overcome, and provide strategies on how to overcome them.
2. *Adopt a growth mindset*. Students will experience challenges and failures in college. Adopting a growth mindset allows students to learn from these challenges and failures and not become demotivated.
3. *Maintain enthusiasm for learning.* Students may take classes that are of little interest to them. They must find ways to make their classes interesting so that they maintain engagement which will lead to success.
4. *Build relationships*. Connecting with faculty, staff, and students will create a strong sense of belonging and offer students resources to overcome challenges and barriers they may experience.
5. *Be socially engaged.* Become involved in campus organizations and events, joining an intramural sports team, and starting a class study group are ways to increase campus engagement and strengthen students' sense of belonging.