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**FOSTERING MINORITY COLLEGE STUDENT PERSISTENCE AND  
BACCALAUREATE DEGREE ATTAINMENT: A COLLECTIVE-CROSS CASE  
ANALYSIS OF HIGH-PERFORMING INSTITUTIONS**

A Thesis in

Higher Education

by

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## ABSTRACT

Racial/ethnic minority college student persistence and degree attainment is of paramount importance to higher education policymakers and administrators. Approximately six of every ten students who enter a four-year college or university fail to earn a bachelor's degree within six years. The failure of such large numbers of racial/ethnic minority undergraduates to complete college poses devastating consequences for the individual students, institutions of higher education, and broader society. In this dissertation, qualitative research methods were employed to design and conduct an embedded collective case study of three institutions that have achieved high and equitable underrepresented racial/ethnic minority student persistence and degree attainment rates. Using three national databases, one public two-year college, comprehensive public university, and private doctoral university were selected for exhibiting relatively high underrepresented racial/ethnic minority student persistence and graduation rates and equity in persistence and degree attainment rates across races/ethnicities. A total of sixty-five administrators, staff, and racial/ethnic minority students were interviewed and a wide range of documents were collected across the three institutions to discover and examine the institutional environments, policies, programs, and practices perceived to contribute to racial/ethnic minority student success on the three campuses. Findings indicate that the three institutions share a set of common cultural characteristics that converge to create environments conducive to engaging, supporting, and retaining racial/ethnic minority students. Implications for policy, practice, and future research are discussed.

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## **CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

One Fall morning, Denise, an African American senior at a large prestigious Midwestern public research university awoke to start another day of college life. As she went through her daily routine of getting ready for class, she noticed on the stall of the restroom wall in her dorm a remark that someone had written, which read: “*I hate niggers.*” An immediate surge of emotion overcame her, simultaneously generating feelings of anger, disappointment, fear, frustration, and resentment. After getting dressed, Denise walked out of her residence hall and ventured toward her first morning class on *Race in American Society*. On her walk across campus, she encountered a flyer that read *Affirmative Action Bake Sale*, which discussed a demonstration later that day at the student union. The university’s Republican student organization was intending to sell cookies that were priced differentially based on customers’ race to, as the flyer indicated, “illustrate the favoritism in which the university is taking part with the admission of unqualified minorities over qualified Whites.” Again, Denise became frustrated with what she felt was a display of ignorance and wondered whether she should make an effort to attend the demonstration and voice her opinion, ultimately deciding that she should avoid the student union for the remainder of the day to avert conflict. She then perused the remainder of the paper to find information about the African American cultural festival to be held that evening, but all of the articles appeared to focus on university organized sports and other topics of which she had little interest. When Denise walked into class, she looked around the room, scanning the sea of White faces to find her friend James, the only other African American student in the class, but to no avail. When the

instructor entered the room, a discussion about affirmative action, the focus of the day's required readings, commenced. Noticing consistent periodic glances toward her, Denise felt pressured to represent her race in the debate, but refrained from voicing her opinions about the importance of affirmative action in fear of confirming stereotypes of unqualified Blacks desiring free handouts.

Later that afternoon, across town, at another public research university of comparable size, a Latino student named Jason walked across campus on the way to his morning class. As he walked by a newsstand, Jason picked up a copy of the campus newspaper. The headlined draped across the front page read *Campus Student Organizations Weigh in on Affirmative Action*, and included a discussion of the various perspectives on the use of race in admissions processes held by student leaders across campus. Jason arrived at his *Introduction to Sociology* class early, and engaged in an informal discussion with his instructor about the relevance of racial inequality, the focus of the assigned readings, to Jason's life. When Jason's instructor noticed his interest in the topic, the discussion morphed into a conversation about undergraduate research opportunities available the following semester. After class, Jason walked to the Latino cultural center, where he spoke to the Director of the Center about the fact that he was not getting along with his roommate. The Director called Jason's roommate and scheduled a meeting at which all three of them would work to resolve the aforementioned issue. Jason and the Director of the Center then proceeded to talk about several issues, ranging from scholarship deadlines to applications for graduate schools.

While the preceding stories are fictitious, the incidents contained within them are anything but unrealistic. Racial/ethnic minority students at predominantly White colleges and universities across the nation experience situations similar to those depicted in the first story on an occasional or even frequent basis, which can result in frustration, isolation, disengagement, or premature departure from an institution. Explicit in this tale is the tension that can result from race relations on campus; implicit in this story, however, are the connotations of devaluation that can accompany the various institutional and environmental characteristics that permeate many predominantly White college campuses. For example, the environments in which the student finds herself convey messages of unimportance through physical traces, such as the remarks written on the bathroom stall wall, and exclusive spaces such as the classrooms with a debilitating climate for particular racial/ethnic minority students. Additionally, the campus media gives disproportionate attention to the values that comprise the mainstream culture at the institution and is absent of any multicultural emphasis. Moreover, the existing cultural stereotypes of beneficiaries of affirmative action as unqualified are examples of assumptions deeply embedded in the culture of American society and many college campuses, and those stereotypes can present major challenges for minority students.

Alternatively, the student in the second story encounters a range of positive experiences that present him with educationally lucrative opportunities and facilitate his development and growth. The relationship and informal interaction with his sociology instructor result in the potential opportunity to benefit from the research experience and mentorship inherent in many undergraduate research programs. The Director of the cultural center reminded him that he needed to apply for scholarships for the following semester and encouraged him to think about the graduate programs to which he is going to apply for the following year. Finally, the emphasis

on discussing diverse perspectives of Affirmative Action in the campus newspaper might be an indication that discourse revolving around issues that are important to racial/ethnic minority students is valued by the campus community. While these two stories present polarized pictures of the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students on predominantly White campuses, many minority students are likely to encounter experiences that would be better represented by a combination of incidents found in the two opening vignettes. Just as the college experience of every racial/ethnic minority student is unique, the institutional environments in which racial/ethnic minority students find themselves are also distinctive.

Although racial/ethnic minority students face many unique barriers to their success in higher education (Eimers, 2001; Hurtado, 1992; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005), there are actions that can be taken by institutions and institutional agents to improve the experiences of these students and increase their likelihood of persistence and graduation. An example of such action is the initiatives to increase diversity that have become commonplace in American higher education. Isolated or one-dimensional efforts, such as strategic plans to improve structural diversity, however, represent insufficient means for diversifying college campuses (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton, & Pedersen, & Allen, 1999).

This dissertation focuses on understanding the institutional characteristics that are conducive to persistence and baccalaureate degree attainment by racial/ethnic minority college students. More specifically, the current study is intended to identify environmental conditions and specific institutional policies, programs, and practices that are perceived to foster minority student success at institutions with high racial/ethnic minority persistence and graduation rates. This chapter includes a statement of the problem that is addressed, the purpose and significance

of the investigation, and the definition of key concepts central to the study. I conclude the chapter with an overview of the organization of the dissertation.

### Statement of the Problem

I will refer to the problem that is the focus of the current study as the racial/ethnic minority student departure crisis. This crisis refers to the troubling departure rates among racial/ethnic minority students in American higher education and encompasses a wide range of individual, institutional, and societal implications that should be considered in any discussion of college student persistence. Five major issues will be addressed in explicating the importance of the proposed study: (a) evidence of racial/ethnic disparities in baccalaureate degree completion; (b) the various costs associated with student departure; (c) the forecasted economic consequences of low racial/ethnic minority persistence and attainment rates; (d) the limited attention of racial/ethnic minorities in higher education theory and practice that have contributed to limitations in our understanding of minority student departure, and; (e) the need for institutions to take responsibility in addressing this departure crisis.

#### *Racial/Ethnic Minority Baccalaureate Degree Completion*

Disparities in the educational attainment of various racial/ethnic student subpopulations are well-documented (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002; Carey, 2004; Mortenson, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Recent figures indicate that Asian and White students graduate within six-years of matriculation at higher rates than their Black and Latina/o counterparts (Berkner et al., 2002). Among first-time, full-time students who entered a four-year college or university in 1995, approximately 71% of Asian and 67% of White students completed a bachelor's degree within six years, while that figure was only 47% for Latina/o and 46% for Black students in the same cohort. Examination of those who completed a bachelor's degree at their first institution reveals

even lower degree completion rates for all groups, but the disparities remain. Sixty-four percent of Asian and 59% of White students who matriculated at a four-year institution in 1995 earned a bachelor's degree at the first college or university in which they enrolled, compared to only 41% of their Black and Latina/o counterparts. When student subpopulations are further disaggregated by sex, disparities among these groups are even greater. For example, Harper (2006) notes that the six-year degree completion rates for African American men who began higher education in 1998 was 32.4% – the lowest among both sexes and all racial/ethnic student subpopulations. Furthermore, across all postsecondary degree levels, White men received at least ten times the number of degrees earned by their African American male counterparts.

#### *Costs of Student Departure*

Student departure has profound implications for individuals and institutions as well as society as a whole. Colleges and universities suffer major financial losses as a result of student departure. Lost revenue from tuition payments, finances spent on recruitment efforts and enrollment services, and decreases in future alumni gifts are all examples of the negative effects of college student departure on institutions of higher education (Swail, 2004).

Possibly the most obvious costs of student departure are those endured by the individual students who leave college before they attain a four-year degree, such as money spent on tuition and fees, forgone wages during enrollment, accrued debt that results from the costs of education, time invested in educational endeavors, and the inability to enjoy the many social and economic benefits that result from completion of a bachelor's degree (Baum & Payea, 2005; Choy & Li, 2005; Swail, 2004). One such benefit of attaining a bachelor's degree is the increased annual and lifetime earnings that a college graduate is likely to enjoy. In 2003, the average annual income of a baccalaureate degree recipient was \$49,900, which was 62% greater than the \$30,800 earned

by their counterparts with a high school diploma (Baum & Payea, 2005). Other socioeconomic benefits that accompany baccalaureate degree attainment, and which college dropouts fail to realize, include decreased likelihood of incarceration, unemployment, and poverty, greater academic preparation of children, and the compensation of financial costs that result from tuition, fees, and foregone earnings.

Perhaps most devastating is the reality that many of the costs of student attrition suffered by individuals result in cumulative negative effects on broader society, such as higher total incarceration rates, higher rates of unemployment, lower academic preparation among future generations, and lower levels of civic participation among American citizens (Baum & Payea, 2005; Swail, 2004). Additionally, lower levels of educational attainment are associated with decreased tax revenues. In 2003, the average total local, state, and federal taxes paid by a high school graduate was \$6,500 – equivalent to 55% of their baccalaureate degree recipient counterparts who paid, on average, \$11,800 (Baum & Payea, 2005). While this list of negative financial ramifications of student departure may not be exhaustive, it provides an illustration of the damaging effects of college student attrition and the corresponding urgency of improving departure rates, particularly among rapidly growing racial/ethnic minority populations. Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that the implications of student departure for institutions, individuals, and society are interconnected and it is therefore difficult to neatly separate them from one another.

#### *Minority Student Departure and the Future of American Society*

In 1998, a group of university presidents and chancellors who were members of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities released the second in a series of reports on student access to higher education. In light of the rapid diversification of the



American population and college campuses, the report expressed the group's consternation with the condition of educational opportunity in the United States and championed a new perspective of student access that included a focus on ensuring *access to success*: providing the opportunity and support for individuals from diverse backgrounds to both participate and succeed in American higher education. The Kellogg Commission noted that, for students, the problem is not only "one of getting in," but also one of "hanging on, and getting out," and that, without subsequent success, "access at the front end is simply an empty gesture" (1998, p. x). This report, in a sense, expanded and redefined the focus on access to include the journey that increasingly diverse student populations undertake after they have matriculated at an institution of higher education.

The Kellogg Commission included in its report a statement about the motivation for the issuance of the publication, indicating that the report was not driven by the notion that college access and diversity make good economic sense, but because they "are matters of simple fairness and justice" (1998, p.iii). While it may certainly be true that social justice is a sufficient reason for combating inequities in American higher education (Kelly, 2005), it can also be argued that fairness and justice in higher education is inextricably intertwined with the economic implications of postsecondary educational attainment. Indeed, the social injustices that result from the aforementioned inequities in educational opportunity may be a source of the future decline of America's competitiveness in the global economy.

A second report, released by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), titled *As America Becomes More Diverse*, outlined the looming economic crisis in American society resulting from the inequalities in its systems of education (Kelly, 2005). The report delineated the economic crisis by highlighting three critical trends in American

society. First, over the next 15 years, the majority of growth within the American population will occur among the least educated subpopulations (i.e., underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities). In fact, between 2010 and 2020, the proportion of the U.S. population that is composed of non-White individuals will increase from 28 to 38%.

Second, trends from 1988 to 2000 indicate that the disparities in educational attainment between White and underrepresented racial/ethnic minority populations have widened, with attainment rates increasing much slower among Black and Latina/o populations (Kelly, 2005). These first two factors together are projected to result in a decline in the overall levels of educational attainment of the American population and a projected *decrease* in the average annual individual income between the years 2000 and 2020. The realization of these possibilities could threaten to devastate the nation's tax base and economic well-being.

The third point emphasized by the report was the continued underrepresentation of African Americans, Latina/os, and Native Americans at every level of education, indicating that American higher education has not been effective at addressing the growing racial/ethnic disparities in educational attainment (Kelly, 2005). Based on these three trends, the report concluded that improving current levels of educational attainment depends largely on the ability of higher education to meet the educational needs of particular racial/ethnic minority populations.

#### *Historical Exclusion from Higher Education Research and Practice*

Despite the significance of this racial/ethnic minority student departure crisis, understanding of the problem and efforts to combat it have been insufficient. Historically, research on college students has largely focused on traditional (i.e., White and middle-class undergraduates in the 18-24 age range) students and much of the existing research on persistence

and attainment has been guided by theories developed from the experiences of White men (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). In their review of pre-1991 research on how college affects students, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) concluded that “if there is a major future direction for research on the impact of college, it will be to focus on that growing proportion of students whom we have typically classified as nontraditional” (p. 632). Indeed, basing our understandings and decisions of how to best serve racial/ethnic minority students on theory and data derived from the experiences of students with very different historical, cultural, and social backgrounds is at best misleading and at worst counterproductive.

A substantial body of post-1991 research has expanded our knowledge of the factors that influence persistence and attainment among racial/ethnic minority students (Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda, 1992, 1993; Cabrera, Nora, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Hagedorn, 1999; Kraemer, 1997; Mow & Nettles, 1990; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996; Tierney, 1992). Nevertheless, most of those studies have been quantitative in nature and focused on identifying the significant effects of various individual predictors on student outcomes. Rendón et al. (2000) have pointed out that, while this recent research adds to our knowledge of departure theory and challenges traditional notions of student services by including minority students, “a new, coherent vision of minority students persistence has failed to evolve” (p. 130).

Existing inquiries into racial/ethnic minority student departure are limited in their ability to capture a holistic understanding of minority student persistence. Investigations of minority student attrition excluding constructs, such as race, campus climate, and campus culture, which have historically been omitted from testing of traditional student departure theories, could contribute to the continued exclusion of important factors that are central to the minority student experience. Consequently, qualitative insights into minority student persistence are necessary to

comprehensively capture the contextual or environmental influences exhibited by various institutional factors that can work together to foster conditions that breed success among those students.

Another way in which racial/ethnic minority college students have been underserved in higher education is historical institutional exclusion. The organizational environments that permeate American colleges and universities have evolved from the long-standing history, values, and norms of traditional college students. Kuh and Whitt (1988) cautioned that institutions may perpetuate “properties deeply embedded in their cultures that make it difficult for members of historically underrepresented groups to prosper socially and environmentally” (p. 15). Furthermore, the educational policies and practices that are so prevalent in American higher education are both a product of the history and culture of those institutions and based on our knowledge of how to effectively serve traditional college-goers. Therefore, conditions and practices that are known to be effective in fostering traditional students’ success in college may not necessarily be equally effective in serving racial/ethnic minorities. In light of the limited attention given to racial/ethnic minority students in higher education research and practice, it is evermore essential to deepen our understanding of how colleges and universities are creating institutional conditions that effectively serve their racial/ethnic minority students.

#### *Institutional Disparities in College Student Success*

While some of the responsibility of student departure can be attributed to individual choice, socioeconomic stratification, and the unequal preparation provided by K-12 education systems, much of the success of students depends on the decisions made and actions taken by colleges and universities themselves (Carey, 2004). Six-year graduation rates among institutions, which range from ten to almost 100%, indicate significant variation in the extent to which

institutions are effectively addressing the departure problem. Indeed, a substantial amount of variation appears to exist, even when controlling for factors such as entering students' standardized test scores, financial resources, degree programs offered, and institutional mission, size, and location.

There also appears to be some disparity in the extent to which institutions achieve equitable persistence and graduation rates across various racial/ethnic subpopulations. Carey (2004) has pointed out that, while some colleges and universities are more effective at serving majority populations, other institutions have graduation rates among racial/ethnic minority students that parallel or surpass their White counterparts at the same institution and are substantially greater than the racial/ethnic minority degree completion rates at institutions with similar characteristics. Now, more than ever, it is beneficial for higher education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to understand the decisions made and the conditions provided by these relatively successful institutions that contribute to their effectiveness at serving racial/ethnic minority students.

While recent efforts (Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003) have provided a better understanding of the departure puzzle and the factors that may influence the persistence decisions of racial/ethnic minority students, many unanswered questions remain. For example, while recent research has expanded knowledge of how colleges and universities foster student success in college (Kuh, Kinzie, Shuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991), current literature still lacks a clear and comprehensive conceptualization of how institutions are effectively addressing the minority student departure problem. Therefore, one key question for those who wish to understand how to improve racial/ethnic minority student

persistence remains: what does an institution that is effective at fostering minority student success look like?

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study is to discover and examine the institutional characteristics that foster racial/ethnic minority college student persistence and attainment. Specifically, the focus of the study is on identifying environmental conditions and specific policies, programs, and practices perceived to contribute to the effectiveness of colleges that have proven successful at *Generating Ethnic Minority Success (GEMS) – the GEMS colleges*. The current study is a response to recent calls by researchers in higher education to identify new approaches to studying college student departure (Braxton, 2000), examine the culture of colleges and universities (Kuh, 2005), and understand the conditions that foster minority student success in higher education (Carey, 2004). The findings of this study will, therefore, make a much-needed contribution to the higher education literature by providing a new perspective on minority student persistence and departure – one that increases understanding of and highlights the power that institutions possess to promote success among their racial/ethnic minority students.

The central question that provided a foundation for the framework of this study was, what institutional factors contribute to racial/ethnic minority student retention at the GEMS institutions? Four additional research questions were explored: 1) What about the environments of the GEMS institutions contributes to racial/ethnic minority student persistence and degree completion on their campuses; 2) how do those environmental factors influence the persistence and degree completion of racial/ethnic minorities on these campuses; 3) what institutional policies, programs, and practices contribute to racial/ethnic minority student persistence and

degree completion on these campuses, and; 4) how do these policies, programs, and practices influence the persistence and degree completion of racial/ethnic minorities at these institutions?

### Significance of the Study

Few would dispute the importance of understanding the college student departure process. Tinto (1993) asserted the following:

More students leave their college or university prior to degree completion than stay. Of nearly 2.4 million students who in 1993 entered higher education for the first time, over 1.5 million will leave their first institution without receiving a degree. Of those, approximately 1.1 million will leave higher education altogether, without ever completing either a two- or a four-year degree program... The consequences of this massive and continuing exodus from higher education are not trivial, either for the individuals who leave or for their institutions. (p. 1)

The continuance of this *massive exodus* has become so significant that state policymakers have begun to include persistence and attainment as two of the main foci of their accountability systems (Zumeta, 2001) and the federal government has recently considered grant programs that are tied to institutional graduation rates (Burd, 2003). Thus, the findings of this study will be of interest both to policymakers who desire to minimize the costs associated with higher education and administrators who are aiming to improve persistence rates on their campuses to meet accountability expectations and secure the acquisition of sufficient public funds.

While the work of many scholars (e.g., Astin, 1993; Bean, 1980, 1982, 1983a, 1983b; Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Swail et al., 2003; Tinto, 1975, 1993) has advanced our understanding of the departure puzzle, existing knowledge of the various factors that contribute to minority student persistence and success remains relatively fragmented and limited. Higher education administrators are forced to piece together evidence from hundreds of empirical studies in attempt to gain a holistic

understanding of what their institutions can do to effectively and efficiently increase minority persistence rates at their institutions. This study will be of great use to higher education researchers, faculty, and administrators, as it will compliment and further recent efforts to understand, synthesize, and make comprehensible effective practices on college campuses. Thus, the findings of this study will also be useful to institutional leaders who wish to better understand how they can champion institutional change toward the end of increasing success among their minority students.

### Key Concepts and Definitions

Included in this section are definitions of key concepts that will be used throughout the dissertation:

*African American* – U.S. born citizen of African descent.

*Asian American* – U.S. born citizen of Asian descent.

*Degree Attainment* – Completion of a baccalaureate degree.

*Campus environments* – The various academic and social settings that exist throughout a particular college or university campus. Such campus environments consist of four dimensions (Strange & Banning, 2001):

*Constructed environments* – the “consensus of individuals who perceive and characterize their environment,” which in turn influences behavior through individuals’ perceptions of that consensus (Strange & Banning, 2002, p. 85).

*Human aggregate environments* – Typical characteristics of individuals within the environment, which influence individual’s attraction to, satisfaction in, and persistence in that environment (Moos, 1986; Strange & Banning, 2001).

*Organizational environments* – The “organized patterns of structure and process that evolve for the purpose of achieving specific goals” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 59). They include: (a) divisions of labor, power, and communication responsibilities; (b) power centers that control behavior directed toward the achievement of organizational goals; and (c) movement within or across organizational boundaries, such as termination, transfer, or promotion (Etzioni, 1964).

*Physical environments* – Physical features that cause, limit, or influence individual behavior (Ellen, 1982).



*Campus climate* – The current attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and observations of individuals within the organization. Characteristics of a campus climate include: a) common member views and perceptions; b) pervasive organizational patterns of beliefs and behavior; c) current atmosphere, and; d) a malleable character (Peterson & Spencer, 1990).

*Campus culture* – The “collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in higher education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p.12-13).

*Institutional departure* – The act of discontinuing enrollment at a particular college or university (Tinto, 1993).

*Latina/o* – U.S. born citizen of Latin American descent.

*Persistence* – The continued enrollment of an individual in higher education toward the end of attaining a baccalaureate degree.

*Racial/Ethnic minority* – U.S. born citizen who is not of Caucasian descent. For the purposes of this study, this category will be limited to African American, Asian American, and Latina/o/a individuals. While broader uses of the term may include international students, they are not the focus of this study, as their experience is likely to differ significantly from U.S. born individuals.

*Student engagement* – Academic and social participation in educationally purposeful activities (see Chapter 2 for discussion).

*Student of Color* – U.S. born citizen who is not of Caucasian descent. For the purposes of this study, this category will be limited to African American, Asian American, and Latina/o/a individuals. While broader uses of the term may include international students, they are not the focus of this study, as their experience is likely to differ significantly from U.S. born individuals.

*Subculture* – A “normative-value system held by some group or persons who are in persisting interaction, who transmit the norms and values to newcomers by some communicated process, and who exercise some sort of social control to ensure conformity to the norms. Furthermore, the normative-value system of such a group must differ from the normative-value system of the larger, the parent, or the dominant society” (Bolton & Kammeyer, 1972, pp. 381-82).

*System departure* – The act of leaving the broader system of higher education (Tinto, 1993).

The concept of student *engagement* is distinct from Tinto’s (1993) concepts of academic and social *integration*. As will become apparent in Chapter Two, Tinto’s use of the integration concept implies that individuals must sever ties with their home cultures and adopt the cultural values and norms of their campus culture in order to increase the likelihood of success. Tierney

(1999) called the expected detachment of students from their home cultures *cultural suicide* and explained that expecting students to commit such suicide has unintended negative consequences by placing disproportionate responsibility on nontraditional students to adapt rather than recognizing institutional responsibility in facilitating such adaptation. Furthermore, the term integration highlights connections to the institutions without emphasis on the quality and quantity of those connections. In contrast, the concept of student engagement employed here implies the investment of time and energy in educationally purposeful activities as well as a shared individual-institutional responsibility to foster connections between racial/ethnic minority students and their institutions.

#### Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter Two of this dissertation contains a review of higher education literature relevant to the current study. First, literature exploring the factors that contribute to college student persistence and attainment is reviewed. The persistence literature is followed by a section devoted to the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students at predominantly White institutions. Next, the critical role of campus environments in the persistence and attainment of racial/ethnic minority college students is discussed. Chapter Three contains the methodological approach, site and sample selection, and data collection and analysis procedures to be used throughout the study. In Chapter Four, I present an overview of the findings that emerged from the data analyses. And, finally, Chapter Five contains a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings in the context of previous empirical literature, and a set of recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### Chapter Overview

Existing evidence of the various factors that influence college student persistence is fragmented into many empirically isolated but conceptually interconnected elements. All of that evidence is essential for constructing a holistic understanding of the departure process. None of those elements, however, are sufficient for painting a comprehensive picture of the multifarious relationships that exist between college students and their institutions.

Higher education researchers have aimed to understand the complexities of the college student departure puzzle for over 70 years (Braxton, 2000). Many college factors, financial and experiential, have been identified as valid predictors of persistence. Furthermore, scholars have recently begun to document the effectiveness of specific programs and practices in increasing the persistence rates of college students (Bailey, Crosta, Lenbach, Marshall, Soonachan, & Van Noy, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie et al., 2005; Kuh, Schuh et al., 1991; Muraskin & Lee, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

Much of the empirical literature on persistence, however, has focused on the examination of samples disproportionately composed of traditional (i.e. White, middle-class, 18-24 year-old) college goers. Realization of the limited understanding of nontraditional student persistence and the unwelcoming environments that racial/ethnic minority students encounter at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) have led higher education researchers to underscore the importance of new perspectives of racial/ethnic minority student departure (Rendón, Jalamo, & Nora, 2000; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Consequently, recent efforts to disentangle the intricacies of minority student persistence have included highlighting and documenting the potential potency of campus environments in hindering or facilitating minority student engagement and persistence (Baird, 2000; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Gonzalez, 2003; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love,

Rendón, et al., 2000). While the body of literature in this area is growing, there remains an urgent need for a coherent conceptualization of how institutional environments and institutional practices derived from those environments can influence minority student persistence.

This chapter contains an overview of the published literature relevant to the study of racial/ethnic minority student persistence. First, literature on the impact of student finances on persistence is reviewed. Then, theories and evidence of the impact of student-institution fit on the departure process is presented. This includes evidence of the effects of institutional type, students' within-college experiences, and specific programmatic practices on persistence. Next, I justify focusing on campus environments with a review of literature regarding evidence of their salience in the experiences of racial/ethnic minorities at PWIs. In order to highlight the utility of holistic inquiries of institutional effectiveness, prior qualitative investigations of high-performing institutions are also discussed. Finally, this chapter concludes with the conceptual framework that guided the current study.

#### Financial Influences on Persistence

Historically, research on student departure has followed two lines of inquiry: Student finances and student-institution fit (Braxton, 2000). Student finance research has increased understanding of the role that economic circumstances play in students' persistence decisions. Alternatively, student-institution fit models have helped unravel the complex influences of various collegiate experiences on student departure.

#### *Human Capital Theory*

Over 40 years ago, Becker (1964) proposed his *Theory of Human Capital*, which has largely been the foundation of investigations aimed at understanding the influence of financial circumstances on student persistence or departure. Becker's theory declared that people make

choices based on the perceived monetary benefits and costs that accompany the available alternatives. Indeed, students and their families consider the financial returns of a college education in their college search, enrollment, and persistence decisions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The Theory of Human Capital provides a framework for understanding the role that socioeconomic background, tuition, financial aid, and employment behaviors have on student outcomes, such as persistence and attainment.

#### *Research on the Role of Finances in Persistence Decisions*

During the 2000-01 academic year, a record \$74 billion dollars in institutional, state, and federal financial aid was dispersed to American college students (College Board, 2001). Students receive public financial assistance in a variety of different forms, such as grants, scholarships, loans, and work study. In light of this massive public investment in student aid, it is not surprising that inquiry aimed at understanding the effects of financial circumstances on persistence and attainment have largely focused on explaining the impact of various forms of financial aid.

*General aid.* Research on the effects of financial aid indicates that students who receive aid are as likely to persist as those who do not (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Moreover, several nationally representative studies support the notion that financial aid increases the likelihood students, particularly from less affluent backgrounds, will persist (Astin, 1993; Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990; Ishitani, 2003; St. John, 1990; St. John, Kirtstein, & Noell, 1991; St. John & Masten, 1990). Researchers have also found, however, that student aid can have a negative impact on persistence if they are awarded in insufficient amounts (Cofer & Somers, 1999; Somers, 1995; St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996). This evidence supports the notion that federal, state, and institutional policymakers should continue to make concerted

efforts to ensure affordability. While this may seem intuitive, there is evidence of an existing movement away from need-based and toward merit-based programs (Heller, 2003, 2006). Heller and Marin (2002) concluded that merit-based aid is less likely to be awarded to individuals from historically underrepresented populations, leaving the neediest students to fend for themselves in an environment of scarce resources. While this shift in aid from need- to merit-based programs could hinder college access for low-income and racial/ethnic minority students, decreases in need-based aid could also have an impact on these students' likelihood of persistence or departure from their higher education institution or the higher education system altogether.

*Types of aid.* There is also a growing body of research on the effects of different types of aid on persistence and attainment. Much of this research, however, has produced contradictory evidence, rendering the relationship between certain types of aid and persistence tenuous. Inquiries into the effects of work study have found both negative (Paulsen & St. John, 2002) and positive (Adelman, 1999; Cofer & Somers, 1998; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Heller, 2003; St. John, 1990; St. John et al., 1991) effects. Likewise, empirical evidence on the impact of loans is mixed. Some studies suggest loans have a negative influence on attainment (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Somers, 1996), while others indicate that they are positively related (Clotfelter, 1991; Cofer & Somers, 1999; King, 2002; St. John, 1990; St. John et al., 1991). While the source of this discrepancy is unclear, researchers who have found negative effects of loans on persistence have suggested that such effects may be due to inadequacies in the amount of financial aid awards received by students (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Finally, a noteworthy finding is that African American students are significantly less likely than their White counterparts to take out loans to pay for their education, suggesting that high loans and debt burdens may be particularly salient deterrents of educational attainment for these students

(Ehrenberg, 1991). Despite the potential negative consequences of debt burdens, budgetary pressures and beliefs that the benefits of higher education primarily benefit the individual, as opposed to society at large, have led to an increased emphasis on loans in college student financial aid packages (Heller, 2006).

*Grants.* Whereas education loans must be repaid and workstudy requires on-campus employment, grant aid is financial assistance in the form of a gift that does not require the student to work or repay the aid monies received. Studies examining the influence of grant aid appear to be more definitive than research on other forms of financial aid – indicating that it is positively associated with persistence and attainment (Astin, 1993; Coltfelter, 1991; St. John, 1990; St. John et al., 1991). While financial aid is often associated with federal and state policy, institutions also play a major role in providing financial support for their students – support that can have a substantial impact on the success of those students. For example, using a nationally representative sample, Heller (2003) adjusted for a variety of demographic, academic, institutional, and cost variables and found that those who received institutional grants were more likely than their nonrecipient counterparts to persist into the second year. Furthermore, the awarding of grants early in students' careers had a significant influence on subsequent persistence. Heller also concluded that the impact of need-based grants was greater than that of non need-based grants: \$1,200 in need-based grants and \$2,000 in non-need based grants raised the odds of graduating by six percent. This is consistent with studies finding that ability to pay is an important factor in educational aspirations and persistence (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992; Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990). Considered together, evidence on the impact of financial aid suggests that targeting grants,

particularly need-based grants, in the early years can be a useful tool in improving institutional persistence and graduation rates, especially among low-income and African American students.

### Institutional Fit and Persistence

In addition to research on the role of student finances in college student persistence, higher education scholars have aimed to unpack the complex relationships between students and their institutions. There are several theories that can be useful in understanding the relationships that develop between students and their institutions, including theories of cultural capital and social capital and student-institution fit theories.

After Becker (1964) established the Theory of Human Capital, other social theorists (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passer, 1977) expanded the concept of capital to include two other forms: *cultural capital* and *social capital*. While a limited body of higher education literature has explicitly applied concepts of cultural and social capital to college student success (Berger, 2000; Hearn, 1990; Kuh et al., 2006), they are useful perspectives for understanding the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students. This is particularly due to the fact that perspectives of cultural and social capital provide meaningful lenses through which to view the struggles that historically underrepresented students can face in navigating newly encountered campus cultures and establishing networks on their college campuses.

#### *Cultural Capital Theory*

Cultural capital refers to the cultural forms of knowledge and skill that, in part, determine one's place in social structures (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital exists, Bourdieu argued, in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. In the *embodied state*, cultural capital is embodied in the individual and results from a combination of processes of incorporation, inculcation, and assimilation. The *objectified state* refers to a state in which cultural capital is



represented in the form of cultural goods, which can be physical transmitted from one person to another and hold symbolic cultural value. Finally, in the *institutionalized state*, which is critical in understanding the importance of cultural capital in the educational progress of racial/ethnic minority students, cultural capital is recognized and institutionalized. One example of institutionalized capital is the recognition and importance of academic credentials in access to educational and occupational opportunity.

Central to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu & Passer, 1977). Habitus refers to developed internalized systems of dispositions that develop as a result of past experiences. In other words, habitus are cultural structures that exist within the minds and bodies of individual actors. Moreover, habitus can be an important tool for understanding the inequities that exist with regard to educational achievement and attainment. This relationship is based on the notion that the agency of students from culturally, socially, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds is limited by the dispositions of their habitus. Thus, the habitus of low-socioeconomic groups may predispose them to patterns of less academically beneficial behavior than their more affluent and cultural and socially advantaged counterparts.

#### *Social Capital Theory and Social Networks*

Bourdieu (1986) also delineated the concept of *social capital*. Social capital refers to the aggregate resources to which one has access as a result of institutional relationships or membership in a group. This concept is also useful in understanding the experiences and struggles of racial/ethnic minority students in higher education. Indeed, most scholars agree that learning to navigate a new social environment and interacting with strangers is important to college student success (Kuh & Love, 2000). Students who effectively navigate their campus environments and effectively build relationships begin to construct a social network on that

campus. Social networks have been defined as “structures of relationships linking social actors” (Marsden, 2004, p. 2727). Viewed together, the concepts of social capital and social networks can be useful in understanding how the intensity and extensity of students’ relationships with administrators, faculty members, and peers in college can provide access to resources and be a powerful factor shaping those students’ experiences and outcomes.

### *Theories of Student Departure*

Much of the existing research on college student departure has been driven by student-institution fit models of persistence. Two models have dominated this area of research: Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model of student integration, which Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) asserted has reached near paradigmatic status, and Bean’s (1980, 1982, 1983a, 1983b) model of student departure. Tinto posited that the extent to which students are integrated into the academic and social subsystems of their campus shapes their commitments to their goals and their institution. The greater the student is committed to graduation and their institution, in turn, influences their likelihood of persistence. Alternatively, Bean’s attrition model is based on the notion that beliefs shape individual attitudes, which determine subsequent individual behavior. This model also emphasizes consideration of factors external to the institution, such as the influence of a student’s family on their intentions to leave or stay in college.

Central to Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model is student integration into the academic and social spheres of campus life; whereas the focal point of Bean’s (1980, 1982, 1983a, 1983b) model is the psychological predispositions (e.g., beliefs and attitudes) that shape a student’s behavior. Recognizing that these two models are not mutually exclusive, Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora, and Hengstler (1992) merged the two models in order to test whether they were complimentary in explaining student persistence. They concluded that a more comprehensive understanding of the

persistence process emerged from the combination of the two theories, thereby highlighting the limitations that models of student departure can have on our understanding of the complexities of the persistence process. Perhaps most importantly, the researchers confirmed and highlighted the notion that student persistence is the result of a complex interplay of personal and institutional factors.

The bulk of research aimed at understanding the effects of student-institution fit on persistence can be separated into two different and interrelated categories: Institutional characteristics and within-college experiences. Several researchers have attempted to explain the importance of the type of institution that students attend in persistence outcomes. Much of the research on student-institution fit, however, has been aimed at testing the effects of student integration, involvement, and engagement on persistence decisions. Lastly, higher education researchers have begun to explore the impact of specific programs on college student persistence.

#### *Research on the Impact of Institutional Characteristics on Persistence*

Research focused on the effects of different institutional characteristics on persistence and attainment has focused primarily on five characteristics: (a) institutional selectivity; (b) control (i.e., public versus private); (c) size; (d) level (i. e., two- versus four-year institutions), and; (e) racial composition. Evidence regarding the effects of institutional selectivity, control, and size indicate that those characteristics exhibit significant effects on persistence, although those effects appear to be mainly indirect. The influences of institution level and racial composition are also complex. Dougherty (2004) referred to the community college as *contradictory colleges*, because they appear to both decrease the likelihood of persistence toward baccalaureate degree completion while simultaneously providing postsecondary educational opportunities for those who would not otherwise pursue postsecondary education. With regard to

composition, racial demographics have been found to be a major factor in persistence, although, like the effects of other institutional type characteristics, those effects appear to be indirect through the campus environment and the experiences of students within that environment. Finally, several within-college experiences and practices that appear to have a significant positive impact on persistence and degree completion have been identified. In sum, this literature suggests that the experiences that students are likely to encounter within the institution that they enroll are more powerful predictors of persistence and attainment than the characteristics of the institution they attend.

*Selectivity.* Recent studies have found that persistence and degree completion rates are highest among institutions with the most selective admissions standards (“Five Year Institutional Graduation Rates”, 1997; “Institutional Graduation Rates by Academic Selectivity, 1996; “Institutional Graduation Rates by Degree Level,” 1996). When researchers control for a variety of other factors, however, the impact of institutional selectivity on persistence has been found to be weaker than that of other within-college factors, such as financial circumstances, faculty quality, and student-faculty ratios (Dolan & Schmidt, 1994; Lee, Mackie-Lewis, & Marks, 1993). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) concluded that existing evidence suggests that the influence of selectivity is probably small and intertwined with the experiences that students are likely to encounter on more prestigious or selective campuses.

*Control.* Researchers examining the relationship between institutional control and persistence outcomes report that degree completion rates are higher at private than at public institutions (ACT, 2002; “Five Year Institutional Graduation Rates”, 1997; “Institutional Graduation Rates by Academic Selectivity”, 1996). It has also been noted, however, that although aggregated graduation rates point to higher rates among private institutions, large

standard deviations within selectivity levels suggest that some public institutions have higher graduation rates than private institutions of equal selectivity (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Like the effect of institutional selectivity, institutional control appears to exhibit effects that may be explained by the experiences that students are likely to encounter *within* private versus public colleges.

*Size.* Size is unarguably a characteristic that plays a major role in the experiences of students on college and university campuses. Wicker (1973) asserted that when an environment has an excessive number of inhabitants, individuals not engaged will lack commitment and responsibility in maintaining that environment. In the context of higher education, this means that as enrollment numbers on a particular campus increase, students' engagement in and commitment to their institution may diminish. In their reviews of three decades of literature on college student persistence, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) concluded that evidence regarding the impact of institutional size on persistence and attainment is inconclusive. Specifically, evidence suggests that size may negatively and indirectly affect persistence and attainment via college experiences (Wolf-Wendel, Baker, & Morphew, 2000). Indeed, Stoecker and Pascarella (1991) provided support for Wicker's (1973) assertion about the inverse relationship between institutional size and individual involvement and commitment, indicating that size may suppress the social integration of students, thereby negatively influencing their eventual persistence and attainment.

*Level.* Dougherty (1994) points out that, for over four decades, there has been dissension among scholars over the impact that community colleges have on educational opportunity in the United States. While proponents argue that community colleges bring educational opportunity to those who cannot gain access to a four-year institution (Cohen & Brawer, 1989), opponents

argue that those community colleges have actually stratified higher education and diverted disadvantaged students away from the path to attaining a bachelor's degree (Clark, 1960; 1980). Evidence regarding the impact of beginning higher education at a two-year college appears to support, at least in part, both of these arguments. Over half of all students who begin their higher education career at two-year colleges never transfer to a four-year institution (Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn, & Carroll, 2003) and students who initially matriculate at a two-year institution take longer to attain a bachelor's degree than their four-year counterparts (Cuccaro-Alamin, 1997). Furthermore, there is evidence that students who attend community colleges are more likely to lower their aspirations for a bachelor's degree by the end of their second year in college than their four-year peers (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1998). While this evidence suggests that starting college at a two-year institution does indeed have a negative impact on four-year degree completion, consideration of other factors renders this relationship complex. Researchers have found that students who transfer from two- to four-year institutions are as likely as those who begin at a four year college or university to attain a baccalaureate degree (Lee, Mackie-Lewis, and Marks, 1993). Thus, the barriers to transfer from two- to four-year colleges may be a major factor in the decreased levels of baccalaureate degree attainment among two-year college matriculants.

Further complicating the relationships between community college enrollment and persistence outcomes is the fact that there is wide variation in the function of community colleges and the students whom they enroll. A number of researchers (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Lee & Frank, 1990; Nora & Rendón, 1990) suggest that students who successfully transfer to a four-year college are much more likely to resemble their traditional four-year counterparts than those who do not. Accordingly, Pascarella (1999) speculates that community colleges may serve

as a testing ground for some students, on which they can clarify their aspirations and future plans. Therefore, for many of these students, baccalaureate degree attainment may not be the hallmark of success. This consideration has important implications for two-year institutional efforts to improve transfer and baccalaureate degree attainment rates among their students; the extent to which they are able to increase those rates may depend, in a different way than for their four-year counterparts, on many external factors, such as the local economy and the availability of workforce opportunities for those without a baccalaureate degree.

*Racial composition.* There is considerable evidence that African American students who attend historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) persist and graduate at higher rates than their same-race counterparts at PWIs (Astin et al., 1996; Ehrenberg & Rothstein, 1994). While these effects could be indirect, explanations of the causal linkages that result between attendance at HBCUs and persistence are still not definitive. In their review of post-1990 literature, however, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) asserted that existing evidence is consistent with the supportive environment hypothesis, which posits that the supportive institutional environment common among HBCUs provides a more effective educational experience for African American students. Indeed, there is a substantial body of literature documenting the greater satisfaction reported by African American students with the environment at HBCUs than that found at PWIs (Allen, 1992; Astin, 1993; Davis, 1994; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Furthermore, attendance at HBCUs appears to be associated with factors that are considered important determinants of academic success, such as increased interactions with faculty as well as general academic and social growth (Flowers, 2003). The struggles of African American and other racial/ethnic minority students at PWIs are discussed later in this chapter.

### *Research on Student-Institution Connections*

If evidence on the impact of institutional types on persistence and attainment indicate that students' experiences within an institution are more important than the type of institution that they attend, it is no surprise that existing research suggests strong linkages between students' behavior in college and their likelihood of persistence. Existing literature highlights the significance of student involvement in particular types of activities (e.g., peer and faculty interaction) in persistence decisions. This research, in a sense, reaffirms that institutions can structure their environments to increase connections between students and their institutions to maximize educational outcomes.

### *Disentangling Integration, Involvement, and Engagement*

The integration of students into the academic and social subsystems of their campus has long been acknowledged as a critical factor in student persistence and degree completion (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Building on the concept of student integration and recognizing that it has both qualitative and quantitative components, Astin (1984) offered a theory of student involvement, which posits that the quality and quantity of student involvement are critical factors in educational outcomes. Indeed, evidence does suggest that the nature and quality of interactions with faculty and peers is an important predictor of degree completion and subsequent enrollment in graduate school (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Subsequently, Kuh et al. (2005) have provided benchmarks that illuminate the various practices of colleges that are effective at fostering student engagement in educationally purposeful activities. Using the National Survey of Student Engagement, they identified five areas in which colleges and universities promote educationally purposeful engagement, including:



1. *Level of Academic Challenge*—includes the amount of engagement in academically rigorous activity, such as studying, paper composition, and the analysis, synthesis and application of ideas.
2. *Active and Collaborative Learning*—includes active engagement in class discussions and presentations, studying and working on projects with peers, service-learning, and out-of-class academic discussions.
3. *Student-Faculty Interaction*—focuses on academically focused interaction, including discussion of ideas from courses or career plans and collaboration with faculty.
4. *Enriching Educational Experiences*—includes learning foreign languages and engagement in cross-cultural interaction, student organized activity, community-based work, internships, learning communities, and international opportunities.
5. *Supportive Campus Environment*—includes essential academic and social support, as well as the quality of relationships with other students, administrators, faculty, and staff on campus.

The extent to which institutions provide opportunities for these educationally purposeful activities could be a major factor in the educational outcomes of their students.

*Academic and social integration.* There is evidence that academic and social integration are not mutually exclusive, but may be mutually reinforcing behaviors (Braxton et al., 1997). Indeed, various forms of student integration could encompass both categories. For example, a student who engages in an intellectual discussion about politics with peers at the local coffee shop may both be participating in an academically enriching experience and strengthening her or his social bond with those peers. Therefore, research on both forms of integration will be reviewed here simultaneously.

Tinto (1993) suggested that failure of students to integrate into the academic and social subsystems of campus decreases their likelihood of persistence. This proposition underscores the importance of new students finding early in their collegiate experience various communities of which they can become members. Indeed, researchers have recognized the importance of the first year of college (Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005), and there is evidence that early engagement could be particularly important in improving student outcomes (Berger & Milem, 1999). Moreover, most studies examining the influence of general

academic and social integration and involvement support the hypothesis that they positively influence persistence and degree completion (Astin, 1993; Braxton et al., 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1998). The terms academic and social integration, however, are broad and encompass a wide and diverse array of activities in which a student can participate. While much of the research on college student persistence has examined the impact of general forms of involvement, there is also evidence regarding the particularly significant impact of interaction with faculty and peers on persistence.

*Faculty and peer interaction.* A substantial body of research has explored the relationship between specific types of involvement and persistence. Several studies indicate that both actual interaction with faculty (Astin, 1993; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Milem & Berger, 1997) and the perception that faculty members are available and interested in their students (Halpin, 1990) are positively associated with persistence decisions. Faculty interaction appears to be among the most salient of students' collegiate experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that "in the aggregate, interaction with peers is probably *the* most pervasive and powerful force in student persistence and degree completion" (p. 615). Existing evidence supports this claim (Astin, 1993; Eimers & Pike, 1997). Like general academic and social integration, however, peer interaction varies widely in form, duration, and intensity – ranging from watching movies to completing group coursework with fellow students. The generality of the integration (both academic and social) and interaction constructs (both faculty and peer) and the broad range of activities that they encompass result in some level of ambiguity regarding what specific experiences are most effective in increasing persistence and graduation rates. The following section contains a review of the research that has been pursued to

shed light on the impact of specific institutional practices strategically intended to improve, among other things, persistence and degree completion.

*Research on Institutional Programs and Practices*

Indeed, evidence of the impact that particular programmatic interventions have on persistence and degree completion is sparse. In fact, in their review of 100 first- and second-tier peer-reviewed higher education journal articles focused on persistence, Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, and Hossler, (2006) found only eight studies examining the effectiveness of specific programmatic interventions. Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) meta-analysis yielded evidence on the effectiveness of seven particular types of programs and practices commonly employed on college and university campuses, which will be reviewed in this section. What this body of research contributes to addressing the racial/ethnic minority student departure crisis is not only support for the effectiveness of various types of programs but also the confirmation that administrators *can* and *do* structure academic programs and experiences that increase the likelihood of persistence and degree attainment.

*First-year seminars.* First-year seminars vary greatly in their focus, duration, pedagogies, and structure, but they almost always operate like regular classes and aim to increase academic performance, persistence, graduation rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Existing research indicates that first-year seminars are effective at increasing first- to second-year persistence for both White and racial/ethnic minority students (Boudrea & Kromrey, 1994; Fidler & Godwin, 1994; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999). Researchers' estimates of the magnitude of the effect suggest that participants have a seven percentage point advantage over nonparticipants to persist into the second year (Boudrea & Kromrey, 1994; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999).

*Instruction in academic skills.* Another type of programmatic intervention examined in the literature is supplemental instruction that is focused on teaching students the skills needed to succeed in college. A dearth of evidence exists on the impact of such supplemental instruction. There is, however, some evidence of a positive relationship between supplemental instruction and persistence and degree completion (National Center for Supplemental Instruction, 1997).

*Developmental and remedial instruction.* Developmental and remedial instruction provides a method by which students who have received inadequate academic preparation can acquire the skills and knowledge required for college coursework. These developmental programs appear to help underprepared students overcome their insufficient college preparation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). More importantly, researchers have found that participation in such programs increase both first- to second-year persistence (Budny, 1994; Garcia, 2000) and long-term persistence and degree completion (Braley & Ogden, 1997).

*Advising and counseling programs.* Advisors and counselors play a key role in helping students navigate the organizational and academic terrain throughout college. Institutions are now taking the initiative to enhance the nature of advising in various ways, such as including pre-admissions advising and intrusive advising that seeks to encourage or force students to interact with their academic advisors. While evidence on the effectiveness of such initiatives is sparse, the evidence that does exist suggests that they can have a significant impact on persistence and attainment (Metzner, 1989; Seidman, 1991; Steel, Kennedy, & Gordon, 1993). In one of the rare true experimental designs in the study of college students, Seidman (1991) randomly assigned 278 students to treatment and control groups. The treatment group received extensive pre- and post-admissions advising, while the control group went through the standard orientation process. Students in the treatment group were 20% more likely to persist into the

second year than their control group counterparts. Peer mentoring programs (Schwitzer & Thomas, 1998; Thile & Matt, 1995) and bridge programs (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997; Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, M., & Goodwin, 1998) designed to promote college transitions and academic success among underrepresented students have also been found to significantly affect persistence.

*Comprehensive support and retention programs.* Several programs have been created to help underrepresented students adjust to, persist through, and graduate from college. Services that these programs provide include basic study skills development, tutoring, mentoring, cultural events, counseling, workshops, English and writing laboratories, and services for handicapped students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Goodwin (1998) reported that participants in comprehensive support and retention programs are seven percent more likely to persist into the second year. Other studies indicate that these programs have a positive and statistically significant effect on long-term persistence to degree completion (Astin, 1993; Somers, 1996).

*Undergraduate research programs.* The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (1998) advocated the improvement of undergraduate education at America's research universities, stating "undergraduates who enter research universities should understand the unique quality of the institutions and the concomitant opportunities to enter a world of discovery in which they are active participants, not passive receivers" (p. 11). Accordingly, there has been a growth of undergraduate research programs, which Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) state are:

...intended both to provide a window on the intellectual life of the scholar and to promote students' active involvement in their own learning, increased and more meaningful interaction with faculty members, opportunities to apply course-related theory and skills in solving real problems, and a challenging intellectual activity. (p. 406)

Researchers who have tested the impact of undergraduate research programs have found a positive and statistically significant influence of these programs on persistence and degree completion (Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, von Hippel, & Lerner, 1998; Rayman & Brett, 1995).

*Learning communities.* Learning communities consist of often thematically or substantively linked courses that groups of students take together in their constructed peer communities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Researchers have given learning communities considerable recognition for their effectiveness at integrating various aspects of the college experience. In essence, these communities bridge the divide between the academic and social subsystems of the campus. In their meta-analysis of over 300 empirical studies, Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1998) found that learning communities increase engagement in both classroom academic and social activities, and result in greater academic development and supportive peer groups. There is also evidence that these communities have a statistically significant effect on persistence (Tinto, 1997).

#### *Studying Racial/Ethnic Minority Student Persistence*

Researchers have examined the conditional effects of specific factors on the persistence process. While there is evidence that the constructs included in Tinto's (1993) integration model affect the persistence of both White and non-White students (Fox, 1986; Nora & Cabrera, 1996), there is also some indication that various factors may affect students in different ways, depending on their racial/ethnic background (Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Tracey & Sedlecek, 1987). For example, Nora and Cabrera (1996) found that the direct effect of goal and institutional commitment on persistence was significant only for nonminorities. The authors also found that perceptions of prejudice, precollege academic ability, social integration, and intellectual development all exhibited statistically significant indirect effects on persistence for both groups,

while the indirect effects of parental encouragement and academic experiences were statistically significant only for nonminority students. Tracey and Sedlacek (1987) concluded that academic ability was a significant predictor of persistence for White students. In contrast, they concluded that the only significant predictors of persistence for Black students in their model were noncognitive factors, while academic ability and first semester GPA were not statistically significant. Therefore, it is possible, if not probable, that institutional factors that influence persistence decisions could have a differential impact on students from various racial/ethnic backgrounds. Campus environments are one aspect of institutions that are likely to be perceived differently by and could exhibit disparate effects on persistence among students from various racial/ethnic backgrounds.

#### The Racial/Ethnic Minority Experience at Predominantly White Institutions

It has already been noted that existing literature suggests the experiences of African American students at HBCUs differ dramatically from their counterparts at PWIs. Furthermore, there is substantial evidence that racial/ethnic minority students encounter environments at PWIs that they find unwelcoming, hinder their adjustment, and result in their isolation and alienation – factors that may be significant predictors of persistence or departure among these students. This section is focused on the literature examining the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students on predominantly White campuses.

#### *The Minority Student Experience*

Higher education research has highlighted and buttressed the notion that racial/ethnic minority students share similar experiences that differ significantly from their White counterparts (Eimers, 2001; Hurtado, 1992; Lewis et al., 2000; Nora & Cabrera, 1996) at PWIs. Lewis et al. (2000), for example, interviewed 75 African American, Asian American, and Latina/o students at

a predominantly White university and found that minority students encountered contradictory pressures to represent their race and assimilate into the dominant, White, mainstream campus culture. The student participants in their study also reported experiencing significant levels of exclusion and marginality, ignorance and awkwardness in interpersonal communications with White students, resentment and hostility from White students, and marginalization by the faculty and in the curriculum. Nora and Cabrera (1996) found that racial/ethnic minority students were more likely to perceive higher levels of prejudice and discrimination than their White peers. Moreover, it has been noted that students of color are more likely than their White peers to experience pressure to conform to racial/ethnic stereotypes (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993) concluded that stresses associated with minority status can present barriers to the adjustment of minority students to predominantly White campuses. While this literature highlights the negative experiences that non-White students encounter at PWIs, additional insight into the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students' experiences can be gained by understanding differences in the experiences of various racial/ethnic minority student subpopulations.

#### *African American Students*

The bulk of the research on minority college students' experiences focuses on the experiences of African American students. Specifically, the literature focused on African American students' experiences has followed two lines of inquiry. First, scholars have underscored differences in the experiences of African American students at HBCUs and their African American peers at PWIs. Second, higher education researchers have examined the challenges that African American students encounter at historically White institutions.



In 1982, Hemmons published a study comparing the experiences of Black students at a HBCU and a PWI, which yielded several compelling findings. Hemmons reported that students who attended the HBCU were significantly more satisfied than their PWI counterparts with several aspects of the collegiate experience, including recreational activity, the curriculum, and the academics on their campuses. Moreover, students at the HBCU were twice as likely as their counterparts attending the PWI to feel that they could talk to their teachers on a friendly basis and that their institution prepared them for membership in American society. Hemmons (1982) concluded that at PWIs:

The Black student not only has to learn what MC2 or H2O equals, but how to adjust to a totally different social environment in which he or she is at best tolerated, at worst openly ridiculed, and at no time ever really wanted. The Black student is the butt of the liberals' good intentions and the brunt of the bigots' malice. He or she is the target of every remedial studies program and the conspicuous dart for every display of compliance with some equal opportunity proclamation. Needed but not wanted, there but not seen, chosen but not selected – Black students' presence is felt but their voices are not heard. (p. 400)

Since Hemmons' study, researchers have further illuminated the various ways in which African American students attending HBCUs enjoy an advantage over their PWI counterparts. Students at PWIs encounter less supportive environments, more frequent racial discrimination, lower levels of institutional support, greater alienation and isolation, more negative relationships with faculty, greater disengagement in educationally purposeful activities, and lower levels of satisfaction with their campus than their counterparts at PWIs (Allen, 1992; Davis, 1994; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). As already mentioned, these disparities in the environments encountered and the wide array of variation in the experiences of African Americans who attend historically Black and predominantly White institutions could partially explain the significant influence of attending a HBCU on student persistence outcomes.

Another body of literature has aimed to unraveling the complex nature of the experiences that African American students encounter at PWIs. This research has, by and large, elucidated the unwelcoming nature of environments encountered by African American students at PWIs, which can function to taint the collegiate experiences and ultimately lead to the institutional or system departure of these students. While there is evidence that African American students experience overt forms of prejudice and discrimination, such as racist comments or jokes and harassment from campus police (Feagin, 1992), many of the negative effects of being African American at a PWI appear to be subtle and covert forms of discrimination. Perhaps the most salient recurring theme in this literature is the sense of alienation and isolation that African Americans at PWIs experience (Davis, 1994; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fries-Britt, 2002). Existing research on African American students at PWIs also underscores the significance of stereotypes in the lives of those students (Guiffrida, 2005; Wallace & Bell, 1999).

#### *Latina/o Students*

Lewis et al. (2000) reported that the dominant focus on Black-White relations in discussions of campus environments can be problematic for other racial/ethnic minority groups. Higher education researchers have also given relatively little attention to Latina/o and Asian students in higher education research. In comparison to the literature on the African American experience at PWIs, far fewer researchers have attempted to understand the experiences of other racial/ethnic groups on predominantly White campuses. Some studies do, however, report obstacles faced by Latina/o students at PWIs (Attinasi, 1989; Rendón, 1994; Gonzalez, 2003). In a study focused on the role of campus culture in the experiences of minority students, Gonzalez (2003) identified three elements of a predominantly White campus culture: the epistemological, physical, and social. He concluded that all three of these elements of the dominant culture

conveyed messages of unimportance, devaluation, and lack of belonging to the Chicano students who participated in his study. Helm, Sedlacek, and Prieto (1998) found that, similar to African American students, Latina/o students' comfort with their own culture was positively correlated with their overall satisfaction. Another illustrative qualitative study focusing on the experiences of Latina/o students has helped shed light on the process by which Latina/o students adjust to predominantly White campuses. Attinasi (1989) found that the construction of *cognitive maps* allowed Latina/o students to position themselves in and make sense of their campus environments. Helm et al.'s finding of the importance of Latina/o students' home cultures and Attinasi's concept of cognitive maps are important, because they support the notion that these students can successfully navigate their newly encountered environment without adopting the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the dominant campus culture.

#### *Asian American Students*

The limited literature on Asian American students in higher education is unequivocal on one point: Asian American students are often excluded from higher education research, policy, and practice. Specifically, two major themes emerge in the literature relevant to the study of Asian American college students. First, the prevalence of the *model minority myth* and the common aggregation of data on Asian Americans have both worked to spread critical overgeneralizations and misconceptions about the Asian American college student population. Second, these misconceptions have led to the systematic exclusion of Asian Americans in higher education, leading to negative ramifications, particularly for underrepresented Asian subpopulations.

The *model minority myth* describes the common notion that the average Asian American student exhibits unparalleled academic achievement and educational attainment. National

longitudinal data provide some support for this notion, indicating that Asian college students enjoy baccalaureate degree attainment rates higher than their African American, Latina/o, and White peers (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002). It is evident, however, that these frequently reported success rates are just as much a function of the methods of reporting data as they are a result of the actual outcomes enjoyed by Asian American students. When data on Asian Americans is disaggregated by ethnic origin, it is apparent that there are vast disparities in the educational attainment levels among various Asian American subpopulations (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993). For example, according to the U. S. Census Bureau (1993), in 1990, 49% of the Asian Indian population had attained a bachelor's degree, compared to only five percent of the Laotian and Hmong populations.

These common model minority misperceptions have been noted as possible causes of the disinterest in the success of Asian American college students (Kim, Rendón, & Valadez, 1998). Such disinterest is manifested in the various ways in which Asian American students are systematically neglected from higher education policy and practice (Yeh, 2002). While the research on Asian American students is sparse, it has been noted that these students, like their African American counterparts, can and do encounter unsupportive and unwelcoming campus environments at PWIs (Osajima 1995; Alvarez, 2002). The various elements of these unwelcoming environments include a lack of resources for Asian American students, discrimination, chilly climates, salient stereotypes, and a lack of support for their adjustment and integration into their college campus. Furthermore, Southeast Asians, who have historically exhibited academic achievement levels below their East Asian and Asian Indian counterparts, are often the most victimized by misconceptions of Asian Americans. Southeast Asian students are underrepresented on their college campuses and can be victims of alienation not only from other

racial/ethnic groups but also from other Asian subpopulations who exhibit higher levels of academic achievement (Lee, 1994). Reviewed together, literature focused on racial/ethnic minority students indicates that these students encounter unique experiences resulting from the different and complex interconnections between their cultures and the dominant White culture of their respective campuses while also experiencing many similar difficulties and challenges that accompany minority status on predominantly White campuses.

### Campus Environments and College Student Persistence

Tinto's (1993) theory, which has driven much of the research on college student departure, and the constructs within it have received criticism for their inability to adequately explain minority student attrition (Braxton et al., 1997; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tierney, 1999). Two major considerations that have historically been left out of research employing Tinto's theory as a framework are differences between the experiences of majority and minority students and the salient influence of campus environments in students' behavior and experiences. In this section, I will examine the literature focused on understanding campus environments in order to highlight the centrality of environments in studying racial/ethnic disparities in student departure.

#### *Understanding Campus Environments*

Approximately two decades ago, Moos (1986) asserted that "arrangement of environments is perhaps the most powerful technique we have for influencing human behavior" (p. 4). With regard to promoting student success, institutions of higher education are unable to alter the demographic characteristics of their students and have minimal influence on factors external to the institution (e.g., family and friends) or students' precollege academic preparation. Institutions do, however, have considerable control over their campus environments, which have a salient and continuous influence on their students, faculty, and administrators.

Despite the pervasiveness of campus environments in the undergraduate experience (Kuh, 2001/2002; Strange & Banning, 2002), their relationship to student outcomes is very difficult to comprehend and delineate. First, it is difficult to operationalize environmental factors, such as physical environments, due to the wide array of environments encountered by students on college campuses. Second, it is possible that much of the influence of campus environments on student outcomes is, like other institutional characteristics, primarily indirect. Indeed, there is some evidence suggesting that campus environments exhibit significant negative indirect influence on student departure (Nora & Cabrera, 1996, Cabrera et al., 1999). Moreover, the disaggregated effects of environmental influences may be trivial, while their cumulative impact could yield extreme power. For example, a Black or Latina/o student could witness several occasions where it becomes stated or implied that she is a product of affirmative action rather than individual motivation and academic ability; these recurring experiences, while having a trivial immediate impact, may have a cumulative effect that eventually leads to her internalizing a self-conceptualization of inadequacy and premature departure. Third, the interaction between students and their institutions is ambiguous and complex (Kuh & Love, 2000). The values, beliefs, and assumptions, for example, that make up the fabric of a particular campus's culture may exclude an individual while exhibiting such subtle influences that the individual herself is unaware of or unable to articulate the ways in which those cultural characteristics have influenced her experience. Given the enormous reliance on students' self-reported data in higher education research, such subtlety could render it difficult to identify significant relationships between environments and student outcomes.

Recognizing the need for an integrated perspective of environments, Strange and Banning (2001) constructed a typology of campus environments. Their typology consisted of four

environmental aspects of college and university campuses: (a) *constructed environments*; (b) *human aggregates*; (c) *organizational environments*, and; (d) *physical environments* (see Chapter 1 for definitions). It should be noted, however, that these four types of environments, although distinct, are not mutually exclusive. Physical artwork or statues on a campus, for example, could be considered part of the physical environment as well as the constructed environment, as they can constitute artifacts of an institution's culture.

### *Distinguishing Campus Climate and Culture*

The overlap of the various forms of environments can make it difficult to distinguish particular features of a campus's environment from others. Most of the literature on the impact of campus environments has focused on *constructed environments*, such as campus climates and cultures. These constructed environments, therefore, are the main focus of this section. Due to the fact that the terms climate and culture are often used interchangeably, identifying and articulating the differences between those two concepts is a critical distinction (Bauer, 1998). Moreover, understanding these concepts and distinguishing them from one another is useful in the examination of interactions between students and their institutions. Table 1 contains a juxtaposition of the two concepts and their components.

Several scholars have defined and demarcated the components of organizational culture (Kuh & Whitt, 1998; Schein, 2005; Schoenberg, 1992). Kuh and Whitt (1988) examined the concept of culture in the context of higher education and defined it as the "collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in higher education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions" (p.12-13). Furthermore, culture is, in part, a function of historical events (Schoenberg, 1992) and is deeply embedded and difficult to change (Peterson

Table 1: *Primary Distinctions of Culture and Climate*

<i>Organizational Characteristic</i>	<i>Culture</i>	<i>Climate</i>
Basis of concept	Deeply shared values, assumptions, beliefs, or ideologies of members	Common member perceptions of attitudes toward and feelings about organizational life
Primary conceptual source	Anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and organizational behavior	Cognitive and social psychology and organizational behavior
Organizational perspective	Holistic primary emergent patterns	Various pervasive organizational patterns, often focused on specific arenas
Major purposes or concepts	<i>Instrumental</i> (is): social interpretation, behavior control, and adaptation <i>Interpretive</i> (has): metaphor or meaning	<i>Extrinsic</i> : member control <i>Intrinsic</i> : member motivation
Primary elements or Emphasis	Superordinate meaning	Common views of participants
Primary values or use	Identifies uniqueness in relation to other organizations	Comparison among organizations or over time
Major characteristics	Embedded or enduring	Current patterns or atmosphere
Nature of change	Cataclysmic or long-term and intensive efforts	Various more malleable direct or indirect measures

*Source:* Peterson and Spencer (1990).

& Spencer, 1990). Whereas campus culture refers to the *deeply embedded* patterns of values, beliefs, and assumptions, campus climate has been defined as the “*current* perceptions, attitudes, and expectations that define the institution and its members” (Bauer, 1998, p. 2). In contrast to campus cultural characteristics that are deeply entrenched in the history and fabric of an organization and difficult to alter, aspects of a campus climate are relatively malleable and more frequently changing.

### *Perspectives of Campus Climate*

A critical component to analyzing the role of campus environments in shaping students’ departure decisions is an understanding of the process by which environments can influence



behavior. In 1979, Moos developed a social/ecological model in an attempt to explain the influence of organizational climates on student development. He posited that personal (e.g., sociodemographic variables, expectations, personality, and coping skills) and environmental (e.g., physical, organizational, human aggregate, and climate) factors influence students' appraisal of their environment, their perceptions of potential coping responses, and their actual response to that environment. Students' responses determine the efforts that they make to adapt to or cope with their environment, which subsequently affects those students' stability and change. Baird (2000) applied the *appraisal* construct in Moos' (1979) model to Tinto's constructs of academic and social integration in order to explain how students' perceptions of the academic and social subsystems of the campus could be a key factor in their willingness and efforts to integrate into those subsystems. That is, students' appraisals of their campus's academic and social environments could be a central factor in their decisions to participate in various academic and social activities on their respective campus. Not only does Baird's adaptation highlight the exclusion of important environmental variables in existing departure theory, but it also underscores the key linkages between campus environments, students' perceptions of those environments, and students' subsequent college experiences.

Central to Moos' (1979) model are both the actual environment and the environment as it is perceived by the individual student. Therefore, while Moos' social/ecological model helps clarify the potential relationships between campus environments and the experiences of students, it also can potentially further complicate our understanding of what constitutes campus climate. Naylor, Pritchard, and Ilgen (1980) addressed this potential problem by developing a schema to understand the various levels of an organization's climate. They asserted that the actual environmental attributes that influence students' perceptions (level one) is translated into

individual perceptions of those organizational attributes (level two), which in turn define the psychological climate construct (level three) that represents the degree of *friendliness* that the individual attaches to the climate. Baird (2000) noted that levels two and three are often conflated in student departure research. Nevertheless, Naylor et al.'s (1980) model highlights the complexity of the climate construct and the importance of considering both external and internalized aspects of campus environments.

Research testing the validity of Tinto's (1993) model often measures academic and social integration using *actual behaviors* of students in the academic and social subsystems of their respective campus. Hurtado and Carter (1997), however, pointed out that the original empirical definition of *perceived social integration* (Spady, 1971) included a psychological dimension that is separate from and can interact with students' actual involvement in the academic and social arenas of campus life. The distinction between the students' psychological sense of affiliation with an institution and their actual participation in academic and social activities is ambiguous (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Sociological researchers, however, have distinguished between *perceived cohesion* (i.e., social cohesion perceived by the individual) and *observed cohesion* (i.e., researchers definition of what constitutes cohesion) (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). One important implication of this distinction is that it is likely that what constitutes a sufficient degree of involvement in a college or university for developing a commitment to that institution may vary, depending on personal characteristics of the student.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) recognized the inadequacy of predetermined measures of participation in explaining racial/ethnic minority student integration and the importance of subjectivity inherent in studying complex constructs that measure an individual's sense of social cohesion in a community. Building on Bollen and Hoyle's (1990) concept of *perceived cohesion*,

they constructed a structural equation model aimed at understanding how racial/ethnic minority students develop a *sense of belonging*. Sense of belonging refers to the extent to which a student feels like they are a part of the campus community and is very similar to Naylor et al.'s (1980) psychological climate construct. Furthermore, students' sense of belonging is likely to be, in part, a direct function of their appraisal of the campus environment. In sum, literature on organizational and campus climate underscores the importance of the role of campus environments, students' appraisals of those environments, and the resulting sense of belonging from those appraisals in subsequent collegiate experiences.

#### *Cultural Perspectives of Student Adjustment and Persistence*

A key concept in Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration is that students must become integrated into the cultural milieu of their respective college or university in order to increase their likelihood of persistence. Kuh and Love (2000) outlined eight cultural propositions based on the work of Tinto (1993) and others (Attinasi, 1989; Tierney, 1999) in order to provide a new and useful perspective for viewing college student departure. Central to these cultural propositions is the notion that incongruence between a student's home (i.e., cultures of origin) and campus cultures (i.e., cultures of immersion) is inversely related to likelihood of persistence and that students who experience considerable incongruity between home and campus cultures must become acclimated to the dominant campus culture or engage in one or more ethnic enclaves or subcultures (Kuh & Love, 2000; Tinto, 1993). Likelihood of persistence is hypothesized to be negatively related to the amount of time spent in one's cultures of origin and positively related to the intensity and extensity of connections that students foster with their academic program and peer groups. While these propositions provide a useful framework for

viewing the role of culture in student adjustment, engagement, and persistence, there is some disagreement over their underlying assumptions.

Tinto's (1993) cultural propositions are, in part, an extension of Van Gennep's (1960) *Rites of Passage*, which explicate the process by which individuals within a culture move from one status to another. Borrowing this concept of passage, Tinto (1993) posited that students must sever both physical and social ties to the communities from which they come in order to dissociate from their home cultures and integrate into their respective campus culture. Tierney (1999) criticized Tinto's assumption that students must leave behind their cultural heritage and called it *cultural suicide*. Alternatively, he advocates a form of *cultural integrity*, propelled by "those school-based programs and teaching strategies that engage students' racial/ethnic backgrounds in a positive manner toward the development of more relevant pedagogies and learning activities (p. 84). The importance of cultural integrity is supported by research finding racial/ethnic minority students to be more successful if they are secure in their own traditional cultural heritage and identity (Helm et al., 1998; Tierney, 1992).

Inherent in Tierney's concept of *cultural integrity*, is the notion that students should not be required to shed their cultural heritage, but instead can successfully become acclimated to the culture of their campus while remaining a part of their traditional culture. This view rejects both cultural rejection (of the dominant campus culture) and cultural assimilation (into the campus culture), in favor of *bicultural socialization*, whereby students successfully become simultaneously socialized and engaged in two cultures (Valentine, 1971). Presuming that racial/ethnic minority individuals are raised in a culture incongruent with the majority culture, de Anda (1984) outlined six factors that affect socialization of minorities into the majority culture: (a) degree of overlap between the two cultures; (b) cultural translators, mediators, and models in

the majority culture; (c) corrective feedback provided to the minority individual; (d) problem solving approach of the minority individual; (e) the minority individual's degree of bilingualism, and; (f) the degree of incongruence between the minority individual's appearance and those in the majority culture. Rendón, Jalamo, and Nora (2000) offered this concept of bicultural socialization as a useful tool in examining the adjustment, experiences, and outcomes of racial/ethnic minority students on predominantly White college and university campuses.

#### *Evidence on the Impact of Campus Climate*

The adjustment of a student to their respective campus environment is an important predictor of subsequent persistence (Tinto, 1993). Evidence suggests that perceptions of racial prejudice and tension can hinder the adjustment of minority students to the campus environment (Fisher & Hartmann, 1995; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996, Steele, 1999). For example, using nationally representative data, Hurtado and Carter (1997) tested the impact of a hostile campus climate on Latina/o students' *sense of belonging*. They found that hostile climates exhibited a significant and negative effect on students' sense of belonging. The importance of these findings is further illuminated by evidence suggesting that racism and discrimination are psychological and social stressors that can present barriers to adjustment for minority students and ultimately lead to psychological distress and poor academic performance (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) also found that discrimination has a significant impact on the commitment of students to their respective institutions.

A number of researchers have examined the impact of campus climates and uncovered evidence that those climates can be an important factor in persistence and degree completion. Measures of campus climate, which have been found to be statistically significant predictors of

persistence and degree completion, include diversity in teaching, institutional orientation to diversity, and perceptions of racial discrimination and prejudice (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, & Hagedorn, 1999; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). For example, using structural equation modeling techniques, Nora and Cabrera (1996) tested the impact of prejudice and discrimination on the constructs included in Tinto's (1993) model. They found that prejudice and discrimination directly affected the persistence of White students and indirectly affected the persistence of both White and minority students via social integration and intellectual development. Nora and Cabrera's (1996) prejudice construct also exhibited statistically significant and indirect effects on persistence via academic experiences, goal commitment, and institutional commitment for nonminority students.

#### *The Role of Institutional Culture in Persistence*

While campus culture is often mentioned in the higher education literature, it is rarely the focus of systematic empirical inquiry. Whether due to the ubiquity and complexity of the concept of campus culture or its intangible and elusive nature, with few exceptions (Gonzalez, 2003; Kuh, 2001/2002; Kuh & Love, 2000; Kuh et al., 2005; Tierney, 1992; 1999) campus culture has been given relatively little attention in the scholarly persistence literature. Using qualitative concept design methods, Gonzalez (2003) identified three elements of campus culture in which Chicano students experienced contradictions that contributed to their marginalization and alienation on a predominantly White campus. The *social element* was used to refer to the system of cultural representation that manifests in the makeup of the student body and the power relations that exist between the various groups that inhabit the campus. Second, the *physical element* of culture was defined as the cultural representations that exist in the use of physical space on campus, campus architecture, sculptures, and other physical symbols. And, lastly,

Gonzalez called the cultural representation of knowledge that is exchanged on campus the *epistemological element* of the campus culture. These three elements were identified as conveying a message of devaluation and lack of belonging to Chicano students on the campus under examination. Gonzalez (2003) concluded that an inadequate representation of Chicano culture on campus led to several difficulties for the Chicano students in his study.

Gonzalez (2003) also identified several sources of support for Chicano students on the campus that he studied. They included Chicano student organizations, symbols representing Chicano culture, Chicano studies faculty, literature focusing on Chicano culture, and students' families. These findings reaffirm the importance of cultural integrity (Tierney, 1999) and validation in the lives of students who come from cultures incongruent with the dominant culture of predominantly White campuses. The finding that family represented a source of support for the students in Gonzalez's study supports earlier assertions that expecting or requiring students to separate from their cultures of origin can have negative and harmful effects (Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Empirical research examining the influences of subcultures on the experiences and outcomes of racial/ethnic minority students is also limited. Kuh and Love (2000) suggested that subcultures, however, are a critical factor in student adjustment and persistence. Specifically, they argued that students who come from cultures incongruent with the dominant campus culture must engage in one or more subcultures. Subcultures can exist on college campuses in many different forms. Two of the most common forms of subcultures in which students engage in higher education are student organizations and academic departments (Guiffrida, 2003; Kiang, 2002).

Providing support for the salience of student organizations in the minority student experience, Guiffrida (2003) found, regardless of mission or type, such organizations work to facilitate social integration among African American students. Students in Guiffrida's investigation also reported that the most important reasons for participating in those organizations were opportunities that such participation provided for establishing connections with faculty members, giving back to the African American community, and engaging with other African American students. Alternatively, students from predominantly White home communities and high schools experienced the most adjustment difficulty as a result of their interaction with other African American students for the first time, indicating that there may be fundamental cultural differences in the dynamics underlying social involvement at PWIs among racial/ethnic minority students from predominantly White and predominantly non-White precollege cultures.

#### Holistic Qualitative Inquiries into High-Performing Institutions

While literature on student departure can be divided into many separate categories, all of those categories are relevant to the persistence process for racial/ethnic minority students. Higher education researchers have recently begun to use a more holistic philosophical perspective to examine colleges with high persistence and graduation rates in order to determine what high-performing institutions are doing to facilitate success among their students. These studies have helped produce a more holistic picture of how institutions can and do facilitate engagement, persistence, and degree attainment. As will become apparent, what is missing in the literature is a comprehensive and coherent set of environmental conditions and institutional practices that contribute to high and equitable racial/ethnic minority persistence rates at high-performing predominantly White institutions that may vary by level and control.



### *A Study of High-Performers*

Based on prior research illuminating institutional conditions that promote success on college campuses, The Education Trust (Carey, 2005) produced a report identifying four components of effective colleges and interviewed leaders at a number of colleges and universities with high graduation rates, relative to their peers, to understand how these components manifest themselves effectively in institutional practice. The investigation provides a glimpse of how these high-performing institutions: (a) create strong connections between students and their institution; (b) maintain a commitment to undergraduate teaching and learning; (c) utilize data to understand and improve the success of their students, and; (d) used leadership to alter their culture toward fulfilling their educational goals. The Education Trust researchers' findings, however, were limited to four-year institutions and lacked a focus on particular student populations. Furthermore, they used a framework consisting of four predefined institutional factors that they sought to understand in greater detail, rather than attempting to inductively understand what those high-performing institutions were doing to promote student success, which limited the scope of the study. The report (Carey, 2005) that contained the findings also failed to outline in detail the methodological strategy used to identify institutions, identify participants, and collect and analyze the data. The report, however, does provide a useful tool for institutions that are pursuing the goal of improving institutions graduation rates.

### *Documentation of Effective Educational Practices*

In perhaps the most comprehensive effort aimed at *Documenting Effective Educational Practices (DEEP)* that contribute to the effectiveness of high-performing colleges and universities, Kuh et al. (2005) conducted an analysis of 20 institutions that exhibited higher-than-predicted student engagement and graduation rates. They identified six cultural characteristics

common among those 20 institutions that helped foster educationally purposeful engagement and success on their campuses. First, the DEEP colleges had enacted missions (i.e., what the institutions *does*) that were congruent with their espoused missions (i.e., what the institutions *says it does*), and an institutional philosophy that guided thought and behavior in pursuit of that mission. In fact, Kuh et al., (2005) noted that faculty, administrators, and students at the DEEP institutions referred to their institutional mission in discussing their behavior and the functioning of their institution. Second, DEEP colleges exhibited “an unshakable focus on student learning” that was manifest in their institutional policies and practices (p. 65). Third, the high-performing colleges were conscious of their physical setting and utilized their physical characteristics to propel them toward fulfillment of their educational purpose. A fourth cultural characteristic of the DEEP colleges was that they provided a coherent educational experience, whereby they fostered acculturation (e.g., they teach students institutional values, requirements for success, how to access services that maximize success) and ensured alignment (e.g., they make available the resources that students need to achieve that success) of resources to meet students’ needs. The last two salient cultural characteristics of the DEEP colleges were their unwavering efforts to improve and their commitment to shared responsibility for the quality of the education they provided and the success enjoyed by their students.

The DEEP project made an invaluable contribution to the student development and persistence literature by painting a comprehensive picture of how institutions can foster cultures and programs that promote success among their students. Baum and Milem (2006), however, noted that Kuh et al. (2005) did not include two-year colleges in their analysis, which limits the audience who can utilize their findings. Nevertheless, the authors asserted that many of the lessons learned from the DEEP project are worthy of consideration for application at two-year

institutions. Baum and Milem (2006) also pointed out that the authors did not control for certain input characteristics of the students attending the institutions included in the site selection process. In addition to these two limitations, conditional (i.e., by race/ethnicity) engagement and persistence rates were not reported as a primary factor in selecting the DEEP institutions. Therefore, while DEEP institutions exhibited higher than expected overall engagement and graduation rates, disaggregation of these institutions' six-year graduation rates by race/ethnicity indicates the predominantly White institutions (i.e., institutions with an enrollment that is over 50 percent White) included in the DEEP sample have, on average, a persistence rate that is 11% higher among White students than their Black and Latina/o counterparts (see Table 2).

Table 2: *White-underrepresented minority gaps in six-year graduation rates among DEEP colleges*

NAME	TYPE	WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC	ASIAN	GAP:PW	GAP:PMI
<b>ALVERNO</b>	MA/PRI/PWI	51.6	36.4	10.0	NA	-20.5	
<b>CAL STATE-MB</b>	MA/PUB/PWI	36.2	9.1	41.0	10.0		0.1
<b>EVERGREEN</b>	MA/PUB/PWI	52.3	NA	30.8	50.0	-2.3	
<b>FAYETTEVILLE</b>	DOC/PUB/HBCU	21.9	36.2	NA	30.0		13.8
<b>GEORGE MASON</b>	DOC/PUB/PWI	51.9	50.2	49.0	59.0	-3.1	
<b>GONZAGA</b>	MA/PRI/PWI	77.3	NA	70.0	70.4	-10.6	
<b>LONGWOOD</b>	MA/PUB/PWI	64.7	55.9	55.0	57.9	-9.8	
<b>MACALESTER</b>	BA/PRI/PWI	83.5	80.0	53.8	63.2	-15.9	
<b>MIAMI</b>	DOC/PUB/PWI	81.1	61.2	71.2	86.7	-16.1	
<b>SEWANEE</b>	BA/PRI/PWI	79.3	76.9	NA	NA	-14.6	
<b>SWEET BRIAR</b>	BA/PRI/PWI	66.7	NA	NA	NA	4.7	
<b>UNIV OF KA</b>	DOC/PUB/PWI	59.0	39.1	41.1	56.1	-19.0	
<b>UNIV OF MAINE</b>	BA/PUB/PWI	58.6	NA	NA	NA	-4.8	
<b>UNIV OF MICH</b>	DOC/PUB/PWI	89.5	68.6	78.6	89.8	-18.4	
<b>UNIV OF TX (EP)</b>	DOC/PUB/HSI	22.2	27.5	26.7	37.5		4.5
<b>URSINUS</b>	BA/PRI/PWI	79.6	67.9	NA	81.8	-15.7	
<b>WABASH</b>	BA/PRI/PWI	69.5	56.3	41.7	NA	-19.5	
<b>WHEATON-MA</b>	BA/PRI/PWI	75.8	66.7	78.6	69.2	-3.9	
<b>WINSTON-SALEM</b>	BA/PUB/HBCU	10.5	45.3	NA	NA		34.6
<b>WOFFORD</b>	BA/PRI/PWI	80.6	70.4	NA	NA	-8.7	
<b>Avg. Grad. Rate</b>		<b>60.59</b>	<b>52.98</b>	<b>49.81</b>	<b>58.58</b>		
<b>Avg. Grad. Rate At PWIs</b>		<b>57.86</b>	<b>46.17</b>	<b>47.75</b>	<b>55.7</b>		
<b>AVG. GAP</b>						<b>-11.1</b>	<b>17.7</b>

Note: a negative (-) gap indicates lower six-year graduation rates among underrepresented minority (Black, Latina/o, and Native American) groups. Data source: Institutional percentages are taken from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Gaps in graduation rates between White and underrepresented minority students were calculated using the Education Trust's College Results Online comparison system.

*Exploration of High-Performing Institutions Serving Low-Income Students*

Muraskin and Lee (2004), researchers from the Pell Institute, set out to identify the institutional factors that contributed to the high persistence and graduation rates at ten institutions with high concentrations of low-income students. Their analysis yielded four main commonalities across the high-performing institutions. First, the institutions provided their students with a personalized educational experience in which faculty and administrators have a direct role in monitoring and helping students. Second, the ten institutions maintained a commitment to undergraduate education, including a dedicated faculty and educational innovations such as freshman skills courses. Third, eight of the ten institutions were located in remote areas in which the campus was the focus of students' academic and social lives. Lastly, the campuses maintained a hospitable policy environment, which included recruiting students with potential to succeed and considerable attention given to student retention. While the findings of the Pell researchers are informative, the study has been criticized for its lack of methodological rigor. Bailey et al. (2006) noted that the failure of the researchers to control for institutional resources and students' input characteristics – aside from socioeconomic background – prevent one from confidently concluding that the success of those institutions was attributable to the institutional characteristics that they identified, as opposed to the factors for which they failed to control.

*A Study of High- and Low-Impact Community Colleges*

Asserting that successful practice identified at four-year colleges may not be sufficient for implementation at two-year colleges with open admission policies, Bailey et al. (2006) conducted a case study of six Florida community colleges in an attempt to document effective practices for two-year institutions. Controlling for a number of student characteristics, they

selected three community colleges that exhibited high success rates and three community colleges that exhibited low success rates among underrepresented minority students – with their definition of success including degree completion, transfer, and three-year persistence rates. The aim was to compare the institutional characteristics of high- and low-performers to identify what factors contributed to the disparities in success between these two groups. The researchers uncovered several compelling findings. First, the institutional focus on retention was more advanced at the high-performing community colleges. The environments and activities at the high-performing colleges appeared to be more inclusive for minority students than their low-performing counterparts. Third, the three high-impact colleges offered specialized retention support to their racial/ethnic minority students. Fourth, the highly effective community colleges had better developed, aligned, and integrated support services for new student adjustment and advising. Finally, the high-performers placed more emphasis on support for faculty development.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this study can be separated into two different and complimentary dimensions. For the first dimension, in response to the historical exclusion of racial/ethnic minority students in persistence research, two philosophical perspectives – *Critical Race Theory* and an *Anti-Deficit Framework* – guided the approach taken to justify the focus on minority students’ experiences at institutions with high-minority success rates. The second dimension consisted of theoretical perspectives highlighting the economic, cultural, and social conditions that, in part, shape racial/ethnic minority students’ decisions about their educationally purposeful engagement and persistence.

### *Critical Race Theory*

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an important perspective for understanding the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students in higher education. CRT challenges notions of colorblindness, merit, and racial equality and can be used to elucidate the inequitable distribution of power and privilege within society and social institutions (Bell, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). If cultural and racial exclusion is a part of the cultural fabric of American colleges and universities (Taylor, 2000), CRT can aid in illuminating the ways by which prevalent institutional policies and practices perpetuate racial inequity (Villalpando, 2004) as well as the ways those policies and practices can contribute to diminishing such systemic inequities. Specifically, counternarratives convey stories of individuals from marginalized groups and present an alternative to the frequently told and often universally accepted narratives of those in the dominant majority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The counternarratives provided by students of color at the GEMS institutions are central to this study. In the context of the aforementioned historical exclusion of the voices of racial/ethnic minority students from higher education research and practice, the counternarratives of students of color can provide a unique lens for viewing the impact various institutional factors have on the experiences of those students.

### *An Anti-Deficit Framework of Minority Student Achievement*

In addition to CRT, an *Anti-Deficit Framework* was employed in order to guide the proposed inquiry. Much of the literature on minority students' experiences at PWIs focuses on the challenges and barriers that those students face, which could be a stimulus for the perpetuation of their disengagement and institutional departure. In the context of studying African American male achievement, Fries-Britt (1998) noted that a disproportionate focus on

the underachievement of African American students can work to foster expectations of underachievement among that population. Valencia (1995) noted that the dominance of deficit frame results in a *blame the victim* way of thinking in which failure among students is a result of “alleged internal deficiencies” (p. xi). Applying deficit thinking to minority student persistence, one can hypothesize that a disproportionate focus on the challenges that cause student departure among minority students may result in the acceptance of those challenges and the expectation of high racial/ethnic minority student attrition rates, both among educators and minority students.

Higher education scholars have recently proposed alternative frameworks for the examination of outcomes among racial/ethnic minority and other underrepresented students. In response to the recognition for a need to investigate the factors that contribute to the success of African American men in college, Harper (2005) has proposed an Anti-Deficit Framework for Minority Student Achievement, which can be employed to understand how various social agents can act to facilitate the achievement of racial/ethnic minority students. For the purposes of this study, I applied the anti-deficit framework at the institutional level to underscore the benefits of focusing on institutional factors that foster positive outcomes among racial/ethnic minority students at the GEMS colleges.

### *The Three Forms of Capital*

Theories of capital can provide invaluable frameworks for understanding the perceptions, behavior, experiences, and educational outcomes of racial/ethnic minority students. Thus, economic, cultural, and social capital will constitute another important component in the theoretical framework of the current study. Student finances play an important role in the decisions that students make about whether to attend or persist through college. Becker’s (1964) theory of human capital provides a useful framework for viewing how financial conditions may

shape the decisions students make about whether to work part- or full-time, enroll in coursework part- or full-time, attend a particular institution, major in a particular field, spend time engaging in educationally purposeful activities in and out of class, and eventually persist or depart. Likewise, this theory can aid in the examination of how institutions can shape financial conditions that are conducive to student success by various methods, such as increasing affordability through institutional need-based grants or encouraging on-campus employment. Thus, the current study included an examination of how various environmental conditions and institutional policies, programs, and practices at the GEMS campuses shaped students' financial conditions.

Cultural capital is also a useful tool in understanding the dispositions that shape students' choices, behaviors, and outcomes. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital can be used to understand how the cultural backgrounds of students from historically underrepresented populations limit the amount of cultural knowledge to which students have access, thereby limiting their choices and opportunities. The concept of habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) provides a useful lens through which to view the individuals as, in part, a product of their culture and to understand how the (in)congruence between students' home cultures and dominant campus culture can be a major factor in racial/ethnic minority students' adjustment, engagement, and persistence in college. Thus, the current framework takes into consideration how the campus cultures of the GEMS colleges validate or exclude students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Finally, social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) can be used to understand the process by which students' social networks play a fundamental role in racial/ethnic minority students' experiences and outcomes. That is, social capital offers a framework that can be used to view how students' access to various resources is partially a function of the social networks with which they are



connected on their respective campuses. Therefore, the current study will examine role of connections with administrators, faculty members, and peers to understand how those relationships shape students access to information, opportunities, and support services.

### *Educationally Purposeful Engagement*

A substantial body of literature highlights the importance of connections between students and their institutions (see Astin, 1993; Braxton et al., 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Much of the existing research on student-institution connections, however, has employed Tinto's concept of integration. It is important to consider that there is a clear and important distinction between integration or connections with an institution and engagement in educationally purposeful activities (Harper, 2006; Kuh et al., 2005). Presumed here is that the latter maximizes student outcomes as a function of the intellectual and physical energy that it requires. Therefore, this inquiry focused on identifying the institutional characteristics that contribute to the provision of a supportive environment for and promote engagement in academically challenging activity, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and enriching educational experiences among racial/ethnic minority students on the GEMS campuses.

### Summary of the Literature

The abundance of existing literature unequivocally elucidates the paramount importance of student departure to higher education researchers and practitioners. Inquiries into the student departure process have traditionally focused on understanding the role of finances and student-institution fit in the persistence process (Braxton, 2000). Due to the fact that existing persistence theory has disproportionately been generated from the experiences of traditional students, as

noted at the beginning of this chapter, the persistence literature lacks any lucid holistic conceptualization of the minority student departure process.

While there is a substantial body of literature on the impact of institution type on persistence, this literature generally indicates that the experiences students encounter within a particular institution are more important than the type of institution that they attend (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Nevertheless, students who attend four-year colleges and universities, smaller campuses, and institutions where they share racial/ethnic characteristics of the majority population on their campus appear to enjoy an increased likelihood of exposure to educationally purposeful and effective activity. Review of the persistence literature also indicates that general engagement and interaction with faculty and peers can have a significant impact on student departure or persistence. While there is evidence of how institutions can foster environments conducive to student involvement, questions remain regarding how institutions have effectively created conditions that engage students of color on their campuses.

The need for an increased understanding of the racial/ethnic minority student departure process and recognition of the potentially salient role of campus environments have led to the presentation of new environmental perspectives of persistence (Baird, 2000; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000) as well as a growing body of research investigating the impact of environments on the persistence process (Gonzalez, 2003; Nora & Cabrera, 1996) and their role in institutional effectiveness (Carey, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005; Muraskin & Lee, 2004). Similarly, research has begun to examine the effects of specific programmatic practices on departure decisions (Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). There remains a need, however, for a clear comprehensive understanding of how institutional conditions and practices that are conducive to minority student persistence and success can enhance the effectiveness of

predominantly White campuses. The findings of this study make a substantial contribution to existing research by providing a clearer conceptualization of how high-performing institutions can and do create conditions conducive to racial/ethnic minority student success.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

### Chapter Overview

In this chapter, the research methods that were used to investigate institutions with high racial/ethnic minority student persistence and degree completion rates are discussed. First, I provide a brief description of qualitative inquiry and a justification for the selection of the qualitative research methods for this study. Second, I discuss the methodological approach. Third, I describe the methods used to select the sites and the samples for data collection. I then outline the procedures used to collect and analyze the data. The chapter concludes with measures taken to ensure trustworthiness of the findings and the role of the researcher.

#### A Qualitative Inquiry into Institutional Effectiveness

##### *Characteristics of Qualitative Inquiry*

There are several characteristics that distinguish qualitative research from quantitative approaches to scientific inquiry (Patton, 2002). First, participants are selected for their rich insights into the phenomena under investigation, rather than for the purposes of generalizing conclusions to a larger population. For the purposes of this study, individuals who have a working knowledge of the campus environments and institutional policies, programs, and practices were selected for their insights into how those factors shape the success of racial/ethnic minority students on their campuses. Second, qualitative research focuses on the essences of experience, as opposed to measurement. Accordingly, qualitative methods can be used for understanding the *wholeness* of an experience, rather than objects or parts of that experience (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, I sought to understand the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students in relation to and in the context of institutional conditions that may contribute to their success in college. Third, personal engagement of researchers in conducting qualitative research is common and the researchers' personal experiences and insights can be a critical factor in the

interpretation of data (Patton, 2002). Additionally, perspective and reflexivity are important considerations, as qualitative researchers have an obligation to be mindful of and reflexive about the biases they may possess (Creswell, 1998). Finally, in contrast to numerical reports of statistical significance produced in quantitative research, the findings of qualitative research are reported using syntheses, storytelling, narration, and participants' actual quotations.

#### *Rationale for the Use of Qualitative Methods*

While a disproportionate majority of research on college student persistence has employed quantitative methods to test the statistical significance of the impact of single constructs proffered in departure models, qualitative methods can be useful for understanding racial/ethnic minority student persistence in several ways. In this section, I outline the rationale for using qualitative inquiry to investigate and understand the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students at high-performing institutions.

First, qualitative methods were chosen for this study as they allow for the exploration of a topic or concept through the use of detailed information (Creswell, 1998). Qualitative methods are ideal if the outcomes of an inquiry are not yet known and a goal of the research is to generate rich descriptive data. While it was hypothesized in the preceding conceptual framework that campus environments, policies, and specific programmatic practices are likely to have an impact on an institution's success in retaining students of color, the nature of those environmental and programmatic characteristics and how they help shape students experiences and behavior was not yet known at the outset of the study.

Second, the research questions that guided the design of this study are best answered using qualitative methods. Creswell (1998) noted that *how* and *what* questions are best pursued through the use of qualitative inquiry. The research questions that guided the proposed study

were focused on *what* cultural characteristics and institutional practices of the GEMS colleges influence racial/ethnic minority students' experiences, persistence, and attainment as well as *how* those factors have an impact on the experiences, persistence, and attainment of minority students.

Finally, qualitative methods were used to study individuals embedded within their respective institutions. Creswell (1998) noted that qualitative inquiry is a useful tool for understanding the experiences of individuals within their natural environments. In this study, I interacted with and interviewed administrators and students on their respective campuses.

#### Methodological Approach: An Embedded Collective-Case Study Design

The embedded collective case study approach allowed for the detailed examination of all cases included in the sample – institutions that fulfill predetermined criteria of fostering racial/ethnic minority student success. This approach helped guide the investigation toward the end of developing an in-depth understanding of how institutional contexts and conditions help shape the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students at the GEMS institutions. In this section, I provide an overview of the embedded collective-case study design that guided the execution of the current study.

Case studies are explorations of a phenomenon within real-life context and are especially useful when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear (Yin, 2003). In other words, the case study approach allows for the in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon as well as the significance of contextual conditions. In this study, the focal phenomenon is racial/ethnic minority student success and the critical contextual conditions are the institutional environments and practices that help shape that success. Thus, given the premise that institutional cultures, policies, programs, and practices are intertwined with racial/ethnic

minority students' experiences and outcomes, case study was selected as the desirable methodological approach for the execution of the current investigation.

Yin (2003) explains that an *embedded* case study design is one in which there are multiple subunits embedded within a case to which attention is given. In the design of the current study, while specific high-performing institutions represent the cases under examination, data was collected from administrators, staff, and students within those organizations, and those individuals will serve as subunits of analysis. Yin also distinguishes between *single* and *multiple* case study designs, indicating that multiple case study designs are often considered more compelling due to their ability to provide the replication of results. When more than one case is studied, it is referred to as a *collective case study* (Stake, 1995). Each case in a collective case study design should be selected on the basis that all cases will either produce similar results or generate contradictory results for predictable reasons (Yin, 2003). For the purposes of this study, cases were selected under the presumption that those institutions *may* produce similar results, given their commonly achieved high-performance in retaining and graduating minority students.

There are four other notable characteristics specific to case study research. First, whereas other forms of qualitative research can focus on a single source of information, case studies include multiple sources of data (Creswell, 1998, Yin, 2003). In this study, individual interviews with administrators, staff, and students as well as institutional documents constituted important sources of information in the description of the cases under investigation.

Second, in case study research, the cases are situated within an economic, historical, physical, or social setting (Creswell, 1998). Indeed, economic forces are critical to the study of college student persistence and degree completion, as trends toward high tuition-high aid in higher education are making it difficult for many students to finance their education and

increasing debt burdens among those who do pursue a baccalaureate degree. Likewise, limited historical attention given to particular racial/ethnic groups in the context of higher education policy and practice at particular institutions, the physical location of colleges and universities, and increasing racial/ethnic diversity in the United States all are examples of major contextual factors important to the state of educational attainment among racial/ethnic minority students.

Third, purposeful sampling is central to the selection of the cases to be studied. Creswell (1998) posits that investigators should choose which cases are most promising and useful. Indeed, the selection of the cases included in this study was guided by the presumption that the institutions that have attained high rates of racial/ethnic minority student retention and graduation can offer insights into potentially promising institutional conditions that can be fostered and practices that can be implemented elsewhere to facilitate success among minority college students.

Finally, a common procedure in collective case studies is the completion of within-case and cross-case analyses (Creswell, 1998). Within-case analyses provide a detailed description of each case and the themes that emerged from the data within each case. Cross-case analyses include a thematic analysis across cases included in the study. The final phase of interpretation involves the identification and reporting of the lessons to be learned from the cases under investigation.

#### Selection of Sites

The three GEMS colleges included in this study were chosen for the effectiveness they have displayed in the area of racial/ethnic minority student persistence and degree completion. I do not contend that these institutions are the most effective at retaining minority students, nor do I claim that the institutional conditions found at the GEMS colleges will necessarily be effective



at every other two- or four-year colleges or universities. The selection of the GEMS institutions, however, is based on the assumption that they have fostered conditions that are conducive to the success of racial/ethnic minority students on their campuses. Moreover, this study is based on the premise that higher education policymakers, administrators, and faculty members can find value in understanding how these colleges have managed to achieve effectiveness and equity in the extent to which they foster success among various racial/ethnic student subpopulations. In this section, I explain the processes by which the GEMS colleges were selected for inclusion in the study.

### *Selecting the Four-Year Colleges*

The Education Trust's College Results Online (CRO) database was used to choose four-year institutions for inclusion in the proposed study. The CRO database, which utilizes data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), permits the comparison of the six-year graduation rates of four-year colleges with the rates of their peer institutions. Graduation rates are based on the percentage of first-time, full-time, baccalaureate degree-seeking freshmen who earned a four-year degree at the first institution in which they enrolled within six years of matriculation. In order to identify peer institutions, CRO applies an algorithm to compare focal institutions to approximately 1,400 four-year colleges and universities throughout the country. All institutions in the not-for-profit sector that reported IPEDS graduation rate data in 2004 and were assigned a selectivity rating by Barron's Profile of American Colleges' 2005 Edition were included in the CRO database.

Once a focal college or university is selected, CRO compares it to all other institutions in the database according to 11 characteristics: (a) estimated median SAT/ACT of freshman class; (b) admission selectivity; (c) Carnegie classification; (d) percent of undergraduates receiving Pell

Grants; (e) Public or private control; (d) number of full-time equivalent undergraduates; (e) student-related expenditures per student; (f) percent of undergraduates 25 years of age or over; (g) status as an HBCU; (h) percent of undergraduates who are part-time, and; (i) status as a commuter campus. The CRO system then calculates *similarity scores* between the focal institution and all other institutions in the database and identifies the institutions that are most similar to the focal college or university for comparison. The CRO database permits the comparison of institutions by the graduation rates of various racial/ethnic student subpopulations (e.g., Asian, Black, Latina/o, and White). Moreover, the CRO system allows for the comparison of institutions by disparities between the six-year degree completion rates of racial/ethnic groups *within* each institution.

For the purposes of this study, four-year institutions were chosen using two criteria. First, the selected institutions exhibited graduation rates among underrepresented minority students that were appreciably higher than the national average. Second, the selected four-year institutions exhibited graduation rates among underrepresented minority (i.e., Black, Latina/o, and Native American) students that were close to or greater than their White counterparts. Finally, because I sought to study predominantly White institutions (PWIs), I narrowed the search to colleges or universities where approximately 50% or more of total enrollments were White students.

The doctoral university that was selected for this study is the University of Southern California (USC). Table 3 shows the six-year graduation rates among White students and underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students as well as the gap between those racial/ethnic groups at USC and institutions within the USC-peer group generated by the CRO database. While all of the institutions contained in Table 3 can be considered selective and have high graduation rates among both White and underrepresented racial/ethnic minority groups, many of

Table 3: 2002-2004 six-year graduation rates and racial/ethnic gaps in 2002-2004 graduation rates among USC and peer institutions

Main	Overall	White Grad Rate	Underrepresented Minority Grad Rate	Gap
University Of California-San Diego	82.6%	82.9%	79.2%	-3.7%
University Of Southern California	82.1%	82.2%	78.1%	-4.1%
Boston University	74.8%	75.0%	69.8%	-5.2%
New York University	80.0%	76.1%	70.4%	-5.7%
University Of Virginia-Main Campus	92.4%	93.7%	86.6%	-7.1%
Cornell University-Endowed Colleges	92.4%	93.6%	85.2%	-8.4%
University Of California-Berkeley	86.6%	85.8%	76.3%	-9.5%
University Of North Carolina At Chapel	81.4%	83.3%	71.7%	-11.6%
University Of California-Los Angeles	87.2%	88.9%	77.0%	-11.9%
University Of Michigan-Ann Arbor	86.6%	89.5%	71.1%	-18.4%
Total	84.6%	85.1%	76.5%	-8.6%

Source: *College Results Online*

those colleges also exhibit notable gaps in the degree completion rates between their White and underrepresented minority students. Only two institutions exhibited a White-underrepresented minority gap below five percent. While the University of California in San Diego (UCSD) exhibited the lowest racial/ethnic gap in degree completion, a large majority of the students enrolled at UCSD are non-White. According to the IPEDS database, White students comprised only 32% of the total enrollment at UCSD in the Fall of 2005 and can therefore not be considered a predominantly White institution. Alternatively, while racial/ethnic minority students comprised approximately half of the students at USC, White students still constituted the largest racial/ethnic group on that campus.

The comprehensive university chosen for inclusion in the institutional sample was the State University of New York at New Paltz (SUNY-NP). Table 4 contains the graduation rates and the racial/ethnic gaps in graduation rates among SUNY-NP and the list of peer institutions generated by the CRO database. Only two institutions, SUNY-NP and Georgia College and State University, actually had higher graduation rates among underrepresented racial/ethnic minority

Table 4: 2002-2004 six-year graduation rates and racial/ethnic gaps in 2002-2004 graduation rates among SUNY at New Paltz and peer institutions

Main	Overall	White Grad Rate	Under Rep Minority Grad Rate	Gap
Georgia College And State University	36.7%	35.3%	46.8%	11.5%
SUNY College At New Paltz	54.3%	51.1%	62.6%	11.5%
Tennessee Technological University	45.3%	45.6%	41.4%	-4.2%
Spring Hill College	61.6%	62.4%	56.0%	-6.4%
SUNY College At Purchase	42.4%	44.0%	36.5%	-7.5%
SUNY College At Oneonta	49.8%	49.4%	41.8%	-7.6%
University Of Oregon	62.2%	63.7%	54.0%	-9.7%
The Richard Stockton College Of NJ	64.1%	65.8%	54.6%	-11.2%
Western Washington University	65.4%	67.7%	55.0%	-12.7%
SUNY College At Brockport	50.7%	51.9%	37.8%	-14.1%
Rowan University	62.7%	67.3%	51.0%	-16.3%
University Of Wisconsin-La Crosse	61.7%	63.0%	44.4%	-18.6%
University Of Wisconsin-Stevens Point	57.9%	59.1%	40.0%	-19.1%
SUNY College At Fredonia	63.7%	64.6%	43.6%	-21.0%
University Of North Carolina-Wilmington	61.3%	62.7%	41.7%	-21.0%
University Of Maine	56.1%	57.4%	35.0%	-22.4%
Total	56.0%	56.9%	46.4%	-10.6%

Source: *College Results Online*

students than White students at the same college, both with graduation rates among underrepresented minority students 12% higher than their White peers at the same institution.

The actual degree completion rates at Georgia College and State University, however, were relatively low (i.e., 35% among White and 47% among underrepresented minority students).

While SUNY-NP has graduation rates among White students (51%) that are slightly lower than its peer institutions (57%), it exhibited overall graduation rates (54%) comparable to its peer institutions (56%) and graduation rates among minority students 17% greater than that of its peers (63% compared to 46%).

### *Selecting the Two-Year College*

Measuring persistence and retention at two-year institutions can be very different from measuring the persistence and retention of their four-year counterparts. Two-year institutions, by their very nature, serve a more diverse array of students, including those who seek an associate's

degree, transfer to a four-year institution, or continuing education. Due to the fact that the CRO database only includes data on four-year institutions and baccalaureate degree attainment rates do not provide an adequate benchmark for success in student persistence or retention at two-year colleges, an alternative method was used to identify the two-year college to be included in this study. First, IPEDS was used to identify two-year colleges that exhibit relatively high persistence and graduation rates. Because those two-year colleges were in California, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Data Mart was employed to compare those institutions' within-semester retention rates with those of other California community colleges. The Data Mart method allows one to compare retention rates based on the rates at which students' actually withdrawal from coursework. Retention rates in the Data Mart are calculated by dividing the number of enrollments that received a mark (e.g., a grade, credit, no credit, or incomplete) by those that received a mark or a withdrawal. The community college selected for inclusion in this study was chosen using two criteria. First, it exhibited high retention rates among all racial/ethnic groups compared to other California community colleges. Second, the chosen community college exhibited virtually equal retention rates among all major racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Asian, Black, Latina/o, Native American, and White).

Butte College was selected as the two-year institution to be included in the current study.

According to the IPEDS Peer Analysis Tool Database, three-year associate's degree completion rates at Butte are high relative to their two-year college peers. The Data Mart shows that the overall retention rates and the retention rates among various racial/ethnic minority student subpopulations at Butte College were noticeably higher than the statewide average during the 2005-06 academic-year (see Tables 5 and 6). Furthermore, the retention rates for Black students

Table 5: *Comparison of Butte College and California community college system Fall 2005 retention rates by race/ethnicity*

Ethnicity	Total Enrollment	Total Retained	Retention Rate (%)	Statewide Retention Rate (%)
African-American	1,215	1,099	90.5	77.0
Asian	2,130	1,969	92.4	83.9
Latina/o	4,468	4,088	91.5	81.1
White	24,421	22,365	91.6	85.4
Total	36,758	33,642	91.5	82.9

Source: *California Community College Chancellor's Office*

Table 6: *Comparison of Butte College and California community college system Spring 2006 retention rates by race/ethnicity*

Ethnicity	Total Enrollment	Total Retained	Retention Rate (%)	Statewide Retention Rate (%)
African-American	1,008	905	89.8	77.3
Asian	1,879	1,759	93.6	83.7
Latina/o	4,395	4,031	91.7	81.4
White	24,065	22,027	91.5	85.3
Total	35,768	32,701	91.4	83.0

Source: *California Community College Chancellor's Office*

at Butte College were only slightly lower than their non-Black counterparts during both semesters of the 2005-06 academic-year.

### The GEMS Colleges

This section provides a brief overview of each of the three GEMS campuses. The three campuses are very different in institutional mission, type, size, location, and resources as well as the students whom they serve. The characteristics of the GEMS institutions span the spectrum on most of these attributes. This is important to understanding the transferability of the findings presented in the following sections. While these institutions vary on all of the aforementioned characteristics, they have managed to create similar institutional conditions to which their administrators, staff, and racial/ethnic minority students attribute racial/ethnic minority student success on their campuses.

#### *The Doctoral University: University of Southern California*

Officially established in 1880, USC opened in the heart of Los Angeles which, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, had a population of 3,844,829 in 2005. When the university first

opened, it served as home to only 53 students and 10 instructors. Since then, the university has greatly expanded. Today, USC's College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences offers undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degrees in over a wide range of over 30 academic departments. Seventeen professional schools within USC now offer master's, professional, and doctoral degrees in 139 areas of study.

The University of Southern California (USC) is an extensive private, not-for-profit, research university located in a large city in the southwest region of the United States. Extensive research universities, such as USC, offer a wide range of baccalaureate degree programs and are committed to graduate education, annually conferring 50 or more doctoral degrees in 15 or more disciplines. USC is home to approximately 33,000 students of which approximately 17,000 are enrolled as undergraduates, and 3,100 full-time faculty members. A highly selective private institution, USC admits, according to the IPEDS, 26.6% of their total applicants in the Fall of 2005. Ninety-five percent of the student body at USC enrolled full-time in the Fall of 2005. Women made up 51% of total enrollments, while men comprised the remaining 49%. White students constituted 47% of the total enrollments at USC in the Fall of 2005, while Asian, Black, Latina/o students made up 21%, 6%, and 13% of the student body, respectively. Estimated total cost of attendance (e.g. tuition and fees, books and supplies, and living expenses) for a student living on the USC campus during the 2004-05 academic-year was approximately \$44,500. While 77% of USC students received financial aid during that year, the average student who received aid was awarded over \$32,000 in grants and loans, with a majority of that amount received in the form of grants. On average, a student who attended USC during the 2004-05 academic-year received almost \$28,000 in combined federal, state, and institutional grant awards.

The current mission of USC is carried out through teaching, research, artistic creation, professional practice, and public service. Its mission includes, but is not limited to, three major areas of emphasis. First, the mission highlights USC's provision of leadership and service at all levels of community – including the global community, the regional community, and the linkages between the individual and society. While it notes the role of USC as a global institution, it also highlights the important role that USC has played in the development of southern California and gives recognition to the emphasis on the “development of human beings and society as a whole through the cultivation and enrichment of the human mind and spirit.” A second area of emphasis in USC's mission statement underscores the importance of integration. The mission highlights USC's devotion to the education of its students and the integration of undergraduate and professional education. The mission also notes that research and teaching at USC is inextricably intertwined. Finally, the mission statement of USC articulates the importance of pluralism, stating the importance of helping students “acquire wisdom and insight, love of truth and beauty, moral discernment, understanding of self, and respect and appreciation for others.”

*The Comprehensive University: State University of New York – New Paltz*

In 1828, a school for teaching classics was founded in New Paltz, New York focused on providing a liberal education. The institution evolved into a normal school and, in 1947, graduate courses leading to a master's degree were introduced into the school. Not until 1994 was the school officially renamed the State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz.

Today SUNY-New Paltz is a public master's university in a small rural town located in the state of New York. Master's colleges and universities offer a wide range of four-year degree programs and are committed to graduate education through the awarding of master's degrees,



awarding 40 or more master's degree across three or more programs. SUNY-NP enrolled 6,418 undergraduate students in the Fall of 2005 and employed 294 full-time faculty members in 2004. In the Fall of 2005, 44% of all applicants were admitted. 2005, White students comprised 61 percent of total enrollments, while their Asian, Black, and Latino counterparts constituted three, seven, and ten percent, respectively. The estimated total cost of attendance for a student attending SUNY-NP and living on campus during the 2004-05 academic-year was approximately \$14,500. The average total amount of grant and loan aid received for a student attending SUNY-NP in the 2004-05 academic-year was approximately \$8,900, with federal, state, and institutional grants representing roughly \$6,700 of that amount.

The mission statement of SUNY-NP highlights both the institution's commitment to diversity and emphasis on holistic student development. The importance of diversity in the mission is highlighted by its attention to "providing high quality, affordable education to students from all social and economic backgrounds" and "the construction of a vibrant intellectual/creative public forum which reflects and celebrates the diversity of our society." Moreover, the SUNY-NP mission stresses the importance of both intellectual development and contribution to a democratic society, stating the institution's goal to facilitate student development of "knowledge, skills, and confidence to contribute as productive members of their communities and professions and active citizens in a democratic nation and a global society."

#### *The Community College: Butte College*

Established in 1968, Butte College was opened for the purpose of extending educational opportunities for residents of Butte County in Northern California. The institution was moved to its current location in Oroville, California in 1972. Today, the college offers over 80 career programs focused on preparing students for selected vocations and occupations. For these

students, Butte offers associate's degrees, certificates of achievement, and career upgrading and retraining. Butte also offers a wide range of transfer degree programs that are designed to offer students coursework to meet lower general education requirements for four-year colleges in the California State and University of California systems.

Butte College is designated, according to the Carnegie classification system, as an associate's college and is located in a small town in the northwestern region of the United States. Associate's colleges offer associate's degrees and certificate programs, but not baccalaureate degrees. In the Fall of 2005, 13,453 students were enrolled at Butte College, which maintains an open enrollment policy. Forty-nine percent of the students who enrolled in Butte College during the Fall of 2005 attended full-time, while 51% maintained part-time status. Fifty-seven percent of the college's students were women and the remaining 44 percent were men. Of all students who enrolled in the Fall of 2005, 68% were White, while six percent were Asian, three percent were Black, and 13% were Latino. Due to the fact that Butte is a commuter campus, total costs of attendance were reported only for residents and non-residents living off-campus. For California residents living off-campus, cost of attendance in 2005-06 was \$13,269, whereas the estimated cost of attendance for non-residents was \$18,169. The average student who attended Butte in 2004-05 received over \$9,000 in aid, approximately \$5,500 of which was awarded in federal, state, and institutional grants.

The mission of Butte College is manifested in its service to the community. The mission states that the college aims to "create a student-centered, community-based learning environment which empowers students to become productive, literate, and responsible members of a diverse society." Butte's mission delineates a diverse array of services that it provides to accomplish that

mission, ranging from degree transfer to a four-year college to teaching English as a second language to community education.

#### Data Collection Procedures

Data collection for the current study consisted of two components, each focused on a different source of data common in case study research (Yin, 2003). First, within each case, individual face-to-face interviews with administrators, staff, and racial/ethnic minority students allowed for the identification of salient campus environments, policies, programs, and practices that are perceived to contribute to the success of the institution. Second, descriptive documents of various programs, practices, events, and data that emerged in the individual interviews were collected subsequent to the interviews to provide additional insight into those phenomena. While observation of classrooms and physical spaces were informally conducted to provide context for understanding the data collected in the interviews and program documents, no formal analysis of observations was included in the study because the amount of time spent observing environments on the three campuses was limited and no systematic observation procedures were employed.

The first phase of data collection consisted of interviews with administrators, staff, and racial/ethnic minority students at each site. Interviews are useful for understanding things that cannot be directly observed (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, interviews with administrators and staff allowed for the acquisition of in-depth knowledge about the deeply embedded values, norms, beliefs, and assumptions that guide behavior on the three campuses. Such interviews can also provide a useful understanding of the various programs and practices that are perceived to contribute to racial/ethnic minority student success on those campuses.

The interviews were conducted using a *semi-structured* approach, which ensured that the interview data provided information necessary to understand the phenomenon under study while

providing flexibility for the interviewer to address emergent themes (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). This approach included the specification of a set of issues to be explored throughout the course of the interview (Patton, 2002). The semi-structured approach also, however, allows the interviewer to build conversation through establishing a conversation style and engaging in spontaneous questioning for clarification and deeper understanding of participants' responses. Therefore, using an interview guide systematized the individual interviews and ensured that all relevant topics are covered, while also allowing for considerable flexibility in probing.

The initial administrator and staff interview guide consisted of five topics – descriptions of campus culture, descriptions of campus climate, factors that contribute to minority student engagement, factors that contribute to minority student persistence, barriers and challenges in serving minority students (see Appendix B). The initial racial/ethnic minority student interview guide consisted of six topics – descriptions of campus culture, participant's feelings about the community on their respective campus, factors that contribute to the participant's engagement, factors that contribute to the participant's persistence, difficulties adjusting, programs and people who were instrumental in college adjustment and experiences. As different themes emerged across interviews, the list of topics was modified to include the emerging themes and acquire greater detail and in-depth knowledge about them.

The interviews were conducted to provide an understanding of the cultural and programmatic landscape of the GEMS colleges. Participants were asked to think about and reflect upon the institutional environments, policies, programs, and practices that they perceive foster success among racial/ethnic minority students on the three campuses. The interview guide provided a list of issues to address throughout the course of the interviews. For flexibility, the

interview guide was continuously modified to address any themes that emerged in previous interviews and required further clarification and understanding.

The compilation of documents completed data collection. Documents pertaining to college missions, strategic plans, support and retention programs, student activities, and classroom pedagogies were acquired at the beginning and the end of the individual interviews. Documents can provide information about things the researcher is unable to observe, such as events that took place before the commencement of data collection, private interchanges, and goals and decisions that are not widely publicized or easily accessible (Patton, 2002). Therefore, documents can yield data that cannot be obtained through the individual interviews.

#### *Participant Selection*

Patton (2002) notes that there is no rule for sample size in qualitative research and writes “the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (p. 245). Therefore, *purposeful sampling* was employed to select participants for the interviews. Two key purposes of purposeful sampling are *intensity* and *variation*. Intensity refers to the selection of information-rich cases, while variation focuses on identifying and describing themes that cut across variation in samples. Selecting participants based on a combination of these two purposes permitted the acquisition of a sample that both provides a wealth of insight into the phenomenon under investigation and a representation of the various individuals that function in a range of environments throughout the GEMS campuses.

Accordingly, the administrators, staff, and racial/ethnic minority students who participated in the current study were selected for their affiliation and knowledge of various aspects of campus environments, programs, and practices as well as the experiences of

racial/ethnic minority students on their respective campuses. The final sample consisted of 65 administrators, staff, and racial/ethnic minority students across the three GEMS colleges. Included in the final sample were 31 Asian American, Black, and Latina/o students and 34 administrators and staff members. White students were excluded from the student sample because research has revealed that they provide inaccurate assessments of the extent to which their racial/ethnic minority counterparts are engaged and satisfied (Harper & Hurtado, In Press). While Asian American graduation rates were not considered in selecting the three focal institutions, those students were included in the interview sample, given evidence that they share common struggles with their Black and Latina/o peers (Eimers, 2001; Hurtado, 1992; Lewis et al., 1996) and that Southeast Asian American subpopulations also suffer from low rates of degree attainment (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993).

To identify administrators and staff for participation in individual interviews, I conducted a thorough analysis of each institution's website. Each college's homepage served as a starting point for the identification of administrator and staff participants. From the homepages, I was able to link to administrative offices and programs across the three campuses. I reviewed each website until I exhausted all of the office and program websites that could be found. A comprehensive review of each website was conducted to identify potential participants for the study.

I began initiating contact with persons at the top of the institution's organizational chart, such as presidents and vice presidents. I then contacted the directors and assistant directors of each program that appeared to serve large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students. Those administrators and staff were initially contacted via email or telephone to arrange a time for their participation in individual interviews. In many cases, administrators and staff who agreed to

participate in the study offered their assistance in scheduling meetings with other important persons across campus. Administrators and staff who agreed to participate were asked to solicit the participation of racial/ethnic minority students on their respective campuses. They helped identify students who were enrolled in first-year seminars, ethnic studies courses, and history courses, as well as students participating in cultural centers, mentoring programs, and targeted retention and support programs.

### Data Analysis Procedures

The primary method used to analyze the data in the current study was the *explanation building* method described by Yin (2003). Explanation building consists of analyzing each individual case successively toward building a cross-case description. The first phase of data analysis consisted of elucidating the environmental characteristics and institutional programs and practices perceived to influence the persistence and graduation of racial/ethnic minority students at each of the GEMS colleges. Specifically, the NVivo © Qualitative Software Package was used to identify, code, and organize the emergent themes within each individual case. First, open-coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) techniques were used to code each individual interview and identify the most salient institutional characteristics that each individual perceived to help foster racial/ethnic minority student success. Those codes were then used to inductively generate themes that describe the most salient institutional factors that influence minority student success on each campus. Finally, each emergent theme was compared to the documents that were collected at the corresponding campus to verify or modify those themes.

In Phase-II of data analysis, the individual case data were used to build a cross-case consciousness. Yin (2003) has outlined several steps that can be followed toward the end of generating a cross-case explanation in case study research. He emphasized an iterative method

by which case study evidence is examined, propositions are refined, and evidence is examined again. Yin's steps in conducting explanation building include: (1) developing initial theoretical propositions; (2) comparing the findings of an initial case against the propositions; (3) revising the propositions; (4) comparing details of the case against the revision; (6) revising the propositions again, and; (7) comparing facts of additional cases to the revision.

The four theoretical propositions that guided data analysis were hypothesized the relationships among campus culture, institutional programs and practices, educationally purposeful engagement, and persistence and attainment. The four propositions that provided a foundation for the analysis were: (1) particular campus environments on the GEMS colleges foster minority student engagement and success; (2) the environments of the GEMS colleges underlie the implementation and evolution of specific policies, programs, and practices that contribute to fostering minority student engagement and success; (3) both campus environments and institutional programs and practices shape racial/ethnic minority students' engagement in educationally purposeful activities, and; (4) both campus environments and institutional programs and practices, in part, determine the persistence of racial/ethnic minority students at the GEMS colleges.

In accordance with the aforementioned explanation building procedures, I began by comparing data from an initial case to the four theoretical propositions outlined above and, accordingly, further detailed and refined those propositions. I continued to compare the facts of the initial case to the revised propositions until all of the emergent themes from the initial case were congruent with the refined propositions. This process was repeated with all three cases until a *cross-case consciousness* was achieved (Yin, 2003). The product of this process was a cross-case description of the three GEMS colleges that highlights the key campus environments,



policies, programs, and practices common among the three institutions and provides a framework for understanding the complex relationships between those institutional factors and racial/ethnic minority student persistence.

### Quality Assurance and Trustworthiness

Whereas internal and external validity are important considerations in the measurement and generalizability of findings in quantitative research, quality assurance in qualitative research is determined by the degree of *credibility* and *transferability* of the research findings. Credibility refers to the congruence of the findings with reality, while transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to situations outside of the cases being studied (Merriam, 1998). For the purposes of this study, credibility and transferability were maximized using two methods prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1986). First, triangulation of data from interviews with administrators, interviews with racial/ethnic minority students, and institutional and program documents were used to cross-check, verify, and modify emergent themes. Specifically, during Phase I of data analysis, the codes that emerged from the interviews were juxtaposed with the documents that were acquired during data collection at each institution. If contradictions emerged between the interview codes and the documents, the themes were modified. Alternatively, if the interview codes and the data from institutional and program documents were congruent, those documents were used to further refine and detail the themes that emerged from the interviews.

Second, discrepant data were identified and examined throughout the study for consideration of alternative hypotheses and questioning of underlying theoretical presuppositions and emergent themes. The discrepant data were sought in both phases of data analysis. First, within each interview, codes that emerged from one section of each transcript were compared to

the rest of the interview. If data incongruent with a particular code was found, that code was modified. In Phase II, identification of discrepant data surfaced as an inherent aspect of the process of explanation building, which was the primary method of data analysis. As explained in the data analysis section, a fundamental component of explanation building is comparing the facts of each case to the propositions and continuously refining those propositions based on the facts that emerged from the individual cases. Those refinements included altering the relationships between the various constructs (e.g., campus culture) in the resulting model as well as modifying the actual constructs themselves. Thus, if the facts of any case were incongruent with the constructs and propositions that guided the analysis, those propositions were modified to foster congruence between the resulting propositions and the facts that emerged from all three cases.

#### Limitations

There are six limitations of the proposed study that deserve attention. First, this study is context bound. While the institutional sample chosen for this investigation includes public and private, two- and four-year, and urban and rural institutions, the sample only includes three colleges and all three of those institutions exist within their own unique political, cultural, economic, and geographic contexts. Thus, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to any broader population of colleges and universities. Nevertheless, the study was designed with the intention that any findings that result from the analysis will be valuable to institutional leaders who wish to learn from institutions who have achieved a certain level of racial equity in retaining and graduating students.

The second limitation that should be noted is the lack of a comparison group. The exclusion of a comparison group prohibits the comparison and contrast of high-performing and

low-performing institutions. Therefore, any findings produced from the investigation must be interpreted with caution, given that the cultural and programmatic characteristics identified at the GEMS colleges may also be found at institutions that do not exhibit high retention rates among racial/ethnic minority students or across all racial/ethnic subpopulations. Moreover, I do not argue that the conditions and practices will be effective in different organizational and social contexts. Rather, this investigation is intended to be an exploration and description of the organizational conditions that are conducive to the success of racial/ethnic minority students at the three colleges included in this investigation.

A third limitation is the lack of control for students' socioeconomic status and pre-college academic preparation. Socioeconomic status and academic preparation could have a major impact on the success of colleges to foster persistence and degree completion in two primary ways. First, if the student body is relatively affluent or academically prepared, high rates of success may be a function of that affluence or prior academic experience. Second, if racial/ethnic minority students at a particular institution come from backgrounds more affluent or more academically prepared than their White peers, disparities in SES and pre-college academic ability could account for the high level of equity in success among the students at that institution.

It is unlikely, albeit not impossible, that the general student bodies at the GEMS colleges are substantially more affluent or academically prepared than their counterparts at peer institutions. Criteria that were used to select the peer institution group for USC and SUNY at New Paltz included standardized test scores, admissions selectivity, and the percentage of undergraduates receiving Pell Grants, all of which are imperfect but effective proxies for socioeconomic status of the student body. This, however, does not account for the

socioeconomic backgrounds pre-college academic ability of particular racial/ethnic groups *within* each institution.

Two attempts were made to address the possibility that racial/ethnic minority students originate from more affluent or academically prepared backgrounds than their White counterparts at the same institutions. With regard to the community college, I compared 1999 per capita income across racial/ethnic groups within Butte County. Moreover, the per capita income of White (\$18,800) residents in Butte County was higher than their Asian (\$8,400), Black (\$14,100), Latina/o (\$10,400), and Native American (\$13,100) counterparts. Thus, it is unlikely that racial/ethnic minority students at Butte College are more affluent than their White peers at the institution. Second, at each of the three institutions, administrators were asked whether the high and equitable persistence and graduation rates achieved by their institutions could be due to the incoming characteristics of their racial/ethnic minority students. At USC and New Paltz, administrators were unable to provide any clear indication that racial/ethnic minority students are or are not more affluent or academically prepared than their White peers at their respective institution or than students at their peer institutions. At Butte, I was assured that most, if not all, of the racial/ethnic minority students attending the institution originated from very modest socioeconomic and academic backgrounds. Despite the aforementioned measures taken to account for the influence of socioeconomic status and academic preparation, the possibility that affluence and pre-college academic ability are, in part, responsible for the relatively high rates of persistence and degree completion at the GEMS colleges cannot be confidently dismissed.

Selection bias constitutes a fourth limitation of the study. Administrators at the GEMS colleges were asked to invite racial/ethnic minority students who could provide valuable insights to participate in this study. Thus, the students who were invited to participate were likely to be

involved in campus activities or connected to the administration in some other way. In contrast, students who were not invited may not be as involved and may have different views than those who participated and provided a substantial portion of the data that informed this investigation.

The conducting of individual interviews at only one point in time constitutes a fifth limitation of this study. Due to the restricted time with interview participants, the depth of understanding of administrators', staff members', and racial/ethnic minority students' perceptions of the various institutional factors that affect racial/ethnic minority students' experiences on the three campuses is limited. In contrast, multiple interviews with participants conducted at various points in time would have allowed for conducting additional interviews and a deeper investigation of emergent themes in the data.

A final limitation of this study is the constraints presented by the use of the qualitative case study approach. Critical to understanding this research is the fact that the methodological approach and the predetermined data collection and analysis procedures may influence the interpretation of the data. Furthermore, personal biases that are a function of my own history, experiences, and knowledge all are likely to influence my interpretation of data collected in this investigation. It is possible that a person of my characteristics and a Black or White woman would interpret the findings in very different ways.

#### Role of the Researcher

Although positivists and quantitative researchers have long sought to remove the influence of the researcher in conducting empirical inquiry, it has been noted that all research is inherently subjective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Consideration of the role of the researcher is important in all forms of research, but particularly critical in conducting inquiries of qualitative nature. The researcher is the key instrument in qualitative research. In this study, my background

knowledge of higher education and qualitative methods was central to designing the study, constructing interview protocols, conducting interviews, analyzing and interpreting the data, identifying linkages in the data, and constructing case descriptions.

While some qualitative researchers have attempted to minimize the impact of researcher subjectivity in qualitative inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), others have adopted a constructivist approach and advocate the importance of researcher reflexivity – the identification and understanding of biases and assumptions that can affect researchers' decisions and interpretations. This approach allows one to embrace their subjectivity and incorporate it into the discourse of research (Charmaz, 2005).

My role as the researcher in the current study was to provide insight into the ways in which the environmental conditions and institutional practices contribute to fostering racial/ethnic minority student persistence and degree attainment at three high-performing colleges. Moreover, my role as the researcher included providing conclusions about how higher education policymakers, administrators, and faculty members may be able to use the findings to foster success among minority students at their institutions.

Given my role as the researcher, it is useful to consider my educational background and how it may influence my interpretation of the data collected in this investigation. With regard to affluence, I come from a low-income background and attended urban public schools before college. I am half Japanese and half European American, but the communities in which I was raised were predominantly Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong). I studied sociology and history at a large Midwestern public research university in an urban area. During my undergraduate career, I was involved in a number of student organizations, but that involvement was limited. Moreover, all of the activities I participated in during my college years

were confined to the Asian American student population on campus. Thus, my sense of belonging to the university was limited to the connections that I had developed within the various Asian American communities and organizations at the institution.

In pursuit of my doctorate, I transitioned from a relatively diverse urban environment to a small and more conservative town in rural Pennsylvania approximately three years ago. During that time, I have become increasingly conscious of the role that culture and race play in the everyday experiences of minorities in predominantly White social institutions such as predominantly White colleges and universities. While I was not oblivious to the salience of race prior to my transition to Pennsylvania, the increased attention I have given to and thought I have invested in understanding the dissonance, tension, and inequity that can emerge from cultural differences has contributed to my espousing a more critical perspective of race relations in the context of American social institutions. Thus, these experiences, and the ways in which they have shaped my perceptions of cultural dynamics is likely to determine my interpretation of the data acquired in this inquiry.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings that emerged from the 65 individual interviews and document analyses conducted on the three campuses identified for their effectiveness at Generating Ethnic Minority Success (GEMS) – the GEMS colleges. First, I offer a brief overview of the institutional challenges consistent across those institutions. Second, I present an explanatory model as a framework for understanding how institutional factors influence the persistence of racial/ethnic minority students at those institutions. The third section contains a delineation of the cultural factors that contribute to minority student success at the GEMS colleges. The fourth section includes concrete examples that exemplify how confluences of those four cultural factors converge and manifest in the institutional policies, programs, and practices on the three campuses. In section five, I present a brief description of the sense of belonging that the cultures of the GEMS colleges foster among racial/ethnic minority students. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of three noteworthy differences among the three GEMS institutions that should be considered when interpreting the findings of the collective case study.

### Institutional Challenges

The purpose of the current study was to discover and examine the institutional factors that contribute to racial/ethnic minority student success at institutions that have exhibited high and equitable underrepresented racial/ethnic minority student persistence and graduation rates. Thus, most of this chapter is focused on describing the characteristics that positively shape the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students on those campuses. The GEMS colleges, however, are not perfect. In fact, administrators, faculty, staff, and students at the three campuses face many challenges and are struggling to respond to them as are other institutions of higher



education. In order to avoid conveying a message that the three institutions are beyond imperfections, I offer two important clarifications.

First, the GEMS institutions are not free from social and institutional challenges. Participants mentioned several barriers to the success of racial/ethnic minority students at the three colleges. Racial/ethnic minority students on the three campuses noted that segregation, to some extent, still exists among their peers. One of the three institutions has been home to incidents, such as debates about affirmative action, which have caused political and racial tension in the campus climate. Racial/ethnic minority students on another campus spoke of experiences with racial discrimination in the surrounding community. Administrators who serve large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students on the GEMS campuses noted the need for more resources and the emphasis on research in the promotion and tenure process as being a hindrance in faculty efforts to serve their minority students to the best of their abilities. These are just a few among the many challenges that members of the three campus communities face in their educational endeavors.

Another important consideration is that the presentation of these findings is not a declaration that the GEMS colleges are the best among institutions of higher education at serving racial/ethnic minority students. Rather, the three campuses were selected as being effective based on the selection criteria and the findings are intended to illuminate the institutional factors that foster racial/ethnic minority student success on those campuses. Any one of the environmental characteristics or institutional policies, programs, and practices found on the GEMS campuses may be found at other colleges and universities. Moreover, some of those institutional factors may be more or less salient on one of the three campuses. What makes the GEMS colleges

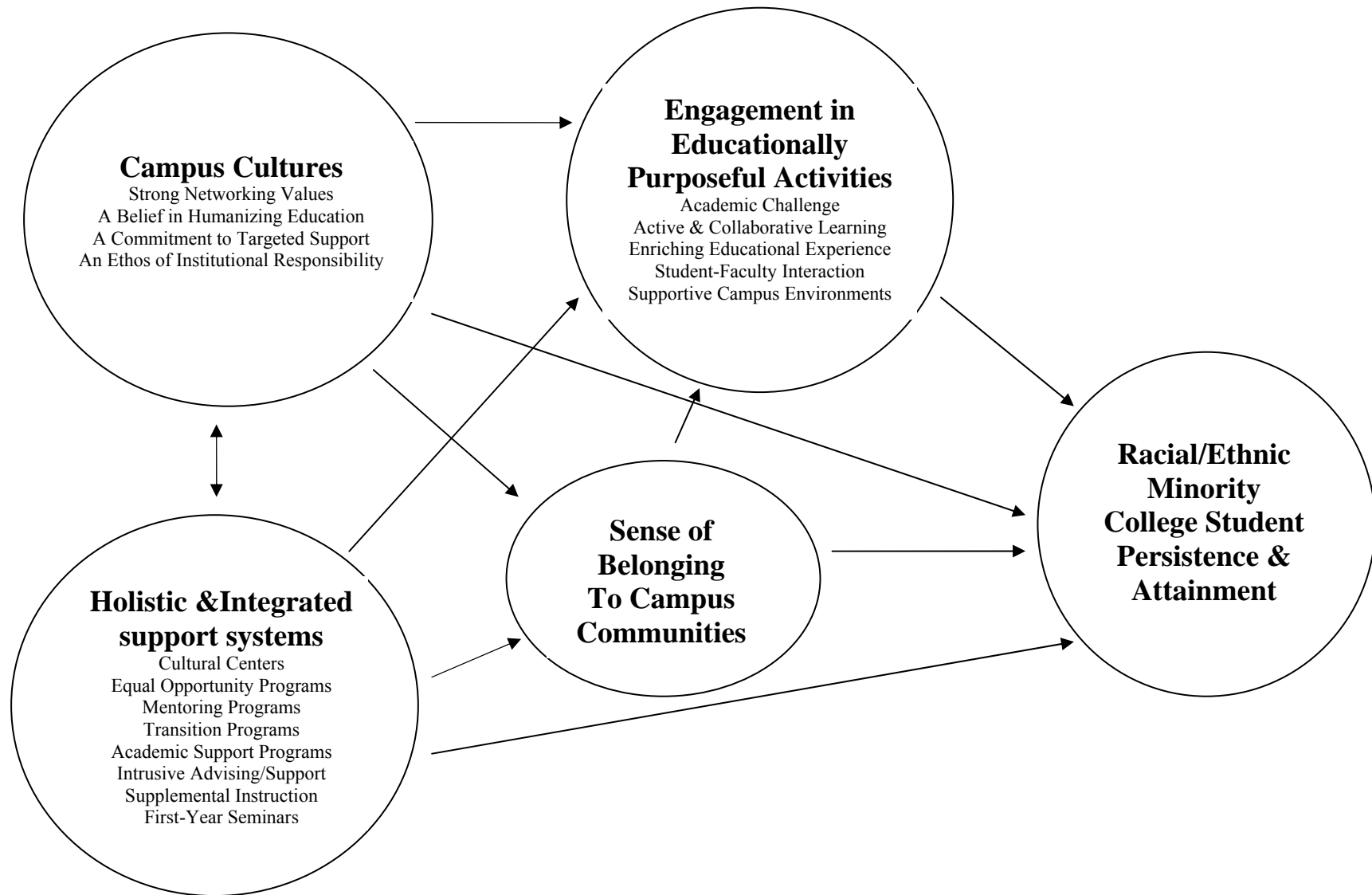
effective is the way in which all of the following cultural factors are present and interact to comprehensively create an environment conducive to racial/ethnic minority student success.

The following sections of this chapter provide an overview of the common cultural themes that emerged across the GEMS colleges. It should be kept in mind, however, that the three campuses are very different. They have unique histories and missions, exist in different geographic contexts, function in the context of disparate sociopolitical environments, and serve students from a wide range of backgrounds. Moreover, the common cultural characteristics that emerged in the data manifest on the three campuses in a variety of ways and sometimes on different levels. Notwithstanding, what is common among the three campuses is the existence of these four cultural factors that work together to help foster racial/ethnic minority student success.

#### An Explanatory Model of Institutional Influences on Minority Student Persistence and Baccalaureate Degree Attainment

In this section, an explanatory model of institutional influences on minority student success at the GEMS colleges is presented. The model in Figure 1 displays the relationships between the constructs that emerged in the data. While it is recognized that factors external to the model, such as their background characteristics, are likely to shape students' persistence and degree completion, those background characteristics are excluded to maintain a focus on the institutional factors that are perceived to influence minority student success at the GEMS colleges. Additionally, while each arrow in the model represents an implied direction of influence in the corresponding relationship between each pair of constructs depicted, it should be noted that the purpose of the model is not to declare an empirically tested causal process. Rather, the purpose of the explanatory model is to provide a framework for understanding racial/ethnic minority student persistence and degree attainment in the context of important institutional environments, policies, programs, and practices at the GEMS colleges.

Figure 1: An Explanatory Model of Institutional Influences on Racial/Ethnic Minority Student Engagement and Persistence



The model suggests that campus cultures have a bidirectional relationship with the integrated support systems for racial/ethnic minority students. That is, while characteristics of the campus cultures provide a foundation for the creation, execution, and development of integrated support systems, those systems also serve to perpetuate or change the cultures of the campus. Campus cultures and support systems, in part, determine the availability of opportunities for racial/ethnic minority students' educationally purposeful engagement. The campus's cultures and support systems also partially determine the extent to which students feel a sense of belonging to the campus community. The model also specifies that the opportunities for racial/ethnic minority students' educationally purposeful engagement are associated with their sense of belonging. Specifically, racial/ethnic minority students' sense of belonging influences the extent to which those students desire to or will become engaged as well as the nature of that engagement. Finally, the model indicates that all of these factors, in part, shape racial/ethnic minority student persistence and eventual degree attainment. In order to highlight the role of institutional factors in fostering success among racial/ethnic minority students at the GEMS colleges, the following sections will focus on providing a description of institutional environments and key policies, programs, and practices at the three institutions.

### Campus Cultures

Each of the three GEMS colleges has a unique campus culture and houses unique subcultures. Despite the vast differences among these three institutions, they also share some commonalities. Emerging in the data were four common cultural characteristics that interact to foster conditions that engage, support, and retain racial/ethnic minority students on the GEMS campuses. Those four characteristics are reviewed in this section. First, participants asserted that administrators, faculty, and staff at the three institutions believe in the importance of

incorporating *a human element* into the educational experience. Second, a fundamental aspect of the culture of the GEMS campuses is the strong *valuing of networks* that consist of high levels of communication and collaboration across institutional agents, offices, and programs. Third, the cultures of the GEMS campuses are characterized by *an ethos of institutional responsibility* for student success that guides administrators' and staff members' beliefs about being proactive in ensuring students access to information and helping them solve their problems. Finally, the GEMS colleges exhibited *a commitment to targeted support* programs and services for racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented college students.

#### *A Belief in Humanizing Education*

Administrators, faculty, and staff at the GEMS colleges expressed a belief in the importance of humanizing the educational experience. Participants highlighted a belief in the importance of a human element that has been incorporated into the educational experience at their respective campuses and allows students to connect with their institutions in meaningful ways. The human element of the culture of the GEMS campuses consists of three facets. First, at each of the campuses, there are administrators, faculty, and staff who genuinely care about and are committed to the success of their students. Second, participants underscored the importance of the meaningful relationships established between racial/ethnic minority students and their administrators, faculty, and staff. Lastly, institutional agents at the three campuses make intentional efforts to support the whole student.

Administrators and staff at each of the three colleges expressed a belief that conscious and intentional efforts to humanize the educational experience are critical to supporting the students whom they serve. They noted their belief in the importance of getting to know students

on a personal level and establishing connections with them. One academic advisor at USC highlighted the importance of humanizing the work with his students:

Humanizing the work. Sometimes, students will come in here stressed out and upset and you let them sit back and allow them to laugh at themselves. If you're serious with them all the time, they'll go away not having had that opportunity to look at things from a different vantage point and see that maybe they were a little too hard on themselves or maybe they were a little too tightly wound to deal with issues at hand. I think humanizing the work is a great thing, because it's easy to become robots in your work but we try not to do that...

The belief in the importance of incorporating a human element into the work of administrators, faculty, and staff at the GEMS colleges manifests in at least three ways. First, administrators, faculty, and staff who humanize the educational experience care about and are committed to the success of their students. One administrator illustrated this when he asserted that it is the caring and committed faculty and staff at SUNY New Paltz who are at the core of ensuring their students are equipped to succeed in college:

I'd have to say our success is due mostly to the faculty and staff, because of how committed they are to their students and in making sure they get things done... We have a lot of faculty and staff mentors who are very committed to the students, who really are trying to help them out. I would have to say our success is mostly because of the faculty and staff.

At each of the GEMS campuses, caring and committed faculty were recognized for their willingness to *go the extra mile* or *go overboard* in engaging and supporting students of color. One administrator noted the centrality of faculty attitudes and efforts in helping students establish connections with Butte College:

The success of the college should really go to the faculty. They are the ones that help with student retention and persistence. They connect with students. The go overboard, although they don't consider it overboard I guess, to help students.

One Black student at Butte College acknowledged how the caring aspect of a relationship is important when he stated, "Counselors are good and well, but a mentor situation is more

desirable to me. This is partially because the mentor cares while counselors might see you as being just another number...”

The strong belief in the humanization of the educational experience at the GEMS colleges is also embodied in the meaningful relationships that those caring and committed administrators, faculty, and staff develop with their students. The director of a cultural center at USC pinpointed such relationships as the key to the Center’s success:

How I made this place successful is I go where the students are. If someone is having a barbecue, I'm going to go and hang out. Before I got married, I was at everything. I was here until 10:00 at night almost seven days a week. The students wanted me there. They would ask, “Are you going to be there?” I was always there and I felt welcome and I felt like they really wanted me there...

As another administrator at Butte College described his philosophy with regard to serving students, he underscored the importance of taking advantage of opportunities to build significant relationships with the students whom he serves:

My style is that, if you are new and you haven’t become part of the TRUST [Transfer for underrepresented student populations] program, I'll walk you over there. By walking the student over, I build a significant relationship. Also, when I walk in that office, I am going to get results. When I bring somebody into the office, they are going, "Hey, David, how are you doing? You got a new student for us?" And, I say "Yes, I do. Take care of this individual." There is that relationship there... That student is now connected.

The following Latina students at SUNY New Paltz provided two examples of important relationships that are established both in and out of the classroom on their campus:

Well, this one Asian professor that I had last year. He's a media professor for the communication and media department...I just, I feel very comfortable just talking to him about anything. Like, I work for the campus radio station and some of the divides and tactics that we use in the radio I've talked to him about and we've actually analyzed it and broken it down. He is doing important things like that.

On campus there have been two people that have really helped me out. One of them is my EOP advisor. I go see her at least once a week. I go see her and we just sit down and we can talk for hours. “Okay, how's everything going?” So, she's like a friend too. Like, “Is everything okay? How are you feeling? Are you not homesick anymore? How are your classes going?”

The last way in which the human element manifests in the educational experience at the GEMS campuses is in the cognizant and deliberate efforts of administrators and staff to serve the diverse needs of the whole student. At SUNY New Paltz, for example, one of the most salient aspects of the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP), which is designed to provide support and retention services for academically and economically disadvantaged students, is the academic advisors who provide their students with support in meeting the academic, financial, and social challenges they may face during their college experience. One academic advisor asserted:

I think overall, if I had to sum it up, it's just that proactive support in all aspects of a student's life and looking at them in a holistic way from start to finish that contributes to minority students' success here....

Participants highlighted administrators and staff at the GEMS colleges who consciously and intentionally work to create an environment in which students feel comfortable approaching those administrators and staff with their problems – regardless of whether those problems are academic, financial, or personal:

We deal with anything from academic issues to personal issues to financial aid. So, we deal with the entire package of what a student needs to be successful here and to be retained and actually graduate... The majority of the students feel like they can go to any advisor with any of their problems, and that's the way it should be because we are really here to support them in any avenue and in any area that we can. – *SUNY Academic Advisor*

An administrator in the Equal Opportunity Programs and Services office at Butte College recognized the importance of serving the whole student in his office's efforts to support and retain racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented student populations:

Our counselors do a lot of academic counseling. But, you can never get through an academic counseling appointment without getting into personal issues. It's just seemingly impossible. If a student is getting a bad grade, it's usually not just because they don't understand the subject matter...it almost always has to do with other aspects of their life. They're having financial problems, family problems, health problems, transportation



problems, child care problems, or any other number of issues. So, our counselors are a very important component of the program and keep students plugged into college.

### *Strong Networking Values*

One of the most salient and noticeable aspects of the campus cultures at the GEMS colleges is the strong valuing of networks. The emphasis on networking throughout the cultures of the GEMS campuses is critical to understanding the experiences of their students because it contributes to high levels of connectivity among various persons and programs across those campuses. The networking aspect of the culture at USC, for example, is so salient that administrators, staff, and racial/ethnic minority students use the terms *Trojan Family*, *Trojan Network*, and *Trojan Family Network* when speaking about the campus. One Asian American student at USC explained how the Trojan Family Network was so discernible that he felt immediately connected, even before he enrolled at the institution:

The faculty advisors of the organizations and a lot of the staff, faculty, and professors come out during Welcome Week. Looking back on it, I wish I had taken more advantage of it, but it was, in a sense, my first networking opportunity at USC. You have a lot but as a first year coming in, I was meeting professors who I later realized I would have my sophomore year. I thought, "Oh, I should have talked to you before." I guess a lot of it is with the Trojan pride, the Trojan family, and the Trojan network. Here at USC, it's a very real thing, so coming in, even at my first orientation when I wasn't even a student here, I already felt that sense of connection. I think that's what you get that first Welcome Week, which is why people find it so much easier to transition into whatever niche or whatever organization they want.

Administrators, faculty, and staff at the GEMS colleges who work with large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students value networking and use it to their full advantage in meeting those students' needs. In speaking with people at the three colleges, the connectivity of individuals and groups across the campuses seems ubiquitous. The networking aspect of the cultures of the GEMS colleges is characterized by an emphasis on high levels of communication and collaboration. Moreover, the administrators, faculty, and staff are intentional about their

focus on and conscious of the importance of maintaining those networks of communication and collaboration. The Director of the Scholar's Mentorship Program (SMP), who is also a faculty member, offered an example of such collaboration when she described how her academic department, the Career Resource Center, the SMP, and the EOP at SUNY New Paltz all collaborate to administer a first-year seminar for underrepresented students:

Well, the EOP program counts on us to help sustain their student population too. If they come to us and ask us to create a particular kind of course, then we will do it. For example, the course that is called "Key Issues in the Education of Under-represented College Students" is the one that they use as their first-year seminar and our program uses it as ours as well. That course is a good combination of academics and survival skills, so the students have to learn to speak in public, do research, go to career resources and set up a resume, participate in a workshop on doing their FASFA, participate in a session on psychological wellness, take part in a session on time management, and so forth.

The networking culture of the three colleges not only contributes to the formation of broader information and support networks but it also works to scale down environments, creating, as one administrator described it, a small college feel for many individuals on those campuses:

There is a great deal of communication...everyone is really good at communicating and it has a really small college feel. Even though there are around 12,000 students here, it feels as though you are dealing in an almost high school type setting of a thousand to two thousand people. – *Butte Administrator*

Racial/ethnic minority students also highlighted how the environments, even at the largest of the GEMS colleges, seem small and personal. The following Asian American student's comment illustrates this point:

The lectures might be from 100 to 200 people, and then your discussions are maybe 20 people. It's cool to be able to transition from a large class to a small class and still have that same feeling and that same environment in terms of cultivating ideas together, working together, and asking questions. In that sense, that stands out most to me when I think of the classes here at USC.

There are many ways in which administrator and staff participants at the three institutions connect students to the broader networks of their respective campuses. At USC, the networking

culture is so salient that it seems to drive the daily behavior of administrators, faculty, staff, and students on campus. One academic advisor at USC demonstrated this by explaining that the methods he uses to connect students with faculty range from taking advantage of fortuitous interactions in the lobby outside of the advising office to encouraging the formal organization of events for student-faculty interaction:

Some of things that we do informally are when we see students out in the lobby area, we introduce them to faculty members or, if they have certain events like some of the missions at the beginning of the semester, we may invite faculty members to some of those events. The Black Student Association invites faculty members to moderate some discussions at their sessions, and we encourage them to have faculty mixers at the beginning of the year just so they could begin to meet faculty members who are masters in their fields of study.

The networking aspect of the cultures of the GEMS colleges is evident in three main forms. One manifestation of such networking is the open lines of communication maintained between faculty and staff. For example, at SUNY New Paltz, as illustrated by the following quote, administrators and staff in the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) and faculty members in academic departments across campus have established a culture in which a two-way system of communication is the norm:

We do have close contact with other faculty...For instance, if there's a situation and a student has certain concerns...there are times when we will call up a professor just to kind of get a sense of what's going on. You know, I've heard the student's side, now I want some insight in terms of what's going on. Why are they failing your class?

A second manifestation of the networking culture at the three colleges is the high levels of communication and collaboration between various student support offices. An administrator at Butte College demonstrated the frequent and close collaboration between various student support service offices on his campus. Specifically, he noted how his Transfer Center actively collaborates with the Equal Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) office and the TRIO office:

Let me give you an example of how we on our campus work together as programs. Equal Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) is a categorical program [state program designed to serve a specific student population], so they have eligibility requirements. Some of the students that get here aren't eligible the first year because they're not taking enough units. Our Targeting Resources for Underrepresented Students (TRUST) program captures those students beforehand and then dually enrolls them in both programs and then I work with EOPS. We also work with the TRIO program and we support the underrepresented students there by participating in a series of workshops where I will go in and talk about transfer and talk about each four-year college system, talk about essays... That is something that we do.

Finally, a third way in which faculty members, administrators, staff, and students on the three campuses maintain high levels of communication is through committees. The use of committees is an important method of facilitating communication among persons from many different campus environments. While it may not always be readily apparent how communication as a result of committees may directly affect students, the following statements illustrate how such communication can enhance students' voice on campus:

The Student Concerns Committee is made up of somebody from the Vice President's office, somebody from Residential Life, someone from campus police, someone from the counseling center, and from a couple of other offices on campus. And, what we do every week is try to identify those students about whom we're concerned; you know, a student about whom a professor calls us and says "I haven't seen this student in class in a couple of weeks and I don't know what's going on." A parent might call and say "I'm worried about my kid, they've not checked in with me." Whatever the issue is, we try to identify who those students are and then try to determine how it is that we might respond to the situation. – *USC Administrator*

We all have advisory committees and we're all expected to kind of communicate with our colleagues. It's part of our professional due diligence, if you will. I think it's pretty common. I chair a number of groups where I come in contact with a lot of faculty members. I chair the Academic Standing Committee...it's the committee where any student who has been dismissed from the college or wants to try to get academic renewal or get a late withdrawal or appeal something, has to go to. I chair the Financial Aid Appeals Committee, which is the group that people when they are dismissed from financial aid appeal to get their financial aid back. We have faculty and students on both of those committees. So that helps me network. That's where I hear a lot of the stories is in the Appeals Committee. That's where we hear the math horror stories and the lack of money stories – all the things that can cause somebody who is disadvantaged in any way can cause them to sever ties with the college. – *Butte Administrator*

What makes these networking cultures so significant for racial/ethnic minority students at the GEMS colleges is not just that they exist but also that the communities in which large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students on those campuses are engaged are highly integrated into the broader campus networks. Such integration is maintained by high levels of communication and collaboration among administrators and staff within those subcultures and other faculty members, administrators, and staff across the broader campus network. Because those minority communities are integrated into the broader campus networks, the communication and collaboration that characterize those networks serve to breakdown barriers that racial/ethnic minority students may face in finding membership in or establishing connections to the broader campus culture.

#### *A Commitment to Targeted Support*

Most or all postsecondary institutions provide programs and services with the intention of supporting the diverse needs of their students. One important aspect of the culture of the GEMS campuses, however, is their commitment to providing supplemental programs and services that are targeted at serving large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students and explicitly linked to other programs and services throughout their campuses. This section details the wide range of support programs and services aimed at serving racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented college students.

Many public policymakers and institutional leaders have committed a substantial amount of resources to create and sustain comprehensive targeted underrepresented student support programs and services on the GEMS campuses. The result of this commitment is the maintenance of a wide range of programs and services that are targeted at serving historically underrepresented college student populations. At USC, for example, institutional leaders have

established and sustained support for three very active cultural centers. Other important support offices and programs at USC include the Scholar's Program focused on serving transfer students of color, the Center for Academic Success which provides academic and social support for racial/ethnic minority students, and the Center for Diversity in Engineering which provides support for students of color in engineering majors. Alternatively, Upward Bound and TRIO are two federally-funded programs focused on improving the quality of education and success among the campus's historically underrepresented student populations.

At SUNY New Paltz, state support allowed for the creation of the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP), which provides academic, financial, and social support for academically and economically disadvantaged students. Additionally, the institution has established a Scholar's Mentorship Program (SMP), which provides faculty, staff, and peer mentors for students of color. A federally-funded TRIO Program also assists students of color in navigating their way through the college experience. The AMP-CSTEP (AC2) Program is an institutional initiative that provides guidance and support for racial/ethnic minority students majoring in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields.

A key targeted support office on the Butte College campus is the state-supported Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) office provides academic, financial, and counseling services for many racial/ethnic minority students. EOPS is housed in an office next to the federally-funded TRIO Program office that provides a diverse array of support services for students of color aspiring to pursue graduate education. These programs work closely with the Transfer Center's Targeting Resources for Underrepresented Students (TRUST) Program, which is aimed at expanding knowledge of four-year institutions and transfer opportunities for historically underrepresented student populations.

As the Vice President of Student Affairs at one of the colleges asserted, it is the collective efforts of those targeted and mainstream programs and services that contribute to the success of racial/ethnic minority students on his campus:

What I would highlight is that it takes all of these things to make it work. It's not any one thing. As I say to parents and students. Let's say I'm recruiting, for example, an African American student. I say, when you come to this campus, we're going to have lots of special things for you. There's going to be the Center for Black Cultural Student Affairs. So, that's a cultural center. We're going to have a residential setting that you may want to live in. We have a major in American Studies and Ethnicity and you may decide you want to major in Afro-American Studies. But at the same time you're going to be in a residential college so you'll have a roommate or roommates, you'll have RAs, you'll have resident faculty, you'll have lots of support around you. But the main thing that you get when you come to this university is that our goal is to make sure that, no matter where you go, you're treated with respect and you're treated with care.

Indeed, what is unique about the GEMS colleges is the large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students who are connected in a meaningful way with one or more of the targeted support programs across their campuses. For example, at USC, the CBCSA serves over 600 students and the APASS provides programs and services for up to 400 students at any one point in time. At SUNY New Paltz, over 500 students are served by the EOP, over 120 students take advantage of the SMP, and over another 40 students of color are served by the AC2 program. And, at Butte, approximately 1,700 students are provided with support from the EOPS and TRIO programs alone. These numbers do not include the many students of color who are served by the other targeted support programs and services on the three campuses.

The commitment to targeted support on the GEMS campuses is multifaceted. First, there is a necessary allocation of resources from policymakers and institutional leaders to help sustain essential targeted support for historically underrepresented students. Second, those targeted support programs and services are led by key persons who are committed to the success of racial/ethnic minority and other underrepresented students on their campuses. Third, those

targeted programs and services are integrated into a broader campus-wide network of people and programs committed to the success of the students whom they serve. Thus, the targeted support programs and services provide their students with both depth and breadth, constituting a critical source of multifaceted and continuous support for their students and provide those students with access to the wide range of programs and services across their respective campuses.

Functioning within all of the aforementioned programs are multiple influential administrators and staff who are instrumental in the impact those programs have on students experiences. The leaders who help sustain the aforementioned support systems exert an important influence on racial/ethnic minority students at the GEMS colleges in three ways: 1) they serve as advocates to whom students can go with any problem they face; 2) they connect students with programs and services throughout the broader campus network, and; 3) they serve as cultural resources, or key mediators, moderators, and role models for their students.

On each of the GEMS campuses, there are a core group of administrators and staff who intentionally work to establish genuine and meaningful relationships with large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students. Many students of color see those administrators and staff as advocates to whom they can go for support. This is illustrated by the following student from USC:

We already knew who it is that we needed to talk to, the directors of each of these programs, so we built that relationship with them where we feel like, "Okay, if I'm not doing well in a class, I could go talk to this person and she will find someone to help me." I think that helped a lot for me in particular because we knew right off the bat where we needed to go whereas some students might not know.

Regardless of the nature of the problem, students can feel confident that these persons will identify and connect them with the necessary information and resources to meet the challenges that they face. As a result, these key administrators and staff members serve as many students'



access point to the broader campus network described in the previous section. A student from SUNY New Paltz commented on how she can trust her academic advisor to connect her with the help or resources she needs:

Not only is she an advisor but she's also a friend. And, she shared her college life and what she went through with me and I can relate to that. So it's like she's really been helpful. I can go to her for anything. Like yesterday I had a problem and she just solved it in seconds. Like, "Okay, look, just take this upstairs and you're done," and that's it and she called up to find out and everything. So, regardless of what the issue is, I can go to her for anything and she's always going to be there.

These administrators and staff also represent key cultural agents who serve as mediators, moderators, and translators for students of color on the GEMS campuses. One Asian American USC student described how two administrators were important in assisting his adjustment and learning how to navigate the campus culture:

The transition period, like I mentioned earlier about the Director and Assistant Director of the cultural center, I would always go in there and they were kind of like my unofficial mentors in a sense just because I would come in with a lot of questions about how to adjust from high school to college. I keep asking people questions, including them. They've been helping me throughout the process.

Another Black USC student described how the Director and Assistant Director of the Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs influenced his experience by serving as key inspiring role models:

Working here with the Director and Assistant Director, I see how successful they are. The Assistant Director is half twice my age and the Director is twice my age and to see how much they're doing, it shows me how much I could do and even more.

Thus, an important aspect of the GEMS campuses is that there is a core group of administrators and staff who work within holistic and targeted support systems that are created and maintained to provide academic and social support for historically underrepresented students and, therefore, have the time and resources to establish relationships with those students.

As previously mentioned, one of the strengths of the holistic and targeted support systems at the GEMS colleges is that they are integrated into the broader network of communication and collaboration that characterizes the cultures of those institutions. Thus, these systems provide programs and services that are a product of collaboration between multiple, and sometimes several, other support programs and administrative offices across campus. The Director of the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) at SUNY New Paltz administrator described her philosophy toward using those networks to effectively provide student services:

I think over the years I have developed a shift in the idea of what you do to get students to use services and how you make them use the services and how you make them want those services. I think I could give you a laundry list of all of our services and they're probably going to look the same as what many other campuses are doing. But the key difference is how we package them and how we link them to other things going on around campus or to other things going on in the program.

The targeted support programs and services described in this section serve many purposes on the GEMS campuses, one of which is the help perpetuate an ethos of institutional responsibility at those three institutions. Both within those support systems and across the broader campus networks of the three colleges persists the guiding principle that students' success, and therefore racial/ethnic minority students' success, is a responsibility of the college as well as the student. The next section describes, in detail, the ethos of institutional responsibility that permeates the GEMS colleges.

#### *An Ethos of Institutional Responsibility*

The work of administrators and staff at the GEMS colleges is guided by a culture in which racial/ethnic minority student success is seen as an institutional responsibility. One way in which this manifests in the practices across the three campuses is through the espoused and enacted philosophy of administrators and staff who consciously and consistently hold themselves accountable for their students' success. Participants noted that many administrators and staff

serving large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students at the three institutions do not always expect students to seek out help. Instead, they make concerted efforts to reach out to students in order to maximize those students' access to information and opportunities on their respective campuses. For instance, one administrator noted the proactive philosophy that guides administrative behavior on his campus:

We're less laissez-faire than we used to be. So, now for example, and we do this for all students, but it started with African American and other minority students. Now every semester if students have less than a 2.5 we contact them. I don't care who you are. We get in touch with you and say we noticed that your grades are less than 2.5 and we want to offer you help. Tutoring, counseling, whatever. And, I think it's harder to get lost. I think less people want to be lost, it's harder to get lost, and there's more intentional support for students. I think that is the biggest key...that you're reaching out and you're not saying "Well, sink or swim. You're on your own." There's help there, and we're not waiting for you to ask for it. We'll offer it to you.

At the GEMS institutions, regardless of the size of the institution, the proactive nature of the campus cultures helps connect students to key programs and services across the campus community. One administrator explained the nature of the proactive philosophy at USC:

I think the first is that we're a very big institution. We have over 30,000 students. About 16,000 of which are undergraduates. So looking at USC just on paper in terms of numbers, people would probably assume this is a big, impersonal place. But the exact opposite is true. This is a place where we really pride ourselves on making every student feel like they matter and in fact one of our mottos is *at USC a student has to run from help*. And, so I think why we do such a good job of retaining all students, minority students included, is that real sense of community that every student feels when they're part of USC.

An administrator at Butte College explained how this philosophy could be particularly salient for racial/ethnic minority students who may come from cultures in which seeking help is a sign of inadequacy. He shared precisely why he believes it is important for administrators and staff to be proactive:

The problem is minority students are not usually going to come in unless they are walked over here. At some level it may be considered a public shaming. At another level they don't like to ask for help. Culturally, they are not that extroverted in terms of seeking

those types of services. If I have a student that makes an appointment with me and they don't show up, I call them up and ask them if they are ok and why the hell they aren't here. We have to get past "All they got to do is ask," and say "How do we take the product out to them."

There are two main ways in which the proactive culture of the GEMS colleges is perpetuated: (1) institutional policies that force students to fulfill certain expectations, and; (2) administrators and staff who assume responsibility for their students' success. Institutional policies that force connections between students, staff, and administrators take on many forms. For example, at SUNY New Paltz, the EOP has designed a system of intrusive advising, in which students are required to meet with their advisors before they register for classes, are evaluated each semester by their instructors, and meet with their academic advisors a minimum of three times per semester. These policies help perpetuate an institutional responsibility to monitor and ensure the success of racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented students.

While not all administrators and staff at the GEMS campuses express a personal philosophy of being proactive, what *is* apparent is that the people on the GEMS campuses who do espouse that philosophy demonstrate a sense of personal responsibility and help maintain a culture in which racial/ethnic minority students feel encouraged and sometimes pressured to engage. Comments from two other students provide an illustration of how their awareness of administrators' investment in their success engendered pressure for them to participate in academically beneficial activities:

So, if you have somebody who is also keeping track of how I'm doing it makes me want to do better, because I know she's going to have to see my grades, because at the end of the semester nobody sees your grades besides you. But, if you know your advisor and everybody else is going to see them then it makes you not want to try harder – *SUNY Black Student*

He just bugs you until you do something. He'll be like "Come to TRIO," and you'll be like "Oh yeah." So he just shoves it in your mouth and you go, because otherwise the next time he sees you he'll go "Hey, why didn't you come?" and you're going to feel all bad. – *Butte Black Student*

Another consequence of the proactive culture is that a considerable number of students are provided with large amounts of information and numerous avenues for exposure to that information. An administrator at USC explained the importance of providing students with access to information in order to ensure students feel like a part of the campus community:

We just try to make sure that there's good ritual early and that you then kind of pester them. Send them emails. Write them letters. Invite them to things. You attend their programs and just try to do a lot of things to help them know that this is their USC.

As one Black student at Butte College noted, the proactive philosophy of administrators and staff on his campus helps to foster an awareness of information and opportunities that he might not necessarily seek out:

The TRIO program basically opens up the opportunity for extra activities, like scholarships and other things that if I was just walking around campus I wouldn't necessarily know about. And, it provides a direct supervision of how I am doing because I check in with the administrators and faculty.

Administrators and staff who espouse this proactive philosophy and make conscious efforts to reach out to students and expose them to information and opportunities can have a profound impact on their students' experiences. The AC2 program at SUNY New Paltz, for example, provides its students with a plethora of information about various opportunities for scholarships, internships, and enriching programs and activities. The following Latina student explained how the electronic communication with administrators and staff in the AC2 program is her primary source of information about internships, scholarships, and other opportunities:

I'm glad I'm in AC2. They've really helped me out a lot... They always send me internship information. Even if I'm not eligible for them, I still look through them because most of the internships are for juniors and seniors... They always try to do activities and stuff like

that...They try to make people feel welcome. They just catch me every time I'm not doing anything. So, I'm going to take advantage of everything I can my freshman year because I don't know what could happen my sophomore year. I could be really, really busy. So, everything they send to me I'm like "Yes, I can make it. I'm going to go."

Common methods by which administrators and staff at USC and Butte College are proactive in providing students with access to information about important academic, personal, and professional issues are through the use of emails and workshops. The SCholar's Program at USC provides a number of services for first-generation and low-income racial/ethnic minority transfer students, including a special orientation, an early immersion program focused on familiarizing students with the university environment and available resources, student success seminars, financial assistance, and academic, financial, and personal advising. One Latina SCholar's Program participant described the broad range of information that the program provides its participants with their student success seminars:

That was with the Scholar's Program but usually during the beginning of the semester, especially Fall when the new group of students are coming in, they do have a lot of workshops. They have workshops for two or three months on different things. They have workshops for library, stress management, test taking techniques, writing, how to take good notes...a whole array of different things; everything from managing yourself personally to academically. They have them for three months and at least two a day.

The SCholar's Program provides one example of how the proactive culture of the GEMS campuses increases students' levels of access to information about enriching programs and services on the three campuses. The barrage of information that students at the GEMS colleges receive ranges from information on programs and services that facilitate adjustment to campus environments to the transition into graduate school or professional life.

#### Holistic and Integrated support systems

The four common cultural characteristics found on the GEMS campuses interact to produce and sustain relatively *holistic and integrated support systems* for racial/ethnic minority

students. At the three colleges, the success of racial/ethnic minority students is not attributed to an independent program or service aimed at supporting or retaining those students. Rather, each of the three campuses is home to multiple targeted support systems that provide academic, financial, personal, and social assistance for large numbers of students from racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented backgrounds. These support systems work in conjunction with the mainstream campus offices (e.g., the career counseling center or orientation programs and services) to create a more comprehensively supportive environment for those students.

In this section, I provide a more in-depth description of one key holistic and integrated support system at each of the three GEMS campuses. The following descriptions are not intended to highlight specific programs that are responsible for the success of minority students at the GEMS colleges. Rather, they are designed to provide an illustration of how the four cultural elements in the preceding sections converge to create a comprehensive, integrated, and targeted system of support for a noteworthy number of racial/ethnic minority students on the GEMS campuses. First, I will provide a description of the Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs at the University of Southern California, paying particular attention to the integrated system of cultural enrichment and support programs offered by that center. Then, I offer a comprehensive description of the Equal Opportunity Program at SUNY New Paltz, in order to illustrate how the program functions to create a seamless educational experience for its students. Finally, I will present a description of the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services at Butte College, highlighting how that office has created a campus-wide network of holistic support for students from historically underrepresented backgrounds.

What should become apparent is the way in which the aforementioned cultural elements converge to create a holistic and integrated system of support for the students who are involved in the activities of these three programs. Specifically, the following sections focus on illuminating how *targeted support* systems that are connected to the broader campus support *networks* of their respective campuses and are administered by persons who incorporate a *human element* and assume *an ethos of institutional responsibility*. The result of these dynamics is the provision of programs and services that help to provide *holistic and integrated support* for racial/ethnic minority students and create a *sense of belonging* among those students.

#### *The Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs at USC*

A key component of efforts to support and retain students of color at USC is the three cultural centers that provide special services for Asian Pacific American, Black, and Latina/o students on the campus. The three of the centers have varying purposes and provide different programs and services for the students whom they serve. The Assistant Director of the Asian Pacific American Students Services office explained this with the following statement:

All three centers play very different roles. Traditionally, the Center for Chicano and Center for Black Culture Student Affairs have played more of a traditional retention focused role. So, they do academic intervention and they check on student's grades. On this campus there are also Latino and African American residential floors. There is no Asian American structure like that. So, our programs are very, very different from their programs. They do the Black family dinner; they do Black graduation, which are similar to Latino Student Services as well. Our programs are more focused on education, politicization, empowerment, leadership, mentoring. So, it's a different focus, and that's because retention is not necessarily our Center's primary mission or primary goal.

Despite their differences, all three centers play a fundamental role in providing important support and opportunities for educationally purposeful engagement on the USC campus. This section describes the various ways in which one of the centers, the Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs, provides critical services and support for Black students.



The Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs (CBCSA) is one of the three primary cultural centers at the University of Southern California. Two full-time Black administrators – a Director and an Assistant Director – manage the center with the help of part-time student staff. The CBCSA is located in the Student Union at the center of the USC campus. The Center consists of a Director’s office, an Assistant Director’s office, a computer lab, and a main area that contains a desk for the student employees, a couch, and two tables. One of the tables is covered with a wide range of information, including an African American Resource Handbook, a Black Student Press newspaper, and information on events and opportunities. Inside the Director’s office, there is a desk behind which the Director sits and two chairs reserved for guests. The walls of the office are covered with pictures of the Director and students with whom she has worked over her years working in the CBCSA.

The CBCSA is focused on providing student services for Black students on the USC campus. The following excerpt, extracted from the website of the Center, provides a summary of the mission of the CBCSA:

The Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs provides a wide range of support services, programs and activities aimed at the development of both undergraduate and graduate students. CBCSA is committed to creating an environment that encourages the intellectual, professional, and cultural growth of African-American students entering and completing degree programs. CBCSA targets five major areas of focus, which include Cultural and Community Awareness; Leadership; Professional Development; Social Enrichment; and Retention.

This statement illustrates the broad focus of the center and is indicative of the wide range of opportunities and services the Center provides for Black students on the USC campus. From the time Black students arrive on the campus to the time they graduate and beyond, the CBCSA channels energy and resources toward supporting them during their transition into and through the college experience. Administrators indicated that the Center regularly provides services to

over 600 students – over half of the Black student population at USC – annually. As the Director of CBCSA noted, however, through various connections and technology, the center reaches and affects the experiences of many more people:

Six-hundred is a lot of people. But, I send out a weekly email that goes out to, when you add students, staff, faculty and alumni, almost 3,000 people. That basically is a snapshot of everything that's going on in careers, in jobs, scholarships, fellowships, and summer opportunities. So, they're getting the information because they are showing up to different programs. But it's just a different feel as far as the actual traffic that might walk through.

*Matriculation.* The Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs establishes connections with students before they even apply to an institution of higher education. The Center sends Black students at USC to local K-12 schools to inform students about life at USC. As the Director noted, the Center is active in recruiting Black students to attend USC:

I want to make sure the things that we do in this office attract a student to come here. It helps in the recruiting, so that's why we have our materials, our web site, our weekly emails, me still going out into the community and speaking to people.

Most of the transition programs and services offered by the CBCSA, however, are targeted at meeting the needs of students once they have been accepted and enrolled.

When Black students begin their four-year college experience at USC, they take part in the campus-wide USC Welcome Week sponsored by the Office of Student Activities, during which they register for classes, take placement exams, and meet administrators, faculty, staff, and students. During this period, students are also given an introduction to the First Year 15, which is a program designed to create awareness among incoming students of the various support services and programs on the USC campus and facilitate the integration of students into the USC community – The Trojan Family.

In addition to the aforementioned processes for facilitating the acculturation of incoming students, Black Welcome Week is a 16-day event designed to add a Black cultural element to the

university's campus-wide Welcome Week by providing activities aimed at celebrating Black culture. During the first two weeks of September, the CBCSA, Black Student Assembly, and Black student organizations on campus collaborate to offer new and continuing students cultural and social programming to help them make the transition into the Trojan Family. The Director of the Center explained the purpose of Black Welcome Week:

One of the things, again, is trying to make a student feel welcome by giving them various programs. One of the big things we do is Black Welcome Week. Black welcome week is really called a week but it's really about 10 or 15 days, but week is the actual joke. Black Welcome Week gives students an opportunity to meet new students, reconnect with students if they're a returning student, and just get a fresh start in meeting all the different people and reconnecting. We have barbecues, we have spades and dominos nights, we have movie nights, and we have the African American marketplace that's usually across the street during that time. But it consists of different things to just show everybody "Look, we're here. Black students are here and we're here to help you."

During Black Welcome Week, students participate in a New Student, Staff, and Faculty Mixer to connect with people in the university community and are given an African American Resource Handbook that provides students with information about Black faculty, Black administrators, Black student organizations, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and Black culture in the surrounding community. One Black student at USC was quoted in the university's newspaper, The Daily Trojan, saying "I think Black Welcome Week was really helpful. It was a great way for me to get involved in the campus community."

Under the Academic Monitoring and Intervention program, administrators in the CBCSA screen students' progress throughout their first year. If there are signs of academic adjustment difficulties, the Center offers academic counseling and connects students with appropriate academic support services to meet their needs. One student highlighted CBCSA's academic monitoring program and support in helping foster success among Black students on campus:

I think CBCSA definitely helps to keep people around because it gives students a place where they know they can go for help. We have programs like academic monitoring which I think definitely helps.

*Connections to the Black Campus Communities.* Additionally, there are several Black communities across the USC campus with which the CBCSA connects its students once they are enrolled. In their first year at USC, students have the option to live in Somerville Place, which is a living learning community established in 1995. Somerville Place is an African American themed residential floor on which 32 Black student residents are mentored by USC faculty and administrators who work to cultivate a community aimed at fostering academic success, leadership, and personal growth. Residents of Somerville Place have five main goals: spirituality, respect, retention, successful transitions, and positive social values. The goals of Somerville Place “aim to foster an understanding of and respect for Black culture, while cultivating a sense of family and community” (CBCSA, 2006, p. 5). A student spoke of the importance of Somerville Place, in providing a venue to connect with other academically motivated Black students on his campus:

When I came here as a freshman, I did live on the African-American-theme floor...I wanted to embrace the African-American community that existed on-campus and balance that with the other communities that exist on-campus. I wanted to get a feel for the people. I wanted to get a feel for those who were doing the same thing I was doing. I wanted to see other people that were here to do the same thing that I was here to do, which was get a degree and excel in their lives.

The African American Honors Society (AAHS) is another program designed to promote community among Black students at USC. The AAHS aims “to promote high scholarship and excellence in service to the Black community” (CBCSA, p. 4). The AAHS also strives to recognize academic excellence. To be eligible for the AAHS, students must have a 3.25 grade-point average, exhibit good character, and demonstrate leadership and service.

Another program housed within CBCSA is the African-Centered Leadership Academy (ACLA), which is designed to develop collective leadership skills among Black students at USC. The CBCSA also provides programmatic opportunities for students to get involved with Black communities beyond the boundaries of the USC campus. For example, through the Historically Black College and University Exchange Program, students have the opportunity to spend one semester or one academic year at a historically Black college or university. Alternatively, the Marcus Garvey Service Learning Project is a collaborative project between CBCSA and USC's School of Accounting, which allows Black students at USC the opportunity to tutor a junior high school student in a nearby community.

USC is also home to 41 Black student-run organizations – equaling one student organization for every 25 Black undergraduate students on the campus – which provide a vast array of campus communities in which Black students can engage with other students from their own racial/ethnic heritages. One student expressed the importance of the connections between the CBCSA and the Black student organizations on campus:

The three main multicultural offices that we have on campus are all connected to their own student assemblies. That is the perfect example of what fosters success here on campus. – *USC Black Student*

What is unique about the CBCSA at USC is the plethora of programs and opportunities that students can access through the Center that are tailored to serving the Black USC community. A participant talked about all of the opportunities afforded to new students by the CBCSA:

Because I'm African-American, I had the ability to connect with the African-American community through venues such as the CBCSA, through venues such as Somerville Place, through venues such as the Black Business Student Association or African-Americans in Pre-Law or 100 Black Men—various organizations that touch upon the interests that I have...

The CBCSA also offers a broad range of annual cultural events and programming. For example, Black Family Weekend is an event in which students and their families are invited to take part in a Soul Food Dinner, a football game, and a non-denominational spiritual gathering at the university church. During Black History Month, the Center and the various Black student organizations on the USC campus organize a wide range of events focused on celebrating Black heritage. During February of 2007, those events included an exhibit focused on the condition of AIDS in Africa and Asia, a Rwandan film screening, celebrations of Black individual achievements, an event focused on honoring women of color, informational sessions on CBCSA programs, discussions about Black culture and race in America, a Black and Gold Scholarship Pageant, as well as a combination of movies, plays, and invited guest speakers.

*The Center as a Resource.* The CBCSA provides students with ongoing resources to assist them in meeting the challenges they face throughout their experience at USC. The Director of the Center described the range of services CBCSA provides:

I would definitely say we are a resource for them. We equip them with an updated web site. We equip them with an African American Resource Handbook. Students come and print their papers here, email themselves, check their emails, print papers, get faxes. So I would say that we are definitely a resource in that realm.

The African American Resource Handbook is a particularly important method by which the CBCSA disseminates information to the Black USC community. The handbook serves as an initial contact point between new students and all facets of the Black community at USC. It provides an introduction to the CBCSA administrators and the aforementioned programs hosted by or affiliated with the Center. It also includes a list of all of the Black faculty members and administrators at USC, so students have immediate access to successful people of color who can serve as important mentors or resources. Additionally, the handbook contains a calendar of events hosted by Black USC organizations throughout the entire academic year. Thus, from the

time they enter campus, students know when and where all of the events throughout the year will take place. Finally, the handbook provides students with information on the various Black student organizations that exist on campus so new students do not have to seek out ways to become involved with their peers. One student, who admitted that he was not very involved on the USC campus, illustrated how the information in the handbook was responsible for his involvement in the Black Business Student Association:

I went to CBCSA and I got the handbook and saw all the Black student organizations. I said, “Okay. Wow. I’m a business major. Black Student Association—why not?” I went to their meeting and it seemed like it was something that I wanted to get involved in, so I did.

Another method by which the CBCSA disseminates large amounts of useful information is through its website. The CBCSA makes accessible to students information on a broad array of general scholarships as well as scholarships created for supporting members of the African American community. All of this information is linked to the CBCSA’s website and is easily and instantly accessible to students. The website also keeps updated links to job and internship opportunities in the surrounding communities, links to the websites of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and information on the various programs and services provided by the Center. One student summed up the role that the Center plays as a resource:

The CBCSA is here to say, “Hey, you’re doing great, and we want to introduce you to other Black people who are doing great. Or, maybe we want to introduce you to Black people who aren’t doing great, and they could use *you* as a model and could look to you as a resource.” That’s really what the office is—a resource.

*A Home Away From Home.* Perhaps the most important method by which the Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs supports its students is through providing a place where students feel comfortable going for support. In other words, the Center serves, for many students, as a surrogate family. As one participant noted, the administrators at the CBCSA have cultivated

an environment that sends a signal to students that they have a place where they can go to have their needs met:

I think what helps a student, any student really, but a Black student in particular, is feeling like they belong and knowing that there is a place that they can come if something should go down...Earlier a student came in and talked about her roommate problems. So, now I'm going to have a meeting with both of them to kind of mediate. But the fact that she knew that she could come and talk to me and say "You know what? My roommate thing is not happening. I need your help." I think when a student has a niche on campus like that they feel like they're a part of the fabric.

Many administrators, staff, and racial/ethnic minority students at the GEMS institutions referred to various communities on their campuses as families. One Black student described how the CBCSA, for many students, functions as their home away from home:

I feel that the office functions as a home away from home. Students are able to participate in various activities that the office collaborates to organize. Students are able to use the administrators as a resource for academic reasons or personal issues...Students know if they're having an issue, they have a parental figure to turn to who also happens to be very involved with the university academically and professionally and can help them.

Just as there are often key members who are responsible for the cohesion of a family, there are key persons who maintain the cohesion of the CBCSA. These persons serve as surrogate parents or older siblings who function as resources, role models, and connections to the university community for Black students on the USC campus. One Black student asserted that "Within the office, most people will say this – the CBCSA Director is like a second mother and the office is like a second home. That's the environment that we promote." The Director established a history at the CBCSA and the various programs and services that now make up the Center are, in part, a function of her experiences and knowledge of students' needs. She explained how she based the programs and services of the center on her own college experiences:

I knew what I wanted when I was a college student and I wanted somebody who was going to be there for me who actually seemed like they genuinely cared. So, that's how I



started. You hear what I'm saying, but look at my office. Do you see the walls over here and behind you [Pointing at a wall full of pictures]? This is history. I have so many pictures that they drift out into the rest of the office. So, the first office door where the student computers are – that whole wall is covered.

She went on to explain how the CBCSA has been successful precisely because of the meaningful and personal relationships that she built with students:

How I made this place successful is I go where they are. If someone is having a barbecue I'm going to go and hang out. Before I got married and before I really was dating strongly with my husband now, I was at everything. I was here until 10:00 at night damn near seven days a week. The students wanted me there. It was like I was there and I felt welcome and I felt like they really wanted me there.

She went on to describe how the fundamental core of the services provided by her office is the human element which helps establish relationships between CBCSA administrators and students:

I think what students really like is a human being. I think that I can get out there and boogey and *drop it like it's hot* just like them, and they go, "Oh, my God. She's so cool." It's always about that human quality. You can't be a director or lead this kind of office and not be a part of the people. I was out there. You see me [Pointing at another picture]? I've got a pink wig on over here. That was at a diversity retreat.

In addition to serving as a human resource for the students at USC the administrators in CBCSA channel their time and resources toward meeting the needs of their students, regardless of whether they are financial, personal, professional, or social. One student's quote underscores both how the Center operates as a home for students and how the Center's Director is a parental figure who can help students deal with their problems, regardless of their nature:

I think the Center functions as a home away from home. Students are able to participate in various activities that the office collaborates to provide. Students are able to use the Director as a resource for more than just academic reasons...if they have any personal issues as well. I know that there have been years where there have been issues with living situations. I feel like the students know that if they're having an issue, they have a parental figure to turn to who also happens to be very involved with the university academically and professionally and can help them.

In addition to all of the aforementioned services, the CBCSA functions to help ease the transition of Black students into life after USC.

*Life Beyond College.* In addition to the web resources that connect students with internship, fellowship, and job opportunities, CBCSA also has a Black student graduation ceremony and organizes workshops to prepare students for life after college and the transition into professional careers. The Black graduation is an important symbolic event that signifies the success Black students on campus have achieved. Already mentioned are the Diversity Career Workshop Series which is a collaboration between CBCSA and the USC Career Center and is focused on educating students about diversity issues in the workplace, including workshops on networking, resume preparation, interviewing skills, and dressing and etiquette. Networking is, perhaps, The Director of CBCSA also highlighted how she strives to establish connections between students and key people on campus:

I would think that the students know that I'm doing things in their best interest. When I'm going to all these meetings I'm trying to figure out more ways to fund things, more ways of hooking the students up with faculty and staff, the alumni and the community as far as job findings and things like that.

One indication of the impact the Center and the administrators within the Center make on USC students' experiences is the recognition they receive from the university community. One of the administrators running the CBCSA was named one of the 20 most influential people on the USC campus in 2007 and received a *Mom Away from Home Award* from one of the USC fraternities in 2002. In sum, CBCSA is perceived as a critical component in the college experiences of Black students at USC.

#### *The Equal Opportunity Program at SUNY New Paltz*

One of the key student support programs at SUNY New Paltz is the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP). The EOP office is housed in the administration building located at the entrance of the New Paltz campus. The EOP reception area contains two desks reserved for student employees and a row of chairs for people to wait for their appointments. Attached to one end of

the reception area is a room with a copier and adjacent to that room is the office of the Director of the EOP. On the opposite end of the reception area is a small space containing information about various support programs and services. The front wall of the EOP office is covered with information about internship and scholarship opportunities. On the same floor of the building are the office of the Assistant Director and the offices of the six academic advisors that work for the EOP. Of all eight full-time members of the EOP staff, five of them are persons of color.

The EOP has existed for 14 years and provides a broad range of support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In order to be eligible for the program, students must meet both economic and educational guidelines. Economic guidelines are based on family income and academic eligibility is determined by high school grades and standardized test scores. In order to qualify, academically, students must have received below a 1050 on the SAT, have a high school average below 85 on a 100-point scale, or have been on graduated from a non-college preparatory high school program. In total, EOP provides services for approximately 520 students. The profile of EOP-served students is very different than their non-EOP peers. EOP students average SAT scores that are 350 points lower than their non-EOP counterparts at SUNY New Paltz. The students admitted to EOP also average high school grades that are eight points lower than their non-EOP peers. Economically, all of the students admitted to EOP are Pell Grant eligible, 98% of them receive the maximum Pell Grant amount, 30% are supported by public assistance, 90% come from households with incomes below \$30,000, and nearly all of them are first-generation college students.

Despite all of the aforementioned factors that might suggest EOP students are at risk, those students' persistence rates are consistently higher than those of non-EOP students at SUNY New Paltz. Among EOP students who matriculated at SUNY New Paltz in 2003, 95% persisted

into the second year at New Paltz, while that figure was 83% for their non-EOP counterparts. Moreover, EOP students appear to attain baccalaureate degrees at higher rates than their non-EOP peers. The five-year graduation rate for EOP students who entered New Paltz in 1998 is approximately 5% higher than their non-EOP counterparts. When asked about minority student success on the SUNY campus, one non-EOP student illustrated how the Program was known for its impact:

The EOP students have the best stuff. They have three advisors and they're always on them. They have the best graduation rates in our school. They are EOP students who people think were not going to make it. But, with regular admission, we just have this one advisor and we don't really have access to all those different services they offer

The mission of EOP is to provide academic, financial, personal, and social support for academically and economically disadvantaged students. An extract from the EOP website describes the mission of the Program:

SUNY New Paltz's Educational Opportunity Program is an academic program designed for capable students who, because of inadequate financial resources and academic preparation, have not had the same opportunities as other students to realize their academic potential. With an annual enrollment of more than 500 students, our EOP is one of the largest in the State University of New York system. A personalized, highly structured academic support program, it offers admission to the University and provides academic, personal, and social counseling, as well as financial aid advisement.

In order to fulfill the mission of the EOP, the office offers a diverse set of programs and services to students who are accepted into the program. These services begin immediately after students are accepted to SUNY New Paltz and continue throughout the college experience.

*Acculturation.* The Equal Opportunity Program focuses on ensuring a smooth transition into college life for its students. Thus, a key aspect of EOP's retention strategy is the frontloading of services to facilitate the adjustment of students in the first year. While the actual components of the first-year experience may vary for EOP students from year to year, there are a standard set of programs and services that provide a foundation for the support EOP provides its

first-year students. When EOP students begin their college experience at New Paltz, they must enter into a contractual agreement with the Program to ensure that they participate in retention services. The students whom EOP serves participate in an expanded summer orientation program. The EOP summer orientation program is an expansion of the regular orientation programming at New Paltz, during which EOP students build community with their fellow EOP peers. One EOP student described the important role of this summer orientation program in connecting students to the Program's cohesive community before they even begin their first year:

Well, we bond especially with each other. We actually meet during orientation. Everyone else has to be here for three days, but if you're an EOP student you have to be here for five days. So, we come a day beforehand, before everybody else does, and we do our own activities. So, during the summer when we come in for those five days, we interact with each other – only the EOP students. And, the next three days we interact with everyone else that got accepted normally to New Paltz. And, the last day we stay together an extra day and we get to know each other further – only the EOP students. So, we formed this great connection and realized we are our own community and we have to stick together.

Another key component of the EOP first year experience is a first-year seminar called *Key Issues in the Education of Underrepresented College Students*, which is taught by students' academic advisors. This key issues course is a credit-bearing course designed to inculcate success inducing behaviors into EOP students early in their higher education career by familiarizing students with academic issues, such as the importance of tutoring, peer mentoring, and creating an academic plan. Beyond teaching students important academic success behaviors, the first-year seminar allows students to develop connections with their EOP peers. One student described the wide range of things she learned in the Key Issues course:

We had a class last semester called Key Issues. Within that class, they teach you how to study. They teach you how to take notes. They teach you everything...everything you need to know to do well.

Another student described how she initially felt the course was unnecessary, but subsequently realized the importance of the things she learned in the seminar:

The Key Issues course is required for the EOP program. It's not required for anybody else. I used to be like "This is unnecessary." That's how I used to feel. But, thinking about it now, I'm actually in-between. I find that it was necessary...

In addition to the first-year seminar, EOP students have the option of joining a First-Year Interest Group (FIG), which is a learning community comprised of a common linked set of courses taken by the same group of students during the first year of college. Members of the FIGs also participate in study groups that include peer tutors. The study groups and peer tutors provide students with an additional source of academic support, as described by the following EOP student:

We have study groups. So, if you have problems with math or English, the groups are always going to be there. I still have a study group this semester. At five o'clock today, I have my study group for math. So, they help. You have to do your homework there and, if you have any questions, there's a professional tutor and a peer tutor there, so they will help you out if you don't understand anything... There's all this extra opportunity that's around, which is what is great about the EOP program.

Financially, EOP provides grants to its first-year students to cover all billed expenses in order to lift any financial burden those students might incur as a result of unmet need. Finally, new EOP students have ample opportunity, via required one-on-one advising sessions and the first-year seminars, to develop relationships with peer mentors and their EOP academic advisors who are at the core of the services provided by the EOP office.

*A Home Away from Home.* At the core of the EOP are the relationships that are intentionally built and sustained between the staff and students. Six academic advisors serve as the persons with whom students have the most direct contact within the EOP. Those advisors function as a resource for students when they need information or support to assist them in meeting the many challenges that they face.

Academic advisors in EOP underscored the close relationships that they establish with students as being a fundamental element of their work. One EOP advisor emphasized the importance of reaching out and developing personal connections with students over any of the actual services provided by the Program:

You know, you can have all the academic advising, you can have this, you can have that, but I think, most importantly, what our students are looking for when they get here is to feel like they can connect with someone and to feel like, although they're far away from home, that they have that support. So, they have that family away from home. Because, a student is not always going to reach out to you. It's going to take some outreach on your part. And that's what makes a difference to a student.

A unique aspect of the EOP academic advisor-student relationship is that it is not focused on any one or two aspects of the students lives. Rather, the EOP advisors focus on serving the whole student and maintain a philosophy that their job is to meet the needs of their students, regardless of what they may be:

As an advisor, we wear a lot of different hats because our title is Academic Advisor, however when you're advising a student all of those other things that students are involved in come...from family issues to issues they face as a first-generation college student. So, we deal with some serious stuff and a lot of times we collaborate with the counseling center here to help our students, I guess in a holistic sense. – *EOP Academic Advisor*

One EOP students' comment illustrates the importance such personal relationships can have in fostering a level of comfort among students in seeking help:

Well, it's not just that she's an advisor, but she's also a friend, and she shared her college experience with me and I can relate to what she went through. So it's like she's really been helpful. I can go to her for anything.

The EOP staff also demonstrates an institutional responsibility for their students' success. In addition to policies that require EOP students to fulfill certain requirements, such as participating in three one-on-one meetings with their academic advisors each semester. The EOP

advisors acknowledged their philosophy that students should not be left to always figure things out on their own. One advisor noted:

We keep a very tight leash on our students in terms of making it so that they have to come in and see us for certain things as opposed to them just feeling like they can do it on their own.

Additionally, EOP advisors shared that they both make a concerted effort to maintain an awareness of the challenges with which their students deal and invest substantial amounts of time and energy in ensuring that their students have the support to meet those challenges. One advisor spoke of how this proactive philosophy led students to compare the EOP staff to the CIA:

They say we're like the CIA because we know everything, because we're getting calls from professors, and copies of police reports. So we know all that goes on with our students and they're shocked. But I think students need to see that. They need to see that we know what's going on and that we care and that we're not trying to harp on them and point fingers and lecture, but if they're messing up we're here to tell them that and we're here to help them move on from there. So we're in the mix in everything, so I think that's very unique and that's a positive thing.

*Inter-Program Network.* While academic advisors in EOP play a critical role in their students' educational experiences, they have help in supporting the students whom they service. The advisors have developed a valuable network that allows them to work collaboratively in meeting the needs of their students. While EOP advisors may not have the knowledge and resources to solve all of their students' problems on their own, it is their connections with various individuals and offices in the campus network that allow them to utilize the necessary resources to assist their students in meeting their academic, financial, and personal challenges. Another advisor described how utilizing communication and collaboration is part of the fabric of the EOP culture:

We're in contact with everyone. You know, we're in contact with the Financial Aid Office to make sure their package is put together. We're in contact with Records and Registration. So, you name it. We're kind of like the middle person that reaches out to



everyone with the student of course. Most of us believe that we should be doing these things for the student.

One example of such connections is the collaboration that EOP has established with the Scholar's Mentorship Program (SMP), which also provides important sources of support for its students. For instance, EOP students are encouraged to apply for scholarships through the SMP. Moreover, many EOP students are involved in the SMP and take advantage of the faculty, staff, and peer mentoring relationships fostered therein. Another advisor described the formal relationship that EOP has with the campus Counseling Services:

We have a form that's filled out by the advisor as well as someone from the counseling center, giving us consent with one another to collaborate on specific things...So, we, you know, are in constant contact over the phone and even sometimes in person. For instance, last semester, I met with one of my student's counselors as well as my student. The three of us met to discuss certain issues with which the student was dealing. So, we work with them very closely, because everything is related. When a student is going through something personal you better believe that it's going to affect their academics so those are things on both sides that we need to know.

Additionally, the administrators and advisors in the EOP office are actively engaged in student activities, with several of them serving as advisors for various student organizations on campus. Thus, EOP works to bridge the divides between various aspects of students' lives and is a point at which students' academic, financial, personal, and social experiences converge.

*Continuous Support.* Another important method by which EOP helps positively shape the experiences of students in its program is by providing constant support that begins before matriculation and continues until after graduation. An EOP advisor spoke of the consistency of the support EOP offers its students:

They just need to feel like people generally care about their success...If I had to sum it up, it's just that proactive support in all aspects of a student's life and looking at them from a holistic way, from start to finish that helps students succeed. Because, sometimes we pay a lot of attention to our first-year students and then students become sophomores, juniors, and they kind of get lost. And, then we pay attention to them right before they

graduate again. So that constant support from the beginning until the end is what is important. They need to feel like someone cares about their success here.

Already mentioned were the many services offered by EOP during their students' first-year experience. The EOP advisors and peer mentors serve as a source of consistent support for students throughout their four-year experience. Additionally, the faculty, staff, and peer mentors with whom the students develop and maintain relationships throughout their college experience also provide a continuous source of support.

With regard to life beyond New Paltz, EOP offers both counseling and financial support for their students. The EOP advisors offer guidance to students planning for graduate education. Moreover, students who participate in EOP are eligible for the Graduate Tuition Scholarship (GTS) Program. The GTS Program offers financial support to cover tuition and fees to attend a program within 22 participating SUNY graduate or professional schools. The program was designed to offer economically disadvantaged students the opportunity to take advantage of a wide range of educational opportunities beyond the completion of their baccalaureate degree.

#### *Extended Opportunity Programs and Services at Butte College*

In 1969, legislation was passed to encourage California Community Colleges to develop programs and services to meet the unique educational needs of *students handicapped by language, social, and economic disadvantages*. From that legislation emerged Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), which is a state-funded program that provides support for programs and services to help educationally and economically disadvantaged students in the state of California. While the program was designed and developed by the state, persons working within EOPS maintain some flexibility in the programs and services they employ to assist students to meet their academic, financial, and personal challenges at their respective colleges. At Butte College, EOPS is centrally located near the Campus Center, which

houses the cafeteria and many student support services. An excerpt from the EOPS website provides a summary of the mission of EOPS:

Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) provides support services to California Community College students who are educationally and/or economically disadvantaged. EOPS assists students in obtaining their educational goals by providing additional support through academic counseling, tutoring, financial assistance, transfer activities, support to single parents through Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE), admissions assistance and other services. EOPS Coordinators/Directors and staff have developed many strategies, resources and approaches that have successfully supported the provision of these services within their colleges.

Explicit in this excerpt is the broad range of support services provided by EOPS. What may be less apparent, however, are the other factors that contribute to the effectiveness of EOPS at Butte College, including the EOPS counselors and the important connections and collaboration that exist between EOPS and other offices and programs on the Butte College campus.

*Access to Resources.* Butte College's EOPS office provides a range of resources to its students. Financially, EOPS provides its students with a \$100 book voucher each semester and emergency loans for those who are facing financial difficulties. Students in EOPS also have the option of buying a refurbished computer for \$90. Among the other resources that EOPS makes available to its students are a calculator and tape recorder loan service and free copying. As one administrator noted, while these services may seem trivial for some people, they are perceived as very important by EOPS students:

We have services that are kind of ancillary that wouldn't sound too significant, like our free copier. We have a free copier service for students. That doesn't seem like much but to them, my goodness, it seems like one of the biggest perks of our program. – *EOPS Administrator*

One student commented on how the financial incentives of participating in the EOPS program helped from the beginning of her college experience when she said, "EOPS really helped me because, before school started, they sent me \$200 to help me buy my books...before I even got

any financial aid.” Another student, when asked about programs and services that contribute to minority student success at Butte, noted the wide range of services available through the EOPS:

The EOPS can help you throughout your two years at Butte. They give you book vouchers, computers, and loans. Also, if you have kids, they have programs that help you take care of your kids and pay for it. There is a lot of support.

*Counselors at the Core.* Providing a foundation for the connections that EOPS forms with its students are the counselors who work within the Program. Similar to the EOP academic advisors at SUNY New Paltz, the counselors constitute a major contact point between EOPS and its students. The counseling staff at EOPS is diverse, and consists of one Japanese, two Black, one Latina, and one White counselor. They provide academic, personal, and social guidance for their students. One EOPS administrator asserted that it is the counselors’ ability to serve their students holistically that contributes to meeting the needs of those students:

The real advantage of counseling is that these students need a lot of time and contact with a person on campus. They need the structure. They need somebody to talk to. So, our counselors do a lot of academic counseling, but you can never get through an academic counseling appointment without getting into personal issues. It's just seemingly impossible. If a student is getting a bad grade it's usually not just because they don't understand the subject matter, but it almost always has to do with something else in their life. They're having financial problems, family problems, health problems, transportation problems, child care problems, or any other number of issues. So, our counselors are a very important component of the program and keep students plugged into college.

Counselors in the EOPS office at Butte College also assume responsibility for their students’ success. Thus, they are proactive in monitoring their students and ensuring they get the necessary support. One EOPS student highlighted this proactivity as an important aspect of her experience at Butte:

My counselor has been really helpful, because I was on probation for one semester, and so she kept me on track, sent me two progress reports that I had to get signed by my teacher per semester, and she checked up on me to see how I’m doing. If I needed to see a tutor, she’d connect me with a tutor.

Academic advising is only one aspect of the role of counselors in EOPS. They also teach courses in various subjects throughout the Butte Campus. Additionally, the counselors advise student organizations on campus and are involved in the surrounding communities off campus. Thus, they provide a conduit through which students are able to socially connect to various aspects of the campus and surrounding community. One EOPS counselor explained that her involvement in the social activities on campus allowed her to establish an important relationship with her students:

I've noticed when I work with students in the Asian Club, they're more able to come up to me, because they know me and if they are having academic problems, I think they will say, "I am not doing very well in school. What should I do?" I think that if I didn't see those students in the club setting, they wouldn't come to me for help. I think sometimes it's hard for minority students to ask for help, especially the Hmong students. I think some of them will think that it's a weakness to go to tutoring or to ask for help or to say that anything is bothering them.

An EOPS student's comment illustrates the importance of the counselors' involvement in and support of the Asian Club on campus:

They're always there when you need help. They help with classes, transfer, everything for the Asian Club. They're always there... Whenever we need certain items or support or accessories for a club, they're always there to get it. They're keeping track of everything. Whenever we need a place to do our fundraising activities, they're always loaning us a house. So it's just great.

In sum, the counselors play an important role in EOPS students' success. One EOPS student expressed just how critical the counselors can be in their experiences:

If you make it to see the counselors, they're all important. Imagine if there were no counselors. What would you do? You'd be struggling to get through college. You wouldn't know what you'd be doing, you'd just be asking friends to see if there would be any good tutors for you and they might not know...

*Campus Networks.* An important aspect of the impact EOPS has on racial/ethnic minority and other academically and economically disadvantaged students at Butte College is the collaborative relationships that the office maintains with other programs and services throughout

the Butte campus. There are two collaborative relationships that I highlight in this section: collaboration with the campus's Center for Academic Success (CAS) and Transfer Center. Butte's Center for Academic Success is located in the center of the Learning Resource Center. It is surrounded by classrooms and faculty offices on all three sides, excluding the entrance to the Center. The Center's location provides easy access to faculty and students taking General Education courses. The Center also provides workshops to promote the development of academic skills among students on the Butte campus. Workshops are administered on a plethora of topics ranging from time management and stress reduction to writing research papers. One student commented on the importance of the workshops:

I will tell you that the workshops are really helpful, because if you're taking classes and you don't understand something or if the instructors are giving you all the information you need but you want more, the workshops are always there. They're free. They're always just walk in... They're just like an regular class and they just help you run through what you need to know about certain topics that you're struggling or having issues with.

The CAS offers tutoring services for students from 8am to 5pm, Monday through Friday. While tutoring sessions in the Center may consist of 5 to 10 students and a tutor, within CAS is the Power Center, which is a collaborative program between CAS and EOPS that allows students in the Equal Opportunity Programs and Services to take advantage of one-on-one tutoring. One Black student highlighted the importance of both the workshops and tutoring in the success of minority students at Butte:

Any of the tutoring services they shouldn't stop. To me, so many people need them. All of the workshops that they too. There are a lot of people who don't know how to use power point or don't know how to study for tests. Those workshops are really helpful. They are basically workshops for success... I think those are great for everybody.

Another example of important collaboration between CAS and EOPS is the Math Success Project. As a result of the recognition that EOPS students were doing poorly in Math courses, CAS and EOPS created this initiative, which clusters students in the same math course with a

tutor who participates in the class. After each class, EOPS students take part in a follow-up session with the tutor in which the information from the course is reviewed. One administrator described the success the program has achieved:

We make sure that the tutor is echoing the material exactly the way the instructor wants the students to learn it. That way the material is reinforced and the tutoring doesn't cause confusion. Now, that program has been *really* successful. We have data that shows that every semester since that program was created in 1998, the students in our program have exceeded the class norms in both grade point average and course completion rates. I think a couple of semesters we missed grade point average. But, we have beaten the rest of the class on completion rate every single semester. And, these are the disadvantaged students!

One of the peer tutors in the Math Success Program described how important he perceived the program to be:

It's a phenomenal program. It's unbelievably successful and why wouldn't it be? You are getting your study time in. You've got your tutor right there. You've got your peer group there with you, all in this thing together. Why wouldn't that help somebody be successful? Amazing.

Administrators and academic advisors in EOPS also collaborate with other offices to bridge divides and increase seamlessness in the educational experiences of their students. For example, Targeting Resources for Underrepresented Students (TRUST) is a collaborative effort between EOPS and the Transfer Center that is designed to focus Transfer Center resources on ensuring historically underrepresented student populations have opportunities to transfer to four-year colleges. An administrator in the Transfer Center explained the importance of the TRUST program:

Within the TRUST program, a student can sign up with me, they will be a participant in a program and that allows them to get much more individualized service. For example, if a student signs up for TRUST, they come in to the Transfer Center and I will have a contract that they enter. Within that contract it is stated that they have to see me at least twice a semester...I will advocate for those students if they are having problems with a professor. They come in and talk to me and I will call up the professor and ask them how we can help this student, because they are in this program. We email those students almost constantly with information about scholarships, classroom visits, and

representatives from four-year universities that are going to be on campus... -- *Transfer Center Administrator*

One EOPS student spoke of how the TRUST program stimulated her to take actions toward transferring to a four-year college:

They made me look through books, go through catalogs about different universities, learn the requirements for my major. Then they helped me plan how I'm going to transfer and everything and figure out what classes I need to take to transfer to the university that I want to go to.

The support systems described in the previous three sections provide examples of how the four cultural characteristics emerging from the data converge to engender a holistic and integrated system of support for racial/ethnic minority students at the GEMS colleges. The campus cultures, programs, and practices that shape the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students on the three campuses help foster a sense of connectedness to the campus community and culture among those students. The next section describes the sense of belonging that results from the aforementioned institutional factors present on the GEMS campuses.

#### A Sense of Belonging

The campus is embracing. When I first came here, I was wandering around campus with my family and it was a good experience. Everybody wanted to help and that's how it is here. Everyone was very helpful. That's an example of how embracive most of the people here are... – *USC Black Student*

I think that once you're in New Paltz you find your niche. You find your community. And, I don't want to graduate because I love it here so much and I think it's all about finding that community that becomes your second home. The community and my friends and my classes...It's just a combination of all of them that makes it so great. – *SUNY Latina Student*

The community here is friendly. Everybody always acknowledges each other for the most part. Even if you don't know someone walking by, there are a lot of connections through classes. I have gone to school at two other campuses where there's less of a connection or sense of community for a common cause. – *Butte Black Student*



These three quotes provide a glimpse of the institutional environments on the GEMS campuses, as they are perceived by racial/ethnic minority students, and the sense of cohesion and community that results from those environments. While the relationship between the aforementioned institutional factors and racial/ethnic minority students' experiences is complex and multifaceted, it is important to note that one of the ways in which the cultural characteristics and institutional policies, programs, and practices at the GEMS colleges influence engagement and persistence among students of color is by providing them with a sense that they belong to a cohesive community on their respective campuses. Specifically, the climate at the GEMS colleges was described as friendly and supportive. Moreover, on two of the three campuses, participants described the communities on campus as a *family* or *home away from home*. Lastly, the climates of the three institutions were characterized by their openness to diversity.

On all three campuses, administrators, staff, and students described the institutional environments as friendly and supportive for students of color. One administrator at USC described the institutional philosophy toward cultivating a supportive environment:

The main thing that you get when you come to USC is that our goal is to make sure that, no matter where you go, you're treated with respect and you're treated with care. People take a personal interest in you, regardless of their color and regardless of their background. So, the goal is to make USC comfortable for you no matter who you are...

One academic advisor at SUNY asserted that the friendly and supportive nature is characteristics of the environments across her campus:

Overall, the people are very friendly, even outside of the EOP program. Overall, the campus climate is very relaxed, very laid back, just very friendly, and very welcoming.

One Black student described how the friendly and supportive aspects of the environments at Butte College positively influence his experience and interactions with other students:

Most of time, there's like people working beside me. If they finish first...I don't even ask them. If they look at me and I'm still writing, they go "Do you get it? Do you need help?"

Then I do the same thing if I finish first and I see them get stuck or something. I don't even know their names. I just ask them "Do you get it?"

At USC and SUNY New Paltz, participants described the campus community or various aspects of that community as resembling a *family* or functioning as *a home away from home*.

Almost all of the participants at USC used the term Trojan Family in describing the community on their campus. The Director of one of the cultural centers at USC compared the sense of family on her campus to that of her own undergraduate institution:

I would definitely say that the sense of family kind of helps big time here at USC. Having come from the institution across town for my undergrad, I kind of know what it's like to feel lost in the big scheme of things, especially as a minority student. Sometimes, when you walk into class and you're the only person that looks like you, that can be an ostracizing feeling. So, I think the sense of family and the fact that there are such things as the cultural centers actually help with the retention and getting students connected academically and socially on campus.

Similarly, racial/ethnic minority students at USC also described the sense of family they felt when describing the community at USC:

At USC, I feel like I'm at home. That's where I think the Trojan family comes from and the Trojan spirit. I keep saying spirit, but I really think that we have a great, great amount of people that really care about the school.

One participant explained how she noticed other students likening their communities at New Paltz to surrogate families when she asserted that, "A lot of times, I'll get people telling me they found a groove, whether it's a student organization, or like an EOP office, or something that they consider their second family."

Finally, when asked about racial tension, most participants were unable to identify incidents involving racial conflict in their campus climates. Rather, participants at the three institutions described the broader communities on their campuses as inclusive and relatively integrated. One student at USC illustrated this with the following statement:

You get a sense that it's not just a White school. It's not just a school full of Asians. It's just a school full of students trying to reach their goal. We're all Trojans...

Instead, participants, such as the following student at Butte College, highlighted the openness to diversity that exemplifies their campus environments: "I believe there is something about the overall environment of the campus, some philosophy here, because the faculty is supportive. They are very respectful of diverse people and backgrounds..." One participant described how the openness to diversity on his campus perpetuates an environment that appears to validate the backgrounds of diverse groups of students rather than pressure students to conform: "There doesn't seem to be, I guess, there's no real social pressure to think or to behave in a certain way. Everyone is very diverse in their behavior and their thinking." The remainder of this chapter contains a brief overview of three differences among the GEMS institutions that should be considered when interpreting the aforementioned findings.

### Key Differences

This section includes a brief overview of a few key differences between among the GEMS colleges. Despite the fact that the three institutions included in this study were very different, few disparities emerged from the data. The differences that are presented in this section may even appear trivial to some. Nevertheless, they are important to understanding how the various cultural characteristics outlined in the previous sections can be implemented and manifest in disparate ways at different institutions.

#### *Diverse Sources of Financial Support*

One distinction among the GEMS institutions that should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study is the sources of financial support that help create and sustain support programs and services at those institutions. All three institutions have programs and services, such as Upward Bound and TRIO, which are supported by federal funds. The

EOPS and Transfer Center at Butte College and the EOP at SUNY New Paltz are state-funded initiatives designed by state policymakers to promote persistence, transfer, and degree completion among historically underrepresented student populations. Therefore, state support appears to be particularly important in creating and sustaining the conditions to foster success among racial/ethnic minority students at those institutions. A few key initiatives at Butte and SUNY New Paltz, such as the AC2 Program and the SMP, are created and sustained by their institutions. Alternatively, at USC, most of the support systems that offer critical programs and services for racial/ethnic minority students are institutional initiatives. Thus, while the proportion of support provided by any one source varies from institution to institution, each of the three GEMS campuses has a system in place that is founded on financial support from both internal and external sources.

*Resource Allocation: Academic and Social Life*

Another observable difference among the three institutions is the relative emphasis placed on academic and social support in the allocation of resources. At USC, a substantial amount of resources are invested in academic, cultural, and social programming targeted toward supporting and retaining racial/ethnic minority students. In addition to the resources invested in the three cultural centers, hundreds of student organizations, many of which are cultural and ethnic organizations, receive institutional funds. At SUNY New Paltz, a majority of the financial resources available for racial/ethnic minority specific cultural and social programming appear to be distributed to the various student organizations on campus. Finally, at Butte College, no ethnic-specific cultural centers and few ethnic-specific student organizations exist. Thus, at Butte, most of the financial and human resources that are dedicated to supporting and retaining racial/ethnic minority students are invested in academic and financial support services.

There are at least two potential reasons why Butte College invests significantly fewer resources in social life on its campus. As already mentioned, the key support systems that provide important programs and services for racial/ethnic minority students at Butte are funded by federal and state governments. Thus, while there is some flexibility in the allocation of resources, the funds allocated for the EOPS and TRIO are designated for specific purposes – retention and graduate education among historically underrepresented college students. Alternatively, at USC, the institution has dedicated resources to create and sustain support systems that have a diverse array of purposes, such as the Asian Pacific American Student Services, which is aimed at cultural enrichment, education, politicization, empowerment, and leadership among members of USC’s Asian American community.

Second, Butte College is a commuter institution. Thus, many of the students enrolled at Butte commute to campus, and leave after class to fulfill other non-academic obligations. The student body at Butte is extremely diverse. Many students have families to which they must attend and many work in nearby communities. Alternatively, a large number of students at USC and SUNY New Paltz live at or near the college and because of proximity have easier and greater access to cultural and social programming on their respective campuses. Regardless of the reasons for the relatively limited resources dedicated to creating opportunities for social engagement at Butte College, it is apparent that such limited investment in the social subsystems of campus and concentration of resources in the academic support systems of campus may play a key role in the various ways the five aforementioned cultural themes manifest in institutional policies, programs, and practices.

*Consciousness of Student Needs: The Millennial Generation*

The last noteworthy difference among the three institutions is the profile of the students whom they serve. The persons who worked closely with racial/ethnic minority students at the three GEMS institutions were conscious of their students' backgrounds and needs. This consciousness manifested in different ways across the three campuses. Specifically, administrators at USC expressed a new challenge arising from serving students of the Millennial Generation – the generation of students currently graduating from high school. They noted that students entering college are difficult to support because they are reluctant to seek out or accept such services. This point was illustrated by the following administrators comment:

Today's students' mindset is they know it all. "I don't need anybody to help me...Why do I need to go to the Black office?" So, we're getting this new type of Millennial student who is coming in here with a totally different mindset, than those who came before them. "Take me off your email list. I don't want this email." Amazing! So, the center helps a lot, but then there's this little group of students who won't even speak to me...I'm just trying to figure out this new millennium child who just thinks they know it all and have no respect for your time or what you're doing until it immediately affects them, personally

While this observation is not indicative of all students on the USC campus, there is a growing body of students at USC who are coming from more affluent backgrounds than those of previous generations. This issue was less prevalent at SUNY New Paltz and possibly nonexistent at Butte College, where a greater proportion of students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Only one racial/ethnic minority student at SUNY New Paltz and no participants at Butte College shared views indicating that support services on their respective campus were irrelevant or unnecessary. Thus, while all three of the GEMS institutions serve students from a broad range of cultural, economic, geographic, and social backgrounds, one important consideration is the general makeup of the student bodies enrolled on each campus. Because of the nature and

selectivity of the institutions, USC serves students from more affluent backgrounds than their peers at SUNY New Paltz or Butte College. Moreover, students at SUNY New Paltz, on average, are more academically prepared than their Butte counterparts.

At Butte College, support services for racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented students are explicitly tailored to their needs. Services offered by EOPS include book vouchers and discounted computers designed to help alleviate the financial barriers faced by the large numbers of economically disadvantaged students in the Program. EOPS also offers childcare for parents who are enrolled in classes on the Butte campus. Outside of EOPS, buses are constantly transporting students from the three surrounding communities to the Butte campus to make it possible for students who cannot afford transportation to attend classes. While these three differences may seem trivial, they are important in understanding the contexts within which the five common cultural characteristics manifest in the policies, programs, and practices on each of the GEMS campuses.

## CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

In this study, I examined three institutions that were identified for their effectiveness at fostering persistence and baccalaureate degree attainment among racial/ethnic minority students to discover and describe the environmental characteristics and institutional policies, programs, and practices that contribute to racial/ethnic minority student success at those institutions. Individual interviews with 65 administrators and racial/ethnic minority students as well as institutional and program documents comprised the data sources for the study. Individual interviews were conducted with racial/ethnic minority students and administrators in multicultural affairs, student affairs, and other academic and student support offices. Purposeful sampling was used to achieve intensity and variation. Intensity refers to the identification of information-rich cases, while variation refers to diversity in the sample (Patton, 2002). Thus, purposeful sampling allowed for the identification of administrators, staff, and racial/ethnic minority students who were both knowledgeable about the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students and represented a broad range of campus environments within three colleges that were selected for their effectiveness at *Generating Ethnic Minority Success (GEMS) – The GEMS Colleges*.

The summary section of this chapter includes a brief overview of the purpose of the investigation, research methods employed in conducting the study, and the key findings that emerged from the inquiry. The summary is followed by a discussion, in which the findings of this study are juxtaposed with those of published research on college student success. Finally, this chapter concludes with a series of implications for policy, practice, and future research on racial/ethnic minority college student success.



### Summary of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to discover and describe the institutional factors that contribute to racial/ethnic minority student success at three institutions that have exhibited high and equitable persistence and graduation rates among historically underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students. Thus, the central research question that provided a foundation for the framework of this study was, what institutional factors contribute to persistence and degree completion among racial/ethnic minority students at the GEMS institutions? Four additional research questions were explored: 1) What about the environments of the GEMS institutions contributes to racial/ethnic minority student persistence and degree completion among racial/ethnic minority students on their campuses; 2) how do those environmental factors influence persistence and degree attainment among racial/ethnic minorities on these campuses; 3) what institutional policies, programs, practices contribute to persistence and degree attainment among racial/ethnic minority students on these campuses, and; 4) how do these policies, programs, and practices influence the persistence and degree completion outcomes of racial/ethnic minorities at these institutions?

Higher education researchers have contributed much to our understanding of what factors contribute to and hinder the success of college students. Limited attention, however, has been paid to how institutions can and do create a campus system in which racial/ethnic minority students academically and socially flourish. This study fills a critical gap in the literature, therefore, by providing an in-depth understanding of how colleges and universities have cultivated institutional environments, programs, and practices conducive to racial/ethnic minority student success.

The theoretical framework that guided the design and execution of the study consisted of four components: two theoretical perspectives that provide a justification for the investigation of institutions that have proven effective at fostering racial/ethnic minority student success and two components that provide a framework for analyzing specific aspects of the racial/ethnic minority college student experience. First, Critical Race Theory and an Anti-Deficit Framework were used to guide the selection of the cases and participant samples. Second, capital theory and the concept of Educationally Purposeful Engagement were used to narrow the scope and identify the central foci of the data collection and analysis.

*Critical Race Theory* (CRT) highlights the importance of considering the perspectives of marginalized groups, such as those from racial/ethnic minority student populations (Bell, 1987; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and an *Anti-Deficit Framework* is characterized by a focus on factors that contribute to positive outcomes among historically underrepresented populations (Harper, 2005). These two perspectives were used to provide a rationale for examining high-performing colleges and universities via the experiences of historically marginalized student populations functioning within those institutions.

In the current study, capital theory was employed to provide a framework for understanding the dispositions that shape the perceptions, behaviors, experiences, and outcomes of racial/ethnic minority students. First, *Human Capital Theory* (Becker, 1964) is a useful perspective for understanding the process by which people make choices based on financial conditions and the monetary costs and benefits associated with each alternative. Second, *Cultural Capital Theory* provides an invaluable lens through which to view how postsecondary institutions can expand students' cultural knowledge and skills to help positively shape their behavior and college experiences. Third, *Social Capital Theory* is a useful perspective for

examining how the social networks with which students are, or are not, connected can limit or increase their access to important information and resources critical to success. Additionally, based on the premise that college student engagement can contribute to the quality of the educational experience to varying degrees, the concept of *educationally purposeful engagement* (Kuh et al., 2005) is used to understand the various areas in which institutions can structure environments to promote student engagement in educationally purposeful activities, including the extent to which they promote: (1) academically challenging activity in which students are engaged; (2) active engagement in collaborative learning activities; (3) student-faculty interaction; (4) engagement in enriching educational experiences, and; (5) academic and social support. These perspectives provide a justification for focusing on how various institutional environments, programs, and practices shape the cultural, economic, and social contexts within which racial/ethnic minority students make decisions about engagement and persistence at institutions that have exhibited effectiveness at *Generating Ethnic Minority Success* – the *GEMS* colleges.

Qualitative research methods (Cresswell, 1998; Patton, 2002; Yin, 1994) were utilized to explore the environments and institutionalized policies, programs, and practices at the three GEMS institutions as well as to examine how those institutional factors contribute to racial/ethnic minority student success. Specifically, case study research methods (Cresswell, 1998; Yin, 1994) served as the primary methodological approach for selecting institutions, selecting data sources within each institution, and analyzing those data. Case study methods are particularly useful for examining a focal phenomenon within a particular context (Yin, 1994). Thus, the aim of this study was to generate an understanding of racial/ethnic minority student

success in the context of institutional environments, programs, and practices at the GEMS colleges.

The two- and four-year colleges included in this study were selected using different procedures. The Education Trust's College Results Online (CRO) database was utilized to identify four-year colleges for inclusion in the investigation. The CRO database allows users to choose any four-year college or university and extract a sample of similar institutions based on 11 institutional characteristics: (a) estimated median SAT/ACT of freshman class; (b) admission selectivity; (c) Carnegie classification; (d) percent of undergraduates receiving Pell Grants; (e) Public or private control; (d) number of full-time equivalent undergraduates; (e) student-related expenditures per student; (f) percent of undergraduates 25 years of age or over; (g) status as an HBCU; (h) percent of undergraduates who are part-time, and; (i) status as a commuter campus. Once the peer institutional sample is extracted, the CRO database permits the comparison of graduation rates or disparities in graduation rates across the focal college and its peer institutions. These comparisons were used to select predominantly White four-year institutions that exhibited graduation rates among underrepresented minority (i.e., Black, Latina/o, and Native American) students that were appreciably higher than the national average and graduation rates among underrepresented minority students that were relatively equal to or greater than their White counterparts (see Tables 3 and 4).

Due to the fact that the CRO database only includes data on four-year institutions and six-year graduation rates do not provide an adequate benchmark for measuring college student persistence and attainment at two-year colleges, an alternative method was used to select the two-year college for inclusion in the study. The IPEDS was used to identify two-year colleges with relatively high degree attainment rates relative to the national population of two-year

colleges. Then, because the selected institutions were located in California, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Data Mart was employed to compare their within-semester retention rates with those of other California community colleges. Thus, the community college selected for inclusion in this study was chosen because it exhibited relatively high and equitable Associate's Degree attainment rates among racial/ethnic minority students compared to the national population of two-year colleges and relatively high and equitable semester-to-semester retention rates among all racial/ethnic groups compared to other California community colleges (see Tables 5 and 6).

Data collection consisted of 65 individual face-to-face interviews and the acquisition of institutional and program documents. Institutional websites were used to identify administrators and staff for participation in the study. Once identified, they were contacted via email or telephone to arrange interview dates and times. Those administrators and staff were asked to assist in identifying student participants for the individual interviews. Thus, the student participant sample consisted of students enrolled in administrators' and staff members' courses (e.g., first-year seminars, ethnic studies, and general education history courses) and students who use or have used various programs and services (e.g., cultural centers, targeted support and retention programs, mentoring programs, and tutoring services) across their respective campuses. Documents containing information about institutional policies, programs, and practices on the GEMS campuses were solicited from administrators and staff at the beginning and end of the individual interviews. While informal participant observations were conducted to provide context for the data analysis, those observations are excluded from the formal presentation of findings and discussion because time spent on each campus was limited and lacked the execution of any systematic observation procedures.

The primary method of data analysis employed in this study was explanation building, which consists of constructing a cross-case consciousness (Yin, 1994). In Phase I of data analysis, the NVivo © Qualitative Software Package and open coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were used to identify key institutional environments, policies, programs, and practices that shape the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students on the GEMS campuses. Phase II of data analysis consisted of identifying themes emerging *across* the three cases and constructing a cross-case description that illuminates how various institutional environments, policies, programs, and practices shape the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students at the GEMS colleges.

To maximize trustworthiness of the findings, two primary techniques prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1986) were employed. First, triangulation of data from interviews with administrators and staff, interviews with racial/ethnic minority students, and institutional and program documents were employed to cross-check, verify, and modify emergent themes and case descriptions. Second, a conscious effort was made to identify discrepant data throughout the duration of data analysis to consistently consider alternative hypotheses and question theoretical presuppositions.

Although the aforementioned techniques were used to maximize trustworthiness of the findings, several remaining limitations of the current study warrant consideration. First, this study is context-bound. The case sample selected for the current study is comprised of three institutions and the findings cannot be generalized to any broader population of colleges and universities. A second limitation of the study is the lack of a comparison group of institutions. Thus, the findings must be interpreted with caution, given that it is possible that the emergent institutional factors that shape racial/ethnic minority student success at the GEMS colleges may

be found at institutions that have not exhibited such high and equitable racial/ethnic minority student persistence and graduation rates. A third limitation is lack of control for socioeconomic status in the selection of the institutions. While multiple measures that are highly correlated with socioeconomic status, such as percentage of Pell Grant recipients, standardized test scores, and institutional selectivity, were used in the selecting institutions for inclusion in the study, this does not account for the socioeconomic backgrounds of particular racial/ethnic subpopulations within institutions. Therefore, the possibility that racial/ethnic minority students at the GEMS colleges originate from more affluent backgrounds than racial/ethnic minority students at peer institutions or their White counterparts at the GEMS colleges should be considered. Selection bias constitutes a fourth limitation of the current investigation. The students who were invited to participate in the interviews were recommended by administrators and staff at each institution. Thus, they may provide different insights than students who are disengaged and have little or no contact with administrators and staff at those institutions. A fifth limitation of the study is the fact that interviews were conducted at only one point in time. Conducting one-time interviews, particularly for a study with such broad scope, limits the depth of understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The utilization of the qualitative case study approach represents a final limitation of the current study. The predetermined data collection and analysis procedures as well as my personal biases, resulting from personal history, experiences, and knowledge likely influenced the interpretation of the data.

The explanatory model in Figure 1 displays a framework for viewing how various institutional characteristics shape racial/ethnic minority students' experiences and persistence outcomes at the three campuses. The cultural elements that emerged from the data help engender holistic and integrated support systems at each of the three colleges and those support systems

perpetuate or alter the cultures on each campus. All of these institutional factors help determine students' sense of belonging, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, and persistence decisions. Racial/ethnic minority students' sense of belonging influences the extent to which those students engage in educationally purposeful activities and persist. Finally, students' educationally purposeful engagement directly influences their persistence decisions.

As depicted in the explanatory model, four cultural elements common across the three GEMS campuses emerged from the data analysis. First, faculty members, administrators, and staff at the three institutions believe in the importance of incorporating *a human element* into the educational experience. This manifested in three forms. First, participants highlighted the importance of administrators, faculty, and staff at the GEMS colleges who genuinely care about and are committed to the success of the racial/ethnic minority students whom they serve. Second, participants underscored the importance of the meaningful relationships that are fostered between racial/ethnic minority students and administrators, faculty, and staff on their campuses. Third, on each of the three campuses, there is a core group of administrators and staff members intentionally focus on serving the whole student.

The second important aspect of the culture of the GEMS campuses is the *strong valuing of networks* that is characterized by high levels of communication and collaboration. Faculty members, administrators, and staff at the GEMS campuses are conscious of the importance of that communication and collaboration, and they are intentional about utilizing them to promote racial/ethnic minority student success on their campuses in a number of ways. First, administrators maintain a high level of communication with faculty on the three campuses. Second, a high level of collaboration exists among the various student support programs and offices on the GEMS campuses. And, third, formal committees provide a common form of



communication among faculty members, administrators, staff, and students at the three institutions.

The third theme emerging across the GEMS campuses is the existence of *a commitment to providing targeted support* aim at serving historically underrepresented student populations. These targeted support programs have the necessary resources to provide racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented students with purposeful academic, financial, and social support. Second, within those subcultures are key individuals who serve as advocates, access points to the broader campus network, and cultural resources for racial/ethnic minority students. Lastly, the targeted support programs that serve large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students on the three campuses are integrated into the broader cultural networks of their respective campuses.

Fourth, administrators and staff who work closely with large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students on the GEMS campuses are guided by *an ethos of institutional responsibility*. That is, there are several administrators and staff at the three colleges who believe that the institution is responsible for the success of racial/ethnic minority students, rather than assuming that such burden should be placed solely on their students. This institutional responsibility engenders a proactive philosophy to offering students services and support. Specifically, students are not expected to seek out services on their own. Rather, administrative action is taken to ensure that students have access to necessary information and services. This is accomplished at the GEMS institutions in two ways. First, policies are established to ensure administrators are aware of their students' progress. Second, administrators maintain a sense of personal responsibility for ensuring students have access to information and services, and help perpetuate a culture in which students feel encouraged and sometimes even pressured to engaged. This

proactive philosophy ensures that students have access to information and opportunities and services that they would not otherwise be exposed.

All of the aforementioned cultural characteristics interact to engender *holistic and integrated support systems* aimed at serving large numbers of historically underrepresented student populations. These support systems have the necessary resources to provide racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented students with purposeful academic, financial, and social support. Second, within those support systems are key individuals who serve as advocates, cultural resources for racial/ethnic minority students, and access points to the broader campus network. Lastly, the support systems that serve large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students on the three campuses are integrated into the broader cultural networks of their respective campuses. Thus, those subcultures provide students with access to a wide range of important institutional agents, programs, and support services.

The campus cultures and support systems at the GEMS colleges all function to create an environment in which racial/ethnic minority students feel a strong sense of belonging to the campus community. Racial/ethnic minority students on the three campuses frequently described the communities on their campuses as friendly and supportive. Second, the general campus communities and various communities across the campuses were often likened by participants to a surrogate *family* or *home away from home*. Third, participants described how the climates on campus were characterized by their openness to diversity.

Despite the vast disparities among the characteristics of the three colleges, few salient differences emerged in the data. At least three key institutional differences, however, should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. While those differences may seem trivial to some, they are nevertheless important to understanding how the various cultural elements

emerging from the data manifest on each of the three campuses. First, while financial support for key racial/ethnic minority-serving programs and services at all three institutions is provided by a combination of internal and external sources, state support plays a critical role in providing the financial means to create and sustain equal opportunity programs at both Butte College and SUNY New Paltz. Second, because Butte College is a two-year commuter college, it dedicates substantially fewer resources to providing opportunities for social engagement on its campus. Lastly, the three institutions serve very different student bodies with varying academic and social needs. While these differences may seem trivial, they are nevertheless important in understanding how the aforementioned cultural factors manifest in the institutional policies, programs, and practices found on each of the GEMS campuses.

#### Discussion

Higher education researchers have contributed much to our understanding of the salient institutional factors that affect student engagement and persistence (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie et al., 2005, 2006; Kuh, Schuh et al., 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). The role of campus environments, such as campus culture and climate, have been considered in shaping the experiences and outcomes of college students (Baird, 2000; Cabrera et al., 1999; Gonzalez, 2003; Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado et al., 1996, 1998; Kuh, 1998, 2001/2002; Kuh & Hall, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie et al., 2005, 2006; Kuh & Love, 2000; Kuh, Schuh et al., 1991; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Researchers have also explored the importance of subcultures, such as student organizations and ethnic studies departments, in racial/ethnic minority students' experiences and outcomes in particular (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2006; Kiang, 2002). Specifically, students' relationships with faculty and peers have also been an important focus of much higher education research (Astin, 1993; Halpin, 1990; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Milem & Berger,

1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). More recently, higher education scholars have begun to examine the impact of specific programs and practices on student outcomes (see Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Patton et al., 2006). Finally, a small and growing body of research has examined the institutional factors that contribute to college student success at colleges that have proven effective at retaining and graduation their students (Bailey et al., 2006; Carey, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005; Muraskin & Lee, 2004). The findings of this study support many of the results emerging from these earlier empirical inquiries and provide new and additional insights into the role that various campus environments play in fostering racial/ethnic minority college student persistence and degree attainment.

One aspect of the holistic and integrated nature of the support systems on the GEMS colleges and the administrators and staff working within those systems is that they serve as a source of financial as well as academic, personal, and social support for their students. Thus, large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students at those institutions have easy access to knowledge of financial options and financial support without ever having to seek out such information or services on their own. This could be an indication of the importance of academic advisors and counselors being knowledgeable about the financial options available to students so they can address their advisees' financial concerns and difficulties when they arise.

The targeted support programs and services that provide academic and social assistance for large numbers of economically disadvantaged students also provide financial resources in the form of need-based grant aid, emergency loans, discounted computers, and book vouchers for economically disadvantaged students at the two public GEMS colleges. Financial support was less salient at USC, which, according to its office of admissions and financial aid, is dedicated to meeting 100% of the predetermined financial need of its students. Thus, while financial factors

were not one of the core cultural characteristics highlighted in the findings of this study, those cultural characteristics contribute to the maintenance of financial support systems that compliment the other forms of federal, state, and institutional aid racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented students receive and may help alleviate the burden of the financial barriers they face.

The findings of the current study, therefore, also support earlier conclusions that ability to pay is an important factor in college student persistence and attainment (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992; Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990). Specifically, the results suggest that grant aid, and particularly need-based grant aid, can be an important factor in helping racial/ethnic minority students persist (Astin, 1993; Coltfelter, 1991; Heller, 2003; St. John, 1990; St. John et al., 1991). Also evident is the notion that targeted aid – aid designated to meet the needs of particular students – may be particularly important. At Butte College, for example, policymakers and administrators who are conscious of the needs of their racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented student populations have made decisions to provide students with resources in the form of discounted prices on computers, book vouchers, free calculator lending services, and free photocopies. Thus, rather than giving students money that they can spend on non-educational expenses, administrators at Butte have identified the specific needs of their students and applied the limited financial resources available to meeting those needs.

Findings here are consistent with earlier assertions that campus cultures play an important role in shaping the experiences and outcomes of college students (Gonzalez, 2003; Kuh, 2001/200; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1999; Tinto, 1993). Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure is based on the notion that

students must separate from their traditional cultural heritages and integrate into the culture of their respective campus. Alternatively, Tierney (1992, 1999) asserted that students should not be expected to sever ties with their cultural heritage, while Rendón et al. (2000) concluded that institutions should assume partial responsibility for facilitating the bicultural socialization of students or, in other words, helping students from historically underrepresented backgrounds successfully navigate their newly encountered campus cultures while maintaining connections with their traditional ethnic heritages. The results of this study support the notion that institutions can create targeted support systems that proactively support racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented students in navigating their campus environments.

Also consistent with the assertions of Rendón et al. (2000) is the ethos of institutional responsibility espoused by administrators and staff at the GEMS colleges. Evident in the findings was the fact that administrators on the three campuses are conscious of cultural barriers that racial/ethnic minority students may face in seeking help. This consciousness is associated with those administrators assuming a personal responsibility to reach out to students. In doing so, administrators do not expect students to adopt dominant campus cultural norms that suggest they must actively seek help, but are instead, in part, assuming the responsibility of connecting students with such information and support. Consequently, they are playing a key role in helping racial/ethnic minority students' ability to navigate their newly encountered campus cultures without having to commit cultural suicide.

Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) concept of habitus implies that the culturally derived structures that exist within persons from historically underrepresented student populations limit their agency, including the actions that determine persistence through the educational pipeline. If this conceptualization is accurate, then exposure to new cultural knowledge and the development

of cultural skills can expand a students' agency. Applying this concept to the college experience suggests that the extent to which faculty members, administrators, and staff exhibit behavior that exposes students to knowledge of the various cultures of their campus may, in part, help shape their dispositions to persist. Accordingly, the findings of this study support the notion that colleges and universities can foster success among their racial/ethnic minority student populations by ensuring that those students have sufficient access to the information and opportunities that promote or are necessary for success on their respective campuses.

With regard to social connections, the findings of this study lend support to the notion that navigating newly encountered campus cultures and interacting with various socializing agents on campus are important factors in determining racial/ethnic minority student success in college (Kuh & Love, 2000). Specifically, the results of this inquiry reinforce the notion that social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and the development of social networks (Mardsen, 2004) can be critical in connecting racial/ethnic minority students to their institutions and promoting success among those students. This not only suggests that relationships between racial/ethnic minority students and the faculty members, administrators, and staff at their respective campuses is critical, but it also implies that the amount of social capital possessed by those faculty members, administrators, and staff may be equally important. In other words, the extent to which administrators and faculty members are valuable resources for their students is partially determined by the meaningful connections they have with other administrators and faculty members across their respective campuses. What the emergent themes suggest is that particular cultural characteristics may contribute to the creation of stronger social networks and maximize the social capital to which racial/ethnic minority students have access.

The findings of the current inquiry support earlier assertions about the importance of the first year of college and early engagement (Berger & Milem, 1999; Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Upcraft et al., 2005) and general engagement throughout the college experience (Astin, 1993; Braxton et al., 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1998). The success of the GEMS institutions in fostering persistence and degree completion among racial/ethnic minority students is due, in part, to campus cultural values and norms that promote seamlessness. Specifically, the results indicate that colleges and universities can in fact create the conditions to maximize the early connections built between racial/ethnic minority students and their institutions and maintain those connections by providing structured continuous support throughout the two- or four-year experience. Furthermore, the results suggest that particularly important in efforts to facilitate adjustment is making ensuring opportunities to establish meaningful relationships, via mentoring relationships and opportunities for social interaction with administrators and faculty, between students and various socializing agents on campus.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) concluded that faculty interaction is one of the most important influences in the experiences of college students. The findings of this study provide support for earlier conclusions that actual interaction with faculty, the quality of those interactions, and the perception that faculty members care about their students are important factors in student success (Astin, 1993; Halpin, 1990; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Milem & Berger, 1997; Nettles, Thoeny, & Grossman, 1986). This study also underscores the critical role of caring and committed faculty in the experiences and outcomes of racial/ethnic minority students. Finally, these findings support earlier studies (Guiffrida, 2005) indicating that faculty members of color may be particularly important in the experiences and outcomes of racial/ethnic minority students. What the current study adds to this literature is the implication that institutions of higher



education, whether they are mid-sized community colleges or large research universities, can foster a culture in which faculty members, administrators, and staff value developing meaningful relationships with their students.

This study also adds to the literature highlighting the importance of faculty by underscoring the importance of key administrators and staff. Specifically, these results suggest that administrators and staff, and particularly administrators and staff of color, can also be salient persons in the experiences of racial/ethnic minority college students. Indeed, the findings suggest that having a diverse core group of administrators and staff who are dedicated to the success of racial/ethnic minority students may be a key component in creating an environment conducive to the success of those students. In sum, the findings of the current inquiry buttress the notion that it is important for students of color to establish connections with persons of color who have been successful in higher education (Burrell, 1980; Gonzalez, 2003; Sedlacek, 1987; Willie & McCord, 1972).

A small and growing body of literature has detailed the impact that specific institutional programs and practices can have on college student persistence. Thus, the results of this study support earlier inquiries finding first-year seminars, supplemental instruction, advising and counseling programs, peer mentoring programs, bridge programs, comprehensive retention programs, and learning communities can contribute to success among college students (Astin, 1993; Boudrea & Kromrey, 1994; Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, M., & Goodwin, 1998; Fidler & Godwin, 1994; Johnson et al., 1998; National Center for Supplemental Instruction, 1997; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997; Schwitzer & Thomas, 1998; Seidman, 1991; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999; Somers, 1996; Thile & Matt, 1995; Tinto, 1997, 1998). The findings of this study do not suggest that any one program or practice significantly affects racial/ethnic minority student persistence.

Rather, it appears that a combination of a variety of programs and practices is crucial to fostering conditions that are conducive to racial/ethnic minority student success.

Carey (2005) conducted interviews with institutional leaders at colleges and universities with high graduation rates relative to their peer institutions. Alternatively, Kuh et al. (2005) conducted a study of 20 colleges and universities with higher than expected student engagement and graduation rates. Consistent with these earlier inquiries, the current findings support the idea that culture is an important driving force in shaping the experiences of college students (Carey, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005). For example, at USC, the networking culture is so strong that it drives daily informal interactions among faculty, administrators, staff, and racial/ethnic minority students. And, at SUNY New Paltz, the espoused institutional responsibility among administrators is a fundamental component to ensuring racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented students are connected to their institutions. Thus, the findings suggest that understanding culture can generate a more in-depth understanding of the experiences and outcomes of racial/ethnic minority students.

Kuh et al. (2005) found that institutions with higher than expected college student engagement and graduation rates provided students with a coherent educational experience whereby they fostered acculturation and aligned resources to meet the needs of those students. Similarly, Bailey et al.'s (2006) conclusion that developed, aligned, and integrated support systems for matriculation, adjustment, and advising contribute to the effectiveness of colleges in retaining and graduating racial/ethnic minority students. The results of this study support those earlier findings. At the three institutions in the current study, racial/ethnic minority students are offered programs and services that supplement regular orientation programs and facilitate acculturation. Moreover, those matriculation and adjustment programs and services are aligned

and integrated with ongoing academic, financial, and social support for large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students on the three campuses.

The results of this study also support the importance of a shared responsibility for student success. Kuh et al. (2005) found that the cultures of institutions with higher than expected engagement and graduation rates consisted, in part, of a shared responsibility for the success of their students. Similarly, the findings of this inquiry indicate that students at the GEMS colleges are not expected to succeed on their own. Rather, administrators, faculty, and staff in the current study assume an institutional responsibility for proactively connecting students with the information and the support services that exist throughout their campuses.

In contrast to the findings of the findings of Carey (2006) and Kuh et al. (2005), participants at the GEMS colleges highlighted the importance of specific targeted support programs and services and underscored the importance of core groups of administrators and staff in providing insight into the institutional factors that foster success among students on their campus. This is likely due to the fact that, whereas those two investigations were aimed at identifying the factors that contributed to general student success at high-performing institutions, the current study was focused on the institutional characteristics that specifically contribute to the success of racial/ethnic minority student subpopulations and was, therefore, more narrow in scope than those earlier inquiries.

Bailey et al. (2006) and Muraskin and Lee (2004) conducted investigations of institutions that exhibited success at retaining and graduating specific underrepresented student populations. Specifically, Bailey et al. (2006) conducted a case study of six Florida community colleges – three with high success rates and three with low success rates among historically underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students. Muraskin and Lee (2004) conducted a study to

identify the institutional characteristics that contribute to high success rates at institutions with high concentrations of low-income students. The results of the current study provide support for some of the findings of these earlier investigations as well as additional insights into how institutions can foster conditions conducive to the success of racial/ethnic minority students.

Similar to the high-performing colleges in Bailey et al.'s (2006) study, the institutions included in the current investigation had specialized support and retention programs for racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented students, but the current findings further specify the role of these programs in promoting racial/ethnic minority student success at the three GEMS campuses. It is clear that a large number of racial/ethnic minority students at the three colleges in this study connect with one or more specialized support programs. Thus, critical to understanding the impact these programs have at the GEMS colleges is realizing that each of the three campuses houses several programs that reach a large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students on their respective campuses, thereby ensuring that a substantial portion of students of color receive the support that they need.

Finally, the belief in the incorporation of a human element into the educational experiences and the assumed institutional responsibility at the institutions included in this study are consistent with Muraskin and Lee's (2004) finding that high-performing institutions create a personalized educational experience via the direct involvement of faculty members and administrators in monitoring and supporting historically underrepresented college students. Those authors found that administrators and faculty had a direct role in monitoring students, intervening in the face of emerging problems, and helping students make choices. Similarly, at the GEMS colleges, faculty members, administrators, and staff build personal relationships with and play a proactive role in monitoring and supporting the whole student.

## Conclusions

Five major conclusions can be drawn from the findings of the current study. First, institutions of higher education can in fact create conditions that are conducive to success among racial/ethnic minority students. Higher education scholars have recently confirmed that there are commonalities among institutions that are effective at fostering success among college students, low-income college students, or racial/ethnic minority college students (Bailey et al., 2006; Carey, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005; Muraskin & Lee, 2004). Consistent with that literature, the five themes that emerged as a result of the present study represent common cultural characteristics that promote racial/ethnic minority student engagement, persistence, and degree attainment at three institutions with high and equitable racial/ethnic minority persistence and graduation rates.

Secondly, higher education institutions that are very different, despite those differences, can share commonalities with regard to how they can create the conditions that promote success among racial/ethnic minority students. All of the five themes presented in this study are visible, albeit with varying levels of intensity and extensity, on the three GEMS campuses. Thus, it is possible that the cultural characteristics that emerged from this inquiry can be cultivated at colleges and universities, regardless of their control (e.g., public v. private), level (e.g., two- or four-year) location (e.g., urban or rural), and size (e.g., small, medium, or large). Moreover, the results suggest that the confluence of those cultural elements may contribute to racial/ethnic minority student success at colleges and universities with very different characteristics, settings, and students.

Third, campus culture can be a powerful tool in connecting racial/ethnic minority students to their institutions and fostering success among those students. The higher education literature is consistent in indicating that connections between students and their institutions are

important determinants of those educational outcomes (Tinto, 1993; Kuh et al., 1991, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005) and that culture is an important factor in shaping those connections (Gonzalez, 2003; Kuh 2001/2002; Kuh & Love, 2000; Kuh, et al., 1991, 2005; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Rendón et al., 2000; Tinto, 1993). The common cultural characteristics that emerged from this study all function to sustain high quality and high quantity connections between racial/ethnic minority students and the communities at the three GEMS colleges.

Fourth, the extent to which institutions can provide an integrated educational experience for students of color may partially determine their effectiveness at promoting success among those students. College student persistence is a longitudinal process beginning before students matriculate at their respective campuses and continuing through transfer or the completion of a degree (St. John et al., 1996). Higher education researchers have both documented the importance of early adjustment in the experiences and outcomes of racial/ethnic minority students and noted the importance of factors that affect students beyond the first year (Cabrera et al., 1999; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Tinto, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado et al., 1996; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Smedley et al., 1993). Moreover, the issues with which college students must deal and the development with which they experience are multifaceted and complex (Chickering & Reisser, L., 1993). The factors that affect college student persistence and degree attainment range from academic, to financial, to social (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). While it is unlikely that any one person or program will be able to help students solve all problems they encounter, certain factors can maximize the access those students have to diverse sources of support to meet their needs. Thus, the existence of multifaceted support programs and services designed to provide a coherent educational experience and serve the whole student may be an important factor in fostering minority student success.

Finally, the ability of institutions to effectively engage and retain racial/ethnic minority students may be a function of their ability to create a broad network of persons dedicated to the success of racial/ethnic minority students throughout their campus. Researchers have underscored the potency of targeted support programs in facilitating college student adjustment and persistence (Astin, 1993; Bailey et al., 2006; Chaney et al., 1998; Somers, 1996). The findings of the current study indicate that communication and collaboration among administrators, faculty, and staff can enhance the impact of these subcultures by breaking down barriers between support systems serving large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students and other support mechanisms that exist throughout the broader campus culture. Therefore, the findings here suggest that while subcultures may be an important component of racial/ethnic minority student success it may be equally important for all faculty members, administrators, and staff across their respective campus to be involved in efforts to support and retain racial/ethnic minority students.

### Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for those who wish to intentionally and effectively foster success among racial/ethnic minority students. Thus, a series of recommendations for higher education policy, practice, and research are offered in this section. First, I offer recommendations for federal, state, and institutional policymakers. Then, I present a set of recommendations for faculty and administrators working with racial/ethnic minority students in higher education. Finally, the chapter concludes with implications for future higher education research.

*Implications for Federal and State Policy*

Institutional control is an important factor to consider in understanding the differences between the three GEMS campuses. While all three institutions benefit from federal support, Butte College and SUNY New Paltz are influenced a great deal by state support as well. As public institutions, racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented students on those two campuses have benefited immensely from the support provided by the California and New York state governments. In particular, the Equal Opportunity Program at SUNY New Paltz and the Equal Opportunity Programs and Services office at Butte College are state-funded programs that emerged as fundamental components of the support systems in place for racial/ethnic minority students on those two campuses. Alternatively, support for the key targeted support systems at USC is provided by federal and institutional sources. This could be an indication that, given limited institutional resources at two- and four-year public colleges and universities, state-support is an important component to promoting success among historically underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students at those institutions. Therefore, federal and state policymakers should take into consideration the importance of providing the resources to sustain and enhance support and retention programs and services for underrepresented student populations.

Some of the most salient targeted support systems on the GEMS campuses link academic, financial, and social support for their students. Consequently, administrators who work closely with students of color on those campuses are able to designate funding for support that they perceive their students need and offer financial advice for those who may face economic hardships. Federal and state policymakers should, therefore, should consider the importance of



ensuring sufficient need-based aid to alleviate the negative effects of unmet need as well as linking need-based financial aid to targeted support programs.

*Implications for Institutional Policy*

Several of the aforementioned programs are institutional initiatives that were created and are sustained by the commitment of resources from institutional leaders. Especially where the combined resources committed by federal and state governments to such initiatives is inadequate, it is important for institutional leaders to consider the importance of investing resources in efforts to establish and sustain a wide range of programs and services dedicated to the success of racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented students. Even in states where federal and state governments have dedicated a substantial amount of resources to create equal opportunity programs and services, private institutions may not have the capability to take advantage of those resources. Thus, while also essential at public institutions, the commitment of institutional leaders to provide the necessary resources to create and sustain initiatives designed to support and retain racial/ethnic minority students may be especially important at many private colleges and universities.

Given the value of meaningful relationships between students and the faculty members, administrators, and staff with whom they interact, committees and persons making decisions about hiring new college and university personnel should be conscious of how their decisions may affect racial/ethnic minority students on their respective campuses. The provost at SUNY-New Paltz has become a proponent of equity in the hiring of new faculty. In reviewing all new faculty hires at New Paltz, the provost now makes a conscious effort to encourage the consideration of faculty of color, which sometimes results in rejecting the recommendations of faculty search committees or encouraging and approving the hiring of multiple candidates. This

is a manifestation of espousing a value of diversity and an institutional responsibility for the success of racial/ethnic minority students. Due to the salient role of faculty of color in the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students (Guiffrida, 2005), such commitment from those making important hiring decisions could be an important component to humanizing the classroom experience for students of color at predominantly White institutions. Similarly, persons hiring staff for positions in academic and student affairs should consider the impact that can result from hiring persons who understand and are dedicated to meeting the needs of racial/ethnic minority students.

### *Implications for Practice*

The findings of this study yield important implications for practice on college and university campuses. First and foremost, institutional leaders should consider and understand the role that their campus cultures play in promoting or hindering the success of different student populations, including racial/ethnic minority students. Emerging from this study was an understanding of how different cultural factors converge to create a system that engages and supports racial/ethnic minority students. Efforts to improve minority student retention rates that are isolated to a specific program or service may not be as effective as understanding and working to reshape the culture of the entire campus to promote success among those students.

The importance of racial/ethnic minority students establishing relationships with persons of color who have been successful in higher education has been well established (Astin, 1993; Halpin, 1990; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Milem & Berger, 1997). Additionally, while faculty members of color are particularly important for racial/ethnic minority students, relationships with White faculty members can also result in important benefits for racial/ethnic minority students (Guiffrida, 2005). Moreover, this study provides evidence that meaningful relationships with

administrators and academic advisors could also be a potent tool in fostering success among minority students. Thus, White administrators, faculty, and staff should be aware of the salient impact that establishing such relationships can have on the success of racial/ethnic minority students and make concerted efforts to create such relationships both in and out of the classroom.

Institutional leaders should also consider the importance of establishing strong networks on their campuses. Promoting and emphasizing communication and collaboration could help prevent the formation of silos and maximize the social networks and accompanying resources to which racial/ethnic minority students have access. Indeed, at USC, the networking culture is so strong that it is manifest in the daily interactions of administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Moreover, students who enroll at USC are acculturated to understand the importance of the Trojan Network before they even begin their first class. Therefore, an important aspect of establishing a culture in which networking is highly valued and influences behavior may be immediately teaching new students, when they matriculate, that networking is an important component to success in college and beyond.

Institutions should make concerted efforts to create and perpetuate an environment in which students are not expected to seek out, identify, and pursue services on their own. Especially for racial/ethnic minority students, who face the threat of conforming to academic stereotypes of inadequacy and superiority (Lewis et al., 2000; Steele, 1999; Suzuki, 2000), establishing a culture in which faculty members, administrators, and staff espouse an institutional responsibility for connecting students with information and resources may be crucial. Promoting an environment in which college personnel perceive it a normal to reach out to and inform students about various academic, financial, and social support services and encourage those

students to utilize such services may be a critical factor in creating a culture in which students of color can and will flourish.

Seamlessness should be an important focus of efforts to increase racial/ethnic minority college student retention. While administering orientation programs and ensuring accessibility of particular campus support is important, it may not be sufficient. At the GEMS colleges, large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students participate in a wide range of programs and services that facilitate their acculturation. Perhaps, equally important is that those programs and services are connected to fundamental forms of continuous targeted academic, financial, and social support. Thus, a critical component in promoting success among racial/ethnic minority students may be offering orientation programs in which those students can develop relationships with key persons (e.g., academic advisors and faculty members) who can have a major and long-term impact on their college experience.

The extent to which support systems aimed at serving racial/ethnic minority students are isolated or, conversely, integrated into the broader campus network is an important consideration. While having systems of targeted support for students of color is essential, the existence of such systems may not be sufficient due to the fact they may not have the information or resources to answer all questions or meet all needs their students might have. Thus, institutional policies and structures should be created for administrators who work with large numbers of racial/ethnic minority students to build a network on campus that permits and promotes easy access to the key offices, such as counseling centers, financial aid offices, transfer centers, and career centers.

Understanding campus cultures is a difficult task. The fundamental values, assumptions, beliefs, and norms that constitute organizational cultures are tacit and often taken-for-granted

(Schein, 1996). Therefore, institutional leaders who wish to understand the impact of their campus cultures on the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students should take a systematic approach to examining how the cultures of their respective campuses may shape the behavior of administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Cultural audits should be employed to both understand the nature of campus cultures and to comprehend how various values, assumptions, beliefs, and norms may hinder or foster connections between institutions and the racial/ethnic minority students whom they serve.

#### *Implications for Future Research*

While this study offers valuable insight into how institutions can foster success among racial/ethnic minority students, it has many limitations. Only two four-year institutions and one two-year institution were included in the sample. The findings and conclusions, therefore, must be interpreted with caution. While the diversity of the institutional sample permits the conclusion that the cultural characteristics found here can be fostered and sustained on both two- and four-year campuses, the three institution sample does not permit the conclusion that the five emergent themes are common across a substantial number of high-performing two- or four-year colleges. Therefore, to allow such conclusions, future inquiries should focus on expanding the sample to include a substantial number of both two- and four-year institutions.

Another limitation of the research design was the exclusion of low-performing institutions. The institutional sample permits the conclusion that there are five common cultural characteristics that contribute to racial/ethnic minority student success on the GEMS campuses, but it does not allow one to conclude that these conditions are unique to colleges that have been successful at retaining and graduating racial/ethnic minority students. As previously mentioned, it is possible that any of the aforementioned characteristics could be found at institutions who

have not achieved such high and equitable graduation rates. Knowledge of the differences between institutions that have been more or less successful at retaining and graduation students of color can be informative. Thus, future research should include comparison groups of institutions so that such assertions can be made.

While it is possible that the findings that emerged from the current study are applicable to institutions that have exhibited success at retaining and graduating other types of historically underrepresented students, exploring such application is beyond the scope of this study. College student subpopulations that are historically underrepresented and may also benefit from the institutional environments, policies, programs, and practices common among the GEMS institutions are first-generation, low-income groups, and other historically underrepresented or marginalized groups. While Muraskin and Lee (2004) explored the institutional characteristics that contribute to success among low-income students, their study also has many limitations, one of which is the exclusion of two-year colleges. Future research could make an important contribution to the higher education literature by increasing knowledge of how two- and four-year institutions that have been successful at retaining and graduating students from these and other college student subpopulations.

Another implication of the current study arises from the potential of using the Anti-Deficit Framework for exploring other desirable outcomes. This investigation confirms the utility of employing an Anti-Deficit Framework to educational institutions, in addition to individuals. Much can be learned, therefore, from studying institutions, approaches, and programs that are effective at fostering desirable outcomes among historically underrepresented student populations. This could involve studying high schools with relatively high rates of graduates attending college, programs that are successful at promoting college access and retention, and

colleges that are effective at fostering other student outcomes, such as civic responsibility, moral development, and cognitive development among the students whom they serve.

Finally, this study echoes earlier calls to study culture (Kuh, 2001/2002; 2005). Future inquiries should examine the cultural factors that shape other important outcomes, such as different measures of student success. Moreover, the limited research that does explore the impact of culture on college students' experiences mostly employs qualitative methods. Higher education researchers, however, should consider the potential application of cultural frameworks to the design and execution of quantitative inquiries. The results of this study, for example, can be quantified and used to create a survey instrument that can be administered to a nationally representative sample of institutions to test their generalizability.

### Closing

All of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions – and society – so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom. (Hooks, 1994)

Hooks highlighted the importance of reframing the way we think about education and educational institutions. Although colleges and universities across the country have altered admission processes and implemented initiatives to increase diversity on their campuses, the benefits of such diversity are limited if the cultural fabric of their institutions remains unchallenged and undiversified. Offering racial/ethnic minority students access to institutions of higher education is important, but perpetuating institutional cultures of which the core values and beliefs alienate, isolate, and hinder the success of those students is inequitable and counterproductive. These findings will, hopefully, provide valuable insight into how policymakers and institutional leaders can begin to change their way of thinking about fostering success among the increasingly diverse student populations entering the gates of their campuses.

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## APPENDIX A: CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

### University of Southern California (USC)

#### *Administrators and Staff:*

- Vice President of Student Affairs (Black)
- Associate Vice President for Student Affairs (Black)
- Associate Dean for Student Affairs (White)
- Director of Campus Activities (White)
- Assistant Dean and Executive Director of Student Life (White)
- Associate Dean of Students (Black)
- Director of the Undergraduate Success Program (White)
- Director of Undergraduate Programs (Asian)
- Director of the McNair Scholars Program (Black)
- Assistant Director of the Asian Pacific American Student Services Center (Asian)
- Director of the Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs (Black)
- 5 Academic Advisors (3 Black, 1 Latina, 1 White)
- Racial Backgrounds: 2 Asian, 8 Black, 1 Latina, 5 White

#### *Racial Backgrounds of Minority Students:*

- 3 Asian American
- 3 Black
- 2 Latina/o

### State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz

#### *Administrators and Staff:*

- Director of the Scholars Mentorship Program (Black)
- Coordinator of the Scholars Mentorship Program (Asian)
- Director of the Equal Opportunity Program (White)
- Student Activities Director (White)
- 3 Academic Advisors
- Racial Backgrounds: 1 Asian, 3 Black, 3 White

#### *Racial Backgrounds of Minority Students:*

- 2 Asian American
- 4 Black
- 5 Latina/o

### Butte Community College (BCC)

#### *Administrators and Staff:*

- Director of Equal Opportunity Programs and Services (White)
- Assistant Director of TRIO (Black)
- Director of the Learning Resource Center (White)
- Director of the Transfer Center (Latino)
- Director of Library Services (Asian)
- Director of Financial Aid (White)
- Coordinator of CARE (Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education) (White)
- 4 Counselors/Academic Advisors (1 Asian, 1 Latina, 2 White)
- Racial Backgrounds: 2 Asian, 1 Black, 2 Latina/o, 6 White

#### *Racial Backgrounds of Minority Students:*

- 4 Asian American
- 2 Black
- 6 Latina/o

## **APPENDIX B: FINAL LIST OF TOPICS ADDRESSED IN INTERVIEWS**

The topics listed below are the various issues or areas that were addressed in each individual interview. Many of the topics that were addressed in administrator and staff interviews emerged from the initial five administrator/staff interviews, which were much more open-ended. In those initial interviews, participants were asked to describe their campus and what factors they believed contributed to minority student success on their campuses. As various institutional factors were

### *Administrators and Staff*

- Perceived unique aspects of the institution
- Factors that contribute to minority student success
- Factors that contribute to minority student engagement
- Specific policies that contribute to minority student success
- Specific programs that contribute to minority student success
- Specific practices that contribute to minority student success
- The role of the interviewer in those efforts
- Methods of communication or collaboration between administrators and minority students
- Description of campus culture
- Description of campus climate
- Barriers and challenges to serving minority students

### *Racial/Ethnic Minority Students*

- What makes them want to be engaged at their institution
- What makes them want to stay at their institution
- Reasons they chose the institution
- Congruence between pre-matriculation expectations and experiences
- Adjustment difficulties
- Programs important in facilitating adjustment and experience
- People important in facilitating adjustment and experience
- Access to information
- Plans after the experience at respective institution
- Efforts to help transition out of institution
- Description of campus culture
- Description of campus climate
- Classroom experience

**Samuel D. Museus**  
**Curriculum Vitae**

**EDUCATION**

**The Pennsylvania State University (University Park)**

Ph.D. Candidate in Higher Education

- *Cognate Field:* Sociology
- *Dissertation:* Fostering Minority College Student Persistence and Baccalaureate Degree Attainment: A Collective-Cross Case Analysis of High-Performing Institutions
- *Advisor:* Dr. Shaun R. Harper
- *Degree Conferral:* August of 2007

**University of Minnesota (Twin-Cities)**

Master of Arts in Higher Education

Bachelor of Arts in History

Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

**PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

**Center for the Study of Higher Education at  
The Pennsylvania State University (University Park)**

***2006 – Present: Research Assistant***

Engaged in a quantitative analysis of state public finances for The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. Analyzing national data on the relationships between state public policy and equity in the K-16 educational pipeline.

Supervisor – Associate Professor Donald E. Heller

**The Pennsylvania State University (University Park)**

***2005 – 2006: Teaching Assistant***

Co-planned and assisted in the instruction of a course on the intersection between *Education and Society* in the teacher education program at Penn State:

- Collaborated in the construction of course examinations, paper assignments, and projects;
- Led multiple weekly recitation sections;
- Graded course examinations, papers, and projects.

**Center for the Study of Higher Education at  
The Pennsylvania State University (University Park)**

***2004 – 2005: Research Assistant***

Worked on various projects conducting qualitative data collection and analysis.

Composed literature reviews on various topics in higher education, conducted qualitative document analyses and interviews. Supervisor – Professor Dorothy Evensen.