Beating the Odds: Counter Narratives of Thriving Students of Color at Dominantly White Faith-Based Institutions

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BEATING THE ODDS: COUNTER NARRATIVES OF THRIVING STUDENTS OF COLOR AT DOMINANTLY WHITE FAITH-BASED INSTITUTIONS

by

Rebecca Ruth Selden Kuhn

A dissertation submitted to the
School of Behavioral and Applied Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education

Azusa, California
July, 2022
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DEDICATION

To my parents, Dave and Dottie Selden, who instilled in me the joy of learning.

To my children, Kristin, Perry, Loren, and Kevin. I treasure your love and support.
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ABSTRACT

Graduation rates of students of color in the United States remain virtually unchanged, despite 50 years of institutions implementing programs and services to increase success among students of color (de Brey et al., 2019). The disparity in undergraduate degree completion rates between White college students and students of color indicates systemic barriers to student success remain pervasive. This qualitative study employs hermeneutic phenomenology to analyze and interpret the lived experiences of 10 thriving students of color at dominantly White faith-based institutions. Schreiner’s (2010a) holistic student success construct of thriving and Harper’s (2012) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework provide the conceptual frameworks for this study. Six major themes emerged from the data: Relationships Matter; Leadership Opportunities are Important; The Desire to Make a Difference; Racial Climate—Not Yet Where We Need to Be; Hope and Positive Perspective—The Spiritual Connection; and Get to Know Me. The most prominent theme, Relationships Matter, related to the role relationships played in students’ perceptions of their thriving. Findings indicated overlapping layers of support and encouragement from multiple sources influence thriving, as does the sacrificial nature of the support received from parents. The junior and senior students of color beat the odds by thriving on a dominantly White campus and progressing toward completing their degrees. The implications of these findings relate to thriving in students of color and making their campus a place they can call home. Practitioners should (a) ask students of color what makes them feel at home on their campus and initiate changes; (b) provide leadership opportunities for students of color; (c) examine and evaluate institutional integrity and commitment to student welfare; (d) hire additional administrators, faculty,
and staff of color; (e) recruit and admit more students of color; (f) provide professional
development in pathways to thriving for faculty and staff; (g) determine the pathways to
thriving for their students of color; and (h) treat others with love and kindness.

*Keywords:* student success, college student thriving, students of color, campus
racial climate, institutional integrity, college graduation rates, higher education
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The confluence of two epic events in 2020 provided one more opportunity to assess the current educational and racial environment in higher education. First, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, college students and professors faced unique challenges as a result of the unexpected switch from a face-to-face classroom setting to remote learning. With only a few days advanced-warning, residential students were sent away from their campuses, and professors scrambled to adapt the second half of the spring semester to an online format. The disparity between students who had appropriate computer technology with unlimited Internet access and those students who did not became more pronounced. Some students learned remotely in the comfort of their home environment while others were forced to drive to parking lots of businesses where free Internet access was available to engage in the learning process from their cars and use their smart phones to complete and upload assignments. The difference in access to technology resources exacerbated the challenges of teaching and learning remotely and turned a spotlight on students of color who had graduated from under-resourced high schools in urban areas as well as rural locations (Flaherty, 2020).

A second event in 2020 consisted of a series of protests by thousands of individuals in cities throughout the United States. Protestors expressed their outrage against excessive use of force by police officers and the deaths of George Floyd (Rahman, 2020) and Breonna Taylor (Oppel et al., 2021) and other African Americans while in police custody (Madrigal & Meyer, 2020; Qureshi, 2020). The effects of centuries of racism and oppression once again were undeniable and obvious to the general public; racism, specifically in higher education, came into focus one more time.
(Anderson, 2020b). College athletes of color began to work collectively to voice their concerns to administrators regarding systemic racism and inequities in expectations and treatment compared to White student athletes. Speaking out about racial inequality or any issues that reflect negatively on their institution is a significant risk for college athletes. Their coaches control athletic financial aid and playing time, both of which have been misused to silence athletes and to influence their opportunities to complete their education, their employment following college, and even their prospects in professional sports (Anderson, 2020a; Rittenberg, 2020).

One example of college athlete activism was the collective action of a group of football players at Mississippi State University who have been credited with the final effort to remove the Confederate battle emblem from the state flag of Mississippi in June 2020. With the support of many of his teammates, Kylin Hill, a running back with national ranking, stated publicly that he would no longer play for Mississippi State as long as the state flag maintained the current design. Many other college athletes, coaches, and administrators throughout Mississippi voiced support for this change. By the end of the month, the governor signed legislation to remove the flag immediately and consider new designs (Anderson, 2020a). That same month, administrators were forced to address the previous and current petitions presented by both students and faculty asking for the removal of portraits, statues, and building names that honored White men who enslaved Black people or expressed White supremacist thinking. Changes were made on many other campuses, as well, including New York Medical College, Western Carolina University, Clemson University, and Princeton University (Anderson, 2020b; Halperin, 2020).
Much could be learned from analyzing these two events from 2020 separately: the challenges in education, particularly for students of color, as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns or the protests against racism as expressed in excessive use of force by some police officers that influenced African American college athletes to speak up about the Confederate symbol on the Mississippi state flag. Analyzing each of these events through the lens of higher education could also be productive. However, examining the results and repercussions of these two events together could lead to findings that might offer a unique perspective compared to specific findings in separate analyses. In a similar manner, in this study, I seek the unique findings that may surface by examining two concepts concurrently: students of color who are thriving in college in the context of a dominantly White faith-based campus environment. This study focuses on students of color who are thriving in college despite the challenges of racism and microaggressions they encounter daily.

Statement of the Problem

Following World War II, the doors to higher education opened significantly wider to less affluent students, women, and students of color. With financial assistance through the G. I. Bill, veterans who had not previously considered going to college now had opportunity and financial means; by 1946, nearly 1 million were enrolled in higher education. This number is significant when compared to the total national college student enrollment of approximately 1.5 million in 1939–40. Women who had entered the work force during WWII also considered the advantages of a college education, and increased access and affordability through federal grants for higher education influenced more women to enroll. By law, students of color had been banned from White institutions in
many states prior to the 1954 decision of *Brown v. the Board of Education*. This landmark case and the Civil Rights Movement made it possible for students of color to enroll in colleges and universities. However, they often endured isolation and exclusion from social activities, including the cafeteria, residence halls, and participation in athletic teams and theatre productions. Students of color enrolled in classes but were not welcome on dominantly White campuses (Thelin, 2011). Despite the hostile environment, students of color continued to enroll in higher education, and their presence and social activism led to changes in curriculum, including the addition of courses in women’s studies, ethnic studies, and race relations (Butler & Schmitz, 1992).

Enrollment data from the 21st century documented the trend of increased enrollment of students of color in higher education. When Musu-Gillette et al. (2017) compared the enrollment numbers of the fall semester of 2000 with the fall semester of 2014, they noted a 119% increase in Hispanic/Latinx enrollment (from 1.4 million to 3.0 million) and a 57% increase in African American student enrollment (from 1.5 million to 2.4 million). By contrast, White student enrollment increased by only 7% in that same time period. However, what initially seemed like encouraging news with regard to students of color in higher education became concerning when enrollment rates of students of color were aligned with completion rates, and the barriers to success for students of color became obvious.

After 50 years of research (e.g., Alsalam et al., 1993; de Brey et al., 2019) and intentional changes in higher education, the disparity in undergraduate degree completion rates between White college students and students of color remain unchanged, indicating that systemic barriers to success remain pervasive. The National Center for Education
Statistics (NCES) documented 6-year graduation rates for students who initially enrolled in higher education in bachelor’s or equivalent degree 4-year institutions in 2010. Nearly 60% of all these students finished their undergraduate education by 2016. Completion rates were disaggregated by race/ethnicity and recorded as follows: Asian American, 74%; White, 64%; Hispanic or Latinx, 54%; Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 51%; African American, 40%; and Native American/Alaska Native, 39% (Ginder et al., 2017). These rates reflect no significant change since 1977, except for a significant drop in the graduation rates of African Americans.

The disparities in educational outcomes across racial and ethnic groups and socioeconomic status (SES) are often called the achievement gap (Williams, 2011), and such gaps have been noted since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 mandated a comparison of educational environments and outcomes by race. The Equality of Educational Opportunity report by Coleman et al. (1966) established a baseline by presenting standardized test scores in reading and math as one example of difference between White and African American high school students. Coleman et al. found the average African American high school senior placed in the 13th percentile in both reading and math. Fifty years later, Hanushek (2016) found only a slight change: the average African American high school senior placed in the 19th percentile in math and in the 22nd percentile in reading. By labeling these pervasive racial disparities as achievement gaps or even completion gaps, the emphasis is placed on the individual student’s ability, rather than on the systemic barriers to educational opportunities that have been pervasive in the United States.
In contrast to the term achievement gap, many educators and researchers now prefer to use the term *opportunity gap*. Proponents of this term use the phrase to focus on the complex systemic factors that influence student performance. Although achievement gap can refer to any differences in educational outcomes between subpopulations of students, the term is most often used to describe performance gaps between White students and African American or Latinx students (Ansell, 2011; Camera, 2016; Yates, 2018). Researchers typically determine these disparities or gaps based on standardized test scores, high school dropout rates, college enrollment rates, and other student success measures (Abramson, 2018, Camera, 2016). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) publishes the report, *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups* regularly (e.g., Aud et al., 2010; de Brey et al., 2019; KewalRamani et al., 2007; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017) that provides statistics for tracking the gaps in all levels of education including college retention and graduation rates.

However, the term achievement gap, and the measures employed to determine difference, implicitly implies one group of students is “less than” compared to another group. Although socioeconomic class, race/ethnicity, and gender may be associated with these different gaps (Carter & Kendi, 2019; Yates, 2018), it is “overly simplistic—and offensive—to look at these data and assume people of color don’t have the ability to become high achievers…” (Abramson, 2018, para.10). Connotations of the term achievement gap evolved from racist ideas and represent false narratives that African American and Latinx individuals do not value education, are less curious, lack the motivation to learn, and are intellectually inferior to White people (Carter & Kendi, 2019; Yates, 2018).
To offset these false, negative connotations of the term achievement gap, many educators and researchers now prefer to use the term *opportunity gap*, as it shifts the focus to systemic barriers to success. Circumstances beyond the students’ control, such as race/ethnicity, geographic location, and SES, impact education and life opportunities more than students’ intelligence or level of determination. Because of a K–12 educational system that is funded through property taxes, many schools in metropolitan areas or remote rural settings are under-resourced and may not be able to provide the necessary resources or opportunities for students to succeed and thrive compared to schools in more affluent areas (Ansell, 2011; Mooney, 2018; Yates, 2018). Under-resourced schools typically enroll a disproportionate percentage of students of color (Becker et al., 2009; Mulvey, 2009). For example, with regard to teacher certification in under-resourced schools, in the 2007–08 academic year, approximately 25% of teachers who taught secondary mathematics in schools with at least 50% African American student enrollment were not certified to teach mathematics. In contrast, in those schools with at least 50% White student enrollment, only 8% of teachers were not certified to teach mathematics (Aud et al., 2010). In addition, many families living in urban or remote rural areas may be living in poverty, and their children may experience daily challenges, such as food insecurity and housing insecurity, which can influence their ability to focus and learn (Munin & Enos, 2016; Redden, 2020).

Other influential factors that create an opportunity gap include test bias and negative stereotyping. Rather than placing the responsibility on the student to improve academic outcomes, the philosophy behind the use of the term opportunity gap places the obligation for student performance on the system that has yet to successfully address the
inequities in available resources, personnel, and learning environments (Ansell, 2011; Mooney, 2018; Yates, 2018). Even with the change in use of terminology from achievement gap to opportunity gap, the universal use of these gap terms implies that something is wrong with one group and that group of students needs to be remediated. The implication is that the students are to blame, that the lack of achievement is the students’ fault (Carter & Kendi, 2019; Mooney, 2018).

The disparity between the increasing enrollment rates of students of color (KewalRamani et al., 2007) and their completion rates (e.g., Alsalam et al., 1993; de Brey et al., 2019) indicates the success of students of color in higher education is worthy of further study. Recent research has recognized this historically consistent disparity in completion rates between students of color and White students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Rather than focusing on factors that contribute to stagnant completion rates for students of color, this study focused on what contributes to the success of students of color in higher education.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to discover how junior and senior students of color have been successful in college, particularly in dominantly White faith-based institutions. Using hermeneutic phenomenology, this study provided a platform and gave voice to the counter narrative of students of color who have been successful in college, who were thriving despite the racial discrimination they faced on dominantly White campuses. Two concepts influenced the approach to this study: Schreiner’s construct of *thriving* (2010a), and asset-based language and research (Bloom et al., 2013; Harper, 2012a; Shushok & Hulme, 2006).
Thriving and Student Success

Schreiner’s (2010a) concept of thriving influenced this study. In higher education, academic success is often measured by a student maintaining a minimum grade point average (GPA) of 2.0, persisting from year to year in a program of study, and ultimately graduating (Kuh et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2008; Mayhew et al., 2016). The concept of thriving is broader and much more holistic. Thriving extends beyond the academic sphere to include the intrapersonal and interpersonal facets of a student’s experience. Thriving college students are engaged in the college experience intellectually, emotionally, and in their relationships. They take ownership of their academic responsibilities and persevere through difficulties (Schreiner 2010b). Thriving students have a positive perspective on life and the future, cultivate healthy relationships with adults and peers, and exhibit a desire to invest in relationships with students who are different from themselves (Schreiner, 2010c). Using the construct of thriving to gauge student success provided a measure that is more extensive than the traditional student success criteria of GPA and graduation. Employing the holistic measure of thriving rather than the minimal criteria of student success provided additional meaningful research data on thriving students of color at dominantly White faith-based campuses.

Asset-Based Language and Research

Similar to the use of the term achievement gap, the very language used for describing many students of color is deficit-oriented. Institutions note deficits with phrases such as low standardized test scores; poor reading ability; inadequate writing skills; low GPA; below-average math skills; or low level of rigor in high school courses (Boylan et al., 2017; Ganga et al., 2018). Changing the terminology and the philosophy
behind the terminology to appreciative (Bloom et al., 2013; Fifolt & Lander, 2013) and strengths-based language (Anderson, 2005; Clifton et al., 2006; Lopez & Louis, 2009; Shushok & Hulme, 2006) redirects the research focus to the assets and strengths of both students and institutions. For example, rather than asking a student a deficit-oriented question such as “What contributed to your low grades your first semester?” a student could be asked “What behaviors and choices help you persist in college despite the challenges you face?” The academy can learn much from students who decide to persevere in college. This positive approach to data collection offsets the current deficit-oriented research that tends to be prevalent in higher education (Harrison & Hasan, 2013).

The effects of this shift in language have been documented by Shushok and Hulme (2006), who identified a paradox in research that occurs when researchers study the deficits to understand desired positive outcomes. For example, research on retention usually is based on what causes students to leave college rather than what compels them to persist (e.g., Tinto, 1988, 1993). Shushok and Hulme (2006) built a case for studying excellence based on the work of Aristotle, who admonished his readers to seek the good life and nurture virtues; they also highlighted Seligman’s (2002) positive psychology concept of happiness and meaning, and Gardner’s (1997) research on individuals who lived their lives in extraordinary ways. Shushok and Hulme (2006) stated their belief and foundation for college student success: “Intentionally enabling students to identify, understand, and leverage their talents, passions, and strengths allows their unique genius to emerge and sets them on a course for success” (p. 4). Helping students succeed and thrive begins with studying students’ strengths, assets, and successes rather than
weaknesses, deficits, and failures. Spending time identifying and developing talents is much more profitable to the student, to the institution, and to society than the same amount of time, energy, and resources designated toward remediating deficits (Clifton et al., 2006; Shushok & Hulme, 2006).

Harper (2012a) also focused on strengths and accomplishments rather than deficits, noting that his Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework has been informed by 30 years of research literature on Black men in education as well as in society. This framework “inverts questions that are commonly asked about educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and Black male student attrition” (p. 5). Rather than focusing on the negative or on what is not being done, Harper asks questions about challenging topics from a positive success orientation. For example, one question about classroom experience was worded this way: “How do Black undergraduate men earn GPAs above 3.0 in majors for which they were academically underprepared?” (p. 5). Harper further reported that the alarmingly negative statistics about Black men in college usually overshadow the stories of Black men who have completed undergraduate and graduate degrees.

The challenge is that although there is a significant increase in the percentage of students of color enrolling in higher education (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017), their completion rates have declined or remained generally the same as completion rates 40 years ago (e.g., Alsalam et al., 1993; de Brey et al., 2019), despite many research-based academic support programs and initiatives (Boylan & Bonham, 2014; Mayhew et al., 2016). By studying thriving students of color at dominantly White faith-based
institutions, this study provides a fresh perspective on the body of knowledge currently available for this population.

**Research Question**

Congruent with thriving as a more holistic measure of student success than the current measures used in higher education research (Schreiner, 2010a), the strengths-based perspective (Clifton et al., 2006; Lopez & Louis, 2009; Shushok & Hulme, 2006) and Harper’s (2010, 2012a) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework provided a lens through which to study the experiences of these students of color who are “beating the odds.” As Harper (2016) noted in the forward to Closing the Opportunity Gap, “Anyone who is serious about improving rates of success for particular groups...[has] much to learn from persons in the group who have succeeded, despite the odds stacked against them” (p. xii). Thus, the research question that guided this qualitative study was: How do thriving students of color who are juniors or seniors at dominantly White faith-based institutions make meaning of the experiences that contributed to their thriving?

**Significance of the Study**

Most research involving students of color in higher education is deficit-oriented (Clifton et al., 2006; Schreiner et al., 2011) or follows Tinto’s research model (1988, 1993) that focused more on why students drop out of college rather than why they persist to degree completion. In contrast, in this study, I focused on students’ strengths and assets rather than their deficits. I moved beyond the typical measures of student success by using Schreiner’s (2010a) more holistic gauge of thriving.

A positive asset-based approach to this research added a fresh dimension to the body of knowledge in higher education. I explored the lived experiences of thriving
students of color at dominantly White faith-based institutions. I gave voice to their counter narratives of success and thriving by providing a platform for their experiences and perspectives and focused on their abilities and contributions to higher education. I featured students of color who were thriving in college and beating the odds.

**Definition of Thriving**

Thriving is a holistic measure of college student success that extends beyond the typical success measures of GPA, retention, and degree completion (Schreiner 2010a). Incorporating concepts from positive psychology and flourishing (Keyes & Haidt, 2003), thriving encompasses not only the academic sphere, but also students’ intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. The five facets of thriving are: “(1) engaged learning, (2) academic determination, (3) positive perspective, (4) diverse citizenship, and (5) social connectedness” (Schreiner, 2010a, p. 4). In this study, thriving students are described as students who were identified by faculty or staff at their institution as engaged in the learning process, investing quality effort in their academic work, persisting through academic challenges, maintaining a positive perspective on life and the future, appreciative of human differences and willing to invest in relationships with individuals who are different than themselves, and involved in healthy relationships with their peers as well as faculty and staff on their campus.

**Conclusion**

This chapter described the problem of a pervasive disparity in educational opportunity that negatively affects students of color, documented the differences in college graduation rates of students of color compared to White students, introduced the concept of thriving and the use of asset-based language in research, stated the research
question, summarized the significance of this study, and defined thriving. Chapter 2 presents a review of the research literature addressing the challenges and barriers students of color experience on college campuses, explains the conceptual framework for this study, and identifies the gap in the research literature and the importance of studying students of color who are thriving.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review of the literature begins with a description of students of color in higher education followed by the use of asset- and deficit-based language in research. I explore the responsibility of the institution in student success, as well as the campus environmental challenges faced by students of color that include racism, discrimination, and prejudice. Next, I focus on student success models and the holistic measure of student success known as thriving. A description of the frameworks for this study (thriving and Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework) completes this chapter.

Students of Color in Higher Education

Collectively, the research findings in Chapter 1 point toward the significance of examining the data related to students of color who are thriving in college. Statistics gleaned from the previous 50 years of research in higher education indicated increased access to higher education for undergraduate students of color has not resulted in increased completion rates for students of color (e.g., Alsalam et al., 1993; de Brey et al., 2019; KewalRamani et al., 2007). Despite such programs and support services as summer bridge programs, Federal TRIO programs, tutoring services, learning centers, first-year seminar courses, and developmental courses in reading, writing, mathematics, and study skills that were designed with the express purpose of enhancing academic student success (Boylan & Bonham, 2014; Mayhew et al., 2016), the gap in graduation rates between White students and students of color has remained relatively unchanged or has slightly increased (e.g., Alsalam et al., 1993; de Brey et al., 2019; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). This marked lack of programming effectiveness indicates a focus on individual students’
skills and success to the exclusion of the institution’s climate, practices, and policies can no longer be considered the best path forward.

**Asset-Based Language and Deficit-Based Language**

Words are powerful. Terminology is important. Although words communicate information, they also convey the writer’s philosophy and values. In this study, I endeavor to use vocabulary that is asset-based, that focuses on the strengths and abilities of students of color and how they contribute positively to higher education. Much of the research focused on students of color succeeding in higher education has been based on a deficit perspective. Deficit-based studies focus on factors that contribute to the lack of student success and low completion rates, rather than the factors that contribute to the success of students of color who have completed their degree (Harper, 2016).

To extend the emphasis on words used to describe students, two more terms are considered: *at-risk*, and *high-risk*. At-risk is a term used in higher education to refer to a student’s likelihood of academic failure, early withdrawal, or not completing a degree (Jean, 2017; Pizzolato, 2003; Yeh, 2002). At-risk refers to a plethora of personal factors that are predictive of a higher likelihood of failing academically or departing from higher education. These personal factors may include first-generation status, low SES, having a disability, academic underpreparedness, being an immigrant or refugee, speaking English as a second language, or being a student of color enrolled at a dominantly White institution (Eitzen et al., 2016; Jean, 2017; O’Keeffe, 2013; Yeh, 2002).

In addition to the risk factors mentioned, some recent studies have brought attention to the needs of students with psychological conditions (e.g., Goodwin, 2016; Gross, 2017; Jean, 2017) and have posited that the academic pressures on student-athletes
and those with merit scholarships should also be considered risk factors (Jean, 2017). Requiring a student to sustain a 3.75 GPA in the student’s major to maintain the student’s scholarship or expecting student-athletes to excel athletically while maintaining grades that ensure their athletic eligibility are risk factors that draw attention to the challenges placed on students who are very talented academically or athletically, yet may be identified as at-risk because of the institution’s high expectations and the stress these expectations may cause students (Jean, 2017).

In *Breakaway Learners: Strategies for Post-Secondary Success with At-Risk Students*, Gross (2017) described yet another set of risk factors: childhood trauma, abuse, violence, and toxic stress. Rather than referring to students who have experienced neglect, abuse, and violence during childhood as vulnerable students, Gross called them *breakaway students*, students who literally are breaking away from their life circumstances and from the family members and friends they love because those circumstances have been violent, harmful, and dangerous. In many instances, enrolling in colleges or universities provided an initial opportunity to these students to break away from destructive living environments, a challenge that requires inner fortitude, wisdom, and determination to leave behind loved ones and friends. By identifying these students as breakaway learners rather than as vulnerable or victims, Gross used affirming strengths terminology rather than deficit-oriented language.

The term at-risk not only has a negative connotation, but also perpetuates a view that the student is solely responsible for academic success (Gumbel, 2020). Pizzolato (2003, 2004) made a distinction between the uses of at-risk and high-risk. When using at-risk, professionals typically identify student characteristics and qualities in a more
permanent manner, as characteristics that cannot be changed or are very difficult to alter. For example, a first-generation student cannot change that status, an individual cannot choose the first language they learn, nor can a student control the circumstances of their elementary or secondary education (e.g., location, personnel, or fiscal resources). By using the term high-risk, Pizzolato conveyed that risk is a gradient scale from low-risk to high-risk, and that high-risk could be mitigated or lowered when institutions appropriately address the needs of students with risk factors. This perspective shifts the onus of meeting the academic expectations and standards of the institution from the at-risk student (who has very little power to change risk factors) to the institution itself and the higher education professionals and institutional resources available to mediate the effects of these factors.

The Responsibility of the Institution

Three traditional missions continue to guide higher education in the United States: (a) teaching, (b) public service, and (c) research. The specific mission statement of each institution typically refers to one or more of these three social missions (Weisbrod et al., 2008). For more than 3 centuries, personnel in higher education have endeavored to provide a well-rounded education for students and to serve society by contributing to the knowledge from which the local community, state, and/or the entire nation could benefit (Astin, 2016; Weisbrod et al., 2008). No reference is made in any of these mission statements to educating only select students.

The offer of admission is an implicit contract. The implication is that the mission of the institution will equitably apply to that student as well as every other student admitted. In The Impact of Culture on Organizational Decision Making: Theory and
Practicing Higher Education, Tierney (2008) stated, “The mission expresses core values, many of which are similar among all higher education organizations. The importance of developing students’ intellectual abilities is a value that all institutions of higher education share” (p. 18). If, indeed, the traditional social missions of higher education include educating every student by teaching real-world knowledge and skills, serving the public by preparing citizens who are better able to contribute in a democratic society, and increasing the body of information through research for the ultimate benefit of the world (Astin, 2016; Weisbrod et al., 2008), then it is critical to address the barriers encountered by students of color in higher education through a spectrum of appropriate academic and personal support strategies, programs, and courses. Historical precedent and integrity in the admission process undergird the ethical responsibility of institutions to support the students these institutions admitted (Casazza & Silverman, 2013; Mulvey, 2009).

Historically, U.S. schools have consistently acknowledged and, to some degree, addressed the needs of students identified as high-risk (Boylan, 1988). From the date that Harvard University established its admissions criteria, there have been students in the United States who have been labeled high-risk by their institutions because they were academically underprepared. Because Harvard followed the European model of instruction and because most textbooks in the 1600s were written in Latin, Harvard required admitted students to be competent in Latin to be successful in their classes. Latin tutors were probably the first professionals in higher education to address high-risk students who were systemically underprepared in the United States (Boylan & White, 1987).
When state colleges and universities opened their doors to students in the second half of the 19th century, they offered preparatory courses to the majority of their students. Because very few public high schools existed in this era, most students simply were not ready for college-level academics. Many land-grant institutions established preparatory departments to address the needs of students considered underprepared; even in the early 1900s, highly selective schools such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton enrolled students who did not meet minimal admissions requirements. The need to address lower than desired student academic skill level was so pressing that by 1890, more than 80% of all colleges and universities in the United States had some form of preparatory program (Boylan, 1988). This trend held steady for more than 100 years (Boylan & Bonham, 2011). Preparatory departments in higher education were an integral part of most institutions; however, they were viewed as an embarrassment to the administration and faculty of institutions striving for true university standing (Parker et al., 2010). It seems a point of tension existed. Although higher education administrators and faculty willingly offered admission to students they labeled as high-risk, the preparatory schools or academic support services created for these students were viewed as negative, perhaps even humiliating to personnel striving for greater academic status.

With regard to perceptions of the value of educating Black college students during the late 1800s and early 1900s, public opinion may have been influenced by Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard from 1869–1909. Although considered a leader in liberal causes, Eliot did not hesitate to share his views in public settings. He supported separate schools for African American students in the South and strongly believed in preserving racial purity (Cohen, 2016; Wagoner, 1997). Strong opinions disparaging the intellectual
capacity of students of color, even though unfounded, remain embedded in higher education environment and culture, continuing to create obstacles and barriers for students of color (Tierney, 2008).

In the past as well as present day, most college students identified as high-risk encountered circumstances and situations that contributed to a perceived lack of readiness for college-level learning. Systemic underpreparedness results from a student’s lack of opportunity, a lack of access to educational resources, and/or a lack of knowledge as determined essential by the institution offering admission to the student (Boylan & Bonham, 2014). Many conditions contribute to systemic underpreparedness, including poverty, racial discrimination, under-resourced schools and communities, and instruction in a language other than the student’s first language. Systemic underpreparedness is a consequence of circumstances and systems that obstruct students’ opportunities to learn. It is not a result of lack of effort or motivation. The student has no control over the learning environment or the life circumstances that contribute to systemic underpreparedness (Boylan & Bonham, 2014; Jenvey, 2016b; Tierney, 2008).

There are educators who would contend that the student identified as high-risk bears the responsibility to adapt to the current educational system and environment, an educational system initially designed by White men to educate a student body composed predominantly of middle- and upper-class White young men (Boylan & White, 1987; Brock, 2010; Thelin, 2011; Tierney, 2008). In contrast, Tierney (2008) and other scholars (Casazza & Silverman, 2013; Jenvey, 2016a; Renick, 2020) have proposed that it is past time for higher education institutions to make changes to better serve the current student
population, particularly those deemed high-risk for an education intentionally designed for and directed primarily toward the goals and needs of White persons.

Tierney (2008) provided an example of an administrator who was not willing to make institutional changes that would address the needs and culture of current students. He referenced two challenges currently faced by Native Americans in higher education: (a) the highly competitive environment with an emphasis on individual achievement and competition rather than cooperation and collaboration which is highly valued by most Native Americans; and (b) the difficulty acculturating Native Americans into the college culture. Tierney described the perspective of an unnamed White male administrator to these challenges. This particular administrator viewed the challenges of a competitive academic environment and differences in culture as problems exclusive to Native Americans, who then were responsible to fix them. This administrator concluded the institution had no responsibility to address these challenges. However, from the perspective of Native American students, the institution may not have been able to function in a multicultural world or may not have been willing to acknowledge and incorporate other values and cultures into the institution. In other words, the institution might have been functionally racist. Too often the “problem” is defined and described in terms of the dominant White culture. Tierney concluded: “Rather than objectify Native Americans as the problem, one might point out that institutional racism and the mind-set of the powerful is the ‘real problem’” (p. 78).

Renick (2020) conveyed a perspective similar to Tierney’s (2008). Renick’s (2020) work as vice-president for enrollment management and student success at Georgia State University focused on increasing the unacceptable retention and graduation rates of
students of color (e.g., 22% for Latinx students and 18% for African American men) by using technology to daily track every student’s progress with a specific goal of increasing graduation rates by providing timely support and personalized intervention for the large population of students of color (65% in 2020) at Georgia State. The Graduation and Progression Success (GPS) Advising System was coupled with a personal follow up from an academic advisor who reached out to a high-risk student within 48 hours of a warning registered by the GPS technology. Renick shared his philosophy about these innovative changes at the institutional level in an interview with Jenvey (2016a) by stating:

The university realized it could not continue with its historic course when there was a clear demonstration for a need to change approach. We questioned what type of institution we wanted to be to accommodate the students of today and not those from yesteryear. (para. 7)

Renick further stated that “Universities are [honor-bound] to defy conventional approaches to students, otherwise they merely perpetuate inequalities for disadvantaged students that the higher education system has been producing for decades” (Jenvey, 2016a, para. 1). Georgia State administrators concluded the university needed to change rather than expecting the new generation of students to change. They successfully adapted their institutional practices and policies to improve the educational environment for all students at Georgia State, which led to increased graduation rates for their students of color (Gumbel, 2020).

The preceding section addressed the concept that when an institution offers admission to students, that institution is acknowledging responsibility for educating those students and supporting students’ learning efforts in appropriate ways. In addition to
addressing academic needs through academic support programs and services, Astin (1993, 2016) concluded the entire college experience, including expressed and implied values of the institution and the institution’s culture and environment, impact student learning and success. The next section describes campus climate, how it contributes to success for students or color, and how it can present hurdles and obstacles to their success.

**Campus Environmental Challenges**

World-class gymnast and the first Black female gymnastics National Champion at UCLA, Kim Hamilton Anthony (2009) described her college experience as a Black student athlete at UCLA. Anthony graduated from an urban high school in Virginia. Although a member of the National Honor Society, her high school counselor failed to submit her application to UCLA even when Anthony told him she had a full scholarship for gymnastics. Neither of her parents attended college, so navigating college applications and financial aid packages for athletes as well as adjusting to life at a university on the other side of the United States was challenging in many ways. She wrote of the misunderstanding about money for books, believing her full scholarship included a voucher for textbooks. Initially, she checked books out of the library, borrowed books from classmates, or simply managed without them. She was overcome with homesickness, desperately missing her mother but not the domestic violence perpetuated by her father or the drive-by shootings and drug culture of her neighborhood.

Very few students of color attended UCLA when she arrived on campus in 1986, and Anthony was the only Black gymnast on her team. She was misunderstood by other Black students who called her “Whitewashed” (p. 169) because she spent so much time
with her gymnastics teammates. She noticed the new cars her classmates drove and their refrigerators, stereos, and other dorm room amenities. She had arrived with only two pieces of luggage. She felt like she did not fit in. Anthony described her adjustment to college as “slow and miserable” (p. 162). Her loneliness, shyness, self-isolation, and feelings of inferiority became strong incentives to give up and go home her first semester. However, it was the encouragement of one of her coaches, the love and friendship of her teammates, a random $100 gift from another student for textbooks, interaction with and encouragement from UCLA alumni athletes, and the realization that a college degree was her opportunity to break out of the cycle of her family’s poverty that helped her see the benefits of staying no matter how difficult the campus environment.

Today, decades after Anthony’s (2009) college experience, students of color face some of the same campus environmental challenges she did. Students of color still encounter racism, discrimination, and prejudice. The following paragraphs examine the literature on campus racial climate in higher education.

The most prominent campus environmental challenge students of color encounter is racism. Institutions of higher education excluded African American students for 3 centuries prior to 1865; even when they were admitted to colleges and universities after the Civil War, admission was restricted to institutions established for African Americans based on the “separate but equal” doctrine. Almost 100 years later, when mandated by the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, colleges and universities began admitting African Americans and other students of color. However, students of color, and African American students in particular, experienced the physical, emotional, and cognitive effects of racism on campuses expressed in student protests, racial hostility,
and violence. Although admission was finally granted to students of color, they were consistently excluded from campus life in residence halls, cafeterias, athletic teams, and campus theater productions. Students of color were treated as second-class citizens and endured shunning and isolation (Thelin, 2011). Racial conflict increased on college campuses in the 1960s and 1970s, and researchers began to focus their studies on campus racial climate. This research provided a baseline for further study and a means for evaluating campus racial climate over the course of several decades (Hurtado, 1992).

**Types of Racism**

There are three types of racism identified by researchers: institutional, cultural, and individual (Museus & Park; 2015; Sue, 2010). *Institutional racism* refers to university policies and practices that result in disadvantages for minoritized racial/ethnic groups within the higher education system. Examples include racial isolation, racial silencing, and pressure to segregate from majority culture students or to assimilate to the dominant culture of the institution.

*Cultural racism* is expressed when the majority culture favors its values, beliefs, and traditions above all others, marginalizing other races/ethnicities because of their values, beliefs, and traditions (Museus & Park, 2015). Cultural racism is often expressed as beliefs in racialized myths. For instance, those who espouse the *perpetual foreigner myth* believe that despite family members being U.S. citizens (usually for 3 or 4 generations), persons of color are still foreigners and are not welcome in the United States (Chun, 1980; Suzuki, 2002). The *model minority myth* is frequently ascribed to Asian Americans. Those who believe this myth think Asian Americans no longer experience discrimination because they have assimilated into the dominant culture by
increasing family income above the average median income of White families, completing undergraduate degrees at higher rates than White students, and securing jobs in the professional ranks, particularly in science and technology (Suzuki, 2002).

However, a more careful analysis of the data indicates that although Asian Americans with a Japanese, Chinese, or Korean heritage typically graduate at higher percentage rates than White students, there are many other Asian Americans (e.g., Hmong, Cambodian, Loatian) whose graduation rates are lower than White, Latinx, and African American students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). This myth leads to the erroneous assumption that Asian American students are always academically successful (Museus & Kiang, 2009) and do not require the same academic or personal support provided for their peers (Suzuki, 2002).

A contrasting false belief is the *inferior minority myth*, which assumes persons belonging to certain races or ethnicities possess deficiencies, are incapable of economic progress, and will not succeed in higher education (Museus & Park, 2015). The inferior minority myth and the perpetual foreigner myth can be reinforced by the *perfidious foreigner stereotype*, which perpetuates beliefs that foreigners are deceitful, treacherous, and cannot be trusted (Suzuki, 2002).

In addition to institutional racism and cultural racism, the third form identified by researchers is *individual racism*. This type of racism occurs when a person from the dominant culture not only holds negative stereotypes about a particular race or ethnic group, but also mistreats and subordinates others because of their race/ethnicity. Examples of individual racism include racial hostility and bullying, verbal insults, and racial profiling (Museus & Park, 2015; Sue, 2010).
Explicit and Implicit Racism

*Racism* refers to a belief that a particular race or ethnic group is superior to all other races/ethnicities because of the distinctive characteristics or qualities that particular group of people possess. These beliefs of superiority are applied to individual and group characteristics such as intelligence, skills and abilities, character, morals, skin color, culture, language, and religion, and become the basis for the belief that the supposed superior race has the right to dominate all other races/ethnicities (Chun, 1980; Sue, 2010; Suzuki, 2002). Racist beliefs are expressed in actions of *discrimination*, overt behavior that is negative, unfair, and harmful to persons of another race/ethnicity (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Suzuki, 2002). The racism students of color experience on college and university campuses can be explicit and implicit. Expressions of racism can be explicit, evident in observable overt behaviors. Racism can also be implicit. These racial expressions are implied, inferred, subtle, or unstated (Museus & Park, 2015; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007).

Overt racial hostility can be expressed in racial slurs and insults, bullying, and racial profiling by fellow students as well as faculty and other campus personnel. These explicit types of harassment can intensify to physical violence and escalate to hate crimes, including beatings and murder (Museus & Park, 2015). The U.S. public has become more aware of racism in general and in higher education, and explicit expressions of racism have become less socially acceptable. Legislation and academic policy have more successfully addressed explicit racism, making it illegal or unacceptable and subject to consequences (Hurtado, 1992).
Explicit racism expressed in acts of discrimination (e.g., racial violence, physical assaults, hate crimes, racial epithets) usually are driven by racial *prejudice* or *bias*. These two terms can be used interchangeably and refer to unsubstantiated negative attitudes toward persons of other races/ethnicities typically based on stereotypes associated with specific races or ethnicities (Case, 2007; Donovan, 2017; Hogan & Mallott, 2005). Laws, institutional policy, and current social and political trends have curbed most overt and explicit racism but have not significantly influenced the prejudice that fuels racism. Contemporary expressions of racism are indirect, disguised, obscure, or unspoken (Sue, 2010). Implicit expressions of racism are less obvious to those in the dominant culture, including most leaders and policy makers in higher education (Combs et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2021). These more subtle, yet harmful, forms of racism toward students of color increasingly persist on college campuses (Johnson et al., 2021; Lilly et al., 2018; Museus & Park, 2015).

Implicit expressions of racism by the dominant culture are referred to as *microaggressions* (Sue 2010). Sue, Capodilupo et al. (2007) described microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). Microaggressions can be unintentional because those who commit microaggressions often perceive their statements and behaviors in a positive, complimentary manner and are unaware their declarations, gestures, and decisions are actually denigrating or dismissive messages to persons of color (Sue, 2010; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007). To counter the belief that
microaggressions are minor, trivial, and harmless, Sue (2010) summarized the work of several authors:

Microaggressions are constant and continuing experiences of marginalized groups in our society; they assail the self-esteem of recipients, produce anger and frustration, deplete psychic energy, lower feelings of subjective well-being and worthiness, produce physical health problems, shorten life expectancy, and deny minority populations equal access and opportunity in education, employment, and health care. (p. 6)

This statement describes the repercussions of microaggressions in the lives of persons of color. The findings of recent research focused on college students of color align with Sue’s statement. Although most studies on campus racial climate and microaggressions are single-race studies focused on students of only one particular self-identified race/ethnicity (e.g., Clark & Mitchell, 2018; Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2020; Leath & Chavous, 2018; Oxendine et al., 2020), there are commonalities in the findings of studies on microaggressions against African American, Asian American, Latinx, and multi-ethnic students.

These studies indicated microaggressions in the form of racial slurs, insults, jokes, and profiling, frequently were associated with racial stereotypes. Verbal and non-verbal messages indicated students of color were not welcome on their campuses, or not welcome in specific areas of their campuses (e.g., near fraternities and sororities, some common social areas). Students of color also consistently reported negative messages about their intelligence, language ability, SES, and choice of clothing and music (Clark & Mitchell, 2018; Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2020; Franklin, 2019;
Johnson et al., 2021; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017; Museus et al., 2016; Museus & Park, 2015). Microaggressions related to the model minority myth were directed primarily toward Asian Americans (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Museus & Park, 2015), but all students of color reported microaggressions associated with the perpetual foreigner myth and the inferior minority myth (e.g., Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2020; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017; Museus & Park, 2015).

Many of the studies of microaggressions have been qualitative studies. These studies have indicated similar findings regarding the effects of microaggressions on students’ reported physiological, psychological, and emotional health. Nearly all students of color on dominantly White campuses in these studies reported feeling unwelcome and often excluded (Harwood et al., 2015; Museus & Park, 2015; Sanchez, 2019). Nineteen Latinx participants enrolled at a large public emerging Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) provided data through semi-structured interviews in focus groups. These students reported the most common form of racism they experienced was microaggressions. Some Latinx students were stereotyped simply because of their ethnicity or skin color and were accused of stealing, cheating, racism against other students, and not valuing their education. Faculty members suggested some Latinx students change their career goals, using disparaging remarks to express their beliefs about students’ lack of abilities. As a result of these microaggressions, students reported feelings of self-doubt, alienation, increased anxiety, and threats to their safety (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2020). African American (Moragne-Patterson & Barnette, 2017), Asian American (Museus & Park, 2015), and Latinx (Sanchez, 2019; Storlie et al., 2014) students also reported feelings of
self-doubt about their intelligence and academic capabilities, along with loneliness, rejection, and a sense of invisibility.

Each racial/ethnic group of students reported some unique responses to microaggressions. African American students mentioned feelings of shame and resentment, as well as reluctance to participate in class discussions because of other students’ expectations and preconceptions about their intelligence and life experience (Clark & Mitchell, 2018; Franklin, 2019; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017). Both African American (Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017) and Asian American (Museus & Park, 2015) students reported a perceived lack of institutional support when they reported microaggressions to campus authorities. Asian American students also talked about their lack of voice. Some students were silenced in a class discussion for bringing attention to racism or discrimination. Other students were ignored or even criticized for calling attention to the lack of ethnic representation in course curricula and campus personnel (Museus & Park, 2015). One unexpected finding from Cuellar and Johnson-Ahorlu’s (2020) study regarding Latinx students was the positive response to interaction with their faculty. Although some students reported experiencing microaggressions from faculty, others reported positive, encouraging, inspiring, even empowering interactions with faculty. These faculty members called students by name, consistently offered academic support, recognized and addressed students’ personal needs (specifically for students who also were mothers), encouraged students to get involved in leadership opportunities, and facilitated students’ sense of belonging on campus.

Two larger studies are worth noting. Moragne-Patterson and Barnett (2017) chose four qualitative studies for their interpretive meta-synthesis study that focused on the
microaggressions experiences by African American students. A total of 108 African American participants in these four studies were enrolled in 11 large public or private 4-year Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Coping with the frequency of verbal and physical microaggressions particularly in classroom spaces seemed to result in psychological fatigue for African American students. They had to expend additional energy to defend their right to study at their institution and to counter the consistent negative messages from faculty and students. Johnson et al. (2021) used a mixed-methods approach. These researchers collected 1,301 digital diary entries from 684 participants over the course of an entire academic year at the University of Mississippi, then analyzed the data for themes related to racism expressed in specific events (e.g., the cheerleader “slave auction” fundraiser) the history of the institution (created for White students; served and cared for by African American employees), and racism related to buildings and monuments on campus. Students were asked to provide demographic information and were then invited to submit detailed information anonymously about racial incidents on their campus. Students were asked to include their perspective and their feelings about the incident. These data from a variety of undergraduate students of color provided a comprehensive picture of the campus racial climate on this campus in 2014–2015. Based on their data, these authors stated that “no space, either on campus or off campus, was free of reports of incivility” (p. 4).

As stated previously, most studies on racism focus on one particular race/ethnicity. However, one qualitative study narrowed the participants to 34 multiracial students. The unique findings of Museus et al. (2016) provided examples of compounded racism experienced by students who identify as multiracial. These multiracial students
experienced the microaggressions based on stereotypes of each of their racial identities that were intensified by the unique microaggressions based on stereotypes of multiracial individuals. Several themes were discovered from the data, including (a) being marginalized or excluded because of their racial identities; (b) other campus individuals challenging or invalidating their racial authenticity; (c) having other individuals impose racial identities on these students; (d) being objectified, dehumanized, and exoticized because of their multiracial physical features; and (e) stereotyped as sexually promiscuous. Students were frequently asked “What are you?” by students trying to determine how they would categorize that multiethnic student. One student reported that when he was with his White family and friends, he was considered Korean, and when he was with his Korean family and friends, they considered him to be White. This student was marginalized and sometimes excluded from each racial heritage and culture. Some students excused their racial jokes and slights by adding a phrase like “but you’re not actually Chinese, so we don’t feel like we’re actually offending you” (p. 689). One participant stated that some believe a person who is of mixed racial heritage is also “mixed up in the head” (p. 692), referring to inferior intelligence or psychological instability.

Findings from quantitative studies align with these qualitative studies. For example, Franklin (2019) used a structural equation model (SEM) to compare and contrast the fatigue experienced by African American and Mexican American students. Based on data collected from 399 participants, he found microaggressions negatively affected African American students psychologically and influenced their behaviors on campuses. Mexican American/Latinx students also experienced stress psychologically
and behaviorally but were influenced to a greater degree physiologically. These findings suggested that microaggressions influence races/ethnicities differently, and the needs of students must be considered when developing programs and policies to mitigate the effects of microaggressions. Cress and Ikeda (2003) conducted a longitudinal study using Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) data from the Higher Education Research Institute at University of California Los Angeles. These researchers used linear stepwise regression to analyze perceptions of campus racial climate at the institutional level and the individual level. From the 508 participants, they found Asian American students are “more likely than all other students combined to experience feelings of depression as well as to perceive negative campus climates” (p. 87), and they also are less likely to reach out for help from campus mental health resources. These two findings contradict the model minority myth and provide examples of the mental health challenges faced by Asian American students in higher education.

In sum, research on microaggressions has collectively indicated there are very few, if any, safe places for students of color to avoid the effects of implicit racism. Microaggressions occur in various geographic locations, as well as both physical and psychological spaces, and influence practically every dimension of the lives of students of color (Harwood et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2021; Sue, 2010). Students of color experienced intentional and unintentional microaggressions from a variety of individuals, including fellow students, faculty, staff, and administrators, as well as individuals from the community surrounding their institution (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2020; Johnson et al., 2021; Sue, 2010). Microaggressions are usually subtle, covert, and implied. Because microaggressions do not involve explicit physical violence, they often are
considered by White persons to be benign or harmless (Sue, 2010; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007). However, students of color experience them as harmful because of the shame, frustration, resentment, anger, and self-doubt they cause that frequently resulted in self-isolation, anxiety, and depression. Research has consistently indicated microaggressions negatively influence mental health and are associated with mental trauma, emotional stress, increased anxiety, hopelessness, and depression (Evans & Moore, 2015). Physical health manifestations of coping with microaggressions included headaches, increased blood pressure, a weakened immune system, sleep disturbances, and exhaustion (Franklin, 2019; Johnson et al., 2021; Sue, 2010).

Students of color also reported having to address negative messages, such as being spoken of as “less than” or intellectually inferior (Franklin, 2019; Johnson et al., 2021; Lilly et al., 2018; Nadal et al., 2015). As a result, microaggressions can influence student behaviors: impatience, increased drug and alcohol use, and skipping class when discussions on racism and social justice are scheduled. Some students are reluctant to participate in class discussion because of other students’ expectations based on preconceptions of the intelligence and academic ability of students of color. Some African American students report choosing to dress differently, avoiding associating with other African American students when in the company of White students, and acting more like White students to assimilate into the greater campus culture (Clark & Mitchell, 2018; Franklin, 2019). Microaggressions, implicit and subtle as they are, are dangerous for students of color because they negatively influence physiological and psychological health (Combs et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2021; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017; Museus & Park, 2015). Additionally, and important to note for this study, the time and
energy required to process microaggressions and respond to them diminishes the bandwidth of students of color to focus on learning and academic progress, inhibiting thriving and academic success (Franklin, 2019; Johnson et al., 2021).

Student Success

The definitions of student success are crucial to the exploration of the experiences of students of color who are able to thrive at dominantly White institutions. The most basic definition of college student success is an earned degree. Often coupled with access, this definition of student success places the focus on expanding access to higher education and increasing both the number of students enrolled and their persistence to graduation (Kinzie, 2020). Other practitioners and researchers in higher education expanded the definition of student success and created models for measuring student success. The following paragraphs present several of the most prominent sociological and psychological student success models based on extensive empirical data.

Sociological Models of Student Success

As higher education expanded and access increased in the 1970s, concerns about retaining students led to research on the complex factors of student persistence. Theories emerged from several academic disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and economics (Kinzie, 2020). Tinto’s (1975) review of the early student departure literature and his sociological research were quite influential in identifying factors that influence students to stay in college or to leave. Tinto’s (1975, 1993) interactionalist theory of retention focused on students’ interactions on campus and their academic and social integration as the basis for student-institutional fit and subsequent persistence.
Tinto (1975) posited that as students’ levels of academic and social integration increase, their commitment to the institution also increases, strengthening their goal of graduating. He defined academic integration as adapting to the intellectual norms of the institution, including earning good grades and interacting with professors. Social integration referred to students’ adaptation to the relational norms of the institution, including fitting into the social environment. Tinto’s model of institutional departure includes several factors that influence a student’s decision to stay or leave an institution: pre-entry attributes such as family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling; goals and commitments expressed by intentions, institutional commitments, and external commitments; and institutional experiences such as academic performance, interactions with faculty and staff, involvement in extracurricular activities, and interactions with peer groups. These factors, some of which the student has no control over, then influence academic and social integration. Leaving college or staying was primarily the responsibility of the student, and the language used to describe this theory was usually deficit-oriented. According to Mayhew et al. (2016), Tinto’s work on student departure has been cited frequently in subsequent literature and maintains a prominent influence in retention models, despite being critiqued by several scholars regarding the model’s cultural insensitivity and assuming the individual student is more responsible for retention than the institution.

It is worth noting that as Tinto continued research on student departure, his findings informed revisions to his theory. In a more recent report, Tinto and Pusser (2006) stated that research findings related to what influences students to leave college is not the mirror image of what causes students to stay in college. This statement supports
the importance of this study on thriving students of color; focusing on what influences their thriving rather than on what influences them to leave college is likely to reveal a different story. Tinto and Pusser continued to define student success as the completion of a degree; however, they acknowledged the important role the institution plays in increasing degree completion, particularly for low-income students. They listed five institutional conditions that promote degree completion: (a) the commitment of the institution to degree completion; (b) high expectations for student success; (c) academic, social, and financial support for all students; (d) frequent performance feedback for students as well as faculty and staff; and (e) various types of opportunities for student involvement.

Braxton et al. (2004) revised Tinto’s (1975, 1993) interactionalist theory of student departure to include six additional factors identified in their research that influence social integration: “commitment of the institution to student welfare, institutional integrity…communal potential…proactive social adjustment…psychosocial adjustment…and ability to pay” (p. 22). Braxton et al. described an institution’s commitment to the welfare of its students as the concern and care the institution expresses and actions it takes to facilitate students’ growth and development. This commitment is founded on the value the institution conveys for students as individuals, as well as for specific groups of students. An institution treats students equally and with respect. The institution’s commitment to student welfare is manifested when students are invited to contribute to the creation of institutional policies and rules and when those policies and rules are communicated clearly and administered equitably.
Institutional integrity refers to the degree to which an institution is consistent with its mission. Institutional integrity becomes tangible when all institutional agents (administration, faculty, and staff) act in accordance with the stated mission and goals of the institution. Students often measure institutional integrity by comparing what they observe and experience after arriving on campus with the implicit promises made to them as prospective students based on the institution’s website and marketing. For example, students would determine to what extent the photographs of students published by the institution on its website or in printed material accurately reflect the racial diversity on the campus. Students might also consider how welcomed and included they feel in the campus community compared to what is portrayed in admissions publications (Braxton et al., 2004).

Communal potential also influences social integration and refers to what students believe about how likely it is they will be able to find and fit into a subgroup on their campus that shares their values, culture, life experiences, and beliefs. Proactive social adjustment refers to students anticipating the relational norms on their campus and attempting to make their behavior congruent with those norms to fit into the campus community. Psychosocial engagement addresses the amount of time and energy a student invests into developing relationships, making new friends, and getting involved in campus social activities. The final influence on social integration is ability to pay. As students consider what it costs financially to go to college and be involved in various social groups on their campus, their ability to pay for their education and social involvement either increases or decreases their social integration (Braxton et al., 2004).
Braxton et al.’s (2004) inclusion of ability to pay in their social integration research of student retention was based on the research of Cabrera et al. (1992), who posited that research on financial aid packages needed to be connected to student persistence, motivation, and social integration. Cabrera et al. found undergraduate students who received financial aid were more likely to integrate socially within their institution which, in turn, influenced retention. Cabrera et al. added that students who received financial aid had more freedom to invest in campus relationships because they did not need to use their time to work to finance their education, and they may have been more at ease integrating socially without the additional stress associated with determining how they would pay for college.

With the exception of proactive social adjustment, Braxton et al.’s (2004) social integration concepts seem to be relevant for retaining students of color at dominantly White institutions. Observing and experiencing their institution’s integrity and commitment to their well-being could influence the retention of students of color, and the ability to pay could enhance psychosocial engagement. However, proactive social adjustment could conflict with communal potential in situations when students of color would minimize their beliefs, values, culture, and ethnic identity to fit in with other groups of students on their campus.

**Psychological Models of Student Success**

In addition to sociological models for student success, research has been conducted to explore psychological factors related to retention and student success. Psychological theories of student persistence added to the descriptions of student success by incorporating factors such as motivation, self-efficacy, and attribution. These factors
were malleable in contrast to some of the sociological factors included in Tinto’s (1975) work (e.g., family SES and prior educational experience). Studies by Bandura (1982), Weiner (1985), and Ethington (1990) contributed to the psychological model of student retention created by Bean and Eaton (2000).

Bandura (1982) focused on self-efficacy, which is an individual’s “belief in their ability to succeed” (Kinzie, 2020, p. 6). When applied in the context of college, students with a strong sense of self-efficacy are more likely to persist in college because they believe they have the ability to succeed. Weiner (1985) analyzed the findings from 10 studies on attributions in educational settings, with participants ranging from first-grade students to college students, as well as two studies on teachers. Weiner found participants attributed success or failure most often to their ability and effort. Further analysis of other studies and Weiner’s continued work on attribution theory indicated when college students attribute their success to effort rather than ability, they also can “attribute their failures to a lack of effort rather than to a lack of ability” (Kinzie, 2020, p. 6). For students of color whose academic abilities are frequently labeled as sub-par (Chun, 1980; Sue, 2010; Suzuki, 2002), Weiner’s attribution theory can help them focus on their effort with the expectancy of improved academic outcomes.

Ethington’s (1990) research on student persistence considered factors such as SES, family encouragement to go to college, and humanitarian/social goals that reflected students’ responses to the importance of statements such as “having friends with different backgrounds and interests from mine,” and “helping others in difficulty” (p. 285). Ethington also included students’ perceived value of going to college as a factor in her study and found students’ goals for going to college (e.g., humanitarian, political,
personal recognition, or business/financial success) were related to the value they ascribed to going to college and influenced their persistence. Also worth noting is her finding that lower SES had a direct negative effect on persistence.

Building on the research of Bandura (1982), Weiner (1985), and other models of student retention, Bean and Eaton (2000) developed their psychological model of college student retention. They stated that psychological models are designed to explain human behaviors, with the presuppositions that (a) those behaviors are choices, and (b) humans are motivated to select choices based on whether the choice will lead toward a specific behavior or away from it. Bean and Eaton constructed their model on malleable student behaviors and characteristics; they considered different types of institutions and built on previous research on self-efficacy, attribution, coping strategies, motivation, and the relationship between attitudes and behaviors. Bean and Eaton posited that the characteristics students bring to the institution (e.g., motivation, coping strategies, beliefs about themselves, past behaviors, and initial self-efficacy) influence how students interact with the college environment and determine how they cope and adapt to their new environment. As students evaluate the outcomes of choices they make in college, they then choose behaviors that lead to staying in college or leaving college. Students whose behaviors lead to academic and social integration, a sense of belonging on their campus, and a commitment to the institution are more likely to persist. This model places responsibility on the student for deciding, based on their behavior choices, if they want to stay or leave. Bean and Eaton acknowledged that their model is complex. They also stated that because students from different cultures perceive the world differently based on their values and past experiences, this model may need to be adapted to examine how
these students are motivated to persist in college and what coping strategies they employ when they address the stresses of higher education.

Astin’s (1984, 1993) extensive research on student involvement in higher education has contributed significantly to the body of knowledge on student development and satisfaction, which informs models of student success. He described student involvement as the “quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience” (1984, p. 528) with the purpose of increasing student learning and development through increased involvement. His research also included students of color and the importance of diversity on campus. Astin (1993) found all students benefit when their institution creates a diverse multicultural environment.

When students were directly involved in diverse activities, such as taking a course focusing on Third World issues or specific ethnicities, students reported “gains in cognitive and affective development (especially increased cultural awareness), with increased satisfaction in most areas of the college experience, and with increased commitment to promoting racial understanding” (Astin, 1993, p. 431). Astin further stated, “The weight of the empirical evidence shows that the actual effects on student development of emphasizing diversity and of student participation in diversity activities are overwhelmingly positive” (p. 431). Astin’s positive findings related to a racially diverse learning environment should be noted as a benefit for admitting and retaining students of color in higher education.
Summary

Definitions of student success continue to evolve based on changes in higher education. Defined initially as an earned degree, student success definitions currently include a multitude of factors and conditions, including persistence, motivation, accomplishing educational goals, academic achievement, student involvement in academic and social activities, student satisfaction with the institution, and even student performance after college (Kenzie, 2020). Detailed models of student success are often challenging to measure accurately.

Although each of the student success theories and retention models described herein was based on extensive research and contributes to the body of knowledge for student success, no one model seems to be complete enough to address student success for all students in higher education. Tinto’s (1975) sociological model was based on unchangeable pre-entry student characteristics that did not address the unique barriers to success faced by students of color. Braxton et al.’s (2004) revision of Tinto included important factors, such as institutional integrity, commitment to student welfare, and ability to pay. However, there seemed to be tension when applying both communal potential and proactive social adjustment to students of color. The psychological models of student success added malleable psychological factors related to student success and retention. However, models such as Bean and Eaton’s (2000) were very complex and may be difficult for the practitioner in higher education to use as a measurement for student success. Astin’s (1984, 1993) theory of student involvement is both simple and complex. This theory indicates that when student involvement increases, student retention also increases. Astin included students of color in his research, but there is still more to
discover about students of color and the barriers to their involvement on campus because many students of color live and work off campus. Therefore, in this study, I use Schreiner’s (2010a) holistic student success model of thriving to describe success for students of color, along with Harper’s (2012a) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework, as the conceptual framework of this study. Both Schreiner and Harper approach research from a strengths-based perspective, which is significant compared to a body of literature on students of color that is more often approached from a deficit-oriented perspective.

**Conceptual Framework**

Schreiner’s (2013) construct of thriving and Harper’s (2012a) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework provide the conceptual framework for this study on thriving students of color at dominantly White faith-based institutions. Integrating asset-based language, both the thriving framework and the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework approach research from a positive perspective.

**Thriving**

The current measures for student success reported in the literature include GPA, persistence to the next year of college, and degree completion (Kuh et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2008; Schreiner, 2013). Concluding that these measures do not indicate a holistic assessment of student success, Schreiner (2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2013, 2014) developed the concept of thriving to expand the basic measures of student success. Schreiner described thriving college students as those who are completely engaged in the college experience with their intellect, in their relationships, and with their emotions. They take ownership of their academic responsibilities and persevere through difficulties (Schreiner, 2010a). They have a positive perspective on life and their future, develop
healthy relationships, and exhibit a desire to work with and help others who are different than themselves (Schreiner, 2010b). Schreiner (2010a) based thriving on the positive psychology concept of flourishing, a term used to describe human well-being (Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Seligman, 2011).

**Positive Psychology, Flourishing, and Well-Being**

In the forward to *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived* (Keyes & Haidt, 2003), Seligman described positive psychology as “a tectonic upheaval in psychology” (p. 3) because it approaches psychology and the human condition with a focus on measuring and nurturing well-being rather than the traditional psychological approach of improving human existence by identifying and treating mental illness.

Positive psychology uses a prevention model instead of a mental illness treatment model by fostering human strengths and virtues, particularly in young people, and developing skills and perspectives that facilitate flourishing and increase the capacity of resilience when an individual is faced with difficulty, disappointment, and suffering. Positive psychology studies positive human emotions such as hope and satisfaction; positive human traits, virtues, strengths, and abilities; and positive institutions including healthy families, education that values open dialogue and inquiry, and democratic forms of government (Keyes & Haidt, 2003).

Flourishing refers not only to the absence of mental illness, but, more specifically, flourishing is also defined as “emotional vitality” and “functioning positively in the private and social realms of [life]” (Keyes & Haidt, 2003, p. 6). Flourishing distinguishes between merely existing and living life fully. The foundation for flourishing includes four concepts. The first is developing skills and perspectives to face the challenges of life and
intentionally increasing resilience when life is difficult. The second concept focuses on relationships. Relating to other individuals and engaging in their lives can produce a life that is more meaningful and lived in community. By choosing to be involved in activities with others, the individual is linked to even larger endeavors for the common good. Although sometimes very pleasurable and satisfying, this joint effort can also be challenging and difficult. Striving together to achieve a shared goal can promote well-being for the larger group. Taking time to be creative and productive is the third concept in flourishing. A positive orientation toward one’s work and other daily activities such as eating, hobbies, and leisure can lead to a sense of satisfaction and well-being even in the normal, everyday aspects of life. Finally, a willingness to look beyond one’s life and activities and engage in helping others also facilitates flourishing. Such engagement with others could involve volunteering in the community, which can benefit those receiving the service as well as those providing the service and affords opportunity for developing the virtue of compassion (Keys & Haidt, 2003).

Seligman (2011) provided a measure for flourishing through the five elements of the theory of well-being. Each element has three properties. First, the element contributes to the well-being of an individual or group of individuals. Second, many individuals pursue the element “for its own sake” (p. 16) rather than as a steppingstone to attain the other elements. Third, each element is exclusive of the other four and has a unique definition and means of measurement. The five elements of well-being are: (a) positive emotion, (b) engagement, (c) meaning, (d) accomplishment, and (e) positive relationship.

Positive emotion, a “cornerstone of well-being theory” (Seligman, 2001, p. 16), is measured subjectively by an individual’s happiness and satisfaction with life, giving
specific consideration to the concepts of personal comfort, pleasure, and related emotions identified in the moment of experience. Engagement is also measured subjectively through questions that pertain to the individual’s sole focus on a particular task or experience. In contrast to positive emotion, which is measured in the present, engagement is measured retrospectively by asking questions such as “Were you totally captivated by this task or event?” Seligman (2001) describes meaning as “belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self” (p. 17). Although meaning has a subjective measuring component, the subjective measurement must align with the objective measures of historical context and logic. One example of measuring meaning could be an individual who, amid a personal life challenge and despair, determines life has little meaning (subjective evaluation). However, when personal life is evaluated in a historical context or examined logically (objective evaluation), the individual realizes there have been several personal experiences and life events that contributed not only to personal meaning, but also enhanced meaning in the lives of others. The fourth element of well-being is accomplishment or achievement—both momentary accomplishment (mastering a new skill such as riding a bicycle) and accomplishment over the course of a lifetime (success in a particular aspect of life such as personal relationships, career, or creative expression). Positive relationship is the final element of well-being. It refers to helping others. Seligman (2011) stated, “We scientists have found that doing a kindness produces the single most reliable momentary increase in well-being of any exercise we have tested” (p. 20). Positive relationship improves an individual’s well-being and the well-being of the person benefiting from the act of kindness. He stated, “Find one wholly
unexpected kind thing to do tomorrow and just do it. Notice what happens to your mood” (p. 21).

**The Influence of a Psychological Model of Student Retention**

In addition to flourishing and well-being, the construct of thriving was influenced by a psychological model of student retention developed by Bean and Eaton (2000). This psychological approach to student retention and departure contrasted with the influential work of Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975, 1988, 1993), both of whom approached student departure from a sociological perspective. Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975, 1988, 1993) based their models on Durkheim’s model of the study of suicide and focused primarily on student departure based on types of institutions (2-year, 4-year, public, private) and student characteristics such as sex, race, family background, academic achievement, and standardized test scores. Findings from studies of student attrition or departure influenced their theories of student retention. This seems to reflect a deficit-based approach rather than an asset-based approach. Tinto’s work evolved over the course of several decades, but most of the terminology used in his *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (1993) referred more frequently to factors related to why students leave college rather than what influences students to stay in college. He used language on student retention more consistently in his fifth chapter when he outlined effective principles for retention. Tinto placed responsibility for student departure on both the institution and the individual student in his theory of individual departure from institutions in higher education. In his model of student institutional departure, Tinto posited that integration into both the social and intellectual communities of the institution were essential for student persistence. Although Tinto’s (1975, 1988, 1993) model has
been consistently cited in student retention literature, his work has often been critiqued for being culturally insensitive to students of color and for placing more responsibility for retention on the student than on the institution (Mayhew et al., 2016).

Instead of a sociological perspective of student departure that focused on institutional types and student characteristics, Bean and Eaton (2000) incorporated four psychological theories into their model of student retention: “attitude-behavior theory, coping behavioral (approach/avoidance) theory, self-efficacy theory, and attribution (locus of control) theory” (p. 50). Their intent was to synthesize these four theories into a model that could further explain student retention by identifying why specific factors of student retention affect other factors. Bean and Eaton stated that, in general, psychological models endeavor to explain human behaviors, and a specific behavior is an individual’s choice. By integrating the four psychological theories, Bean and Eaton developed their model of student retention to explain how a student’s past behaviors, beliefs, coping strategies, skills and abilities, self-efficacy, motivation, and personal characteristics interact with the institutional environment and lead to the behavior of persistence. Bean and Eaton summarized their complex model by stating:

Students enter college with a complex array of personal characteristics. As they interact within the institutional environment several psychological processes take place that, for the successful student, result in positive self-efficacy, reduced stress, increased efficacy, and internal locus of control. Each of these processes increases a student’s scholarly motivation. These internal processes are reciprocal and iterative with continuous feedback and adjustment…[leading] to academic
and social integration, institutional fit and loyalty, intent to persist, and to the behavior in question, persistence itself. (p. 58)

The components of Bean and Eaton’s psychological model of student retention focused on student choices and behaviors rather than personal characteristics that could not be changed, thereby allowing for the creation of interventions and adaptations designed to help students evaluate and address their choices and behaviors. Their model also recognized the importance of an institution taking responsibility to facilitate programs and strategies for students to improve retention and student success.

**The Five Components of Thriving**

The concepts of flourishing and well-being from the field of positive psychology (Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Seligman, 2011), along with Bean and Eaton’s (2000) psychological model of student retention, influenced Schreiner’s (2010a) holistic approach to student success known as thriving. Thriving is defined as “being fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally, experiencing a sense of psychological well-being that leads not only to persistence to graduation, but also to being able to contribute meaningfully to society” (Schreiner, 2020, p. 20). The construct of thriving encompasses three domains of student well-being: academic thriving, psychological thriving, and interpersonal thriving. The domains are measured through five malleable components: “(1) engaged learning, (2) academic determination, (3) positive perspective, (4) diverse citizenship, and (5) social connectedness” (Schreiner, 2010a, p. 4). Each of these components is described.

**Engaged Learning.** One of the two components of academic thriving, engaged learning, is active, intentional, intellectual and psychological. Engaged learners are
mindful of what they are learning so they can apply it to other areas of life (Schreiner & Louis, 2011; Derrico et al., 2015). Engaged learning is evident when students are actively and purposefully involved in the learning process. Engaged learners look for meaning in what they are learning and connect new concepts with what they already know. They process what they are learning through discussions with faculty, classmates, and friends, as well as through personal reflection. Engaged learners are willing to go beyond the minimum course expectations and seek out new learning opportunities (Schreiner 2010a; 2020). Students who are engaged academically ask thoughtful questions and explore new ideas outside the classroom (Schreiner, 2010b). They are not satisfied with the minimalist approach of surface learners; they develop into deep learners and critical thinkers (Bain, 2004, 2012; Tagg, 2004). Schreiner (2010b) emphasized that engaged learning involves both behavioral engagement and psychological engagement—actions and thinking.

**Academic Determination.** In a similar manner to the engaged learning scale, the second component of academic thriving, academic determination, involves both behaviors and attitudes. Academic determination also involves motivation, hope, and persistence. Students who are academically determined learn to master their environment and gain confidence in the midst of academic challenges. They monitor, evaluate, and adapt their learning behaviors and complete their academic responsibilities (Derrico et al., 2015). Academic determination refers to a student’s sustained effort and the organization and management strategies used to maximize personal time and effort. Students exhibit academic determination when they create and pursue meaningful academic goals, making choices that reflect their academic values as expressed in their desire to address both their academic demands and personal needs. When they face the
challenges of learning, they seek out the academic resources and support available on their campuses and ask for help. This component of thriving requires that students invest energy and effort in the learning process and realize hard work is often required to learn well and accomplish their academic goals. Self-regulated learning is defined as taking responsibility for learning, especially when it is difficult or frustrating, and developing the skills and strategies necessary for a variety of assignments and learning situations. Self-regulated learning is also a quality that academically determined students have developed. Additionally, students who demonstrate academic determination take control of their learning by attending to the demands of college life and by managing their time effectively (Schreiner 2010a, 2010b). The final element of academic determination is the ability to identify and apply one’s strengths to the learning process, particularly when one faces challenges. Incorporating their strengths into the sustained effort required for learning helps students reach their academic goals (Schreiner, 2020).

**Positive Perspective.** Schreiner (2010a, 2013) referred to the component of positive perspective as the foundation of thriving and described it as “the primary psychological lens through which students view the world” (Schreiner, 2020, p. 22). Students with a positive perspective are optimistic about themselves, the world in which they live, and their future in that world. However, their positive perspective is also realistic, enabling students to identify challenges and develop proactive coping strategies to address the difficult realities they encounter. This perspective is present-oriented as well as future-oriented; students are capable of examining a specific event or challenge from multiple perspectives and placing it in a context that minimizes overreacting. What may have been overwhelming in the moment can become more manageable when
considered in the broader context of life. Students with positive perspective can reframe difficulty and disappointment into an opportunity for learning and personal growth. Students operating from a positive perspective do not easily give up. Persevering through challenges in college helps students develop problem solving and critical thinking skills (Schreiner 2010a, 2020).

**Social Connectedness.** The importance of social relationships is a common finding in most research related to physical health, psychological health, or student success (Schreiner, 2010c). Relationships foster well-being across a spectrum of nationalities and cultures (Diener, 2000) and play an important role in college student retention (Bean & Eaton, 2000) and personal growth (Schreiner, 2012). A student’s ability to develop and maintain healthy relationships with others is an expression of the component of thriving labeled social connectedness. Thriving students cultivate friendships that are mutually beneficial and satisfying, that go beyond surface interaction and build trust and intimacy. They learn to listen attentively and to give and receive support (Derrico et al., 2015). Thriving students sense that they matter and are appreciated, and they believe their contributions to the college community are valued. As a result of social relationships, students learn the give-and-take of healthy relationships (Schreiner, 2012; 2020). Social connectedness and diverse citizenship comprise the domain of interpersonal thriving. While social connectedness focuses on the mutual benefits of personal relationships, diverse citizenship “emphasizes the attitudes and values that drive [students’] interactions with others” (Schreiner, 2020, p. 23).

**Diverse Citizenship.** This second factor of interpersonal thriving, diverse citizenship, refers to the value students place on individuals who are different from them,
an openness to developing relationships with these individuals, and a desire to make a positive difference in their shared community and society. Diverse citizenship operates on two levels. On the individual level, students believe the other contributes uniquely and positively to their relationship. At the community or even global level, exploring and discussing their differences contributes to a deeper understanding and appreciation of difference and how that can produce benefit for society as they work together, building confidence in their ability to contribute positively to the greater good (Schreiner, 2013, 2020).

The five constructs of thriving are both measurable and malleable; therefore, changes at the institutional level and interventions at the individual level can make a difference in student thriving. Based on previous models of student retention and additional research on thriving, several additional factors have been identified that influence thriving. These pathways to thriving for students of color are described in the following paragraphs.

Pathways to Thriving for Students of Color

Pathways to thriving refer to the environmental interactions and psychosocial influences that can directly or indirectly influence thriving in students of color (Schreiner, 2014). Every student brings personal characteristics with them to campus. However, once students arrive on campus, they interact with the facets of the campus environment that can influence them in several ways. For example, environmental interactions can influence the degree of certainty a student has about their academic major, their involvement in campus organizations and activities, and the interaction they have with their professors. Students are also influenced by psychosocial factors, such as their level
of spirituality and the psychological sense of community they experience on campus. Each of these can influence thriving in different ways for students of color. There is no “one size fits all” approach to thriving, and it is important to explore the specific pathways to thriving for different racial/ethnic populations and customize interventions for each group of students. Research on pathways to thriving has disaggregated the data for African American, Latinx, and Asian American students. On dominantly White campuses, students of color have fewer pathways to thriving than White students (McIntosh, 2012; Schreiner, 2014). The four major pathways to thriving for students of color are student-faculty interaction, campus involvement, sense of community on campus, and spirituality (Schreiner, 2014). Schreiner (2014) stated:

Although intervening in any one of the four areas could make a significant difference in students’ ability to thrive, intervening in each area in ways that specifically support the diverse needs of underrepresented students can have a multiplying effect on their likelihood of success. (p. 12)

The following sections explain each of these four pathways, as well as institutional integrity and commitment to student welfare.

**Student-Faculty Interaction.** One experience all students can expect throughout their college career is interaction with faculty. Through their teaching, course design, choice of resources, assumptions about their students, growth or fixed mindset, validation, and availability to students for academic advising or mentoring, faculty play a vital role in student engagement, success, and thriving. Faculty have a powerful influence on students to either facilitate thriving or hinder it (Schreiner et al., 2018; Schreiner et al., 2020; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Interaction with faculty occurs in a variety of
settings (e.g., classroom, office, research lab, outside of class) and means (e.g., online, face-to-face, social media, email). Student-faculty interaction has also been used consistently as a measure of student development and success. Not all students benefit to the same degree, but regardless of the type and frequency of student-faculty interaction, student satisfaction with their college experience increases (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). According to Astin (1984), student-faculty interaction related more strongly to student satisfaction than any other type of campus involvement, including friendships with peers.

Kim and Sax (2017) conducted a meta-analysis of the research literature related to student-faculty interaction. Based on their analysis of 284 empirical studies published since 2000, Kim and Sax found student-faculty interaction is positively associated with student motivation, attitude, satisfaction in college, academic engagement, intellectual development, personal growth, and sense of belonging. They examined both formal and informal student-faculty interaction, as well as the quantity and quality of the interaction. Examples of formal interaction usually related to academics and included conversation or discussion in class, during office hours, or in a research setting; informal interaction occurred out of class in various locations on campus or in a mentoring relationship. Kim and Sax also examined how student-faculty interaction differs by student characteristics such as race/ethnicity, sex, SES, and pre-college experiences. They included ways student-faculty interaction directly influenced students and the indirect or conditional affects based on various other factors. They incorporated studies on students who were athletes, first-generation, low-income, international, STEM majors, learning online, and students of color. Kim and Sax also identified measurable outcomes found consistently in
the research on student-faculty interaction: “(1) academic achievement, (2) college persistence, (3) cognitive outcomes, (4) affective outcomes, (5) civic outcomes, (6) spiritual outcomes, and (7) vocational outcomes” (pp. 100–101).

Several of the findings from Kim and Sax (2017) relate to this study on thriving students of color. Student-faculty interaction was positively correlated with the personal development and social skills of students of color. Specifically for African American and Asian American students, Kim and Sax found a positive relationship between student-faculty interaction and academic achievement, as measured by GPA at 4-year institutions. Higher GPA was also found for Latinx students at community colleges. For African American students, informal interaction with faculty was associated with better career preparation. However, informal interaction with faculty outside of class sometimes was a negative predictor of cognitive gains and GPA. Similar to Kim and Sax, Mayhew et al. (2016) found frequent student-faculty interaction in the form of quality mentoring had a positive effect on students’ political involvement, racial tolerance, and cultural awareness.

In an earlier study, Kim and Sax (2009) found course-related interaction between students and faculty was positively associated with cognitive development for several student groups, including Latinx, Asian American, first-generation, and those with lower SES. Mayhew et al. (2016) also noted a positive relationship in cognitive gains based on student-faculty interaction in the context of research in science and technology for African American students who self-reported increased understanding.

In addition to the direct effects, Kim and Sax (2017) noted indirect or conditional effects of student-faculty interaction by race/ethnicity. Formal academic interaction, such
as asking questions of faculty during class or office hours, was associated with higher GPAs for all students in their study (White, Asian American, Latinx, and African American). Frequent interaction between African American, Asian American, and Latinx students and faculty was a positive predictor of increased personal development.

Regarding commuter students, frequent interaction with faculty was not a predictor of higher GPA, which is worth noting because many students of color live off campus.

Kim and Sax (2017) noted reciprocal effects of student-faculty interaction in their study. Student interactions with faculty that were both personal and academic had a positive relationship with GPA and racial tolerance. However, the reciprocal was also noted. Higher student GPAs and racial tolerance could have led to an increase in student interactions with faculty.

Although student-faculty interaction is an important pathway to thriving for students of color, this pathway varies for students based on race and ethnicity (Schreiner, 2014) and “particularly in dominantly white institutions” (Schreiner et al., 2020, p. 195). In a quantitative study of 2,724 college students, Schreiner et al. (2018) used structural equation modeling to determine the significant predictors of thriving among the 535 students of color in their sample. They found the combination of (a) faculty who included diverse perspectives in their classes and (b) the frequency of faculty interaction with students contributed directly to thriving for these students of color. Schreiner et al. (2018) also found when faculty are sensitive to diverse learners, welcome and encourage students of color to contribute to class discussion, and incorporate diverse perspectives in their course curriculum, students of color are more likely to thrive.
Campus Involvement. Campus involvement refers to the various opportunities students have to participate in organizations and programs on their campus. Examples include athletics, student organizations, leadership positions, and volunteering for community service. Nearly four decades ago, Astin’s (1984) research on student campus involvement indicated the degree of a student’s involvement in college was aligned with a student’s development as a learner and as an individual. More campus involvement typically resulted in more learning and personal growth. As more research was conducted on students of color and campus involvement, Schreiner (2014) found Latinx and African American students encountered barriers to campus involvement, which, in turn, influenced their thriving. Many Latinx students live at home and commute to campus. Their commuter status and responsibilities at home often inhibited their ability to remain on campus in the evenings when most student organizations meet. For African American students, their work schedule was a barrier, as African American students are significantly more likely than any other racial group to work off campus for more than 20 hours each week. Both commuting to college or working off campus hindered these students of color from making the most of their college experience which can impede thriving.

Although students of color encounter hurdles to campus involvement, those who are involved in activities and programs on their campuses experience thriving differently. For example, African American students benefited more than any other group from campus involvement, especially when they were involved in leadership. Their campus involvement contributed directly to their thriving. For Asian American and Latinx students, campus involvement contributed indirectly to their thriving because for these
students, campus involvement was more beneficial when it related to interaction with professors and a stronger sense of community (Schreiner, 2014).

Schreiner (2014) included several implications based on her findings. Institutions could adapt campus activity scheduling to provide more opportunities for campus involvement for students who commute or work off campus. Identifying leadership potential in students of color and inviting them to lead organizations and programs validates their ability to contribute (Rendón, 2006) and provides opportunities for them to participate as full members of the community family rather than simply as guests (Paredes-Collins & McIntosh, 2020; Schreiner, 2014).

**Psychological Sense of Community.** Although student demographics and pre-college characteristics do not change much, if at all, for the individual student, the psychosocial factors that contribute to student success, as measured by the Thriving Quotient, are malleable (Schreiner et al., 2013). Students can make changes in their lives, in their attitudes, and in their behaviors that contribute to their sense of community on their campus, which is the most prominent pathway to thriving for students of color. But more importantly, institutions can develop appropriate interventions to enhance the sense of community for students of color on their campuses and thereby facilitate their thriving (McIntosh, 2015; Schreiner et al., 2018). Sense of community is a broad term that embodies not only students’ feelings of belonging on a campus, but also a recognition that they contribute to the community and that the community invests in them; they have a voice in the community and a sense of ownership and pride in their institution (Paredes-Collins & McIntosh, 2020; Schreiner, 2014). For students of color on dominantly White campuses, there may be layers of community; that is, they may experience a sense of
belonging within the larger campus community as well as a sense of belonging with a smaller group of students who share similar culture and with whom there is more familiarity and ease (Paredes-Collins & McIntosh, 2020).

The experiences that contribute to a sense of community on campus also differ based on race/ethnicity. For Latinx students, their sense of community was enhanced by their campus involvement, while African American students found a strong sense of community through spirituality. Asian American students benefited from the community that developed with other students in their major (Schreiner, 2014).

**Spirituality.** In the thriving literature, spirituality is more than a religious belief. Spirituality refers to students’ beliefs about their purpose in life and how they ascribe meaning to their experiences. In addition to providing a sense of meaning, hope, and direction in life, spirituality can foster the ability to cope appropriately with the challenges students face as students gain perspective for understanding and interpreting the world in which they live (Schreiner, 2014).

Since the early years of this century, researchers in higher education have had a renewed interest in spirituality and have acknowledged that spirituality influences learning and student development (Astin et al., 2011; Chickering et al., 2015). McIntosh (2012, 2015) focused his doctoral research on how other factors such as sense of community and campus involvement influence thriving, particularly in college students of color. He found that for all students of color in his study, sense of community was most influenced by spirituality; as a result, he encouraged practitioners in higher education to be mindful to place spirituality within the cultural background of the student’s race/ethnicity. McIntosh noted one of the most significant findings in his
research involving 7,956 students was that spirituality was not an isolated factor; rather, students’ spirituality interacted with their conversations with faculty, their involvement in campus activities, and their sense of community.

**Institutional Integrity and Student Welfare.** Students of color who perceive a consistency between the published mission of an institution and the outworking of that mission in policy and practice can develop a strong sense of community and loyalty to their institution because of the consistency between what they were told during the admission process and what they experienced personally upon enrollment. When students of color feel heard and cared for by the administrators, faculty, and staff members at their institution, they are more willing to invest in the community because they sense the community at their institution is caring well for them; they believe their welfare matters to the institution (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Braxton et al., 2004). Using the Thriving Quotient (Schreiner, 2012) and additional survey questions related to institutional integrity and commitment to student welfare, Ash and Schreiner (2016) analyzed the survey results of 1,536 students of color from 12 dominantly White faith-based institutions. They found students’ perceptions of institutional integrity were “the most significant contributor to their psychological sense of community on campus” (p. 49). Sense of community has consistently been the most significant predictor of student thriving (Ash & Schreiner; McIntosh, 2015; Schreiner, 2014). Because sense of community for students of color is influenced by their perceptions of their institution’s integrity and commitment to their welfare (Ash & Schreiner, 2016), delivering on the explicit and implicit promises made during and after the admissions process and
expressing genuine value and care for the well-being of each student are important objectives for institutions that desire to help their students of color thrive.

Thriving as a holistic measure of student success is not bound to student demographics or characteristics that typically do not change. Rather, as a measure of interpersonal and intrapersonal well-being in addition to academic success, thriving is malleable. Students can change during college and move from surviving to thriving in their learning and personal development. This framework is both practical and hopeful when applied to research on students of color in higher education.

**Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework**

Harper’s (2012a) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework is a fitting companion to thriving because it focuses specifically on the strengths and contributions of African American students in the education system. It is a counter-narrative to the research on students of color that has historically been deficit-oriented. As with early measures of student success and retention that focused more on why students left higher education than why they stayed (e.g., Tinto, 1975, 1988), Harper (2010) stated that “most empirical studies amplify minority student failure and deficits instead of achievement” (p. 64).

Harper (2012a) asserted that his Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework has been informed by 30 years of research literature on Black men in education as well as in society. This framework “inverts questions that are commonly asked about educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and Black male student attrition” (p. 5). Rather than focusing on the negative or on what is not being done, Harper asks questions about challenging topics from a positive and success orientation. For example, one question about classroom
experience is worded this way: “How do Black undergraduate men earn GPAs above 3.0 in majors for which they were academically underprepared?” (p. 5). Harper further reported the alarming negative statistics about Black men in college usually overshadow the stories of Black men who have completed undergraduate and graduate degrees.

In addition to Harper’s research on Black student success (e.g., Harper 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2015), Harper has co-edited two books that focus on research of students of color. In *Advancing Black Male Student Success from Preschool through Ph.D.*, Harper and Wood (2016) present a series of chapters that begins with quality pre-school education for Black boys and moves through each phase of education to doctoral programs emphasizing the potential of Black boys and men and programs and strategies that are making a positive difference in their success. The second edited volume by Quaye and Harper (2015), *Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations*, introduces the reader to research and effective practice for engaging various populations of students of color in higher education, including multiracial, international, athletes, homeless, veterans, low-income, and adult learners returning to college.

The conceptual frameworks of Thriving (Schreiner, 2013) and Anti-Deficit Achievement (Harper, 2012a) were constructed on a positive and success-oriented foundation. Although Harper’s framework (2012a) was created specifically for research on Black men and boys, it has been used in research of other populations of color, and the principles and approach are valuable for this study of students of color.
Conclusion

This chapter included a discussion of the literature relevant to the thriving of students of color on dominantly White faith-based campuses. Although several thriving studies have found pathways to thriving for students of color, none of the literature specifically mentions students of color who are juniors or seniors. This study will add to the body of literature on thriving students of color by focusing on students who are closer to completing their degree.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Although enrollment of students of color has been increasing significantly (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017), their completion rates have remained unchanged for the past 50 years (de Brey et al., 2019). Despite the introduction of programs and services designed to support learning and success for students of color in higher education, systemic barriers to success remain pervasive. Research literature currently includes several studies focusing on students of color who attend dominantly White faith-based institutions yet are thriving in college; however, most of these studies are quantitative. By exploring and documenting the lived experiences of junior or senior students of color who have been able to thrive despite barriers to their success, this study produced novel data by providing a platform for these students to share their counter narratives, perspectives, and insights from an asset-based perspective. The findings from this research inform how individuals in higher education listen and respond to under-served minoritized students and better facilitate thriving for more students of color at dominantly White institutions. The research question guiding this study was: How do thriving students of color who are juniors or seniors at dominantly White faith-based institutions make meaning of the experiences that contributed to their thriving?

In this chapter, I describe the rationale for choosing hermeneutic phenomenology as my research design. In addition, I outline my plan for selecting participants, collecting data, and analyzing the data. I explain the processes I used to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and also examine my role as the researcher.
Research Design

The research method I used for this qualitative study is hermeneutic phenomenology. Quantitative research typically signals an exploratory or explanatory phase of research, either when there is not a significant body of literature on a topic or when quantitative data are no able to fully explain a phenomenon. Qualitative data are collected from interviews with research participants, observations of participants in various contexts, and documents related to the research topic. Research findings are specific to the participants and cannot be applied generally to a larger population (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research can effectively explore a phenomenon not yet documented in research literature, which is the case for this research study. The qualitative researcher conducts interviews with individuals who have experienced a specific phenomenon and examines related documents, gathering and analyzing data that produce a deeper understanding of that phenomenon (Creswell, 2015). Explorative qualitative research provides rich, in-depth findings that are valuable as transferrable knowledge that can lead to innovation and development of hypotheses, to testing hypotheses, or to developing theory for other types of research (Flyvbjerg, 2011). I have chosen to conduct qualitative research because very little is currently known about junior or senior students of color who are thriving at dominantly White faith-based institutions. Qualitative research is a means for exploring the phenomenon of thriving in students of color who have chosen to attend a dominantly White faith-based institution. More specifically, the qualitative research method of hermeneutic phenomenology incorporates both the interview data from the students and my interpretation of the interview data.
Phenomenology

Phenomenological methods explore a specific event or experience of human life; something that can be observed; something that can be very usual, common, and every day (Porter & Robinson, 2011) or something that may be taken for granted and typically overlooked (van Manen, 1990). Phenomena can include an individual’s particular experience, values, thoughts, emotions, perspectives, concerns, habits, actions, and purposes (Benner, 1994; van Manen, 1990). According to van Manen (1990), the ultimate purpose of phenomenological research is not to establish theory that explains reality, but rather to discover and describe “plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (p. 9). Phenomenological research begins with description and discovery that can lead to a better understanding of human experience.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a type of phenomenology that is both descriptive and interpretive. It provides a structure for the researcher to analyze and interpret the meaning of the phenomenon (as described by the participant) through the lens of the researcher’s personal knowledge, preconceptions, biases, experience, values, and philosophy (Porter & Robinson, 2011; Ray, 1994; Streubert & Carpenter, 2011; van Manen, 1990). The research question for this study was addressed using hermeneutic phenomenology. Through interview questions related to their personal educational experiences, participants were able to describe this phenomenon of thriving from their unique perspective. Hermeneutic phenomenology provided a platform for participants’ individual and collective voices to be heard. This method also provided opportunity for me, as the researcher, to interpret these students’ experiences, intentionally considering
my understanding of student thriving, my values, biases, and preconceptions, as well as my experience working with high-risk students of color.

**Brief History of Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

An understanding of hermeneutic phenomenology begins first with an introduction to phenomenology. German philosopher and university professor Edmund Husserl founded the philosophy and methodology of phenomenology (Moran, 2000; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000). Moustakas (1994) considered Husserl to be a pioneer in converging philosophy and science in the early 20th century and used the term “subjective openness” (p. 25) to describe Husserl’s radical approach to science and inquiry. Husserl’s contemporaries favored an objective study of science and ridiculed his subjective approach. Husserl’s phenomenology had an epistemological basis, always focusing on what can be known by studying the descriptions of lived experiences by the individuals who lived those experiences (Patton, 2002). Husserl’s methodology relied only on rich descriptions of human phenomena, or experiences for analysis of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). In other words, the researcher would bracket personal beliefs, biases, theories, presuppositions, judgments, and feelings from the analysis of the phenomena being studied (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011; van Manen, 1990).

Martin Heidegger (1962) studied under Husserl, but eventually disagreed with Husserl on two vital characteristics of phenomenology. First, Heidegger started from an ontological basis rather than Husserl’s epistemological basis. Instead of focusing on the relationship between the knower and what is known (epistemology), Heidegger asked what it means to be, to exist, and what it means to be human. Heidegger’s emphasis was on being and existence (ontology) rather than on knowing (epistemology). Second,
Heidegger disagreed with Husserl regarding the concept of bracketing. Whereas Husserl believed it was necessary to bracket the biases, judgments, and feelings of the researcher, Heidegger embraced these as part of the interpretation of the phenomenon. The lived experience of the research participant is interpreted by the participant and through the personal lens of the researcher. This significant difference between Husserl and Heidegger in interpretation resulted in the development of a new type of phenomenology known as hermeneutic phenomenology (Leonard, 1994; Moran, 2000), also referred to as interpretive phenomenology (Benner, 1994; Ray, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

**Hermeneutics**

Hermeneutics essentially is “the theory and practice of interpretation” (van Manen, 1990, p. 179). Hermeneutics encompasses the process of interpreting a variety of human interactions, including conversations, books, nonverbal gestures, literature, or art, in different circumstances and different environments (Porter & Robinson, 2011). Porter and Robinson (2011) stated, “We experience the meaning in relation to our own histories, desires, memories, imaginations, etc.” (p. 2). Culture, language, and traditions can also influence interpretation.

Hermeneutics is historically associated with the Greek god Hermes, who was given the task of delivering and interpreting messages from the Greek gods to the Greeks. Hermes “…had to re-create or reproduce the meaning that would connect to his audience’s history, culture, and concepts in order to make sense of things” (Porter & Robinson, 2011, p. 3). In recent centuries, theologians and scholars developed hermeneutics as a structure and process for analyzing and interpreting biblical texts (Benner, 1994; Porter & Robinson, 2011; van Manen, 1990). Husserl’s initial work in
phenomenology and his emphasis on the description of the phenomenon combined with Heidegger’s development of the interpretation of the description, formed the foundation for the qualitative research method of hermeneutic phenomenology (Porter & Robinson, 2011).

**Hermeneutic Phenomenology as Methodology**

My research question focused on the phenomenon of thriving and, specifically, undergraduate junior or senior students of color thriving at a dominantly White faith-based institution. Thriving is a dimension of human experience, placing this study within Heidegger’s ontological framework. Participants’ detailed descriptions and an organized and thoughtful interpretation of their descriptions indicated the use of hermeneutic phenomenology was appropriate. My personal experiences, values, and biases did not have to be bracketed during my interpretation of the data. Analyzing the data through the lens of my previous experiences, values, biases, presuppositions, and feelings provided an opportunity for an additional layer of analysis and interpretation of the data.

**Site Selection**

Selecting a specific site for this research study was of less consequence than the selection of participants. Therefore, the site selection was determined by the location of the participants. The focus of this study was the individual student participants rather than a study of their institutions.

**Pilot Study**

To better prepare for interviews with the participants, I conducted a pilot study with two individuals of color who allowed me to interview them and were excited about the opportunity to support this study through their feedback about the interview protocol
and about the interview process itself. These pilot interviews helped me gain confidence with the protocol and prepared me for the interaction I had later with each participant. Furthermore, this pilot study allowed me to address my emotional response to the interview experience. Hearing the potential answers to the interview protocol helped me work through my unexpected emotions as I listened to these individuals share their lived experiences related to their thriving on a dominantly White faith-based campus.

**Participant Selection**

I used purposeful sampling to select individuals for this study, choosing participants who met specific criteria (Richards & Morse, 2013). Participants were students of color who were juniors or seniors. They exhibited characteristics of thriving as observed by the gatekeeper. Students who are thriving are doing well academically; psychologically engaged in their university; optimistic about the future; and have strong, healthy relationships with others (Schreiner, 2013). Each gatekeeper was a higher education professional employed at the participants’ institution and competent in identifying students who are thriving.

The gatekeeper invited students who met the research study criteria to participate in this study by sending them my written invitation and description of the study via email. Students who chose to participate responded directly to me via email. Participants were informed about the study and signed a consent form. Confidentiality for each participant was maintained, and each participant chose a pseudonym for the study to protect their identity. Participants received a $25 gift card following their interview.

From the pool of students who contacted me, I intended to select both male and female students, as well as students from a spectrum of race/ethnicity. I originally
planned to interview a minimum of 15 students; however, the ultimate number of 10 participants was determined by the number of students who met the research criteria and contacted me. Even with only 10 participants, there was saturation of data categories identified through the coding of the interviews (Richards & Morse, 2013).

I chose to interview students who had reached junior or senior status because I believe the experiences that contributed to their thriving will provide another dimension to the current knowledge on thriving. As juniors or seniors, these students were enrolled in higher education much longer than first-year students. This longevity provided a unique perspective on their thriving that first-year students of color may not yet have had. I focused on students who were thriving because, as discussed in the literature review, thriving describes student success more broadly and holistically than other student success theories or models. In addition to academic success, thriving includes interpersonal and intrapersonal well-being (Schreiner, 2010a).

I interviewed students of color because the gap in completion rates between White students and students of color persists (de Brey et al., 2019; Ginder et al., 2017). Although quantitative research data have contributed to a better understanding of the various pathways to thriving in students of color (e.g., McIntosh, 2012; Paredes-Collins, 2012), there is a gap in the literature of studies focused on the lived experiences of thriving students of color who were juniors or seniors.

**Data Collection**

Data for this study was collected from (a) interviews with participants, (b) a questionnaire completed by each participant, and (c) my field notes. Participants were interviewed one time, with interviews lasting between 60–105 minutes. I used a semi-
structured interview protocol, asking open-ended questions with the flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on the participant’s response (Richards & Morse, 2013). I used a protocol designed to prompt participants’ descriptions of their lived experiences related to their thriving and provide latitude for me, as the researcher, to follow up on points of interest and ask for additional information. This extended time for the interview process provided opportunity for intensive and prolonged contact (Maxwell, 2013) with each participant and detailed descriptions, leading to what Richards and Morse (2013) referred to as “rich and thick” (p. 223) data in each information category. Participants also completed a questionnaire that provided demographic information relevant to the study.

My field notes also provided data for this study. Field notes include the researcher’s reflections and responses to each interview, documenting thoughts and feelings about the content, as well as observations about the participant and the environmental aspects of the interview (Maxwell, 2013; Richards & Morse, 2013). I created a digital journal to record my impressions, thoughts, responses, observations, and evaluations of each interview. This data supplemented the data collected from the interviews and informed my interpretation of the data which is a critical component of hermeneutic phenomenology.

Because of the current COVID 19 considerations and restrictions, interviews were completed using Zoom, an Internet platform for virtual meetings. Interviews were also recorded, transcribed verbatim electronically using an app called Otter.ai, edited personally for accuracy, then stored in a secure location accessible only to me as the primary researcher.
**Data Analysis**

Analysis requires immersion in the data and time to consider the data repeatedly, looking for relationships, similarities, differences, common features, and the expected as well as the unexpected (Maxwell, 2013). I began analysis of the data by carefully reading my field notes and interview transcripts and listening to the recorded interviews. Data were coded to identify interesting descriptions, phrases, or words related to the research question. I used Dedoose, a secure web-based coding system, to organize codes into themes for further analysis. Reflecting on the data and journaling my thoughts helped me reduce the descriptions to the essence of the phenomena (van Manen, 1990) and initiate the interpretation of the interview data.

**Processes for Ensuring Trustworthiness**

Validity of data and research findings is an important exercise in qualitative research. Several strategies help ensure the validity and credibility of the research, and collectively these strategies are referred to as trustworthiness. For qualitative research, several processes affirm the trustworthiness of the data: collecting rich data, member checking, triangulation, investigating negative cases (Maxwell, 2013), and inter-rater reliability (Richards & Morse, 2013).

**Collecting Rich Data**

Collecting rich data refers to data that are detailed and complete, providing a full description of the phenomenon being studied. Rich data result from interaction with the participant over time through an initial interview and soliciting feedback about the accuracy of the interview transcript and interpretation of the data. Descriptive and detailed field notes are another source of rich data (Maxwell, 2013). Crafting an
interview protocol that encourages full descriptions of how and why each participant is thriving led to rich data.

**Member Checking**

One process for affirming accuracy of the data is sending a copy of the interview transcript to the participant and requesting the participant’s feedback. This process is referred to as member checking and is critical for establishing the trustworthiness of the data (Maxwell, 2013). I solicited participants’ feedback by sending an appropriate portion of the findings to each participant to ensure the accuracy of their interview data. Verifying the content of the interview data with the participant provided a valid source for me when I interpreted a participant’s experiences, perspectives, and feelings. When I used direct quotes from participants in the findings recorded in Chapter 4, I omitted words such as “um,” “like,” and “you know” to make their quotes easier to read.

**Triangulation**

Another measure of trustworthiness is triangulation, which is the process of comparing data collected from one study against data from related studies, as well as comparing data collected by one method, such as an interview, with data collected from another method, such as observations documented in field notes and memos (Maxwell, 2013; Richards & Morse, 2013). Triangulating my observations recorded in my field notes with the interview data and relevant literature was one measure of trustworthiness.

**Investigating Negative Cases**

I also looked for interview data that was inconsistent with other data. Maxwell (2013) referred to inconsistent data as *discrepant evidence* or *negative cases*. Careful
examination and analysis of negative case data can increase the trustworthiness of the research data and help identify flaws in that data or in the logic used to analyze the data.

**Inter-Rater Reliability**

One more check for the trustworthiness of data is referred to as inter-rater reliability (Richards & Morse, 2013). I asked members of my dissertation committee to provide feedback and insight regarding the codes, themes, and interpretation of the data I collected. Each of these processes (collecting rich data, member checking of interview data, triangulation, examining negative cases, and inter-rater reliability) increased the trustworthiness of the data as well as the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Using hermeneutic phenomenology as the research method involved interpretation of the data by the researcher. I endeavored to maintain the integrity of verbal descriptions in the interviews, but the interpretation of the data was filtered through the lenses of my life experiences, beliefs, and biases. In the next section, I describe my beliefs, life experiences, and perspectives that likely influenced this research study.

**Role of the Researcher**

I am a learner. I am reflective. I usually ask “why” and “how” questions. My knowledge and way of thinking have been shaped, in part, by having lived among people who are very similar to me, as well as people who are very different from me. I have lived among individuals who think differently, who are different racially/ethnically, and whose cultures are different than mine. I continue to unpack my memories and perceptions of my early childhood years lived among Native Americans in an Aleut village in Alaska and on a Navajo reservation in New Mexico. For several years during
elementary and middle school, I lived in the poorest county in Missouri. During that time, I was introduced to the welfare system, and, even in my limited childhood understanding, I knew that the flour, butter, and other commodities dispersed at the county courthouse each month made a positive difference for many families in the area.

My view of the world and culture was altered again during high school when I became friends with African Americans at my high school and also spent several weeks each summer interacting with African American and Jewish high school students who lived in urban Cleveland and spent part of their summer at the camp where my family lived. Living among Filipinos for 7 years as an adult in Manila and Baguio City, Philippines has also influenced my understanding and perspective of culture and revealed to me some of my biases and prejudices that I continue to address and change. All of these life experiences converge with characteristics about myself that I cannot alter: I am a White American woman. But I also am an individual who cares about other individuals, both those who are similar to me and those who are different from me. I value difference, whether it is in thought, beliefs, culture, ability, language, life experience, or race/ethnicity.

I value my faith. Epistemologically, I am a theist. I follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and endeavor to integrate biblical principles and conservative Christian theology into each dimension of my life. I believe in absolute truth. I believe that all truth is God’s truth. I believe God created all things and sustains his creation. He is the source of all knowledge, and knowledge exists whether or not I am conscious of it. Knowledge can be discovered individually or together with others. I also believe my finite intellect will never be able to fully comprehend all the knowledge humans have discovered and will
continue to discover. However, working to increase my knowledge and to understand and apply that knowledge is a worthwhile daily task I embrace.

As I approached this academic research study, I incorporated the epistemological position of critical realism. Grad (2009) concluded most epistemologies lie on a spectrum between objectivism and subjectivism, and one specific epistemology rarely addresses how an individual thinks about knowledge and applies beliefs about knowledge in the real world. So, although I begin with theism, I believe the practical application of critical realism in the context of hermeneutic phenomenology can provide a layer of important analysis.

Critical realism is credited to Roy Bhaskar and is rooted in the study of existence (ontology) or, from a practical perspective, a “study of the way the world is” (Fleetwood, 2014, p. 182). Critical realism acknowledges two levels of reality: (a) what is physically real, and (b) what is perceived or believed to be real. The first level of reality, the natural world, exists whether or not it is acknowledged by humans, and it does not change. The second level is described as a perception of natural reality or the human interpretation of the natural world. This level of reality is dynamic and, for critical realists, includes knowledge in the form of ideas, theories, and beliefs (Leroyal, 2021).

In the context of research, critical realism seeks to discern and identify the “mechanism” behind the perception or belief (Corson, 1991, p. 237). With regard to my research study, the natural reality is that students of color, despite the racism they encounter on a dominantly White faith-based campus, do thrive. Data from interviews with students of color who are thriving in the environment of a dominantly White faith-based institution would be included in the second layer of reality, the students’
perceptions and beliefs about their thriving. As a researcher using hermeneutic phenomenology, I endeavored to interpret what participants were saying about their experiences of thriving by exploring the mechanisms and structures behind their communicated reality. Approaching my research through the lens of critical realism added another layer of analysis and, perhaps, insight into this phenomenon of thriving.

I was first introduced to hermeneutics as a systematic process of interpreting and applying the original meaning of biblical text as it was written in Hebrew or Greek. I believe language matters. Words are important. How I interpret and make meaning of words spoken by others is a weighty responsibility. I felt this weight of responsibility, and it influenced my research and data analysis.

I am an educator. The teaching and learning process fascinates me. I spend time with colleagues discussing ways pedagogy might be more effective. I work with students to discover together what learning strategies and skills might be more effective for them. The philosophy and methodology of developmental education influences me. Every individual is in the process of developing, of growing and changing intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Professionals in the field of developmental education endeavor to provide opportunities through programs, services, and courses that facilitate the developmental process for college students, helping students determine where they are developmentally and helping them progress forward (Boylan et al., 2017). I have been a developmental educator for more than 20 years. I care about my students. I care for my students. Their learning and development are important to me.

As I considered this research endeavor, I was concerned about a few other things. I questioned my ability to develop rapport with students of color who would participate in
this research. Would the differences in our race/ethnicity enhance or hinder this study? I wondered if my perspectives and beliefs would overshadow rather than clarify the meaning of participants’ lived experiences related to thriving. I wanted the findings to represent the intent and meaning of the data shared by participants.

Conducting the pilot interviews provided insight and confidence that the passion I have for this topic and the care I have for participants would be evident. The enthusiasm expressed by each participant and their willingness to be transparent and forthright encouraged me throughout the interview process. I was humbled by each participant’s desire to add their voice and perspective to this study and am very grateful for their contribution.

At the beginning of each interview, the participant and I took time for introductions. This information, in addition to the information provided by the student in the questionnaire, gave me a starting point for conversation and establishing rapport. Our shared interest in making higher education a more welcoming environment for students of color made the interview process enjoyable. During the course of most of the interviews, participants’ spiritual beliefs organically entered the conversation, and this became another common interest and value. Later when I sent the interview data to participants and asked for their input, their comments were enthusiastic, complimentary, and appreciative. These responses further verified our rapport and my success at hearing, understanding, and synthesizing their stories.

Hermeneutic phenomenology as a qualitative research method embraces the researcher as a research instrument. My strengths, my background, my faith, my experience as an educator, my attitude toward my students and my beliefs about them,
and my concerns about this study influenced how I interpreted the data and made meaning of the meaning participants ascribed to their lived experiences. The data were important. What participants said was significant. I approached the process of analysis and interpretation carefully and respectfully, and, hopefully, gave voice to a counter narrative of thriving and academic success that will enrich the body of knowledge and degree of understanding about thriving students of color at dominantly White faith-based institutions. It is impossible to eliminate all bias from qualitative research, but I believe my previous experience with students of color, my growth mindset toward students of color, participants’ excitement to be a part of this research, and my desire to amplify their counter narratives rather than my opinions helped temper my bias and misperceptions.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I introduced the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology, explained the rationale for choosing this methodology, and described the research process of selecting participants. I also discussed how I collected and analyzed the data, as well as how I ensured the trustworthiness of the data. I finished by reflecting on my role as the researcher. Chapter 4 describes the coding process and themes that emerged from these interviews.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the lived experiences of thriving students of color in college on a dominantly White campus and find how these students make meaning of what contributed to their thriving. I used hermeneutic phenomenology as the method to consider and understand the essence of their experiences. The research question that guided this study was: How do thriving students of color who are juniors or seniors at dominantly White faith-based institutions make meaning of the experiences that contributed to their thriving? This chapter begins with a description of the 10 participants and their definition of what it means to thrive. I then illustrate with participant quotes the six themes that emerged from the data, beginning with the most dominant theme and followed by subsequent themes that emerged from or related to the previous theme(s). The six themes were: Relationships Matter; Leadership Opportunities Are Important; The Desire to Make a Difference; Racial Climate—Not Yet Where We Need to Be; Hope and Positive Perspective—The Spiritual Connection; and Get to Know Me.

The 10 research participants for this study were from five private, dominantly White, faith-based institutions with enrollments of less than 2,000 traditional undergraduate students and located in four regions of the United States: West Coast, Midwest, Southeast, and East Coast. Demographics included the following: eight females and two males; four juniors and six seniors; four first-generation; and three who transferred from other schools. Their self-reported race/ethnicities included Hispanic/Latinx (2), biracial (2), Asian-European (1), African American (3), Afro-Latinx
Their academic majors were each unique to this group of participants: liberal arts, environmental biology, nursing, music and worship arts, biology education, communications, psychology, public relations, criminal justice, and media, culture, and the arts.

Each participant had been identified as a thriving student by a faculty or staff member at their institution. Participants responded to questions about their academic experiences, motivation, involvement in campus organizations and programs, leadership roles, relationships both on and off campus, campus racial climate, and what would help future students of color thrive in college. I coded their responses to interview protocol questions, and from these initial codes, six themes emerged: Relationships Matter; Leadership Opportunities Are Important; The Desire to Make a Difference; Racial Climate—Not Yet Where We Need to Be; Hope and Positive Perspective—The Spiritual Connection; and Get to Know Me.

Near the beginning of each participant’s interview and before discussing any of the specific characteristics of thriving, I asked each student to describe what thriving meant to them. Their descriptions and experiences provide a foundation for the rest of this chapter. All 10 participants included academic success (Engaged Learning, Academic Determination) and healthy relationships (Social Connectedness) in their descriptions or experiences. Most students spoke positively about their life and their future (Positive Perspective). They each also talked about overcoming tough situations, personal challenges, or academic difficulties and using these as opportunities for personal growth. Nearly every student mentioned their desire to make a positive difference on their campus and in their community by collaborating with others who are different from
them (Diverse Citizenship). When asked how frequently they were thriving, nine students replied “most of the time” and the tenth student said “some of the time” with a reference to the ups and downs and personal challenges of the current semester. Although these students’ descriptions do not use the five specific facets of thriving as reflected in the Thriving Quotient instrument (Schreiner, 2013), the essence of thriving was confirmed in their own words.

**Descriptions of Thriving**

The students’ descriptions and examples of thriving indicate an understanding of the operative use of thriving in this study: a holistic measure of student success that includes academics as well as the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of the student’s life (Schreiner 2010a). Additionally, these students’ descriptions of thriving referred to leadership roles, advocating for themselves, gaining respect, taking initiative, and receiving support and encouragement especially when they accepted new responsibilities or faced challenges. They used “joy”, “gratefulness”, and “constant growth” to describe thriving and building into the lives of others to help others succeed in life. Thriving also included a spiritual dimension, a reference to their relationship with God that influenced their relationships with others and was a basis for their sense of meaning and purpose in life.

In addition to making new friends, Yoda described thriving as accepting leadership responsibilities, standing up for herself, and gaining respect from others. She then summed it up by stating emphatically, “Thriving is taking the initiative! Yeah, thriving is taking the initiative!” Yoda described a proactive approach to contributing to an environment in which she and other students would have opportunity to thrive through
advocacy and leadership. Alex also included leadership roles but added that through
serving others via her leadership roles, she received personal support and encouragement.
There were mutual reciprocal benefits. She said:

I’ve had a lot of opportunities to showcase my [leadership] skills while also
learning new skills in different positions that I have across campus. And [that] put
me in relationships with a lot of different people who very much support me, that
I can learn from, and who encouraged me to do what I do.

For Alex, support and encouragement became a cycle of receiving, then giving. The
encouragement and support Alex received while executing her leadership responsibilities
was extended to the students she encountered through her leadership roles.

Michelle explained thriving as a dynamic process of “constant growth” as an
individual, as a student, in her faith, and in her professional relationships. She described
thriving by saying:

[I’m] not in the same place as [I] used to be. So as a student, from freshman to
senior year, I’ve been thriving because I’ve been growing in my faith, in my
academics, in my networking connections. Thriving [is also] being able to take
[advantage] of opportunities and keep growing.

One aspect of personal growth for Michelle was her faith and relationship with God.
Several other participants included the spiritual dimension in their definitions. For
example, Liv focused on relationships and personal identity in the context of her faith and
gave evidence of a positive perspective:

Thriving is having right relationship[s] with God, self, and others. And that’s
where I’d say I’m at this year: being so secure in my identity in Christ and my
relationship with him, even through a lot of trials. And in relationship with others,

I think thriving can be like joy.

Liv was one of three students who used the word joy in their description of thriving.

Devin also mentioned joy along with purpose in life, both of which he connected to his relationship with God. He said to thrive is “just to be able to still wake up every day and have a joy to life and have a passion for what you’re doing, knowing that there’s a reason for being here.” Devin also said that thriving is not just an individual endeavor; it involves influencing others in positive ways and developing a perspective that allows him to turn difficulty into personal growth:

I think that to grow [personally], but then to grow other people, has been the biggest takeaway from that whole year of college, knowing that every single experience that happens here, good or bad, is something that’s actually not [just] for you, it’s for you to pour into someone else and be able to use that to [empower] other people and help them thrive and then do their best. [One of my professors would often say] “Everything put in your life is there for you to grow and then to grow other people.” [Life] doesn’t really ever get easier this side of heaven, but knowing that God is still present during the good and bad has been really, really huge.

Devin concluded that thriving for him required helping others grow and thrive, and God would be present with him and others through the good times in life as well as hard times.

In addition to Schreiner’s (2010a) five constructs of thriving (Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Positive Perspective, Social Connectedness, and Diverse Citizenship), these students said thriving for them involved both receiving and giving
support and encouragement in their relationships when college life was good and fun as well as when it was difficult and discouraging. Thriving was not an individual or self-centered endeavor. These students talked about a variety of individuals who built into their lives and how that helped them thrive, and they also spoke about the importance of building into others so their lives would change and improve. They referenced leadership roles when they described thriving and connected what they learned by leading and how they grew in the process of helping others thrive. They wanted to make a difference.

They mentioned specific changes that needed to happen on their campuses with regard to understanding others and caring well for others with the purpose of making their campus a place where every student felt at home, included, heard, and respected. These students connected these essential changes in campus racial climate to their faith and their relationship with God. They expressed that the racial climate on their campuses was improving and extended grace and patience to individuals who were offensive to them and fellow students of color. As they reflected on their thriving, they then offered wisdom and advice about thriving to faculty, staff, and future students of color. The next section describes each of these six themes that emerged from the interviews.

**Relationships Matter**

The most prominent theme from the interviews related to the role relationships played in students’ perceptions of their thriving. Every student talked about the importance of relationships. They each brought to their campus strong relationships with their family members and had developed relationships with their peers, professors, staff, co-workers, internship supervisors, and others. These relationships provided the support and encouragement these students needed when they encountered both academic and
personal challenges. These relationships also supported their personal growth, enhanced their sense of community and belonging on their campuses, and became a foundation to invest in the lives of others and make a positive difference. Based on their own words, their relationships contributed to these students thriving in college.

**Relationships With Family**

Relationships with family shaped each student’s perspective on attending college and choosing their specific institution. Family relationships also provided support and encouragement through tough times and influenced their motivation and determination to stay in college. Each of these 10 students grew up with the expectation and desire to go to college. Liv said she “always knew [she] was going to go to college.” Mely shared that going to college was “always implied” and that there was “never a time when I even considered that I wasn’t going to go.”

The four first-generation students had role models or were involved in young scholar programs in middle school and high school that nurtured the idea of going to college. Devin recalled that college was “never required” in his family, but both he and his brother were “always encouraged” to go by their parents who started college but never finished. His parents frequently used the phrase “You can!” to remind him college was an opportunity and that he and his brother were capable of succeeding. Jesús had his older brothers as role models and a source of motivation: “Seeing them [succeed in college] pushed me to go, too.” Michelle’s family came to the United States as refugees from a small Asian country. She recounted the sacrifice her parents made, leaving behind their life and culture with the hope of providing better opportunities for their children. Also a first-generation student, Michelle considered a college education a privilege and
an opportunity to help her parents and give back to her ethnic refugee community. She wanted to “have [her] voice heard through education” and believed college would “prepare [her] for leadership.”

Family relationships also influenced these students’ choice of institution. Devin transferred during the COVID 19 pandemic and was able to take classes online and live at home his sophomore year before moving several states away to his new school for his junior year. He related how important it was to be with his family during that year and have the flexibility to continue his schooling virtually. Jacqueline, after visiting several large state institutions during her involvement in a young scholars program during high school, knew she wanted to stay close to home to take full advantage of her strong family connections. She believed she would be more successful at a smaller, private, faith-based institution with a low student-teacher ratio and small class size. More than half of these students knew their family financial resources were limited, so they and their families chose a school that offered a financial aid package that made college a tangible possibility. Although Tiana was completely independent from her parents and had to work all through school to support herself and her education, she talked about the emotional support she received from her grandmother and her uncle. They provided the stability and encouragement she needed through transferring twice and choosing a major that was a good fit for her.

In addition to shaping their attitude and desire to go to college, family members supported them while they were in college. Their relationships with their families helped them through difficult times and motivated them to persist. Mely recounted that
[Applying to the nursing program was] the most stressful thing I’ve ever done. And going through interviews and taking exams and all that… I just felt like I couldn’t do it. But you know, my friends and my family were always there to tell me that I could. They helped me study, they made flashcards, my mom and I practiced interview questions, so that was awesome.

Jacqueline said, “Family is great, too. They know if I’m struggling with school or if I need some space. They kind of get it.” Esther also shared an example of her parents’ support and care for her during Fall semester of 2021:

Their love and their care, especially this last semester, where they literally came to school to just be here and support me while I was going through some really, really tough stuff, that kept me going. [Their] love and support is literally what makes me thrive because I would have given up a long time ago, and they were here the whole time. They are the main reason why I’m still even trying to do the things that I do.

Relationships with family were a source of stability and encouragement. Families were vital for students’ thriving and persevering through academic and personal challenges.

Family relationships not only influenced their choice of institution and supported these students tangibly and emotionally as they navigated college but were also a source of motivation to stay in college for these students. Jesús’ oldest brother, the first in his family to go to college, attended a large well-known state university. This brother called him out for attending nine institutions and focusing more on baseball than academics. He also was a role model for discipline:
[My brother] gave me the definition of what discipline was, without sugar-coating it, and that really helped me. The definition of discipline is just doing things you don’t like, but doing it like you’d like it. And that’s how life is. Sometimes you’re gonna do things you don’t want to do, but you have to do them. I saw myself as a failing student, and now I see myself as a thriving student. And it took me a while to get there. I was lucky enough to be in college long enough and actually stay in college for long enough to see that I also am thankful to have the family that I have, the support. I couldn’t thank my family enough for the support I have, and that’s why I say that there are other minorities where they have zero support, you know. They don’t have anyone behind them.

Jesús added that family support is necessary for White students, too. He said some of his White friends do not go to college because their families do not support them.

The sacrificial nature of their family’s support made others determined to stay in school. For example, Michelle’s parents sacrificed everything to come to the United States as refugees and start a new life. Had her family stayed in their home country, she would never have had the opportunities she has now:

My mom and dad, they had to make a choice to sacrifice their own comfort to come here. So just witnessing that sacrifice made me realize that, hey, if I don’t try this [in the] land of opportunity, and try to reach for those dreams, then I’m wasting my parents’ sacrifice.

Mely’s family were not refugees but had a long history as African Americans that meant they had not been given opportunities because of systemic oppression. Mely’s grandmother’s lack of opportunity became a motivating force in her life:
My mom went to college, but my grandma never did. She never graduated high school. So, I mean, we can do it; we’re not defined by our parents or history or whatever happened in the past. We are just as capable as everyone else, and we can do it.

Both Michelle and Mely were influenced to go to college by their family history and sacrifice, and they wanted to take full advantage of the opportunities they had to attend college.

The specific situations and circumstances were different for each participant, but the common thread was having family members who encouraged them to go to college and supported them in college. Support rarely came in the form of money for tuition or other expenses; rather, it involved emotional, physical, or mental support. Families encouraged these students to be and do their best, celebrated their achievements, and were simply present when needed. Family relationships and support, particularly when it was sacrificial, then became a source of motivation for these students to persist through challenges and graduate.

**Relationships With Friends and Classmates**

Each participant stated that relationships with fellow students on campus, in their residence halls, in their major, or in student organizations and programs contributed to their sense of community, the feeling that they belonged on their campus, and their thriving. They talked about the friends they have made, even lifelong friends with students who looked like them and students who did not. They mentioned their personal growth from healthy, encouraging relationships as well as through difficult relationships. There were friendships that surprised them, too, and relationships that developed only
because of a specific context. Some participants also made intentional choices about which students they would spend time with, weighing the benefits with the challenges. Although students spoke about deep friendships with White students, several also mentioned that relationships with “students who looked more like them” contributed to their thriving because those relationships had a dimension of mutual understanding about how they navigated their world and the freedom and comfort to just be themselves without explanations.

Devin said “[I made] friends that [I] can really tell are going to be lifelong friends, actually encouragers and challengers at the same time.” Alex stated that overall, her relationships with other students have been really good. However, she has been selective in choosing her friends, noting, “I think I’m very good at finding people that I know are good people, for the most part. And I am very in tune with [people] I feel safe or comfortable around. And if I’m not comfortable, I will not stay around.” Although Alex has not pursued long-lasting relationships with individuals she did not describe as safe, she has not avoided conversations with students with whom she differed in perspective and values. She expressed that those difficult conversations became learning opportunities to listen to and better understand another student; these conversations were uncomfortable but still beneficial.

Jesús came to his current institution after having been a student in “at least eight other schools.” He described himself as straightforward and as someone who enjoys talking with people. He admitted he has “grown and matured the past couple of years” and, at this point in his life, gives himself some time to get to know a student before “getting into touchy subjects. I really [take time to] understand someone. That’s also very
important.” In addition to understanding a fellow student, Jesús listens and encourages. He stated, “[When you] care about them, they want to hear you because you’re talking about them and not focusing on just yourself. I really take interest in other people’s problems and what they’re going through. And that’s also helped me a lot.” Jesús has learned to use his personal strengths in building relationships to become a better listener and encourager. He is developing the ability to understand his fellow students and himself at a deeper level.

Nearly all participants talked about the importance of their close friends. Esther called her “friend circle” the “people that I really trust. It’s a small circle, the ones that I spend the most time with.” Likewise, Tiana referred to her “core friends” who share “similar values and things that we care about.” As a senior, she has been maximizing the opportunities to spend time with her close friends as well as classmates that express perspectives different from her own. She described it this way:

I just really love meeting people, but also I want to try and be intentional with who I surround myself with. [Now, as a senior], I have a lot more healthy, intentional relationships, [but] there’s still some people I normally wouldn’t want to hang out with. But I still hang out with them because I still want to [have] that diversity.

Liv also talked about diversity in her friend group. She described close relationships with students who do not look like her when she referred to the group of urban academic scholars with whom she started college. She said, “We come in with the cadre of a diverse group of urban leaders, so I’ve been blessed with relationships [with] people who do not look like me, [who] have completely different backgrounds.” Liv’s cohort of
urban scholars did not look like her. She added that being a part of this leadership program provided her the opportunity “to make friends with people I never [otherwise] would have been friends with.” Liv’s comments also provided insight into the diversity within this group of students of color. As a group, they may express differences between themselves and White people, but Liv also acknowledged the diversity within this group, and she realized she probably would not have developed relationships with some students in her cadre had they not been in the same leadership program.

Sometimes these relationships developed in the classroom and within their major. For example, Michelle talked about the friendship and working relationship she developed with another student in her major. After working solo for a year as the social media manager for the public relations major, Michelle asked her Honduran friend to collaborate with her the following year. They just “clicked” as friends their first year, and as co-workers, they challenged each other to develop unique ideas and infuse creativity into their media posts. Their team effort improved their work and strengthened their friendship.

In addition to relationships with classmates and fellow students, several women in this study talked about relationships and friendships formed in their residence halls. One comment provided an overarching expression of the benefits of developing relationships in the context of residence hall life. When Alex talked about her experience in her residence hall as a student mentor her sophomore year and as a resident assistant her junior year she said, “I love being with people, and this is the best way to be with people—to live with them and reach out to them and just experience college life with them.” Living in a residence hall with other women fostered some deep friendships as
well as opportunities for some of these women to grow through interpersonal challenges and differences. Michelle, the only woman of color on her floor of her residence hall, talked about the “tight group of girls” with whom she lived.

I was the only [student of color], and it was really noticeable that I was different. So I was a little uncertain about how deep of a connection that I would form with the girls on my floor. And it took some time to just realize that the difference that they noticed is not everything. It’s only the surface, and people can relate to me at a different level [through] hobbies, through passion, and through [academic] major and other things. I can still be friends with other people that [don’t] look like me, and they can accept who I am.

Michelle continued by saying that by having an open mind to people who were different than her helped her find “a community” that first semester in her residence hall and strengthened her relationship with her White roommate. She said, “I’m still living with my roommate from my freshman year because she’s amazing!” However, Michelle also encountered some challenges in her relationships in her residence hall. She was more comfortable with her smaller group of residence hall friends rather than the larger group of women in her residence hall. She said, “I don’t do well in [large] group settings because I value one-on-one conversations rather than [conversations] in a group setting where I just don’t talk, I just listen.” Some of her encounters with White women in her residence hall were difficult because of cultural differences and miscommunication. However, she and the other women in her residence hall eventually developed better relationships and “learned to laugh together, and that bond [created] a better environment than I expected.” Michelle decided to “take the opportunity” to build relationships with
those who were different than her. She adjusted her perspective and was able to turn a difficult experience into an opportunity for personal growth by nurturing relationships with the White women in her residence hall.

Liv also shared her thoughts about living with and being friends with students who do not look like her. Because she is German, Irish, and Filipina, Liv described herself as a bridge between students of color and White students because she has lived in a constant blend of cultures her entire life. She has seen

The tension of races, even in relationships. I’d say my closest friends, a lot of them are White, and they’re [in] my [residence hall] wing. And they’re just girls [whose] hearts are so passionate for the Lord and are very like-minded, very encouraging, keep each other accountable, and are always growing. Seeing myself grow in [my faith] and having friends that are also doing that is really cool. I’ve made lifelong friends here.

For the women participants who lived on campus, these residence hall relationships contributed in significant ways to their thriving. Mely spoke of the role that resident assistants (RAs) played, in addition to the role that her fellow residents played, describing how the RAs often wrote notes of encouragement:

Those thoughtful, even sometimes short words of encouragement that we receive from other people really made a difference. When someone says, “I know this is hard,” “I believe in you,” “I know you can do this,” “I’m thinking about you,” or “I’m praying for you.”

For these students, developing relationships while “living 24/7” in a residence hall environment provided opportunities for lasting friendships. They learned about each
other, talked about life, laughed and cried together, studied together, and learned how to live well together.

While residential students were able to form significant relationships with other students as they lived and worked together, commuter students did not have these same opportunities because they were rarely on campus in the evenings. However, commuter students found other ways to form relationships on campus. For example, Jacqueline’s account of her experience in line during registration her first day on campus illustrated a serendipitous encounter with a student that developed into a meaningful friendship.

When I first got [to campus], I only knew one other person who came from the same high school as me. So, we already [planned to do] registration [together]. [When] I was in line, another [Latina] turned around and [said] “What major are you?” And [I replied], “I’m a criminal justice major.” And she said “Okay, well, you’re gonna hang out with us!” And next thing you know, we’re meeting each other’s moms. We’re having dinner at [each other’s] houses. We’re taking the same classes. So, I think this type of friendship really flourished [and] having the initiative she took to make friends with me was just awesome. I definitely think it helped me get through college [these] last couple of years.

Relationships developed by the female participants with other women in their residence halls or with another commuter facilitated their sense of belonging on their campuses. They shared the academic and social dimensions of their lives and usually the spiritual dimension. They grew in the context of relationships developed with other students of color as well as with White students. However, along with the benefits of these relationships, personal challenges also surfaced.
The challenges Michelle faced as the only woman of color in her residence hall required an “open mind” and an intentional choice to develop relationships in this setting. Other students referred to difficulties they faced in some relationships with people who were different from them. In contrast to relationships with students who were different from these participants, Esther’s comments about the importance of relationships with students who were more like her are significant. Esther said developing relationships with people who look like her influenced her sense of community when she said, “Something that played a really big role [in my sense of community] was hanging out with more people that are like me. [With] other women of color, we have this really supportive community here.” She said the entire population of students of color on her campus was about 10% of the student body, and only a portion of that group were Latinx. It was within the context of relationships with people who were more like her that she felt understood and had the freedom to be herself without any explanation or defense. Mely’s comments aligned with Esther’s when she said the students of color on her campus found common ground in their diversity and felt comfortable with each other. They tended to “stick together.” Jacqueline’s story about meeting a new friend during registration was about a relationship between two Latinas. Their common ethnicity and culture were components of their vital relationship. Although these participants pursued, valued, and benefited from their relationships with White students, they needed relationships with students who looked like them. Relationships founded on common ethnicity were refreshing, safe, and vital to their sense of belonging on their campus and their thriving in college.
These relationships with fellow students provided opportunities for friendship, encouragement, community, personal and professional growth, and a sense of belonging on their campus. These students reflected on the fun of meeting new people and developing friendships. They talked about shared values, feeling comfortable and safe, the importance of listening, and evaluating relationships. Participants expressed an openness and a willingness to initiate relationships, even though, in some situations, they realized they would not agree on every issue or share the same values. They chose to transform their differences in perspectives, values, ethnicity, culture, and their perception of the world into opportunities to understand themselves more clearly and to listen to and learn from other students on their campus. The common thread of support and encouragement these participants referred to in their relationships with their families was mentioned again when describing their peer relationships.

**Relationships With Professors and Advisors**

In addition to the relationships they developed with their peers, these students discussed the essential relationships they had with their professors and academic advisors. They consistently spoke of academic support and encouragement but also of the ways their professors helped them personally. Some of their professors moved beyond the teaching role and became their mentors and friends. Their professors believed in them, recognized their potential and abilities, and trusted them.

As students described their relationships with professors, they spoke of instructors and advisors who knew them by name, knew their parents’ names, and were “relational and relatable.” Professors helped them out when they needed to buy a book for the LSAT, they connected virtually with students’ parents when COVID pressures mounted,
and they challenged students to do more than they thought they were capable of doing. Students had the kind of relationships with professors that also included social interactions outside of class, including opportunities to put up Christmas lights at a professor’s home. Jacqueline said, “Every professor I’ve had has been phenomenal!” Students spoke highly of their professors’ interaction outside the classroom as well as within the academic realm.

For Jesús, the interaction with faculty in the classroom was “night and day” different than his experience in all his other institutions. After attending eight other institutions, Jesús said he was barely surviving. “I had my floaties and I was in the ocean, and I was just surviving out there.” At his other schools he “was turning in stuff late, just going with the flow, doing everything on my time.” His perspective started to change when he enrolled in his current school as “at first, I was more of an athlete than a student. But gradually, over time I started transitioning more to student-athlete.” When his professors started talking to him about his academics and his potential, he realized they cared about him and his work, and he should care about his education, too. When his academic effort became obvious to his professors, they spent time making sure he knew how to approach the assignment, considered his other academic and life responsibilities, and sometimes adjusted due dates to allow him opportunity to submit his best effort. Jesús elaborated on one specific experience:

I would say the one relationship that really made me thrive was with Professor _______. She was the first professor I really talked about my life with, like, my personal life. And when I started opening up to her, she said, “You know what, Jesús, you need to [open up] with everyone. When you talk, people listen, and
that’s what’s good about you.” I never realized it [before], but she’s right, because everyone I talk to enjoys talking to me. That’s what really happened 3 years ago, and that’s when I saw that when I started talking more and started being more of an extrovert. I started really experiencing myself with others and my grades shot up and I started feeling better about myself. I never knew I had this skill until someone told me I had it, and it really helped.

Jesús’ professor saw him as an individual, as a student with potential, and took the time to speak with him about his abilities. She went beyond academic content and developed a relationship that gave her the platform to share her perspective about his strengths. He emphasized that his professors “really made a big difference” in his success as a student. The relationships Jesús had with professors went beyond his expectations as his professors became friends and mentors.

Like Jesús, many of these students were initially surprised at the type of relationships they were able to develop with faculty. Students described the role professors played in their thriving as inspiring them, being kind to them, and being aware of their mental health needs. As a result, they felt an increased personal sense of value when around these faculty. Devin stated:

Being able to have the teachers that I’ve had, they’ve really encouraged me in so many different ways. I don’t think any of my classes would be [going] as well as they are if it wasn’t for the teachers being encouraging and inspiring. The teachers here are different, and they’re able to have a hand in knowing that you’re doing okay mentally and physically as well as academically. [They are] so loving and so kind, more than just someone you see every day.
Devin added that several of his professors became his friends, someone he could converse with about his life and aspirations rather than just academics.

Tiana noticed, even as a prospective student, how different the faculty were from what she expected. She perceived they really cared for her and wanted her to succeed, which gave her a “conscious sense of her value.” She elaborated on this experience:

I think that’s one thing that shaped me: a lot of professors are very willing [to help] and are very encouraging. The professors really do invest that time, not just in you academically, but they’re open about their lives, and they’re open to hearing about your [life]. Even the president, he literally invites students over to his house to have popcorn with his wife and kids. It’s a very intimate personal thing that I just didn’t experience at my other [two] universities.

Tiana had been enrolled in two previous universities, and she had not experienced this type of personal relationship before.

Alex was also pleasantly surprised by the holistic care she experienced from her professors. She thought they would be more focused on the “academic side than the mental health side.” But what she noticed was different about the professors at her institution was “how much they’re willing to have grace over different things. They’re very kind and very willing to sit down with you and talk over things.” As a result, these students believed their professors wanted them to succeed. They knew they were heard and were cared for holistically, including their mental well-being.

Some students had the experience of professors reaching out to them, while others took the initiative to get to know their professors. Liv talked about her biology professors. She made the effort to get to know them, and they, in turn, learned more about her, too:
Professors know your name. They learn it and they go even deeper. They care about you. Obviously not every class, but even in classes with 100 students, they find ways to get different people talking and sharing a little bit about themselves. I think [at my institution] that’s very special. So, I’d say professors are very relational, and they look at you as a whole person.

Liv appreciated her professors’ efforts to get to know her as a person while she also sought to get to know her professors outside the classroom. She realized her professors believed in her, and that added to the support she already sensed from them.

In addition to the personally supportive mentoring relationships with faculty, two students spoke of the trust they felt professors had in them. Liv said:

I’m reading [a book that talks] about transitions, and it’s really helped me understand the trust that I’ve been given. I really think that [trust] is earned, but [my professors] were quick to give me trust, which then made it quick for me to be able to step into roles, and [they] have believed in me since day one.

Esther described the trust she experienced from professors in the context of everyday interactions, as well as during illness or family emergencies:

If you’re having a hard day, you’re walking through campus and you see your favorite professor or staff member and you just get to talk to them, and they ask you about [your] day. I’ve been building relationships with them, and I’m lucky enough to have some of those professors trust me so much, that if I left in the middle of class, they wouldn’t assume the worst [about me].
Both Liv and Esther talked about being very thankful for the trust their professors had in them. Their professors believed what they said and believed in their abilities to learn and to lead.

Some students experienced supportive relationships with their professors who had specific academic roles. Michelle mentioned two professors: one was her academic advisor and the other directed the global ensemble of which she was a member. Michelle met her academic advisor during summer orientation and course registration before her first semester. She was questioning her choice of biology pre-med as her major, wrestling with disappointing her parents if she changed her major, and struggling to make this important decision. She contrasted her experience in the biology majors session with that of the public relations major. As the only student of color in the full room of biology majors, she did not feel heard or cared for, nor did she feel like she fit in.

After that meeting I decided to go to the [public relations] department just to get to know what the PR department is about. I met my [current academic] advisor there, and she was very warm, welcoming, and it was only me. She wanted to get to know me, and she explained the program, and asked me what my major was. I said [it was] bio, and she [said], “Well, if you’re interested in PR you always can switch.” At that point, I already knew that I wanted to [change my major]. Michelle’s academic advisor for PR listened to her, gave her options, left the conversation open for further discussion, and did not pressure her to make an immediate decision. Michelle said her academic advisor created “community right off the bat through inviting us over to her house and just creating that relationship within our major. She described these actions as particularly beneficial for her.
Michelle then described another of her professors as someone who listened to her, but also challenged her. This music professor was the director of the global ensemble. As an immigrant and refugee from a country in Asia, Michelle felt an immediate connection with the director who was Chinese:

I could relate to her more because we had the same values and the same experiences. She came to the United States for her college education as well, so I could really tell her a lot more [about] being a minority at [my] college. [She] still is my mentor till today, and it’s just really good to be a part of that ensemble and do what I love, which is singing, but also have my director as someone that I could talk to easily.

Whether helping Michelle work through the challenges of changing her major, feeling more a part of the community in her major, or sharing similar cultures and life experiences, both of these professors related to her at a very personal level and beyond the scope of their teaching responsibilities.

These participants said their professors consistently went beyond their expected role of course instructor. They invited students into friendships, encouraged, and “inspired.” Most participants remarked they did not believe professors on other campuses would do the same; they believed their professors were unique in that they developed relationships with students of color outside the classroom, would have conversations over a cup of coffee or a meal in the cafeteria, and even invite them to their homes. These types of everyday interactions and kindness resulted in the students saying they felt like they were treated as humans, not just another number. They said their professors got to know them personally and not just as students. Because nearly all their professors were
White, the relationships initiated by these professors and the kindness and care expressed by them formed a very positive impression on these students of color.

**Relationships With Staff**

In addition to the positive relationships with professors that contributed to their thriving, four students spoke highly of their relationships with members of the staff at their institution. They spoke of reciprocal relationships in which encouragement was given and received. They mentioned relationships with staff who were accessible, intentional, and open to addressing any question or problem the student broached. Students also talked about staff who trusted them and became their mentors.

Although all four students described intentional relationships with specific staff members who trusted them and treated them with kindness and respect, Liv knew the names of the people who worked in food service and cleaned the residence halls. She perceived them as “really supportive and encouraging.” These relationships were reciprocal, in that she also tried to encourage them.

Alex described two staff members with whom she interacted regularly. The first was the director of intercultural life on her campus. She described him as “intentional,” both in his role as director and personally, as he was “always checking in, making sure everyone is [okay].” He knows all the students of color on her campus and takes the time to reach out to each of them consistently to see how they are doing. She also described him as a “safe person,” someone she can trust and converse with about the challenges and barriers of being a student of color.

Alex also worked closely with the associate campus pastor who was her boss when she was a student mentor her sophomore year, and who serves as the advisor for the
organization on her campus that addresses social justice issues. She described him as “the best,” as “I feel like I can go to him with literally anything ranging from academics to spiritual life to relationships, anything, and I know that he will provide knowledge or wisdom and speak into that situation.” Both of these staff members were accessible, welcoming, and available. On a dominantly White campus, Alex experienced mutual respect and genuine care from them.

In addition to respect and care, Esther mentioned the level of trust she experienced from staff in her role as a student worker. One responsibility she had was a guard at the campus entrance, which was located quite far from most campus buildings. This distance created a challenge for Esther when she had to work during a semester break and the closest building with restroom facilities was going to be locked during that break. However, during the previous months, Esther and these women developed a relationship, and when the women who worked in that part of the building became aware of her dilemma, they made sure she had access to the building. This simple act of kindness was so important to Esther. “They actually gave me a key to that department so that I could go there whenever I needed. They really trusted me.” Although giving her a key was a simple gesture, the trust it implied was particularly meaningful to her.

Two students, Liv and Michelle, described relationships with staff that developed into mentoring relationships. Liv mentioned several staff members she considered more than supervisors or campus employees. One administrative assistant “is incredible. She’s there for the full gamut. And people really open up their lives [to her]. I know all her children’s names, and they come and visit the campus.” She also spoke highly of her direct supervisor. “I know his daughters. They’re always here. And when I was
quarantined, his daughter wrote me a card and gave me flowers.” These unexpected acts of kindness were personal and extended beyond the work relationship to include family.

Michelle also spoke of many staff members who intentionally and consistently built into her life as a student and as a person, “I have mentors, advisors [who] are willing to pour into my life and help me grow as a student and challenge [me]. I have co-workers willing to [collaborate] with me and challenge me, as well.” She was appreciative of the professional and student level of relationship, but also the personal level. What may have started as a professional relationship between a staff member and a student developed into a life-giving relationship, as staff members invested into Michelle both professionally and personally.

These students talked about so many individuals who in the everyday course of their college experience chose to befriend, encourage, mentor, and build into the lives of students of color; for these participants, the efforts of these staff members were noticed and appreciated. Relationships with staff members provided another dimension of support and encouragement for them. These students respected the staff members they worked for or with. They appreciated the employees who served their food in the cafeteria and cleaned their residence halls. They remembered staff members’ families who chose to nurture relationships with them in thoughtful ways. They called each other by name and built into each other’s lives.

**Relationships Beyond Campus**

Outside of family, relationships on campus were mentioned most often by these students as contributing to their thriving. Yet, several participants talked about how their relationships with individuals beyond their campuses supported their academic and
personal growth and enabled them to thrive. These relationships tended to be at church, in
the local community, or at work. Devin referred to the college group at the church he
attended and voiced his appreciation for the opportunity to simply be away from his
campus and interact with individuals in a different setting. He said “being able to just
have a new environment, a place that isn’t school, that you can just be open and talk
about things” was refreshing for him. Mely talked about time spent in the local
community near her campus and the two-fold benefit of investing in the lives of local
residents and making new friends. She shared, “Being able to reach out to communities
outside of the campus, that’s just awesome, and all the friends I’ve made, that’s definitely
a positive thing.” Developing relationships off campus was refreshing, enriching, and
mutually beneficial, as these students interacted with individuals in the local community.

Jacqueline described the relationship she has with her manager and co-workers, as
well as her experience volunteering at her church as supporting her endeavors as a
college student and encouraging her to persist.

I’ve been working at [a restaurant] for about three-and-a-half years. They’re also
making sure that my school is my number one priority, meaning that my manager
will work with me. If I have an exam I need to study for, if I need to finish a
paper, if I need to take less workdays, [she will say], “You need to put your
academics first!”

When Jacqueline spoke of the other volunteers at her church, she said “I have a whole
different family at church.” They, like Jacqueline, are also very goal-oriented. In addition
to working with the youth at their church, the other volunteers make sure Jacqueline is
studying and help her prepare for exams.
Tiana has worked at jobs off campus her entire college career. She said there were times when she did not have a “big sense of community” on her campus, and the relationships she developed at her church and at her workplace were even more important to her. She described her off-campus internship at an advertising agency in the large city where her school is located as an environment in which she was valued as a woman of color and cultivated her self-confidence:

Before [I started this internship], I never [wanted] to work in the corporate world. I [didn’t] want to go near it! But my company actually has really great company culture compared to other places that I’ve [worked.] The biggest way they’ve helped me, I think, professionally, [is they’ve] given me a lot of encouragement and strength. Even coming in with no agency experience, [they said] “We want to hear your perspective. We want you to learn [and] to know you’re valuable. You have the skill set. All of the things that you’ve done [previously are] going to make you so much better as a strategist within this company.”

This encouragement boosted Tiana’s confidence and enabled her to thrive.

Relationships beyond their campuses provided yet another source of support and encouragement for several participants. Individuals not directly connected to their institutions affirmed these students’ abilities and encouraged them academically. They provided a place for them to just be themselves and talk and created nurturing work and internship environments.

**Relationships and Sense of Community**

Relationships with individuals and small groups of people became a foundation for a broader sense of community. As these students developed relationships with their
peers and with faculty and staff, they began to sense they belonged on their campus, that their college environment had become their community, a place where they cared for others and others cared for them. Students talked about community in relation to their residence halls, the faculty and students in their major, and the campus organizations in which they participated. When participants talked about their sense of community, they used words such as “safe” and “belong” when they described feeling like a member of the community; they were investing into the well-being of others, and others were investing in them. They said they felt like they belonged. However, every participant also said that, based on their observations and experiences, not every student of color on their campus experienced the same sense of community they did. They used phrases such as “it’s kind of sad” when describing the sense of community on campus and referred to some students of color as “loners.”

Tiana shared that she has struggled with a sense of belonging and feeling part of a community as she moved frequently when she was younger and attended “five elementary schools, two middle schools, and three high schools.” As a college senior, she defined her community as “people who love you and support you. There’s still this sense of [being] here for one another, especially when things are very difficult.” Tiana’s primary and secondary school experiences highlight the importance of community at the college level. She needed to have a community in which there was love and support for others, particularly when life was challenging.

Jacqueline, a commuter, said the sense of community she experienced on campus motivated her to stay at her school and developed her determination to graduate:
I was able to grow [and feel] at home with [my] professors. A part of me just knows I belong [here]. I know many students like to transfer out, but it was always in the back of my head [that my professors have] seen me grow, and I should [finish my degree here]. I am definitely a student of [this] school in the eyes of my friends and my professors. So, I think just having that feeling of also wanting them to see me finish is why I’m so [determined] to finish and stay [here].

Jacqueline spoke with conviction about the relationship between the professors and friends who have been involved in her academic and personal growth and her desire to finish in the presence of this community, of her community.

Several students credited their sense of community to their involvement with smaller groups. Michelle said, “I feel like the community [at my institution is in] small pockets of community that I belong to. And that makes a good balance of all the support that I need.” She listed her residence hall wing, her scholarship program, and students and professors in her major. Mely also referred to other students in her major and her residence hall as smaller communities. She stated, “Other nursing students and my roommate and people that I live with and see every day, [they’ve] definitely contributed to me feeling like I belong [at my institution]. Liv also cited her residence hall experience as a contributor to her sense of belonging and added, “I feel like I belong when people trust me” and “just having people who I can be happy with, but also sad with, is really big in belonging.” These students shared the importance of their involvement in smaller communities within the larger campus community and of being able to share the full
spectrum of life and emotions with the people with whom they have mutually supporting relationships.

Although each participant affirmed they had a strong sense of community and felt like they belonged on their campus, they also talked about other students of color on their campus who did not have the same experience and perspective. Devin contrasted the words “college” and “home” in his description. He said that although some students of color might have a certain amount of sense of community at their institution, they do not feel at home at their institution:

A lot of people feel like this is their college, but it isn’t their home. [It’s] kind of sad. More students than not feel a lacking when it comes to belonging. This isn’t a place for them, [although] they have friends and they have people in different clubs and cliques. Ultimately, when it comes to saying that this is your home for four years, it’s been kind of lacking. I think that people can run into a situation that they just don’t feel like they belong; they feel like they fit in only with a couple of people and not with everyone at the college.

Devin mentioned he has friends in various groups of students such as other students in his major, and first-year students who arrived on campus the same time he did (although he was a junior transfer). He thought involvement in different campus organizations, studying in different majors, different outlooks on life, or even different reasons for enrolling at his institution might contribute to some students of color not feeling “at home.”

Liv echoed this theme as she talked about her desire to make her campus “home” for students “who don’t have friends” or “meaningful connections with others.” Mely
referred to some students of color that might not be as out-going as others and described them as “loners” who are “on their own.” She doubted that these students felt like they belonged on her campus. Jacqueline noticed students of color on her campus who made the effort to join the campus community, but their efforts were not reciprocated. She said that although some students of color invested in others, she “didn’t sense that other people were investing in them.”

For each of these 10 participants, their relationships with family, peers, professors, advisors, staff members, and individuals in their local communities contributed to their desire to go to college, their motivation to persist in college, their ability to cope with the challenges both inside and outside the classroom, and their sense of community on their campus. They consistently used the words “encouragement” and “support” when describing the importance of these relationships. The spectrum of their relationships enriched their lives, and the multiple overlapping layers of support and encouragement were critical to their well-being. Relationships mattered to them as they said they would not be thriving without these relationships.

**Leadership Opportunities Are Important**

The second theme, Leadership Opportunities Are Important, focuses on the leadership roles these students had in various campus organizations and programs. Rarely were they involved only as a member. Instead, they had leadership responsibilities; they planned, organized, developed, and evaluated. These leadership opportunities were usually connected to other campus relationships and the students’ desires to make changes to improve their campus environment. Some leadership positions increased these students’ sense of belonging on their campus. Some leadership positions were offered to
these students by faculty or staff who recognized their potential leadership skills and strengths while other roles were the direct result of students’ initiative, character, and hard work. Some students experienced the pain and disappointment associated with making difficult decisions. Other students worked closely with organization advisors and staff members or had oversight of other students in their organizations and programs. They had opportunity to develop and implement their philosophy of leadership, to hone life skills, to negotiate and compromise, and train other students for leadership roles. For these students, leadership opportunities provided them with hands-on experience in making a difference on their campus. Their involvement in diverse citizenship tasks (Schreiner 2010a) contributed to their thriving.

For some participants, leadership roles contributed to their sense of belonging on campus. For example, Tiana’s involvement in student government as a student senator gave her a sense of belonging and purpose on her campus and helped her develop compassion and empathy. She described it this way:

I think this [leadership role as a student senator] shaped me and really gave me a sense of community at [my institution]. Being a student senator who welcomes in new students was a big part of helping me feel like I belonged at that institution and helped me feel like I really had a purpose and could help other people. [Student government] was about developing yourself as a leader, but also being compassionate towards yourself and compassionate [and empathetic] towards others.
Tiana said that developing compassion and empathy for other students as well as toward herself in the context of a leadership role was very important to her, and welcoming new students to her campus increased her own sense of belonging.

Michelle’s leadership experience illustrates how some leadership roles are offered to students by faculty, staff, or fellow students who recognize the student’s skills, strengths, and potential. Michelle mentioned three leadership roles during her interview. She described her first role as social media manager as “one of the main experiences in my portfolio. I think I gained [this experience because] my advisor trusted me to do something more than just being a student.” Her professor, who also served as her academic advisor, identified Michelle’s potential and offered her the opportunity to develop that potential. Her advisor believed in her abilities and acted on that belief. This leadership role during her first year in college helped Michelle develop confidence and initiative. She said, “I’m always looking for those opportunities, and when there are opportunities, I take [them]!” The second leadership role Michelle mentioned related to another student of color who saw Michelle’s potential and trained Michelle for a leadership position opening up the following year. She explained, “When I was a junior, the student liaison [for the urban leadership scholarship program] saw me as a potential leader. She gave me lots of opportunities to serve.” After this student graduated, Michelle moved into the role of student liaison her senior year. The purposeful transition in leadership from one student to another is an example of one student of color preparing another student of color for a new leadership role. When Michelle assumed this third leadership opportunity, she brought her own leadership philosophy and style. She invited everyone to contribute to the discussions and gave each person a voice. She said, “I like
to include everyone. I don’t want to be the one talking a lot. So, as a leader, I did that, and everyone felt like their voices [were] heard.” Michelle’s leadership journey began with an opportunity given her by her advisor followed by an older student mentoring her to become the next student liaison for her scholarship program. Her journey culminated in a leadership position that gave Michelle opportunity to develop her skills even more. Michelle’s leadership experiences helped her develop confidence and collaborate with faculty, staff, and students. She identified her strengths and leadership philosophy and incorporated these into her leadership role her senior year.

Esther’s story is an example of a student who experienced the pain and disappointment of making difficult decisions. She thoroughly enjoyed her work in the campus safety and security department. She used her organizational skills and her ability to manage a plethora of details in a project assigned to her by her supervisor at her institution. She was tasked with the responsibility to create a report detailing various safety components of each building on her campus by mapping out the buildings, drawing a basic floor plan that included electrical and other details, and took pictures for future reference. Esther, who referred to spreadsheets by exclaiming, “Oh my goodness, that’s my thing!” readily expressed the benefits of completing this comprehensive campus project and the other opportunities she had working in the safety and security department. However, there were difficult aspects of her work experience that forced her to reconsider this campus job. She often would advocate for other students of color who came to the safety office to settle parking tickets. Too frequently, these became situations when the staff would make assumptions about these students’ irresponsibility or make inappropriate comments or jokes. In these instances, Esther was able to stand up for these
students because she knew them and their character. However, eventually the environment in this workspace became “just toxic,” and Esther made the difficult decision to resign from this job even though the income from this campus job was used to help finance her education.

Students also mentioned working closely with the advisors of their organizations and the staff members who had oversight of campus programs. Alex shared her experiences from working closely with the advisor for the social justice organization on her campus as well as the Residence Life staff. As one of the coordinators for the social justice organization, she worked closely with the advisor who challenged her to look beyond the immediate situation and consider possibilities of change in the future. Under the supervision of the campus ministries department, this organization facilitated and hosted events “where we talk about social issues and create a safe place to talk about them. Some of them are really hard, especially on a [dominantly White] campus like ours, but we feel the need to have those harder conversations.” Alex further explained the benefits of leadership in an organization that focuses on social justice:

I have been able to hear conversations and understand people in a new way. How I might look at one interaction or one situation can be extremely different from how someone else takes it because we come from different backgrounds, because we are different races: I’m multiracial, versus [someone who is] an African American student. So, I’m able to get more sides to the same story, basically, which I think is very beneficial because it allows me to think in a [broader] term.
In the same way Alex has learned to consider several perspectives of one social justice issue, she hoped other students would also learn to listen and consider all the responses to a specific controversial issue.

Based on her desire to build into the lives of first year students and begin to help them develop a sense of community on their campus, Alex applied for the position of student mentor (SM). Having benefited from her relationship with her SM during her first year, she wanted to be a part of this process for new students. The SM role is a companion to a resident assistant but has a unique focus and mission. Alex described an SM as “someone who’s there—call it a spiritual friend. They’re there for the students in the freshman halls, a person they can come to and talk confidentially about issues they are dealing with and not have to be concerned about being disciplined.” She said an SM differs from a resident assistant (RA) or a resident director (RD) in that the SM is not involved in student discipline.

Her experience as an SM led her to apply to be an RA her junior year, a role she enjoyed because of the meaningful relationships she was able to cultivate and the community she and the students developed in the residence hall:

Having meaningful connections with your residents [and the residence life] staff is very much another family that I have on this campus. I feel very safe with them. We come together and work very well. Across the whole campus, all of Res Life is very in tune with each other, and I see so much value in the stuff that we do from simple programming to bigger events. Definitely, Res Life has been very influential and allows me to connect with people I might never have connected with in my time being here. I might have never thought to speak to them in
passing on campus, but now that they’re my resident, I see them, and I live with them.

Connecting with her residents often involved getting to know them better through conversations over lunch or dinner and learning about each other’s lives and sharing stories; simple meaningful everyday interaction that can make a difference in students’ lives she would have missed had she not become an RA.

Students learned leadership does not require perfection; evaluating outcomes and learning from mistakes is more important. Both Alex (a junior) and Jacqueline (a senior) changed their perspectives on success, which influenced their understanding and philosophy of leadership. They concluded their leadership roles do not have to be perfect but do require learning from their mistakes. Jacqueline stated, “My success looks a lot different from someone else’s success. So, even if you fail, success is learning from that mistake and trying again.” Alex added:

If you would have asked freshman me, [my description of success] probably would have been [having] straight As all the time and do nothing wrong. But I quickly learned that that is not the definition of success. Now I view success as still having those [high] expectations for [myself] but being okay if they aren’t met [to] the fullest that [I] think they should be, and, most importantly, learning from something that might have gone wrong and [asking] “What can I do next time to do better?”

Alex and Jacqueline expressed it is possible and crucial to learn from mistakes in their leadership roles, and this perspective released them from the unrealistic demands of perfectionism.
I mentioned earlier in this section that some students were offered leadership positions by faculty and staff, and others worked hard to attain leadership roles. Liv experienced both pathways to leadership. Liv held several leadership positions on her campus. Her initial role in the urban leadership scholarship program was offered to her. She later applied for leadership as a resident assistant (RA). Her early experiences as a leader and her assessment of student life on her campus prompted her to run successfully for student body president. Her platform focused on students’ common beliefs and values and recognizing and embracing their differences with the purpose of building a legacy. She credited her successful campaign to her many friends who eagerly worked with her to develop and market her campaign platform and her plans for the campus and fellow students. As student body president, she had the opportunity to meet each week with all the student leaders on her campus: student government, student organizations and clubs, global involvement, intercultural programming, class officers, athletics, intramurals, and many more. “So, it’s such an eclectic group of people that all come together, and then I get to lead those meetings. [It is an] incredible opportunity!” Her role as student body president was the culmination of 3 years of building relationships and investing in the lives of fellow students.

When recounting their leadership roles and experiences, students mentioned personal growth, broadened perspectives, opportunities to get to know students and staff they otherwise would not have known, opportunities to listen as well as to lead, and opportunities to improve the personal and educational experiences of other students through success as well as failure. They were challenged and stretched, prodded to learn more and do more, and these opportunities and experiences in leadership contributed to
their thriving in college. One other phrase these students shared with regard to leadership related to what prompted them to lead in the first place. In addition to developing leadership skills and cultivating friendships, these students used their leadership positions to make an immediate difference on their campuses and prepare them for future endeavors after college.

**The Desire to Make a Difference**

Each research theme has roots in the themes previously mentioned. Relationships fostered leadership roles on their campuses, and these students’ leadership efforts were fueled by their desire to grow personally and make a positive difference at their institutions and in the world (collective benefit rather than only personal achievement), even when those efforts involved being vulnerable and taking risks. They referred to their involvement on and off campus as “something bigger” than themselves and as a means to express their “desire to make a difference.”

These students talked about how their strengths and personal cultural experiences influenced their desire to make a difference in others’ lives. They referred to being involved in something bigger than themselves, something that would extend beyond their individual efforts and current sphere of influence. One student built on her previous experience and her passion to make a difference on her campus by running for student body president. Several students were applying to graduate school to enhance their knowledge and skills to make a difference after college. Living out their intense desire to make a difference in the present and in the future contributed to their thriving.

Esther spoke about how her strengths and varied cultural experiences growing up were foundational for understanding how other people think and work. Her own culture
and her international cultural experiences in Brazil and Asia have influenced how she expressed her leadership values and style and her desire to make a difference. She also talked about her personal strengths of justice and fairness:

Something that my parents always told me about myself is that ever since I was little, I was really big on justice and fairness. It’s something that I brought with me now that I’m grown up, and I’m actually in a [leadership] position where I can help people. I can do something about it. I can speak up. I can educate people.

Esther’s strong sense of justice and fairness combined with her experience in multiple cultures have increased her ability and resolve to make a difference on her campus and in the world.

Alex illustrates the concept of being involved in something that is “bigger” than her, an effort or event that goes beyond individual influence primarily in the present. She referred to her involvement in the social justice organization on her campus when she said:

I’ve been the coordinator now for 2 years. I work on a team, and whether [we plan a movie night or a panel discussion], having that position gives me a leadership role, and it allows me to be part of something that I think is much bigger than myself. Even if I can’t make a change in that moment in time, I still feel like I’m planting seeds in people’s minds that they might have never considered talking about [before]. I don’t expect to change everybody’s mind [immediately], but if I can just [plant a] seed, maybe they come back to that same topic 5 or 10 years from now.
Alex wanted to make a difference in the present as well as influence students later in their lives. She knew some of her efforts could influence students years later, and the future possibilities for change encouraged her to continue to work for change now.

Liv also recognized her efforts to facilitate making a difference for her fellow students in the present could have long-term effects. After several leadership roles on her campus and observing the community culture at her institution, Liv wanted to do more, to make a bigger difference. During her first 3 years of college, Liv gained a broader perspective of campus life and decided to run for student body president to make her campus more welcoming to every student, a place where every student felt comfortable and at home, especially the students on the fringes of the campus community. She stated:

There definitely is that perspective in the back of my mind of how hard it is to be a person of color on this campus for some, and obviously it’s a two-way street, but there is ignorance that exists and that’s part of my role [in relationships and leadership] to [eradicate] that ignorance and push to make this place home [for every student].

Liv’s mention of “home” is only one of several references to home made by these students in their interviews. Their concept of home referred to being a full participant in the life of the college family, being included, acknowledged, heard, loved, cared for, invested in, and comfortable on a dominantly White campus. Liv wanted to be the leader of a task that was bigger than she alone could handle, and she was passionate about drawing many other students into the endeavor.

Several seniors were pursuing graduate school as an expression of their desire to make a difference. Yoda had applied to a graduate program in psychology so she can
continue to help people cope with the challenges they face. Jacqueline is using her
criminal justice major as preparation for law school. As a volunteer at her church, she has
seen so many Latinx families affected by the challenges their children face and wants to
represent these families and advocate for their children through the court system.
Michelle decided to go to graduate school to continue her personal and academic growth,
even though she considers it a big risk. She said, “I’m challenging myself to go further
and study more” because she believes education will increase her opportunities in
leadership and making a difference. Jesús also plans to continue his education so he can
help students who live in poverty. He described them as the students no one wants to talk
to, whose clothes are ripped and dirty, and “don’t smell good because they can’t shower.”
He said, “My research for my master’s program [will focus] on how [students living in
poverty] really need our support and motivation.” He continued by adding it is not just
about a new pair of shoes or providing a new laptop. He believed students and their
families living in poverty need mental health support, encouragement, and opportunities
to make changes in their lives, and he wants to be involved in that hard work.

The students in this study are aware of the world they must learn to navigate, the
challenges and barriers faced by their families and other families of color, and they are
driven to make a difference. For these students of color, making a difference based on
their life experience and leadership roles at their institutions required an awareness of the
needs around them and a passion to do something productive to address those needs.
Involving themselves in campus and world issues bigger than themselves was an outlet
for expressing their values and passions; this involvement contributed significantly to
their thriving. For these students of color, their insight for helping others also included
being aware of their campus racial climate and the life challenges faced by their families and ethnic communities. In addition to investing their talents and energy into relationships and leadership in campus organizations and programs, these participants talked about how they were able to thrive on a dominantly White faith-based campus where students of color were still treated differently and “less than” White students.

**Racial Climate—Not Yet Where We Need to Be**

When these 10 students spoke about the racial climate on each of their campuses, they shared both the positives and negatives. They talked about the institutional changes leading to improvements on their campuses, and they also discussed the bias and prejudice they still faced at the individual level because of their race or ethnicity. They readily acknowledged racism was present on their campuses but had experienced such racism primarily expressed as microaggressions rather than overt discrimination. Most participants considered the primary cause of racism at their institutions to be “ignorance” rather than hatred or a conscious sense of White superiority. Their personal responses to racism in the college setting connected to their deep desire to make a difference on their campus and in the world. They reported that when they perceived inappropriate behavior, they tended to speak up, teach, and respond with grace and patience. They were hopeful about the changes in process at both the institutional and individual levels but cautioned there is still much work to be done for all students to feel safe and at home, and for each campus to foster an environment in which every student, particularly every student of color, has the opportunity to thrive.

This section begins with students’ comments about institutional change then moves to what students said about campus racial climate at the individual level. Their
initial remarks about campus racial climate were favorable. One student described her institution’s approach to diversity as “thoughtful” and “loving.” Another student described their campus diversity as “really healthy.” They elaborated on what administrators and other institutional agents were doing to facilitate change in campus racial climate. These efforts included plans to celebrate Hispanic Month and Black History Month; bringing a specialist on race relations in Christian communities to campus; and setting up campus-wide dialogues to facilitate a better understanding of race, ethnicity, nationality, and culture. However, as they described their personal experiences in more detail, they referred to racial discomfort, microaggressions, and having to weigh the overall value of seeking justice or simply moving on because of the time and emotional energy required to report a racial incident. They also talked about the tension they felt on campus as well as feelings of exhaustion and fear. There were times they were hesitant to speak up, and they consistently avoided conversations involving politics.

These participants’ initial remarks about campus racial climate were quite positive. For example, Devin, a biracial student at a school on the West Coast with a higher percentage of diversity than the other four schools referred to in this study, was encouraged by the racial, cultural, and international diversity on his campus. In addition to African American, Latinx, and White students from the United States, students from countries such as Brazil, Russia, and Australia also had a presence at his institution. He said the diversity on his campus was “really good” and “really healthy.” Devin had not personally “felt any discrimination or bias” and stated, “I think the positive diverse climate has let me know that I don’t have to hide being different.” Devin perceived an
absence of discrimination directed personally toward him, and the diversity on his campus allowed him to freely express his own racial identity.

Esther, an Afro-Latinx student attending a school in the Southeast with approximately 10% diversity in the student body, described an example of efforts made at the administrative level at her school. She was encouraged by her institution’s commitment to begin hosting events that focused on the heritage and culture of various ethnicities:

[My school has] been having events for Hispanic Month [this year], and next year, they are planning to do Black History Month, which is so important. As an Afro-Latina, being able to be in a community that’s willing to learn more [about other races and cultures] is huge.

Esther believed the recent large campus events provided opportunities for dialogue between people who are different and were an indication that the administrators at her school were trying to promote students of color and their cultures. She added that these types of events contributed to her sense of belonging on her campus. She felt valued and encouraged when a question-and-answer chapel service focused on students of color:

One of the things that we talked about were these assumptions you automatically think [of when] a person says they’re from [a] certain country. One of the girls from Mexico [talked] about the culture [and] the assumptions [about Mexican woman] which [were] so similar to South American women in general. To just have somebody representing you, clarifying those things, and [saying], “Hey, we don’t like [it] when you make a joke about this or when you make a comment like
this.” That has been a huge part of helping me to have that sense of belonging, because [I felt like I was not] an outcast.

As a result of the campus-wide chapel service, Esther felt represented, given a voice, valued, and respected; she felt her culture was being taken seriously.

Another example of a change in campus racial climate initiated from the faculty and staff level focused on two institutional agents who were described as a “bridge” between students of color and faculty. Alex is a biracial student enrolled at a school in the Midwest which has a diverse student population of less than 10%. She credited the intercultural director and the associate campus pastor for facilitating racial climate changes on her campus. Because the intercultural director is at the faculty level and he is a person of color, he “is the voice of the students of color” to the faculty. Alex said the intercultural director has “built meaningful relationships with all of us” and welcomes their opinions and feedback. As a result, Alex felt these two people on campus “are very crucial in making students feel like they’ve [been] heard. At least one person is listening, and they can take it to a table that I can’t get to.” She explained it is beneficial to be able to speak with these “bridge people” so she can gain perspective. She said, “We’re able to hear from [the other] side while also voicing our concern.” The intercultural director and the associate campus pastor facilitated two-way communication between students of color and the faculty, giving both parties a voice and expanding mutual understanding.

Students’ comments moved from the positive aspects of racial climate to more specific individual examples of prejudice, bias, and microaggressions. Several students alluded to positive efforts toward change initiated at their institutions but expressed that so much more still needed to be accomplished. Referring to the work at the institutional
level, students said, “I definitely see that the effort [is] there, [but] we’re not there yet” or “we are making steps in the right direction for people to feel represented.” These types of phrases were followed by further detail about their personal experiences and what they believed still needed to change. They noticed changes at the institutional level, but interaction with students at the individual level was different. Esther wondered, “Yes, we’re celebrating the diversity and respecting others’ cultures, but how are we being more practical about [the ignorance on campus about other cultures and ethnicities] and reaching out to each other and making an effort to change that?” Esther and several other students of color saw a difference between institutional efforts and the need for change at the individual level.

Several students attributed the need for individual change to “ignorance.” They made a distinction between intentional racism and ignorance or a lack of awareness. Liv shared her story of an event on her campus that illustrated this idea. She noted a large portion of the student body at her school responded to the plight of the Burmese population living under oppression in Myanmar. An ethnic student organization sold t-shirts to raise money and planned an evening of prayer attended by “hundreds of students.” Although support was obviously expressed for the Burmese people in a collective way at this event, on other occasions individual students at her institution spoke inappropriately to Asian American students and other students of color. Her summary of this disconnect was “I don’t think it’s racism. It’s definitely just ignorance.” She then added that many students simply do not know what to do about social justice.

Jacqueline, a Latina attending a school on the West Coast, also provided an example of how ignorance plays into racism on her campus. She contrasted the diversity
of the people who live in the community surrounding her school, the community where she and her family live, with the “predominantly White Christian upper-class” students who also attend her school. She said she could feel the cultural difference as soon as she stepped on campus. She said that in addition to the more affluent White students on her campus, some students of color also came from middle-class families. She commented, “I don’t want to say the [middle-class students of color are] white-washed, but they have grown up in a different [environment]. They didn’t grow up with the same [financial or cultural] struggles [that people in my community have].” Ignorance of the culture and economic status of residents in the local community just beyond the campus boundaries made it difficult for students to understand and relate to Jacqueline and those in the community surrounding the school.

Mely agreed that ignorance was at the root of most racial slights. An African American senior at a school in the Southeast with low diversity, she commented that some people on her campus said things without realizing it was offensive and hurtful. Initially, she just let it go because she did not want to jeopardize new friendships, and she wanted to fit in. However, she concluded that to truly be a friend, she needed to talk about what her friends said and did that were offensive to her. Mely elaborated on this “lack of awareness”:

A lot of times the White students tried to always make it seem like there’s not a difference between them and students of color. And I know that they don’t mean anything [bad by that]. It’s okay to acknowledge that I’m different than you. And I think the main issue that I’ve noticed on campus [is] just ignoring that there is a racial and cultural difference.
Mely said it is better to acknowledge she is different from White students than to pretend differences do not exist.

Some students’ experiences with racism had different degrees of intensity. For example, there were references to “weird situations” or “questions or comments that were just a little uncomfy.” For example, Tiana said she never felt she was not accepted, but, as an African American at a school in the center of a large city on the East Coast with less than 10% diversity, she did experience a few incidents when she thought that if she investigated the incidents a bit more, there could have been a racism issue. At that point, she had to determine what was best for her in the long run; she concluded that for her personally “she [didn’t] think it was worth it to further investigate.” She said, “I’m at a point where [I realize] people are flawed, and I just want to be a positive example towards people, [especially] in the past year with race riots.” Tiana’s experience draws attention to how students of color chose to respond to microaggressions. They can address it in more personal ways as Tiana did or report the incident to the appropriate authorities.

Some students contemplated what kind of effort might reduce “ignorance” and create space on campus for important conversations. Liv described herself as Asian-European based on her family heritage of Filipino, German, and Irish. She was quite candid about what students of color experienced on her campus in the Midwest and the importance of “just having space where we’re all brought together and have hard conversations lovingly” about microaggressions, hate crimes, or the deaths of Black men such as George Floyd. She then asked:
Isn’t anyone talking about this right when hate crimes are happening, getting to flip the script and say, “I understand how hard this is” and “I can’t even imagine what it’s like”? Have you ever asked an Asian how they’re feeling right now? Liv added that all students are battling different things, and it is easy to lose sight of the bigger picture.

One student stated that life is more difficult when students of color do not feel represented or heard, or when they do not have the opportunity or space to discuss current racial issues. Alex stated that “events like Black Lives Matter brought up a lot of things, and sometimes they weren’t talked about. But you could feel it. And I think people were just on edge; everyone felt on edge.” Her simple, yet telling statement emphasized the importance of providing the time and space for students to work through difficult racial events and to debrief with individuals who understand their perspective. Otherwise, the tension related to that event continues to build.

Other students’ interview comments indicated they do not always feel recognized, they rarely have a voice in decision-making and policy, they encountered bias and prejudice, and they had to manage the fatigue caused by microaggressions. For example, Esther had considered her campus workplace a “safe haven” until she started hearing sexist and racist comments directed to other people. She felt like she was “constantly being judged,” and the reactions and responses from her coworkers were “heartbreaking. People are sometimes so hurtful, even in their little comments or jokes.” She shared her internal dialogue this way:

To my face, you’re going to act a certain way, but as soon as I turn around, you’re going to be a completely different person. You’re not going to make these little
snarky comments when I’m around, but you’re gonna make it whenever you’re around other people.

Esther described herself as someone who has struggled with insecurities, so having to cope with these microaggressions was “really discouraging.” She said “I guess it just adds to [the insecurities]. It’s definitely a challenge. I would say it’s something that I don’t think about a lot, but when I [stop] to think about it, it gets really exhausting.” Both Esther and Alex referred to the emotional toll microaggressions cause for students of color, the increased tension of being on edge and the sheer exhaustion of having to process the insults, jokes, and derogatory comments directed at them because they are persons of color.

In addition to current racial events, a few students talked about the political component of racism. A few students commented about how at conservative Christian colleges and universities, it is usually assumed that students have the same political views. This assumption resulted in confusion and fear for many students of color on Michelle’s campus when students reacted to the administration inviting a prominent conservative politician to speak on campus for a major event. Michelle, an Asian American studying at a campus in the Midwest, said the atmosphere on campus changed dramatically: “[Students of color] didn’t show up” for that event, and there were “a lot of call outs in the classroom.” It was “very scary” and “a really unhealthy climate for everyone.” Students were impacted immediately as well as in the succeeding months. Michelle stated:
[That] was a really hard year because everyone was either afraid to talk or they weren’t afraid. [Students] didn’t want to hear the other side of the story. They wanted to stick with their side and just feel more hatred with one another.

Michelle’s account of this campus event illustrates the importance of communication and the significance of the administrators and other institutional agents understanding of the heritage and culture of all the students enrolled in their institution.

Jacqueline also addressed what happened on her campus when racial events overlapped with politics. She said she avoids political conversations because of the tension that results from the combination of race and politics. She explained her thoughts this way:

As you can imagine, with the whole Black Lives Matter movement, with police brutality, all [these types] of things have been going on. Students have their very own opinions. And they definitely bring it onto the college campus. I know there’s students who have Trump banners on their trucks or Blue Lives Matter, all those type of things are on our campus and you just feel the awkwardness. You just feel the tension between students, and coming from a criminal justice major, it’s just more noticeable. And then because we’re on a Christian campus, it’s so weird because two worlds are colliding that shouldn’t be colliding in the first place, but, yet are because of students. So, it’s just that tension that you can feel. I try not to make it an issue, but it’s just in the back of my head, knowing that some students don’t want me there, nor do they like seeing me there.

Jacqueline’s words were packed with emotion and pain. She noted the irony of the tension and awkwardness that existed on a Christian campus because of differing views
on race and politics and shared how unwelcomed she felt on her campus because of how some students expressed their opinions.

In sum, students initially shared positive comments about their campus racial climate. Most were encouraged and hopeful about seeing improvement initiated on their campuses from the administrative level. However, students also provided examples of incidents in which they experienced the frustration of individual students’ ignorance about diversity and microaggressions including insults, jokes, and negative assumptions about character directed at them or at fellow students of color. Negative campus racial climate inhibited some students’ sense of belonging on their campuses, which then influenced their thriving. To paraphrase what most of them said with regard to an inviting, welcoming home environment: their campuses are not yet where they need to be. A consistent home environment does not exist for all students of color. However, it is important to also note that these students exhibited a positive perspective. They believed change was possible. They were hopeful that relationships between persons of color and White persons could improve and would be better in the near future. They were working for that improvement. They wanted to make a difference, and their hopeful perspective was grounded in their faith and spirituality.

Hope and Positive Perspective—The Spiritual Connection

Most participants made a strong connection between what they believe about God and how they viewed their experiences. Their faith in God provided perspective and hope when they struggled with academics, relationships, racism, and personal difficulties. Their faith in God grounded them. Their faith-based positive perspective and hope contributed to their thriving. The following paragraphs describe how belief in God
changed their outlook on life and learning, was a primary reason for choosing their institution, provided a foundation for strong lifelong friendships, adjusted attitudes, and influenced how they measured their success.

Faith in God influenced their approach to life and academics. Their education was not just a personal endeavor; it was motivated by God’s care for them. Tiana said that at her current school her “mentality definitely changed.” The year before she transferred was a time when she “personally renewed [her] faith and invested time into God.” She said her focus changed as she endeavored to “honor and glorify God in everything.” Her faith and relationship with God became a source of strength and determination.

A spiritual environment in which students could increase their faith and develop a deeper relationship with God influenced their choice of institution. Living and learning in an atmosphere of shared beliefs was another source of support and encouragement for some students. For example, Michelle chose her school for the “opportunity to grow in my faith as well as in my academics.” She said, “[my family] knew that the faith aspect is very important for my growth, and they knew the level of care and intentional community that [my institution] has to offer.” Her institution facilitated her ability to create relationships founded on a shared belief in Christ: “From the first day that I [was] on campus, I was really surprised how the upperclassmen integrated faith into everything.” Michelle also talked about how one of her closest friends challenged her spiritually. They talked about their relationship with God, prayed together regularly, encouraged each other in their faith, and came to value their friendship because of their shared faith. Michelle also referred to the support of the pastor of her church and her fellow church members that encouraged her to persist and work toward earning her degree.
Their common spiritual beliefs also helped these students develop close relationships with students who were different than them. Some of Liv’s closest friends were White, and their faith was an important component to their “lifelong” friendships. She said:

I’d say my closest friends, a lot of them are White. They’re just girls [whose] hearts are so passionate for the Lord and are very like-minded, very encouraging, keep each other accountable, and are always growing. Seeing myself grow in [my faith] and having friends that are also [growing] is really cool.

Not only were Liv’s friendships strong during her college years, but she also described them as lifelong relationships.

Faith in God influenced personal growth in other facets of some of these students’ lives. They mentioned a change of attitude, self-confidence and values, developing a philosophy for how to treat others, and a standard for measuring their success. Jesús emphasized the importance of his relationship with God and how it contributed to his personal growth and change in attitude. He said “I really got close to God [at my institution]. I went from being negative, everything bothered me to [enjoying] life now.”

Esther summarized her perspective on relationships when she stated, “My real friends know [me], and God knows me, and that’s all that I need.” These statements express the importance of being known and understood by others and how that defined what was truly necessary for Esther to live a confident life. Yoda shared her philosophy of extending grace to others, especially those who do not treat her kindly or are unaware of their discrimination and bias toward her and other persons of color. She endeavors to live by the Golden Rule from the Gospel of Matthew, to treat others in the same way one
wants to be treated. Devin drew a connection between his faith in God and how he measures success. He described success as being able to glorify God through everything he does and to add value to someone else’s life to the extent that they are “able to accomplish things you aren’t able to accomplish, to elevate someone else to do more than you did.” It is an approach to life that is selfless, humble, and works for the good of others.

These students’ faith in God provided a basis for their hope for change and a positive perspective when life was difficult. Their belief in God was not a stand-alone dimension of their lives. They integrated their faith in God into their academics, relationships, life philosophy, and behaviors toward others.

Get to Know Me

In addition to questions about their thriving, academics, relationships, leadership roles, and motivation, I asked these participants to share advice that would help future students of color thrive in college. I also asked them for their advice to college faculty and staff that would help students of color thrive. They did not hesitate in their answers to these questions, and their responses revealed more about each participant and what they believe contributed to their thriving.

This final theme reveals a very personal facet of each participant. Their advice to students and to faculty and staff in higher education provided another view into their values and perspectives on thriving. The main topics of their advice to students were communication, relationships, and choice of institution. Advice to faculty and staff focused on understanding the student first as a person; listening and exhibiting personal
qualities such as humility, patience, and kindness; affirmation; culturally relevant learning environments; and communication.

Participants’ advice to students focused primarily on cultivating healthy relationships. Students drew from their own experiences to provide wisdom and direction for future students of color these participants believed would help them thrive in college. Relationship advice referred to good communication, character, trust, and the college environment.

With an emphasis on “true communication” and personal character, Liv shared advice on relationships. She emphasized the importance of both listening and speaking when developing a new relationship. She also talked about compassion and humility:

Be willing to listen as much as you are willing to speak. Relationship is a two-way street, and it starts with [active] listening and genuine care. You need both strong convictions and compassion with humility. Be ready to listen first before you give your opinion.

Liv also said asking clarifying questions in a loving way could prompt conversations that would help a new student get to know others in meaningful ways and used the word “humble” several times as she described developing healthy relationships with others.

The qualities of trust and belief were added to the list for developing relationships. New students were advised to “find people who you trust and who believe in you…search far and wide for them because that support is going to be huge!” Incoming students were encouraged to contribute to a relationship as much as they desired to receive from a relationship, and “be willing to receive help!” New students were advised to “be comfortable about stepping into this unknown territory of college”
and were assured they would “find people that are good and are safe.” The people who they would find might look like them or they might not, but they would be worth the search.

New students were also advised to find a school that was a good fit for them. Enrolling in an institution that suits them would help them understand themselves better and be in an environment where they could develop healthy relationships. Jesús said, “I feel like students need to find where home is. That’s very important. Honestly, they need to find not where they want to go [to school], but where they fit.” This advice came from a student who attended eight schools before he found his best fit.

Advice to promote thriving in new students centered around healthy relationships based on trust, giving and receiving, and support in an environment that would encourage students to step into “the unknown.” In their advice to future students of color, these participants revealed what contributed to their thriving: supportive relationships based on humility and compassion where there was “giving and receiving” in an environment that was both “safe” and stretching.

Advice to faculty and staff was more extensive, but also congruent with the theme of “Get to Know Me.” Participants advised faculty and staff to understand each of their students of color and “get to know” them first as a person; an individual with a story, life experience, and hope for the future. Their advice also included a long list of human characteristics including humility, patience, and compassion. Their advice included “affirmation” and the importance of an inviting learning environment for all students. Finally, these participants wanted to remind faculty and staff of the importance of “what they say and how they say it.”
When students talked about the idea of getting to know and understand the student first as an individual, they were referring to the student’s life situations such as SES and whether they were working two jobs for personal survival and to provide for the family while going to school full-time. Devin recommended that once faculty and staff understood the person, they could “then speak growth and life into the student academically and spiritually.” Tiana’s advice was similar, but she and other participants added important characteristics and qualities faculty and staff should develop. She said, “I think the biggest thing is listen. Listen and be humble, be willing to just get to know your students. Be patient, humble, kind, get to know your students.” Liv added, “Be teachable. Be compassionate.” Alex advised, “Meet the student where they are, no matter what their status might be, academically or socially. Don’t stop being a faculty member, but lose that mask for a moment and just meet them where they are.” Jesús continued this thread by including poverty and mental illness in the list of life situations that affected students. He said students who live with poverty, mental illness, and less motivation need to know someone cares about them. Michelle also mentioned the importance of getting to know students personally:

I feel like if you really want to know someone, you have to be able to make the students feel comfortable and reach out to them. Get out of your comfort zone and invite students into a conversation, showing they care, being friendly.

These participants emphasized relationship, character, and a willingness to invest in students in ways that align with who they are. Personal knowledge then allows institutional agents to refer students to appropriate academic resources and culturally relevant organizations and programs.
Another category of advice to faculty and staff focused on affirmation. When a professor or staff member understands a student well, they can then affirm the student knowledgably and sincerely. Alex declared, “Affirm that the student can do it! They need to hear this phrase: ‘You can do it!’” She then shared her backstory about this phrase:

[My Dad] doesn’t allow us to say “can’t;” it is like his cuss word. He has slowly taken “can’t” out of my vocabulary. And I think that was a very important lesson that I wish younger me could have known, but also something I wish other people would implement to let them know that they can do it. You should never say “You can’t.” You can always try.

Alex emphasized the significance of how simple words of affirmation have influenced her life and attitude toward difficult tasks and how students of color just starting college also need to hear true, sincere affirmation consistently.

The next category of advice related to inclusive curriculum and learning resources. Jacqueline proposed professors be inclusive and diverse in their curriculum, assignments, sources, perspectives, lecture content, reading requirements, videos, and conversations. She suggested:

Just [be] broader and beyond the White Christian authors. I’ve had a couple of professors who were very much only Christian [and] White-oriented, and you can see that some students just didn’t feel as connected in those aspects. Professors [need to] realize that there [are] different types of students and [try] to make that effort to have the [homework and lectures] be more diversified.

Jacqueline’s advice relates to welcoming students to the campus and making it feel like home for them. Including perspectives and learning resources that reflect the experiences
of people of color helps new students of color relate to the content and engage in the learning process which helps them thrive.

The final category of advice is about what faculty and staff say and the way they say it. Content matters but so does tone of voice and body language. Where the professor or staff member speaks and with whom they speak is also relevant. Michelle discussed the importance of one-on-one conversations with students of color rather than calling on students of color during class to address a specific question about culture or race. She encouraged faculty to make the class a more comfortable and inviting learning environment for all students, and students of color in particular, by encouraging participation rather than demanding it. She emphasized understanding the student as a person first but went on to say, “Some professors want to help students of color, but they don’t know [how] to help.” Michelle added that expecting a new student to contribute to a class discussion before getting to know them as an individual could be intimidating and could discourage the student from future participation. She advised professors to reach out to students before or after class, talking to them “just one-on-one” first before “calling [them] out in front of [their] peers.” Michelle’s advice is based on making new students of color feel welcome in the college classroom by inviting them into a conversation or discussion in a more private setting before expecting them to speak in front of a group of students who may look different from them.

Two other participants contributed to the advice on what a professor says and how, when, and where it is said. Tiana added that faculty and staff should “be open to dialogue and hearing different perspectives. Be willing to learn as much about your students as you expect your students to learn what you are teaching.” Michelle echoed
this advice, “Please be more considerate of the things you say, the way you say things. It’s the way that you say it that can sometimes affect people.” Her advice came from personal experience in a class in which she was the only woman of color. Her professor was talking about a political issue, sharing his personal perspective in a professional manner. Previously in this class, the professor emphasized the importance of equality and how God sees each person and values each person, and how “especially in a Christian institution, we’re supposed to be acting like Him.” On this particular day when the professor was expressing his personal perspective on a political issue in a manner that valued every individual, the student shared her response:

I remember that day. I literally ripped a page from my notebook and I wrote a little note saying “Thank you,” because of how refreshing that was, how valued [my professor] made me feel as a woman of color. That was really refreshing.

For Tiana and Michelle, the manner in which content is presented is sometimes more valuable than the content itself. Michelle was refreshed by her professor’s professional and personal expression of God’s value of each and every individual, including her.

Participants’ advice to faculty and staff reflects their desire to be known and understood as an individual student of color. Their advice was offered to help institutional agents do what these participants believe will help future students of color at dominantly White faith-based institutions thrive in college.

Conclusion

This chapter described the 10 participants in this study and presented their thoughts on the concept of thriving. Each of the six themes that emerged from the interview data was discussed: Relationships Matter; Leadership Opportunities Are
Important; The Desire to Make a Difference; Racial Climate—Not Yet Where We Need to Be; Hope and Positive Perspective—The Spiritual Connection; and Get to Know Me. Each of these related to or built on previous themes to give voice to participants’ experiences, perspectives, and life wisdom related to their thriving in college. In Chapter 5, I analyze these themes compared to the literature on thriving students of color.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Chapter 4 documents what participants perceived and how they made meaning of their lived experiences that contributed to their thriving in college on dominantly White faith-based campuses. Employing hermeneutic phenomenology, I analyzed the essence of their responses and offer an interpretation of the findings. I focus on six specific topics that influence thriving in students of color: support and encouragement, the role of faculty and staff, making a positive difference, spirituality, campus racial climate, and advice from participants to help future students of color thrive. I also compare the analysis and interpretation of the findings in this study to the current literature on thriving and students of color in college.

Support and Encouragement

The most prominent theme, Relationships Matter, illustrates the significance participants placed on their various relationships and how they perceived these relationships contributed to their thriving. They consistently used the words “support” and “encouragement” when they spoke about their relationships. They received support and encouragement from various sources, including family, peers, faculty, staff, and individuals off campus, such as employers, co-workers, fellow volunteers, and internship supervisors. This support and encouragement helped them decide to attend college, choose their specific institution, and persist through academic and personal challenges. The support and encouragement in relationships influenced their personal growth and sense of community on their campuses. As participants shared examples of the support and encouragement they received, they also shared how they then extended support and
encouragement to others. In some cases, the support and encouragement they received were returned to those from whom it originated; in other situations, their support and encouragement were extended to individuals who may not have reciprocated.

Reciprocal support and encouragement were expressed in the spectrum of relationships mentioned previously: family, peers, professors, staff members, and individuals off campus. Families supported their students and were later encouraged by the growth and progress their students made as they progressed through their courses of study and leadership roles. Reciprocal support and encouragement occurred at the peer level as well, as illustrated by Michelle who encouraged her friend to join her as a social media manager for their major. Their combined efforts increased the creativity in their media posts, which then encouraged Michelle as she realized their collective efforts were an improvement over her previous individual work. Relationships in the residence halls also illustrate reciprocal support and encouragement as students helped each other through academic and personal challenges throughout their college experience. Several students took the time to extend support and encouragement to their professors and staff members through notes and other acts of kindness, such as helping hang Christmas lights at a professor’s house or greeting by name those who served their food in the cafeteria or cleaned the buildings on campus. These experiences of giving and receiving support and encouragement in various relationships contributed to these participants’ thriving in college.

In addition to reciprocal support and encouragement, students extended support and encouragement to individuals who may not have returned support or encouragement. These expressions of Diverse Citizenship (Schreiner 2010a) contributed to their thriving.
In their leadership roles, participants encouraged other students to join an organization and work toward improving life on campus or in the local community. Participants talked about being involved in causes bigger than themselves. They worked for the common good and for the benefit of others by volunteering in the local communities surrounding their campuses and addressing social justice issues at their institutions. These students were able to overcome the difficulties they faced during college, in part, because they were in healthy relationships that allowed them to process challenges and employ resources and strategies to address the challenges they encountered and move forward.

Students also spoke of developing relationships with people who did not look like them, as well as with those who did look like them. They made a conscious choice to enroll in a dominantly White institution, knowing most of their new friends, classmates, and nearly every professor and staff member would be White people. Their previous life experience informed them they would encounter some form of racism, yet they still decided to attend. They were willing to diminish their racial identity to initiate and cultivate relationships with White individuals they valued and from whom they benefitted. They also pursued relationships with people who looked like them, stating these relationships were safe and life-giving. In the context of relationships with people who looked like them, they felt comfortable, could just be themselves, and relate more easily to these friends. Although relationships with people who did not look like them and those who did look like them were both valued and beneficial, participants seemed to indicate their relationships with students who looked like them were vital to their well-being and thriving. They needed friends who were fellow students of color. Their
relationships with individuals who looked like them were critical to their sense of community and belonging which, in turn, influenced their thriving.

The findings related to how support and encouragement as experienced in healthy relationships contributed to thriving for these participants are congruent with previous literature on thriving. The giving and receiving of support and encouragement was reported by Derrico et al. (2015) and Schreiner (2020) as examples of the thriving constructs of Social Connectedness (healthy meaningful relationship) and Diverse Citizenship (valuing the differences in other students and contributing to positive changes in communities locally and globally). In a qualitative study based on interviews with 23 students from five dominantly White faith-based institutions, Derrico and her colleagues (2015) found meaningful relationships influenced students’ perceptions of their thriving. Students involved in meaningful relationships felt known by others, believed their voice was heard, felt confident enough in healthy relationships to ask for help when they were struggling, and experienced a sense of community on their campus. Although the thriving literature reported reciprocal support and encouragement in students’ relationships contributes to their thriving, my study may add another nuance to the contribution of relationships to thriving for students of color, as participants in this study experienced overlapping layers of support and encouragement from multiple sources. In challenging academic and personal situations, these students drew from the support and encouragement of their families, peers, faculty and staff, and individuals off campus.

One additional finding from student relationships may also be worth considering. For at least two participants, the sacrificial nature of their family support was a source of motivation in college. For example, Michelle’s family moved to the United States as
refugees, leaving behind their extended family and friends and the familiarity and comfort of their home and culture to provide better opportunities for their children. This significant sacrifice motivated Michelle to work hard in college, which then also contributed to her thriving. A second participant was motivated to work hard in college by her family history. Mely determined to take full advantage of the opportunities offered her by a college education because her grandmother did not have the opportunity to go to college. African Americans such as Mely’s grandmother and other minoritized races and ethnicities were denied a college education because of the systemic oppression they experienced in the United States.

The Role of Faculty and Staff in Student Thriving

Participants emphasized the importance of their relationships with faculty and staff and how their interaction both in and out of the classroom influenced thriving. These students spoke highly of their professors and shared examples of professors’ academic and personal support and encouragement. The literature on thriving and student success consistently refers to the important role of faculty, and the experiences of these participants align with previous research (e.g., Kuh et al., 2008; Mayhew et al., 2016; Schreiner, 2014; Schreiner et al., 2020).

Participants’ relationships with their professors contributed to their thriving, specifically in the areas of Engaged Learning and Academic Determination (Schreiner, 2010a). Of note were the comments students made about professors, academic advisors, and staff members who recognized their potential and abilities, believed in them, and trusted them. These types of affirmations of students of color on dominant White campuses are congruent with the research by Rendón (1994, 2006) which led to the
development of validation theory. First introduced by Rendón in 1994, validation refers to affirmation of non-traditional students (including students of color) by faculty and other institutional agents for the express purpose of recognizing students academically and personally by treating all students equally, being approachable, and working with students who may need extra help. Rendón (1994) found when students are validated, “they experience a feeling of self worth and…everything that they bring to the college experience is accepted and recognized as valuable. Lacking validation, students feel crippled, silenced, subordinate and/or mistrusted” (p. 44). Every participant mentioned the importance of validation in their college experiences and how affirmations from faculty, staff, and other students contributed to their thriving.

**Making a Positive Difference**

Participants’ descriptions of thriving that were reflected in the themes Leadership Opportunities Are Important and The Desire to Make a Difference are also congruent with the literature on thriving, as they express the elements associated with the thriving constructs of Positive Perspective (viewing the world and the future optimistically), Social Connectedness, and Diverse Citizenship (Schreiner 2010a). In their leadership roles, participants accepted greater responsibilities, increased their self-confidence, developed their strengths, took initiative, gained respect, advocated for themselves and others, and lived out their desire to make a positive difference on their campus and in the world. When describing their leadership opportunities and building into the lives of others to help them succeed, participants used such words as “joy,” “gratefulness,” and “constant growth.” Their leadership initiatives provided a platform for working with others to make a difference on their campus and in their world that was informed by their
positive perspective. These students’ attitudes, goals, and actions all worked together to contribute to their thriving and make a positive difference for others in the process.

Congruent with the thriving literature, these participants’ sense of community and belonging on their campuses increased. They focused more on the success of others than gaining recognition for their own personal accomplishments and were able to reframe failures in leadership into opportunities for evaluation and growth. They developed the capacity to wait for change in the future based on their endeavors in the present and sought opportunities to address the ignorance of the effects of microaggressions on their campus. Each of these actions reflects the realistic optimism, cognitive reframing, openness, and ability to make a difference that are inherent in the construct of thriving (Derrico et al., 2015; Schreiner, 2014).

**Spirituality**

Every participant in this study referred to spirituality as a contributor to their thriving. Most expressed a specific belief in God and a personal relationship with God that affirmed their value as a human being and informed their purpose in life. Their faith was a foundation for how they treated others, especially those who were different from them. Their beliefs about God were a source of hope and encouragement when life was difficult and provided a perspective on their life experiences that allowed them to consider the bigger picture and forgive those who mistreated them or were prejudiced toward them. Their faith and relationship with God motivated them to persist through difficulty and provided the strength to do so.

In the past 20 years, the body of research on spirituality in higher education has expanded with books such as *Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult Higher*
Education (Tisdell, 2003), Exploring Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education (Chickering et al., 2015), and Cultivating the Spirit: How College can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives (Astin et al., 2011) along with a plethora of research articles. The thriving literature includes spirituality as a pathway to thriving, particularly for students of color and African American students specifically (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Derrico et al., 2015; McIntosh, 2012, 2015; Schreiner, 2014), which aligns with the findings of this study.

Spirituality describes the connection between the human intellect and spirit (Astin et al., 2011). In thriving literature, spirituality refers to beliefs that are a foundation for decision-making, give students a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and provide a source of personal strength when navigating the challenges of life. Students of color in dominantly White institutions encounter barriers to thriving not experienced by their White peers. Spirituality mitigates these barriers, as they apply their sense of meaning and purpose in life and draw on their understanding of God and the strength to cope with racial prejudice and microaggressions. Spirituality can facilitate developing meaningful relationships in college and a sense of community on campus for students of color, thus providing an important pathway to thriving (McIntosh, 2015; Paredes-Collins & McIntosh, 2020).

**Campus Racial Climate**

The most difficult theme to analyze and interpret was the fourth theme: Racial Climate—Not Yet Where We Need to Be. It was difficult for me because after hearing their encouraging stories of academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal thriving, I felt the weight of being entrusted with participants’ personal stories of prejudice and racism. I was amazed and humbled as I listened to their accounts and realized the degree of
personal vulnerability it required of them. Each student was not just willing, but eager to entrust their college experiences to a total stranger who happens to be an older White woman.

When these participants responded to an invitation to participate in a study of thriving students of color in college who were beating the odds, they were excited and appreciative for the opportunity. Each participant had been identified as a thriving student by an employee on their campus, a gatekeeper who was knowledgeable of the concept of thriving who then passed on to them my invitation to participate. I thought about the courage it took to send me that first email, to step into unknown territory. I now know volunteering for this study was another expression of their desire to be a part of something bigger than themselves and to make a positive difference in higher education. I felt the weight of amplifying their voices and interpreting their stories with clarity and integrity.

The differences in race and age between participants in this study and me, the researcher, were troubling to me from the beginning of this research endeavor. I do not fully understand the experiences of persons of color and will never comprehend what it is like for them to experience racial injustice and inequity day after day. However, I can listen and learn. As a woman in the United States, I have some experience of personal discrimination, of being treated as “less than,” and have felt the sting of microaggressions from time to time. However, those experiences are minor compared to what persons of color consistently encounter. My own experiences can be a starting point for action that fuel my desire to continue to be an informed ally and an advocate for the students of color I come to know through my work as a professor and academic coach.
Processing campus racial climate was also challenging for me because of the pain, frustration, and deep hurt participants expressed while sharing their encounters with microaggression. One of the questions I asked during each interview focused on how consistently their campus experiences aligned with the promises made by the institution during the admissions process. For example, when an institution communicates to prospective students that a family atmosphere exists at their institution, that all students are welcomed as part of that college family, and that the institution is committed to the well-being of each student, the institution is making implicit or explicit promises to the prospective student. Braxton et al. (2004) referred to these institutional promises as institutional integrity and commitment to the welfare of the student. Both institutional integrity and commitment to student welfare are connected to the mission of the institution. When students perceive a strong degree of institutional integrity and commitment to their well-being, their thriving increases (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Conn, 2017).

Some participants stated their experiences on campus did not align with what their institution communicated regarding diversity and a welcoming family environment for them as a student of color. Their accounts of microaggressions on campus conflicted with both institutional integrity and the institution’s commitment to caring for the student. From my perspective, the anguish participants experienced because of the racial climate on their campus was intensified by broken promises, by a breach in institutional integrity and a lack of commitment to each student’s welfare. However, students consistently responded to microaggressions with patience, grace, forgiveness, and the hope that the racial climate on their campus would improve.
This section on campus racial climate follows the section on spirituality because participants integrated their beliefs about God with their actions; their faith informed their responses to the microaggressions they experienced on their dominantly White faith-based campuses. The slights, jokes, demeaning comments, and other microaggressions they faced daily simply because of the color of their skin took a toll, however. Each racial slur, inappropriate joke, and demeaning comment hijacked their attention and demanded time and energy to process, often depleting their mental and emotional energy and reducing the time they could have spent on academics. Yet even with these barriers, each participant was thriving despite the microaggressions they faced.

These participants reported having to work in “toxic” environments, and feeling “fatigued,” “exhausted,” and “discouraged” in the aftermath of processing microaggressions. They felt racial tension on their campuses and personal anxiety when racism was not talked about or addressed appropriately on their campus. They reported needing time and space to process microaggressions, hate crimes, and the deaths of Black individuals such as George Floyd. They did not feel represented or heard particularly in institutional policy decisions, and they perceived they were constantly being judged. When racial issues collided with political views on their campus, they became fearful of speaking up and sometimes felt very unwelcome on their campus. These participants attended a faith-based institution that claims to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. Some of Christ’s teachings address relationships; Jesus taught his followers to love their neighbors, their fellow human beings, in the same way and to the same extent that they loved themselves (Luke 10:27) and to treat others the way one wants to be treated (Matthew 7:12). When participants did not experience these foundational Christian
teachings, they responded as Jesus did when he was mistreated; they were compassionate, forgiving, and hopeful of change. Several participants used the word “ignorance” when describing the root cause of microaggressions on their campus; their gracious response to inexcusable behaviors was informed by their understanding of Christ’s teaching.

Johnson’s (2012) qualitative study of the responses of African American men to racism on their campus is informative in understanding how these students could respond so graciously to oppression. Johnson described spirituality as a personal belief that could mitigate the effects of microaggressions. For his 15 participants, their spirituality enabled them to express compassion, empathy, kindness, and forgiveness toward the individuals who committed the microaggressions. Several of Johnson’s participants also used the word ignorance when describing why others committed microaggressions. Johnson found spirituality was a source of resilience and optimism; his participants believed tomorrow would be better. Spirituality also provided a greater awareness of his participants’ value as human beings and gave them meaning and purpose in their lives. Connecting their spirituality to their behaviors, participants were able to react to microaggressions without rage or violence.

Johnson’s (2012) findings are congruent with the connection participants in this study made between their Christian beliefs and their responses to microaggressions. They considered ignorance to be the primary cause of microaggressions and responded graciously with forgiveness. They had a strong desire to share their perspectives about differences in race and culture with others on their campus, believing change would happen.
One more word that surfaced in several interviews was “home.” Some students expressed a desire for their campuses to be like home for them, while realizing for many of their fellow students of color, the campus did not feel like their home, nor was it a place where they could thrive. When they spoke of what a healthy campus climate would be, they used words such as “safe,” “comfortable,” “equal,” a place where they were loved, respected, cared for, belonged, heard, invested in, and understood. For these students, home was where they had the freedom to be themselves without explanation or having to defend themselves or put on a show. They could totally relax without having to be concerned about trying to fit in to the dominant culture. They were accepted, no matter what. They did not have to hide or wear a mask; they could fully embrace their racial or ethnic identity. Home was also a place where they were challenged to be their best, to grow and triumph through adversity. Home was a reference to a better place. Home was where they could thrive.

The word home could be a metaphor for thriving among students of color. Home is where they are a full-fledged member of the family, not a guest. It is the place where they enjoy the benefits and privileges of belonging, rather than a place to which they are invited as a guest to come for a visit. Home is where they are surrounded by people who love, accept, and seek to understand them. It is where they develop healthy relationships and learn about the world in which they live. Home is where they acquire perspectives and attitudes about life and where they learn how to treat others and respond to others. Home is the source of their values, motivation, and spiritual formation. It is where they learn to work with others and what it takes to make the world a better place. It is also
where they experience how personal sacrifices ultimately work for the good of the entire family. Home embodies all they need to thrive.

**Advice to Future Students of Color and Institutional Agents**

The final theme, Get to Know Me, focused on the advice participants offered to future students of color as well as to faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education regarding what would help students of color thrive in college. It was not surprising that participants’ advice centered on relationships, because their relationships both on and off campus was the most prominent theme in this study. Their healthy relationships with family members, peers, professors, staff members, and individuals off campus contributed to their thriving in college. Although participants’ advice to future students of color varied in detail, the common core of their advice was the importance of developing authentic relationships built on compassion, humility, trust, self-awareness, mutual benefit and willingness to step outside their comfort zone.

In their advice to faculty and staff, participants emphasized the importance of getting to know future students of color first as a person, then as a student. They advised faculty and staff to learn about their culture and values, as well as their needs as a student, and to diversify their curriculum and assignments to include content and assignments about persons of color. Participants also mentioned several qualities they believed were important for faculty and staff to exhibit, including humility, patience, compassion, and active listening. Words of affirmation to students were significant, and participants encouraged faculty and staff to be mindful of what they say, as well as how they say it.
Once again, the student success and thriving literature supports the advice students offered for future students of color, faculty, and staff. Based on their research on thriving students of color, Paredes-Collins and McIntosh (2020) recommended course expansion to include contributions from persons of color in reading assignments and class discussions, as well as intentionally learning about the life experiences of their students of color. They mentioned the importance of faculty and staff knowing what contributes to thriving, as well as understanding the barriers to thriving for students of color. Schreiner et al. (2020) emphasized the important role professors play in either facilitating or impeding thriving in students of color through the “assumptions, attitudes, and actions” (p. 193) they express in their interactions with students of color.

**Conclusion**

Nearly all the findings from this study reflect previous research on students of color or thriving. Relationships that supported and encouraged these students of color influenced their thriving. Faculty and staff influenced thriving by getting to know these students of color personally, interacting with them both in and out of the classroom, recognizing their potential and abilities, providing opportunities for leadership, believing in them, and trusting them, each of which was a means of validating the student personally and/or academically (Rendón, 1994, 2006). Participants’ efforts to make a difference through membership and leadership in campus organizations and programs as well as involvement beyond their campus was motivated by their desire to make a difference locally and globally, and these roles also influenced their thriving. Participants’ faith in God influenced their thriving and became a foundation for their
gracious and forgiving responses to racial and cultural ignorance and microaggressions on their campuses.

Two findings that do not appear in the literature on thriving are the overlapping layers of support and encouragement received from multiple sources that contributed to thriving, and the sacrificial nature and benefit of the family support some of these students received. Students’ numerous references to support and encouragement from all types of relationships is worth noting and considering for future research. The sacrificial support mentioned by participants motivated them to maximize their opportunities so they would not waste the sacrifices made on their behalf. Additionally, the metaphor of home as an embodiment of the construct of thriving could prompt an expansion to the types of questions researchers ask students to find what else contributes to a thriving environment for students of color in college.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS

This study focused on the lived experiences of thriving students of color and how they made meaning of their thriving in college on dominantly White faith-based campuses. In this final chapter I discuss the significance of this study, address the limitations of the study, provide implications for practice, suggest topics for future research, and conclude with my reflections about this research venture.

Significance of the Study

I chose the topic of thriving students of color in college because only about half of the students of color who begin a 4-year degree program finish their course of study and graduate. Although the percentages of students of color enrolling in higher education continue to increase, the completion rates of students of color have remained basically stagnant for the past 5 decades (de Brey et al., 2019). The literature on student success combined with the more recent research on student thriving in higher education have contributed to the body of knowledge about students of color in higher education and are a source for implications to improve professional practice in higher education. Current thriving research continues to inform pedagogy, practice, and policy at institutions. The literature has documented encouraging findings related to student thriving based on multiple studies involving thousands of college students at more than 50 public and private colleges and universities (Vetter et al., 2019), as well as varied pathways to thriving for several student sub-populations, including African Americans, Latinx, and Asian Americans (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; McIntosh, 2012, 2015; Schreiner, 2014; Vetter et al., 2019). Disaggregating the data and focusing research on smaller populations of
college students continues to reinforce previous findings and discover new findings. This qualitative study focused on a small group of students of color with the objective of contributing to the body of knowledge on thriving students of color enrolled in dominantly White faith-based institutions. This study is significant for several reasons and detailed in the following paragraphs.

First, this study is significant because of the changing demographics in higher education. As the percentages in racial and ethnic populations change in the United States, more students of color are enrolling in higher education, while the percentage of White students enrolled in higher education is expected to decrease (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Higher education institutions need to be prepared for the demographic shift in their student populations, and this study could inform culturally relevant changes in pedagogy and campus environments so institutions will be better prepared to address the needs of students of color more effectively.

Second, this study is significant because it is presented from an asset-based perspective rather than the more common deficit-oriented approach. This study presented findings on what influenced student thriving and focused on students’ strengths rather than their deficits. This asset-based approach is aligned with the conceptual frameworks of this study. Schreiner’s (2010a) thriving and Harper’s (2012a) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework provided a holistic understanding of student success in higher education by including the academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal facets of students’ lives in addition to their strengths and contributions to the academy. This study focused on the five malleable factors of thriving: Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Positive Perspective, Social Connectedness, and Diverse Citizenship (Schreiner, 2010a)
using asset-based language, and goes beyond the traditional measures of student success of GPA, retention from one academic year to the next, and degree completion (Kuh et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2008; Schreiner, 2013).

Third, this study is significant because it addressed the importance of institutional integrity and commitment to student welfare (Braxton et al., 2004). For example, based on mission and marketing, institutions imply that all the students they admit, including students of color, should experience the same welcome and quality education in a healthy campus environment promised them as prospective students. Institutional integrity and commitment to the welfare of all students implies adapting curriculum and pedagogy and creating a campus environment conducive to learning and thriving for all students, and students of color in particular.

Finally, this study is significant because the qualitative methodology gave voice to these junior and senior students of color and provided rich descriptions of their perspectives and experiences of learning, living, or commuting at a dominantly White campus. This dissertation amplifies these students’ voices and their perspectives on what influenced their thriving on dominantly White faith-based campuses. Furthermore, finding new pathways to thriving for students of color could potentially lead to additional pathways to thriving for all students in higher education.

Limitations

Several limitations of this qualitative research became evident during this study. Although 10 participants were sufficient for saturation of the data, the ratio of women participants (8) to men participants (2) may have influenced the findings. The skewed gender ratio could have resulted from the initial identification of thriving students of
color on a particular campus by the gatekeeper or could reflect the fact that more women of color than men of color are currently enrolled in higher education (de Brey et al., 2019). Furthermore, the findings of this qualitative study are not generalizable to the larger population of students of color in higher education.

A second limitation of this study is that all participants were enrolled at small, private, dominantly White, faith-based institutions. Additionally, all participants affirmed a belief in God that influenced their life perspective and actions. Students enrolled in large public institutions, private secular institutions, or historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were not represented in this study.

The third limitation involved the interview format. Interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom, and there were times when the weak Internet connection interfered with the ability to hear students’ responses clearly, requiring repeating a question or clarifying a response. Virtual interviews also prevented the opportunity to interact with participants in their campus environment and collect field data on site that might have contributed to the findings. However, scheduling the interviews without having to consider the time and expense of traveling to four different regions of the United States may have been a convenience for me as well as participants who had more flexibility in scheduling their interview times. This flexibility may have encouraged students to participate in this study.

The fourth limitation of this study was my role as the researcher. The data collection, analysis and interpretation of the data, and the findings were all influenced by who I am. My bias, my faith, my knowledge base, and my life experiences as an educator and a White American woman affected by relationships with many individuals who are
different than me influenced this study. However, I felt a strong responsibility to the 10 participants to listen to their counter narratives of thriving and accurately communicate the essence of their lived experiences. They entrusted their stories to my care, and I wanted to amplify those stories through this study. I also benefited from the feedback from my committee and the participants to help ensure participants’ voices were evident.

**Implications for Practice**

The literature on student success and thriving includes a wealth of very practical research-based practices for improving learning in a campus environment that ultimately influences thriving for students of color. I include many of them, but first I want to provide a condensed synthesis of the implications for practice that may help the reader remember these implications. When I interact with my students, I often ask them how they will remember all the relevant vocabulary, important theories, and life applications presented in a particular course. I challenge them to develop a system that will help them analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the vast amount of information presented to them every day in college. I ask them how they will make this information more manageable and more memorable. Therefore, listed in order of importance and based on the findings of this study, I suggest associating the implications with the concept of making students of color feel at home at their institution (e.g., feeling loved, accepted, safe, comfortable, free to be themselves, and challenged to be their best), so they are able to thrive.

First, I recommend faculty, staff, and institutional leaders ask the students of color on their own campuses what makes them feel at home, then determine how to initiate appropriate changes. Listen to their responses. Give the students of color voice and agency to identify changes they believe will help them thrive. This implication refers to
the importance of relationships and how they influence thriving in students of color. Listening to their experiences will also facilitate getting to know students of color on one’s own campus.

Second, provide opportunities for students of color to make a difference on their campus by increasing the leadership opportunities available for students of color. Every participant in this study was involved in leadership and it became a means to express their desire to make a difference on their campus and in their world.

Third, examine and evaluate institutional integrity and commitment to the welfare of every student by determining to what extent one’s institution lives out its mission and keeps its implicit and explicit promises to students. This practice could include designating times and spaces on campus for discussion of current events and difficult racial topics. Students of color who experience an institution’s integrity and care develop a strong sense of community and are more likely to thrive.

Fourth, be intentional about hiring administrators, faculty, and staff who are persons of color. Participants mentioned the importance of relationships with people who look like them.

Fifth, as an institution increases the number of administrators, faculty, and staff members who are persons of color, recruit and admit more students of color. Students of color need role models and employees to whom they can more readily relate.

Sixth, provide faculty and staff development in pathways to thriving for students of color. A better understanding of thriving fosters behaviors and attitudes that influence thriving in all students. Professional development for all employees can help create an educational environment from the classrooms to the residence halls in which all students
can thrive. Particularly for faculty, professional development on culturally relevant pedagogy can change the classroom dynamic significantly and increase the ability for students of color to thrive.

Seventh, identify the pathways to thriving for students of color on one’s own campus and determine what programs and initiatives would enhance those pathways for those students of color. Lastly, practice love and kindness: love your neighbor to the same extent that you love yourself and treat others with the kindness with which you expect to be treated. As your campus transforms into a place students of color can feel at home, it can become more welcoming to every student.

Implementing these recommendations at the institutional level and at the individual institutional agent level (administrator, professor, or staff member) are both necessary for students of color to feel at home. Tangible evidence of diversity at the institutional level includes updating curriculum to include the contributions of persons of color; increasing persons of color in faculty and staff positions; establishing consistent times and places for productive discussion of current racial issues; educating the institution’s governing board, faculty, staff, and students in holistic diversity; and measuring and evaluating progress in the aforementioned areas (Paredes-Collins & McIntosh, 2020).

At the individual educational practitioner level, implications for making the campus home for students of color include getting to know students of color and calling them by name, seeing students first as individuals with a cultural heritage and the ability to enrich the learning process, implementing culturally relevant pedagogy, making time to interact with students of color both in the classroom and around campus, developing a
growth mindset toward students of color and their capacity for academic success, and affirming the strengths and abilities of students of color and expressing value for their perspectives and contributions to the academy (Dweck, 2006; Schreiner et al., 2020; Vetter et al., 2019).

Returning to the metaphor of home, implications for developing the campus environment into a place students call home revolve around two principles mentioned in Chapter 5: loving students of color as human beings with the same intensity with which one loves oneself and treating students of color in the same way one wants to be treated. Respect and validate students of color. Treat them with kindness, compassion, patience, and as equals.

**Areas for Future Research**

Thriving and the pathways to thriving for various student populations are complex. Demographics in higher education will change as the number of students of color enrolling in college continues to increase. Further research on thriving may uncover additional influences to thriving, particularly for students of color.

This study on thriving students of color in college focused on traditional-aged junior and senior college students on dominantly White faith-based campuses. The limitations of the study inform several areas for future research. For example, when I began to receive emails from students who wanted to participate in this study, I received correspondence from two non-traditional students who were very excited about the prospect of being part of this study. It was very difficult for me to reply to each of these individuals that the parameters of this study were set for students aged 18–25 and I could not include them in this research.
Future research on thriving students of color should include non-traditional students as well as students enrolled in large public universities, private secular institutions, HBCUs, and HSIs. Students transferring from community colleges to 4-year institutions could also add to the thriving literature. Another population to study would be students of color from a lower SES enrolled at institutions with a large population of affluent upper middle-class students to examine the campus environment less affluent students face and how this environment influences their thriving.

Several participants in this study talked about the challenges and benefits of working during their college career or commuting to campus rather than living on campus. Students employed either on or off campus and commuter students could provide additional perspectives on thriving. One other topic for future research relates to the idea that participants in this study as well as participants in Johnson’s (2012) study used the word *ignorance* in relation to discrimination and microaggressions on campus. Research focusing on the deeper meaning and connotation of the word ignorance as used by students of color and their gracious and forgiving response to racial and cultural ignorance connected to their spirituality could also be worthwhile.

**Reflections on This Study**

I have been thinking about two phrases recently: “be my guest” and “make yourself at home.” Each is an invitation, but they have differing degrees of hospitality and freedom. Guests are welcomed into a home, but their access is limited by the comfort level of the host. For example, a guest is treated kindly, usually offered some type of refreshment, and enjoys polite conversation about the weather or a sports team. However, they cannot check out the food in the refrigerator or put their feet on the coffee table. In
contrast, the phrase “make yourself at home” implies the individual should feel as
comfortable in this home as they feel in their own home. This person is granted the same
privileges extended only to other family members; they do not have to pretend or hide
who they are. When I think about students of color on dominantly White campuses, I
wonder if they can make themselves at home or if they are just perpetual guests on their
campus, never granted the full status as a member of the family. It is difficult to thrive in
an environment where one is either a perpetual guest or not welcomed at all.

Each of us has an idea of what home should be like. Assumptions and policy for
learning and living at dominantly White institutions typically connect to White culture
and personal experience. American higher education was initially established by White
men for upper-class White young men (Boylan & White, 1987; Brock, 2010; Thelin,
2011; Tierney, 2008). Nevertheless, U.S. higher education has, to a degree, adapted and
adjusted to accommodate the increased number of women and persons of color.
However, it is vital to collaborate with persons of color to determine what they believe
will make dominantly White institutions places where students of color can learn and
thrive. The White narrative of higher education in the United States must be infused with
the counter narrative of persons of color. I hope the counter narratives of the 10 students
of color in this study will contribute to changes that will make dominantly White
institutions more welcoming and more like home for future students of color. Perhaps the
first step is for readers to ask themselves what it is like to feel at home on their own
campus and what they can do to help make students of color feel more at home, too.
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APPENDIX A: STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Hermeneutic phenomenology uses a semi-structured interview protocol; therefore, the following questions will be used or adapted based on the responses of the student being interviewed.

1. Tell me a little bit about your journey so far. How did you decide to go to college in the first place? Why did you choose this institution?

2. What were some of your expectations about college?
   a. Where did these expectations come from?
   b. How have your actual experiences compared to some of these expectations? (note: this question addresses institutional integrity) – ask for examples!

3. You were selected for this study because other people perceive you as someone who is thriving in college. What do you think about that? What does “thriving” mean to you?
   a. If they say they are thriving: What are some things that indicate to you that you are thriving? What is that like for you?
   b. If they say they aren’t thriving: What are some things that indicate to you that you are not thriving? How would you describe yourself, then?

4. Researchers describe thriving as “making the most of college” and being successfully engaged in your classes, in healthy relationships, and in making a difference. Based on that definition, would you say you are thriving most of the time, some of the time, occasionally, or hardly ever? Tell me a little about how you decided on your answer to this question.
5. As you consider all your life experiences, tell me about an event or accomplishment that is an example of how you have succeeded. What does “success” mean for you?

6. Now let’s talk a little more about what it’s like for you at this institution.
   a. First, I’d like to hear about your academic experiences. What have your classes been like?
      i. What have been your best academic experiences? When did you feel like you were learning the most? (ask for examples)
      ii. Talk to me about some of your challenges and struggles along the way, and what you did to overcome those challenges. (ask for examples)
      iii. What motivates you to keep going academically?
      iv. Tell me about your first semester here. What were your classes like for you back then? What adjustment did you make? Who was helpful to you as you navigated your first semester of college? (If student mentions any developmental/remedial courses, follow up on that.)

1. How did you feel about this (developmental) class? Tell me about your experience as a student of color in this class. – explore intersectionality more here.)

2. What advice would you give to other students of color who begin college having to take a developmental/remedial course?
3. What advice would you give to faculty and staff about how to best support these students?

b. Now let’s talk about the relationships you’ve formed while in college.
   i. Tell me about what your interactions with other students have been like. (ask for examples) How about interactions with students who are from a different racial background than you? (examples)
   ii. What are some campus activities or organizations you have been involved with? How did they contribute to your ability to thrive here? (examples)
   iii. How about relationships with faculty or staff? (ask for examples)
   iv. How have your relationships with family or friends outside this institution affected your ability to thrive? (ask for examples)

c. Finally, let’s talk about the sense of community on campus.
   i. Tell me about your own sense of belonging here, first. What influences that?
   ii. Now tell me how you think other students feel here—do you think they feel a sense of belonging? What leads you to think this? (examples; if there’s a discrepancy between their own sense of belonging and their perception that others feel differently, explore that more)
   iii. What is the racial climate like here?
      1. If positive: tell me about some things that make the campus racial climate positive for you.
2. If negative: tell me about some times when you have been negatively affected because of your race.

7. If you think back on all your college experiences and relationships, who or what experiences really helped you thrive? Tell me more about them.

8. Finally, what advice would you give to students of color who begin college with some barriers to their success but want to “beat the odds” and thrive here? What advice would you give faculty and staff about how to support these students best?

9. Is there anything else you think is important for me to know, that would help me better understand the experiences of thriving students of color at a dominantly white institution that had initially labeled them as not yet ready for college?
APPENDIX B: LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Dear Student,

I am conducting a research study of students who are thriving in college, and people at your university have nominated you as a student who is thriving here. Thriving students are engaged in the learning process, persist in their academic tasks even when they are difficult, develop healthy relationships with individuals both inside and outside the classroom, have a positive perspective and are optimistic about their future, and appreciate individuals who are different from themselves.

My name is Rebecca Kuhn. I am a Ph.D. student at Azusa Pacific University, and I want to invite you to participate in a research study that focuses on students of color who are thriving in college, students who are “beating the odds” and are moving toward completing their degree. Perhaps you are the first in your family to attend college or you have overcome adversity. Maybe you have faced difficulty or disappointment personally or academically and have emerged stronger from that struggle. Your story is valuable, and I would love to hear it!

By responding to several interview questions, you will have the opportunity to share your story about the experiences that have influenced your success as a college student. Your story, along with the stories of many other thriving students of color, will provide a perspective essential for improving higher education for future students of color.

With your permission, I would schedule an interview with you via Zoom in December that will last about an hour. I will have several additional questions for you a few weeks later, and that interview will be about 30 minutes. I also will ask you to complete a short questionnaire that includes your contact information and some basic background information such as the name of your university, your year in school, and your major.

Your college experience and your story are important. Your perspective is significant. As a “thank-you” for your time and participation, you will receive a $25 Amazon gift card.

If you have questions, please feel free to ask. If you are interested in participating in this research study, you can email me at rkuhn14@apu.edu I want to assure you that your participation is voluntary, you may choose to stop at any point in the research process, and the research data will be kept confidential.

Thanks for considering this opportunity to make a difference in higher education!

Sincerely,

Rebecca Kuhn
Ph.D. Candidate at Azusa Pacific University
rkuhn14@apu.edu
Title of research study: Beating the Odds: Counter Narratives of Students of Color who are Thriving in College
IRB # 21-277
APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

Key Information:
If you agree to participate in this study, it will involve:
- Male and Female students of color between the ages of 18 and 25
- Procedures will include an Initial Interview, a Follow-up Interview, and completing a short questionnaire
- Two (2) interviews are required
- These interviews will take about 1.5 hours total
- There are no risks associated with this study
- You will receive a $25 gift card for your participation
- You will be provided a copy of this consent form

Invitation:
You are being invited to participate in a research study conducted by the researcher listed above. You are being asked to volunteer since you meet the requirements for enrollment into this study. Before you can make your decision, you will need to know:
- What the study is about;
- What you will have to do in this study, and
- The possible risks and benefits of being in this study
The researcher will talk to you about the study, and she will give you this consent form to read. You may also decide to discuss it with your family or friends. If you find some of the language difficult to understand, please ask the researcher about this form. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form.

Purpose: The study for which you are being asked to participate is designed to learn more about the college experiences of students of color and what influences their thriving or success in college. Although there has been a significant increase in the number of students of color enrolled in higher education, the graduation rates have not increased since the 1970s. This study will focus on students of color who are thriving; who are engaged in the college experience intellectually, emotionally, and in their relationships. Thriving students take ownership of their academic responsibilities and persevere through difficulties. They have a positive perspective on life and are optimistic about the future, cultivate healthy relationships with adults and peers, and exhibit a desire to invest in relationships with students who are different from themselves. By interviewing thriving students of color, this study will provide an opportunity for participants to share their experiences and perspectives which are essential for improving higher education for future students of color.

Procedure: To be a voluntary participant in this study, you will be asked to be interviewed twice by the researcher and complete a short questionnaire with your contact information and basic information including the name of your school, your
major, and when you plan to graduate. Your total participation in the study will involve 2 sessions/interviews. The first interview will last approximately one hour, and the second interview (conducted a few weeks later) will last about 30 minutes.

**Possible Risks:** It is expected that participation in this study will provide you with no more than minimal risk or discomfort which means that you should not experience it as any more troubling than your normal daily life. The foreseeable risks in this study include recalling and describing challenges or struggles you may have experienced as a student and describing the campus racial climate at your institution. However, there is always the chance that there are some unexpected risks. These may include, for example, an accidental disclosure of your private information, or discomfort by answering questions that are embarrassing. If you feel uncomfortable or distressed, please tell the researcher and she will ask you if you want to continue. If you experience any distress as a result of the questions asked in the interview, you can contact the counseling services at your institution or speak with an employee at your institution such as your Resident Director who can provide information about other resources available to you. Because this is research, you can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

**Benefits:** You may or may not benefit from participation in this study. Benefits include the opportunity to share your story and what has influenced your thriving in college. Recalling and sharing your experiences might encourage you and increase your motivation to continue and complete your college education. Although the information you provide may not benefit you directly, your story and perspective will increase the knowledge about college students of color and benefit future college students of color.

**Confidentiality:** The investigator/researcher of this study will keep your personal information collected for the study strictly confidential. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Your identity will be kept strictly confidential by referring to you only by the name you choose for the study (a pseudonym) that will protect your identity. The institution you attend and anyone you mention by name will not be disclosed. The data will be stored electronically on a secure server and will be password protected. Any data in printed form will be kept secure in a locked location available only to the researcher.

This document explains your rights as a research subject. If you have questions regarding your participation in this research study or have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Principal Investigator using the information at the bottom of this form. Concerning your rights or treatment as a
research subject, you may contact the Research Integrity Officer Donald Isaak at Azusa Pacific University (APU) at (626) 815-6000, ext. 3796 or at disaak@apu.edu.

**Conflict of Interest:** The Principal Investigator has complied with the Azusa Pacific University Conflict of Interest in Research policy.

**Compensation:** As a token of our appreciation for your participation in this project, you will receive a $25 gift card.

**Voluntary Status:** Your participation is voluntary which means you can choose whether or not you want to participate. You may withdraw any time without penalty. If you decline to continue, any data gathered to that point may be used in data analysis. If you choose not to participate, there will be no loss of benefits to which you are entitled.

**Consent:** I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I understand the procedures described above, and I understand fully the rights of a potential subject in a research study involving people as subjects. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study. I have received a copy of this consent form.

☐ I am 18 years of age or older
☐ I am younger than 18 years of age

☐ I agree to be recorded
☐ I do not agree to be recorded

___________________________________  ________________  ________________
Participant Name Printed  Participant Name Signed  Date

I have explained the research to the subject or his/her legal representative and answered all of his/her questions. I believe he/she understands the information described in this document and freely consents to participate.

____________________________________________  ________________  ________________
Signature of Principal Investigator  Date  Time

[Signed by researcher after participant has demonstrated understanding of research procedures through questions and answers]

Rebecca R. Kuhn
rkuhn14@apu.edu
APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Participant Questionnaire

First Name: ___________________________ Last Name: ___________________________

Name of your university: ___________________________

Your major: ___________________________

How many times have you changed your major since you first enrolled in college?
   ____ Never  ____ Once  ____ Twice  ____ Three or more times

Class year:  ____ Junior  ____ Senior

When do you expect to graduate (month and year)? ___________________________

How would you describe your college grades:
   ____ Mostly A’s  ____ A’s and B’s  ____ Mostly B’s  ____ B’s and C’s  ____ Mostly C’s  ____ Below a C

Did you transfer to this university?  ____ No  ____ Yes
   If yes, when did you transfer? ___________________________

Did either of your parents graduate from college?  ____ No  ____ Yes

Please check all the college experiences you have participated in so far:
   ____ College athletics  ____ Student leadership role
   ____ Clubs and organizations  ____ Honors program or classes
   ____ Internships  ____ Service-learning courses
   ____ Developmental writing course  ____ Developmental math course
   ____ Research with faculty  ____ Ethnic organizations
   ____ First-generation support services  ____ Summer bridge program
   ____ TRIO programs

Age: ___________________________

Sex: ___________________________
Race/Ethnicity:

Email: 

Cell number: 

To protect your identity, please choose a name you would like me to refer to you as for this study and enter it here:
APPENDIX E: DATA ANALYSIS CODES

Academics
Academics best learning environment
Academics challenges
Academics classes
Advice to faculty
Advice to students of color
Beading the odds
Campus involvement leadership opportunities
Campus involvement orgs
Expectations of institution
Expectations not met
First semester experience
Lessons learned
Motivation sources
Other insight-last protocol question
Racial climate
Racial climate negative
Relationships
Relationships off campus
Relationships on campus faculty
Relationships on campus staff
Relationships on campus students
Sense of community personal

Sense of community negative

Sense of community other students

Success defined

Success examples

Support

Support from faculty

Support from institution

Thriving described

Thriving experiences

Thriving frequency

Thriving spiritual God

Why go to college

Why this institution