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The Magic of Connection and Care: Experiences of Students of Color in Online Community College Classes

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Maduli-Williams, Denise

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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY SAN MARCOS

The Magic of Connection and Care: Experiences of Students of Color in Online Community College Classes

A proposal submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

Denise Maduli-Williams

Committee in charge:

California State University San Marcos

Manuel Vargas, Chair
Sinem Siyahhan

University of California, San Diego

Beth Simon

2023

The dissertation of Denise Maduli-Williams is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

California State University, San Marcos

2023

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Lt. Colonel Edralin "Ed" John Maduli, USAF, Ret., who instilled in me a love for learning, encouraged me to begin my doctoral journey, always knew I could do anything I set out to do, and steadfastly supported me in completing it even in his final days.

EPIGRAPH

"If a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower."
Alexander Den Heijer

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VITA

1994	Bachelor of Arts, California Polytechnic State University, SLO
1994 - 1996	Peace Corps Volunteer, Botswana
1997 - 2000	Teacher, New York City Public High Schools
1999	Masters of Arts, TESOL, Teachers College, Columbia University
2001 - 2007	Professor, Harold Washington College
2008 - 2015	Professor, City College of San Francisco
2016 - present	Professor, San Diego Miramar College
2023	Doctor of Education, University of California San Diego, California State University, San Marcos

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Magic of Connection and Care:

Experiences of Students of Color in Online Community College Classes

by

Denise Maduli-Williams

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California San Diego, 2023
California State University, San Marcos, 2023

Professor Manuel Vargas, Chair

Online education, also referred to as distance education, has been on a steady rise for

over a decade, and California community colleges offer more online courses than any other

public higher education institution. Although the success gap, as measured by course completion,

between online and face-to-face learning is closing overall, online courses, specifically in California community colleges, continue to have lower success rates than the traditional in-person classes; furthermore, this disparity is exacerbated for students of color. One aspect that has been researched in this instructional modality has been the impact of social presence, or "the degree to which online participants feel connected to one another" (Whiteside, 2017, p. 4) in online courses. In addition, research specifically focused on community college students of color highlights the relational domain of teaching and learning as the foundation for success (Wood & Harris, 2015).

This qualitative study sought to understand and amplify the experiences of students of color in online courses. This study utilized a dual-lens conceptual framework, which merged the Social Presence Model (Whiteside, 2015) with the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in the Community Colleges (Wood and Harris, 2015). Together, they provided complementary lenses to examine how students of color experienced social presence in online courses, and how such experience related to their perceptions of feeling connected to the learning community and supported towards success in their online learning.

Eleven study participants were interviewed in one-on-one semi-structured Zoom interviews. Thematic analysis revealed five main themes, including the magic of human connection, the importance of a warm welcome, the value of student-to-student interaction, the significance of instructor presence, and the clarity of content presentations. The findings give a window into the experiences of students of color in online courses, and implications include ways faculty and leaders can improve the online experiences for students of color and seek to close the gap between face-to-face and online learning.

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction to the Study

Online education is not new, and the educational landscape continues to change with the steady rise of online education enrollments, especially over the past fourteen years, growing even faster in the past few years (Seaman et al., 2018). Even before COVID-19 shuttered schools and colleges, and sent all on-campus courses online, the numbers of online courses were skyrocketing. For example, in 2016, more than six million students took at least one distance education course, representing 31.6% of K-20 students (Seaman et al., 2018). Public institutions enroll two-thirds of all distance learners (Seaman et al., 2018).

Similarly, the number of online classes have been steadily increasing in the California Community Colleges System with more online credit courses offered than at any other public institution of higher education in the country (Woodyard & Larson, 2017). In the 2016-2017 academic year, one in three students enrolled in a California community college took an online class. The spring of 2020, when the global pandemic pushed all courses to online instruction, The California Community College System offered 73,439 online education courses, with a total enrollment of over one million students (CCCO Report, 2020). Before COVID-19 closed in-person instruction in California community colleges across the state, the rapid growth of online education was prompted by numerous factors, including convenience, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness (Johnson, 2015). Online education in the community colleges opens access to allow students, who do not have the privilege to take courses on campus, to pursue their college coursework.

Despite their growth and popularity, online courses in California community colleges have not reached the same educational results of traditional face-to-face classes (Johnson, Mejia, & Cook, 2015; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Over the past 10 years, the online education completion rates have steadily climbed. The latest data show that the success rates between traditional face-to-face (70 percent) and distance education courses (69 percent) has closed from 17 percent, just 10 years ago, to one percent in 2018-2019 (Data Mart, 2020). Though there is much to celebrate by this increase in success rates, the completion rates vary by ethnicity, with some groups still lagging behind in the online environment. Specifically, students of color showed the following completion rates: African-American 53%, Native American 57%, Latinx 62%, and Filipino 64%. Those rates do represent an increase over previous years, but still fall well below the overall 69% success rate.

There is a growing body of literature that addresses this disparity. Typically, the online format has resulted in lower persistence and success rates than traditional face-to-face classes (Johnson, Mejia, & Cook, 2015; Xu & Jaggar, 2013). Additionally, studies have revealed that only about 60% of community college students who enroll in online courses successfully complete them (Johnson, Mejia, & Cook, 2015). Also worthy of note, results are even lower for ethnic and racial minorities, with African-American and Hispanic students online success rates between 17.5 and 9.8 percentage points lower than their White peers (Johnson, Mejia, & Cook, 2015). Latino/a students also earn lower grades online when compared to their peers taking the same classes in face-to-face settings (Kaupp, 2012).

As online education courses rise, educators, administrators, and institutions seek ways to examine the quality of online instruction. Numerous studies have sought to examine the state of online courses more comprehensively (Johnson, Mejia, & Cook, 2015; Jaggars, 2016; Xu &

Jaggars, 2013) with research focusing on connections between social presence, community-building, retention, and overall student success (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Bush, Castelli, & Lowry, 2010; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999; Jaggars, 2014; James, Swan, & Daston, 2016; Whiteside, 2015).

Additional research in closing the opportunity gap between traditional face-to-face and online classes has highlighted instructor's social presence and a sense of community as significant. Social presence could close this gap by becoming a vehicle that enhances the instructor-student relationship as well as builds and sustains community online. Social presence is a complex idea intertwined with aspects of interaction, engagement, and community. While many differing definitions of social presence exist, for the purposes of this study, social presence is defined as "the degree to which online participants feel connected to one another" (Whiteside, 2017, p. 4). Despite the complex nature of social presence research, many researchers conclude that social presence has an impact on student interaction, satisfaction, and learning online.

Augmenting research on online education, this research study looks at community college students, with a special focus on students of color. Utilizing the Socio-Ecological (SEO) Model, Wood and Harris (2015) researched community college men of color, finding that faculty-student interactions were the key to success; feeling that faculty care about them, value their interactions and presence, and believe they belong in the class was a significant factor. These researchers therefore posit, in their Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in Community Colleges, that the most important factor for student success is relational, which includes trust, mutual respect, and authentic care. While Wood and Harris's studies have centered on traditional face-to-face classes, they may also inform research on online settings. Additionally, although their research focused on men of color, they have also asserted that the practices they researched

in supporting men of color work for students of all racial and gender backgrounds (Wood & Harris, 2017).

This study utilized a dual-lens framework, which included the Social Presence Model (Whiteside, 2015) and the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in the Community Colleges, placing enhanced instructor-student relationships as the foundational component of effective teaching and learning. Together, they provided lenses to examine how students of color experience social presence in online courses, and how such experience related to their perceptions of feeling connected to the learning community and supported towards success in their online learning.

The Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in the Community Colleges augments the Social Presence Model and enabled the researcher to view experiences of students of color specifically. The Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color contends that the relational aspects of teaching are foundational and critical towards success of men of color. Trust, mutual respect, and authentic care make up this enhanced instructor-student relationship. Faculty who integrate these relational strategies offset the external issues that face students of color and observe "greater levels of engagement, persistence, and achievement among their students" (Wood & Harris, 2015, p. 27).

Examining the experiences of students of color in online learning through both the Social Presence Model and the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in the Community Colleges, offered valuable insights to experiences of students of color in online courses and possible ways to close the opportunity gap between face-to-face and online instruction for students of color.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

As the need for online instruction continues, there are concerns about how to design and develop courses that are of the same caliber as those of face-to-face quality. Research has focused on many aspects of instruction, including course design, assessment, technology familiarity, and content. A large body of research has also focused on faculty-student interaction and student presence. However, up to this point, most research has focused on students at four-year universities, leaving out community colleges. Furthermore, the research so far at community colleges has not focused specifically on the experiences of students of color in online courses. Consequently, as the equity gap in success and completion rates remains wide for students of color between face-to-face and online courses, it is imperative to understand these students' experiences to inform teaching and best practices.

Lacking in existing research are voices from community college students of color. Rather than focusing on teachers' or administrations' voices, this study sought to hear from students directly about their experiences with online instruction. Thus, this qualitative study was designed to amplify the voices of community college students of color, by using a phenomenological approach—a qualitative type methodology. The purpose of this study is to understand and examine the experiences of students of color in online courses in community colleges to close the equity gap in success and completion.

The main research question to this study is the following: In what ways do social presence and relationships relate to success and program completion of students of color in online learning? The following sub-questions further facilitated data-gathering points related to the main question:

1. How do students of color describe their relationship with their online instructors?

a. What instructor behaviors influenced the students' perceptions of feeling a sense of trust, authentic care, and mutual respect online?

2. How do students of color experience social presence in online courses?

a. What elements of social presence (affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion) do students perceive support their success online?

Conceptual Framework

This study utilized a dual-lens conceptual framework, merging the Social Presence Model with a focus on social presence— "the degree to which online participants feel connected to one another" (Whiteside, 2017, p. 4) in online learning—and the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in the Community Colleges, which places enhanced instructor-student relationships as the foundational component of effective teaching and learning. Together, they provided a dual-lens to examine how students of color experienced social presence in online courses, and how such experience related to their perceptions of feeling connected to the learning community and supported towards success in their online learning.

Community of Inquiry

A major portion of research on online learning experiences utilizes the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework, which explores the interconnectivity of social, teaching, and cognitive presences (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Social presence includes the participants projecting themselves as "real," while also fostering collaboration; it also focuses on the design, curriculum, and direction to create successful learning environments; and it includes cognitive presence which relates to how learners construct and create meaning by exchanging information and connecting ideas (Garrison, 2009). Garrison (2009) identifies the following three categories of behaviors associated with social presence: affective, cohesive, and interactive. Affective

behaviors include personal expression, including emotion, feelings, beliefs, and values, and components consisting of paralanguage—nonverbal communication, such as tone, pitch, or manner of speaking, emotion, value, humor, and self-disclosure (Swan & Richardson, 2017). Cohesive behaviors include ways to build and maintain a sense of group community, including greetings and salutations, social sharing, and self-reflection (Swan & Richardson, 2017). Finally, interactive behaviors are those that show attention and support through and incorporate acknowledgement, agreement-disagreement, approval, invitation, and personal advice interaction (Swan & Richardson, 2017).

Building upon the Community of Inquiry Framework, the Social Presence Model offers a deeper examination of social presence. In this model, social presence is examined as the most substantial factor to maximizing learning in online settings. It becomes the crucial factor that synchronizes all the components (instructor, students, content, teaching strategies, media, and outcomes) within the learning experience (Whiteside, 2017). The Social Presence Model builds upon the three previous social presence indicators: cohesive, affective, and interactive behaviors, adding in two additional elements: knowledge and experience and instructor involvement (Whiteside, 2015).

Socio-Ecological Model

Looking solely through the lens at social presence of online education may not be enough to understand the needs of students of color in a particular community college. Thus, utilizing also through the lens of Socio-Ecological (SEO) Model (Wood & Harris, 2015), which researched community college men of color and found faculty-student interactions key to success, may result in a more thorough understanding students of color experiences with online instruction. Feeling that faculty care about them, value their interactions and presence, and

believe they belong in the class are significant factors. Wood and Harris (2015) therefore posit, in their Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in Community Colleges, that the most important factor for student success is relational, which includes trust, mutual respect, and authentic care.

Taken together, Social Presence Model, grounded in online learning, and the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in the Community Colleges, with a focus on faculty-student relationships and interaction, became a useful dual-lens to view how students of color experienced online instruction, and how this dual lens related to their perceptions of feeling connected to a community of learners, and supported towards success in online education.

Research Methodology Overview

I utilized a phenomenological approach—a type of qualitative research—to explore the ways in which elements of social presence and faculty-student relationships and interactions contributed to students' experiences in community college online classes. The methodological approach included two phases.

For Phase One, I deployed a recruitment survey to gather volunteers for the interviews, the main part of the qualitative research. An invitation with survey link was sent via email and posted on Canvas to 14 online course sections with nearly 350 students. Twenty-one students indicated that they would be interested in participating in an interview; I contacted all 21 students. Eleven students responded to my invitation for interviews.

For Phase Two, I interviewed 11 students of color, using a semi-structured interview protocol via Zoom, a video conferencing tool. The reason for using Zoom was two-fold. First, because I wanted to interview students who were taking online courses at the time of the interviews, and students who often take online courses are not able to come on campus and an

online setting is the most convenient for this. Second, given the closure of campuses because of COVID-19, face-to-face interviews were not possible at that time. The interview questions and protocol were designed to be open-ended and developed to correspond to the social presence aspects of the survey. I also sought to dive deeper into the areas of the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in Community Colleges, which complement social presence: trust, mutual respect, and authentic care.

Limitations of the Study

I realize that as the researcher, as well as a community college English professor, teaching online for the past seven years, with experience in technology integration for nearly fifteen years, and many ties to online educator networks may lead to bias. Additionally, as an online student, I also experienced first-hand the impact that relationships, community building, and a humanized, social presence can have in enhancing the online learning environment. As a professor of color, teaching students of color, I also feel a strong sense of responsibility to support equitable learning experiences for all. Therefore, the positionality and background as an online teacher in the community colleges may impact the lens through which the researcher will view the students' experiences. On the other hand, my familiarity with the online setting offers a clearer vision and comfort in understanding the online learning environment.

Utilizing video-conferencing capabilities of the Zoom platform for interviews was also unique. Given the nature of the student demographics, those who are best suited for online classes because of the need for flexibility, it made sense that joining in via video-conference was most convenient. Additionally, since many courses utilize video conferencing, this tool was not new for students. Furthermore, I am familiar with the technology and was able to utilize it easily.

Lastly, the consequences of COVID-19 made in person interviews very challenging and even unsafe at this time.

It is important to note that this study included a small sample size and was limited to just one semester, at one community college. Despite these limitations, learning about students' online experiences firsthand was vital, and will add to the research literature.

Significance of the Study

Further understanding and research of online instructional experiences are critically important for community college students who often have the most need for online coursework as this learning modality improves access to higher education, but also may present great difficulty. In addition, though strides have been made overall in closing the opportunity gap between traditional face-to-face and online learning, the gap for students of color remains wider.

In the end, online education supports a wide variety of students across the nation, in public higher education, and especially in California Community Colleges. Bringing together best practices with social presence and applying them to course design and delivery will ensure that students will be as successful in online settings as they are in face-to-face classes. Then equitable online learning experiences will be in place to support student success and transform lives.

Definition of Terms

Since I reference the following terms throughout this dissertation, the definitions follow.

Online: a course taken entirely online

On-campus and In-person: a course that takes place entirely on campus in a classroom. Used interchangeably.

Face-to-face: a course that takes place on campus in a classroom. Used interchangeably with on-campus and in-person.

Distance Education: instruction that is separated by physical distance and utilizes technology. Includes a variety of course modalities including fully online, asynchronous, and synchronous.

Learning Management System (LMS): the software application or web-based technology system that handles all aspects of the learning process – where content is housed, delivered, and tracked.

Synchronous: a type of online course with some required live meeting times, usually using Zoom.

Asynchronous: a type of online course with no set meeting times nor live video meetings

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review examines the demographics and background of distance education in California Community Colleges; how online courses have been evaluated; and the dual-lens conceptual framework of Community of Inquiry (CoI)—with emphasis on social presence—and the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in Community Colleges—with its focus on the foundational domain of instructor-student relationships. The literature review reveals that social presence factors, as well as instructor relationships forged in authentic care, trust, and mutual respect, which are foundational for successful online learning experiences.

Background and Context

Distance education, where instructors and students are separated and courses are conducted online, once considered to be a small subset of education, has now become decidedly mainstream. For the past 14 years, the number of students taking at least one distance education course has risen, with the largest growth in the public higher education sector (Allen & Seaman, 2018). Even before COVID-19 shuttered schools and colleges and pushed all on-campus courses online, the numbers of online courses were skyrocketing. For example, in 2016, more than six million students took at least one distance education course, representing 31.6% of all students (Seaman et al., 2018). Public institutions enroll two-thirds of all distance learners (Seaman et al., 2018).

Situated within this higher education universe, are California Community Colleges, the largest higher education system in the United States, serving approximately 1.8 million students (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2017). These institutions have also had a steady increase in online course offerings to reach a wider population of students, many who find it difficult to come on campus for every course (Woodyard & Larson, 2017). In the 2016-2017

academic year, one in three students enrolled in a California Community College took an online class. In spring 2020, when a global pandemic pushed all courses online, 73,439 online education courses were offered, with a total enrollment of over one million (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Report, 2020). As we return to a new "normal," online classes remain still a large component of the courses offered. At the district level of this research site, 77% of credit course enrollments were online in 2021-2022. Specifically, 81% of students took a course with an online component, and asynchronous courses accounted for 86% of online enrollments (SDCCD Distance Education Update, 2022).

Many community college students supplement their traditional coursework with online courses throughout their academic career. Because of this need, over the past 14 years the number of California community college students taking an online course has nearly tripled (Woodyard, & Larson, 2017). In the 2017-2018 academic year, before COVID-19, 860,283, students enrolled in an online course in the California Community Colleges; this means that one in three students took an online class. Over the past 10 years, the online education completion rates have steadily climbed, and the very latest data show that the success rates between traditional face-to-face (70 percent) and distance education courses (69 percent) has closed from 17 percent just 10 years ago to one percent in 2018-2019 (extracted from Data Mart, 2020). Though there is much to be celebrated by this increase in success rates, the completion rates vary by ethnicity, with some groups still faring far less well in the online environment. Specifically, African American students' completion rates were 53%, Native American 57%, Latinx 62%, and Filipino 64%. Those rates do represent an increase over previous years, but still fall well below the overall 69% success rate.

It is important to note the diverse body of students at California community colleges, especially as it pertains to online education. California Community Colleges are open access, consequently they include a wide-range student body (Johnson, Mejia, & Cook, 2015). About 67% of California's 2.1 million community college students are ethnic minorities (Johnson, Mejia, & Cook, 2015). Distance education students in California Community Colleges are 30% White, 39% Hispanic, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander, 8% Black, 5% multiracial, 3% Filipino, 1% Native American, and 2% unknown/declined to state (Woodyard & Larson, 2017). Notably, Hispanic students now outnumber White students marking a major shift in the demographics. The average online student in 2016-2017 was female, 20-24 years old, and Hispanic (Johnson, Mejia, & Cook, 2015). In addition, 40% of students enrolled in California Community Colleges are first-generation college students (Johnson, Mejia, & Cook, 2015). As we note the changing demographics of community colleges, with a clear increase in numbers of students of color, and the rising need for online classes to meet these students' needs, examining the equity gap in success and completion for students of color in online courses is critical to support students who benefit greatly from having online options.

Online Quality Standards

As the numbers of online classes have grown, institutions have increased professional development and developed rubrics for assessing quality of online education. The Online Network of Educators (@ONE) and the Online Education Initiative (OEI) include standards followed by the California community colleges. Both rubrics include sections that emphasize the importance of social presence and interaction.

Online Educational Initiative (OEI) Rubric

The OEI increases access to and success in online courses in the California community colleges, while ensuring high-quality instruction (Woodyard & Larson, 2017). Through a collaborative process, the OEI Course Design Rubric was developed in 2014 as one measure to guarantee online courses meet the accreditation requirements. The rubric includes the following five sections: Content Presentation, Interaction, Assessment, Accessibility, and Institutional Accessibility Concerns. For a course to be offered through the California Virtual Campus—Online Education Initiative (CVC-OEI) Course Exchange—it must be reviewed and meet the rubric's standards.

Online Network of Educators (@ONE) Standards

@ONE is a professional development network for educators teaching at community colleges in California. To ensure best practices supported through research, @ONE developed online teaching principles that focus on the interconnections between student success and teaching. These principles are in place to ensure that California community college students are supported online through best teaching strategies. The principles state that effective online teachers: (1) are present within their course; (2) apply equitable methods to promote student access and success while acknowledging institutional obstacles; (3) respond to student needs and use data for continuous course improvement; (4) teach and model ethical online interaction, while helping students develop digital literacy that will poise them for success; and (5) recognize ongoing professional development is a central component of their success.

As the push to make improvements in online success rates continues, more offerings evolve, and more teachers are trained, the OEI Rubric and @ONE Online Teaching Principles remain at the forefront of online teacher training and course evaluation. Social presence,

instructor-to-student interaction, and student-to-student interaction, components of these quality

assessments, are principal tenants in the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework and Pyramid of

Student Success for Men of Color in Community Colleges—the conceptual framework guiding

this research study.

Definition of Social Presence

Because of the complexity of the topic, various definitions of social presence exist

without unanimous agreement. First introduced as fundamental to person-to-person

communication and as "a quality of a medium itself" (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976, p. 65),

social presence theory now focuses on distance education communication. Since the first

iteration, researchers have defined social presence differently. For example, social presence has

been explained as "the degree to which participants are able to project themselves effectively

within the medium" (Garrison, 1997, p. 6); how one is seen as a "real" person in mediated

communication (Gunwardena & Zittle,1997); "the degree of person to person awareness" (Tu,

2000, p. 1662); a sense of belonging to a community (Picciano, 2002); and the impression that

others are participating in the communication process (Whiteman, 2002). Most recently, social

presence is defined simply as the degree to which online participants feel connected to each other

and as a critical literacy for online learners (Whiteside, 2017). Drilling down to the core of social

presence and how it shows up and impacts online course experiences is complex. For the

purposes of this literature review, the definition used here refers to the extent to which online

participants feel connected to their instructors and to each other (Whiteside, 2017).

No matter the specifics of the definition, research shows connections to varying degrees

of social presence to student interaction, satisfaction, depth of learning, and academic

performance (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Bush, Castelli, & Lowry, 2010; Garrison,

Anderson, & Archer, 1999; Jaggars, 2014; James, Swan, & Daston, 2016; Whiteside, 2015).

Because social presence is complex and multi-faceted, it is difficult to measure. Common

formats for research into social presence are studies of practitioner-oriented literature, surveys,

controlled studies, and course quality rubrics. To assess social presence in the online learning

environment, several frameworks are commonly used in the literature.

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework

A dominant portion of the research addresses social presence through the Community of

Inquiry (CoI) Framework, which explores the interconnectivity of social, teaching, and cognitive

presences (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Each presence is further defined to provide

context and clues to the connections. Social presence has to do with the participants projecting

themselves as "real," while also fostering collaboration; teaching presence focuses on the design,

curriculum, and direction to create successful learning environments; and cognitive presence

addresses how learners can construct and create meaning by exchanging information and

connecting ideas (Garrison, 2009). Within social presence, three categories of behaviors are

defined: affective, cohesive, and interactive. Affective behaviors have to do with personal

expression, including emotion, feelings, beliefs, and values, as well as components consisting of

paralanguage, emotion, value, humor, and self-disclosure (Swan & Richardson, 2017). Cohesive

behaviors include ways to build and maintain a sense of group community, including greetings

and salutations, social sharing, and self-reflection (Swan & Richardson, 2017). Finally,

interactive behaviors are those that show attention and support through and incorporate

acknowledgement, agreement-disagreement, approval, invitation, and personal advice interaction

(Swan & Richardson, 2017). By examining the connections between the social, teaching, and

cognitive presences, researchers seek to understand online learning experiences. The CoI figure

below illustrates the overlapping relationships between social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence.
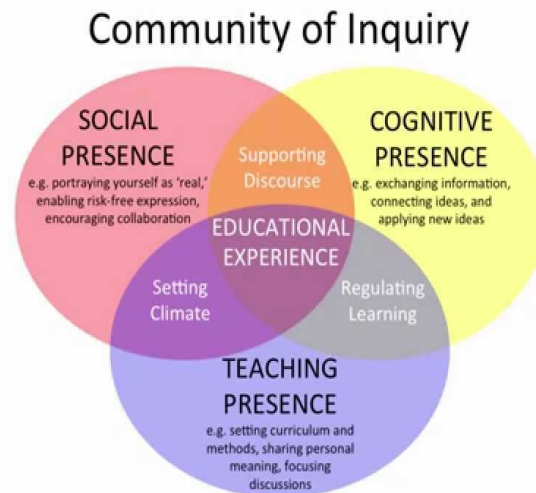
Figure 1: *Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework (Garrison, et al., 2000)*

The Community of Inquiry Framework also produced the development of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Survey, which has been used in numerous research studies to examine online learning and teaching environments (Swan & Richardson, 2017). Studies using the CoI Survey focus on the role of social presence (Annand, 2011), interrelationship of presences (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999), students' perceptions and satisfaction (Maddrell, Morrison, & Watson, 2017), and perceived learning (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Within the CoI Framework, in online learning experiences of graduate students, all three [social] presences have shown significant relationship with student satisfaction, with social presence having the most significant correlation (Akyol & Garrison, 2008). Although most of the research utilizes the CoI Framework, it has been fifteen years since its introduction. Since then, a focus on social presence, as the highlighted feature, has emerged to understand social presence in online learning environments. The Social Presence Model (Whiteside, 2007, 2015) is one of the latest.

The Social Presence Model

Building upon the Community of Inquiry Framework, the Social Presence Model offers a deeper examination of social presence. In this model, social presence is examined as the most substantial factor to maximizing learning in online settings. It becomes the crucial factor that synchronizes all components (instructor, students, content, teaching strategies, media, and outcomes) within the learning experience (Whiteside, 2017). The Social Presence Model builds upon the three previous social presence indicators, including cohesive, affective, and interactive behaviors, and adding two additional elements: knowledge and experience and instructor involvement (Whiteside, 2015). The Social Presence Model figure below illustrates the intersection of the five related elements in the Social Presence Model: affective association, community cohesion, interaction intensity, knowledge and experience, and instructor involvement.
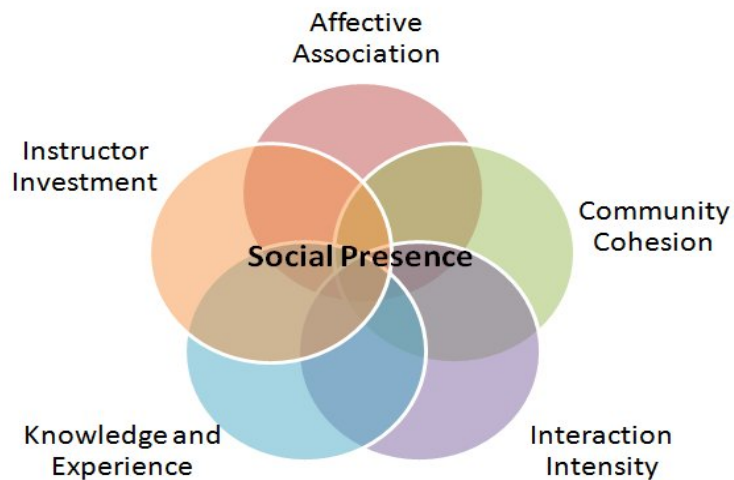
Figure 2: *Social Presence Model (Whiteside, 2015)*

Affective association addresses the emotional connection and includes emotion, humor, personal self-disclosure, and paralanguage—nonverbal communication such as tone, pitch, and

manner of speaking. Community cohesion relates to the entire course community. It includes greetings, salutations, sharing additional resources within the group, and seeing the group as a whole. Instructor involvement focuses on the actions of the instructor such as establishing relationships, making connections, modeling behaviors, and timely feedback. Interaction intensity consists of the level of the interaction between participants and can be direct quotes or paraphrases (Whiteside, 2015). Lastly, the knowledge and experience component examine the prior knowledge and experiences that students bring to the learning experience (Whiteside, 2015). Taken together, these five components of the Social Presence Model put social presence at the heart of understanding how these interrelated elements relate to satisfactory online experiences. Significantly, the Social Presence Model posits social presence as a critical literacy that forms the basis of a successful online learning experience (Whiteside, 2015).

Studies looking through the lens of the Social Presence Model are commonly case studies, surveys, and qualitative interviews examined using the Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer's (1999) Social Presence Coding Scheme. In her study of online discussions and instructor and student interviews, Whiteside (2015) concluded that social presence is the overarching principle that drives instructor and student interactions, behaviors, content, and outcomes. Additionally, Wei, Chen, and Kinshuk (2012) analyzed over 500 question-based surveys collected from learners with previous experiences in online classes at three schools. Their analysis revealed that social presence has a substantial effect on learning interaction, which in turn affects learning performance.

Social Presence and Student Outcomes

Utilizing the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework and Social Presence Model, research on social presence has included connections of social presence to interaction,

satisfaction, learning, and academic performance (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rovai & Barnum, 2003; Stein & Wanstreet, 2003; Tu, 2000). Research has focused on types of student interaction such as asynchronous and synchronous, quality and type of instructor-student interaction, and ways student-student interaction appear in a course. In addition, research has included into how social presence connects to student learning and satisfaction.

Student Interaction

In face-to-face courses, interaction, collaboration, and a strong relationship between instructors and students are critical to the long-term success of all students, especially students of color (Wood, Harris, & White, 2015). These same factors of interaction are explored with relation to online interaction. Interacting online occurs through course activities such as announcements, discussion board forums, feedback on assignments, and may be text-based on through elements of voice and video. Additionally, interactions may be asynchronous—not occurring at the same time—or synchronous—occurring at the same time. Also importantly, interaction occurs between students and instructors, and among students themselves. Social presence is a vital factor that affects student interaction (Tu, 2002; Tu & McIssac, 2002). In turn, lower levels of social presence result in lower levels of interaction (Garramore, Harris, & Anderson, 1986). One study by Tu (2000) examined social presence in the online learning environment through the students' point of view through surveys and observations. This author's findings suggest that a higher level of social presence is needed to boost and nurture interaction. Communication styles that were relaxed, friendly, and encouraging promoted social presence and activities and tasks that supported interaction about learners included written assignments, group projects, online presentations (Tu, 2000).

Instructor-student Interaction

Focusing specifically on instructor social presence and exploring factors of frequency, type, and quality of interactions between the instructor and student can help to understand its importance. Several research studies consistently suggest that instructor-student interaction is a significant factor to student success in online courses (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Bush, 2010; Delmas, 2017; Jaggars, 2016; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rucks-Ahidiana, 2012). Studies show that online students do care about knowing their instructor as a "real" person and "there" (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014). Frequent and effective student-instructor interaction encourages students to commit to the course, and in turn, students perform better academically (Jaggars, 2016). Factors examined include intimacy and immediacy. Intimacy involves the feeling of closeness and connection (Argyle & Dean, 1965) whereas immediacy refers to the psychological distance between the people communicating (Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968).

Students sense the social presence of an instructor with the immediacy of response and type of feedback received (Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk, 2012). Online instructors need to apply immediacy behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal, used in face-to-face classes to the online environment to increase overall learning and course satisfaction (Gordon, 2016). Students look for timely responses to emails and questions, interaction on discussion board forums, and feedback on assignments and papers. Richardson and Swan (2003) surveyed 97 students in online learning courses and found that teacher immediacy behaviors increased students' feelings of social presence which impacted perceived satisfaction and learning in the course. Posting announcements, reminders of assignments and deadlines, and messages about course logistical issues also are indicators of high-interaction instructors which help students feel connected to the instructor and the course (Jaggars, 2016).

Marman (2014) also conducted a mixed-methods research study to discover student preference for course elements in online college classes. Through both surveys and interviews, findings concluded that community activities that foster interactivity and social learning increase rapport with the instructor and improve student satisfaction in an online course. These interactive activities can quash students' feelings of isolation and disconnection from their instructors and classmates (Marman, 2014). Moore (2013) additionally focused on this idea of interaction between teachers and students. In this case, dialogue was examined to reveal how much interaction existed between teachers and students. The study concluded that low interaction through dialogue can lead to great transactional distance, or feelings of separation, in turn making it more challenging for autonomous learners (Jaggars, 2016). In an online setting, this transactional distance can be even more challenging to cross; therefore, incorporating activities such as discussion boards, online group projects, and utilizing interactive technology tools are ways that could increase dialogue between students and lessen the feeling of distance.

Student-student Interaction

Besides interaction between instructors and students, online experiences also involve students' interactions with each other. This learner-to-learner interaction is another critical component of the online learning environment (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Studies show that learner-to-learner interaction is both motivating and stimulating for students (Moore & Kearlsey, 2005). High levels of interaction then contribute to satisfaction (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998). However, other studies examined the impact of teacher-student interaction versus student-student interaction with differing results (Jaggars, 2016; Johnson, Mejia, & Cook, 2015; Kear, 2010). A survey of nearly 15,000 students by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (2013) concluded that the feeling of "camaraderie"

among students within the class contributes to persistence. Different from high instructor engagement, students reported not feeling engaged with one another (Jaggers, 2016). The study utilized a holistic rubric to assess 23 online courses at two community colleges, collecting data from over 600 students and 19 instructors; finding that the student-student interactions were not reported as important as the student-teacher relationship (Jaggers, 2016).

Various online activities encourage both student-student and instructor-student interaction. One example is adding personal profiles (photos and background information) as a welcoming task in an online course. Because of the rise of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, there is increased awareness of personal profiles, which include a photo or avatar and short description. Recent studies examine whether there is a connection between personal profiles and social presence (Arnold & Paulus 2010; Kear, Chetwynd, & Jefferies, 2014). Using a survey with closed and open questions, Kear, Chetwynd, and Jeffries (2014) analyzed students' feelings towards use of personal profiles in online forums. The findings were mixed: some students reported that they felt more in touch with the students and instructors who had a personal profile, other students did not feel any sense of interest in reading the profiles, and some students expressed privacy concerns. The debate continues as to the impact student-student interaction has on student satisfaction and success.

Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction towards an instructor and online courses overall is another component reviewed in online (distance education) learning literature. Social presence can positively affect student satisfaction towards the instructor and the course (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Cobb, 2009; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Gunawardena, 1995; Hostetter & Bush, 2006; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Russo & Benson, 2005; Wise, Chang, Cuffy, & de Valle, 2004).

When interaction is high in a course, levels of satisfaction in the course also rise (Swan, 2001).

In a survey of 397 online learners, students reported that interactions with both instructors and

students were high and noted this as a contributor to satisfaction in the overall course (Eom,

Wen, & Ashill, 2006). Another study of online learners reported that younger students (16-25)

felt they learned less and were less satisfied overall, whereas older students (36-45) felt they

learned more and were more satisfied with online learning (Frederickson et al, 2006). The same

study concludes that students were more satisfied with the course when they had ample access to

instructors. Importantly, satisfaction is a strong predictor of student retention and success for

community college students (Woodyard & Larson, 2017). In the 2017 distance education student

satisfaction survey of over 6,000 students across 55 colleges, students who graduated from an

online program reported satisfaction levels of 90 percent, compared with those who withdrew

reporting only 20-percent satisfaction levels (Woodyard & Larson, 2017).

Student Learning and Performance

In addition to outcomes of interaction and satisfaction, the effect of social presence on

students' depth and perception of learning and academic performance is examined in the

research. Social presence positively influences both actual and perceived depth of learning

(Hostetter & Busch, 2013; Kang & Im, 2013; Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Russo

& Benson, 2005; Wise, Chang, Duffy, & de Valle, 2004). Swan et al. (2000) conducted a

satisfaction survey in an online asynchronous graduate cohort course and uncovered those

students who reported the highest levels of instructor interaction also reported the highest levels

of perceived learning in addition to engagement and participation.

Fewer studies have focused on student grades as impacted by social presence. When

compared with exams and assignments, social presence can have an impact on performance on a

written assignment (Piccano, 2002). Additionally, the quality of interpersonal interaction relates positively and significantly to student grades. Online course design features can influence student performance, in turn affecting academic performance (Jaggars, 2016). In a comprehensive study of over 600 students and 19 instructors in interviews and observation data examining four areas of design including organization and presentation, learning objectives and assessments, interpersonal interaction, and the use of technology, it was concluded that the only design feature that had a significant and positive correlation to student grades was interpersonal interaction between the instructor and student (Jaggars, 2016).

Furthermore, classroom rapport, an additional aspect of social presence, has also been connected to successful learning and higher grades (Glazier, 2016). Classroom rapport is simply amicable interactions between faculty and students (Bernieri, 1988). A study by Glazier (2016) of 465 students over six years compared one course with rapport-development strategies built in, such as humanized instruction features of video, extensive personalized feedback on assignments, and personalized emails to an online course with none of the above rapport-building strategies. The study examined rapport through course grades and an anonymous student survey instrument. Both qualitative and quantitative data concluded that rapport building by the instructor can improve student success as measured by course grades and retention rates (Glazier, 2016). Despite the negative difference in taking online courses, rapport—a harmonious, friendly relationship—offset this negative impact and students in the online rapport class had lower attrition and higher grades. As research continues on the effects of social presence on online courses, the area of learning and academic performance is one to be explored further.

Social Presence and Technology Tools

Infusing the online environment with social presence in a way that students feel connected and that the instructor and students are "there" and "real," requires expertise in technology tools that allow and encourage interaction. Studies have examined the relationship and impact of technology tools in the online space (Borup, 2012; Jaggars, 2016; Marmon &; Rucks-Ahidiana, Barragan, & Edgecombe, 2012). Rucks-Ahidiana, Barragan, and Edgecombe (2012) conducted a thorough analysis of the varying technology tools and digital course features available in online community courses examining the categories of archival presentations, communication forums, external web-based sources, and instructional software. The categories were examined for purpose and satisfaction, and the authors claim that though students value being engaged in a variety of ways in online courses, instructors do not integrate a wide variety of tools whether it is from lack of knowledge or training.

Additionally, various studies concentrate on the way social presence is formed through regular interaction, feedback, and the power of voice and video in adding in a human element (Borup, 2012; Jaggars, 2016; Marmon & Gordesky, 2014; Rucks et al., 2012). Social presence is increased when the class moves away from being purely text based to incorporate voice and video (Jaggars, 2016). In other words, when students see and hear each other and the instructor online, social presence is increased. Students have a sense of belonging to a community, and the shift from teaching themselves or solely ingesting content to being part of a learning community increases their success in online settings. Borup (2012) interviewed 18 students in three different online courses that incorporated a variety of video-based teaching and learning strategies. The inclusion of video interaction had a substantial effect on students feeling that the online class felt more like a face-to-face classroom and that the instructor had a social presence. In another study

of online design features, video chats were one of the factors students reported to increase the teacher-student relationship (Jaggars, 2016).

The Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in the Community Colleges

Augmenting the research on social presence online, understanding the needs particular to community college students of color is also necessary. The Socio-Ecological (SEO) Model (Wood & Harris, 2015) fills this gap, accounting for the primary factors affecting the success of men of color in community colleges. Importantly, this model is based on findings from the Community College Survey of Men (CCSM), posed to over 4,000 male community college students across 27 colleges (Wood & Harris, 2016). The model informs this research study as it is based on research into community college men of color, and encompasses three parts: inputs, socio-ecological domains, and outcomes.

Specifically, the campus ethos domain is perceived as having the most influence of student success (Wood & Harris, 2015, p. 24). The three most critical components of this domain include belonging, welcomeness to engage, and validation. In the SEO Model, the onus on student success is not placed on the student as it is in many traditional models. Instead, external factors account for student success, with faculty, campus professionals, and institutional resources bearing that responsibility. Taken together, elements of this model complement the elements of social presence and provide a fuller picture of how students of color experience online learning.

The figure below showcases the three-fold structure of the Socio-Ecological (SEO) Model, including inputs, socio-ecological domains, and outcomes.

Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model

Inputs

Socio-Ecological Domains

Outcomes

Background/ Defining Factors
- Age
- Time Status
- Veteran Status
- Primary Language
- Citizenship Status
- Generation Status
- [Dis]ability

Societal Factors
- Stereotypes
- Prejudice
- Criminalization
- Economic Conditions
- Capital Identity Projection
- Mass Incarceration

Non-Cognitive Domain
- Intrapersonal (Self-Efficacy) (Locus of Control) (Degree Utility) (Action Control) (Intrinsic Interest)
- Identity (Gender) x (Racial/Ethnic) x (Spiritual) x (Sexual)

Academic Domain
- Faculty-Student Interaction
- Academic Service Use
- Commitment to Course of Study

Environmental Domain
- Mediators (Finances) (Transportation) (External Validating Agents)
- Commitments (Family Responsibilities) (Employment)
- Stressful Life Events

Campus Ethos Domain
- Sense of Belonging (Student-Student) (Student-Faculty) (Student-Student Service)
- Campus Racial/Gender Climate
- Welcomeness to Engage
- Campus Resources (Access) (Efficacy)
- Internal Validating Agents (Faculty) (Staff)

Student Success
* Persistence * Achievement * Attainment * Transfer * Goal Accomplishment *Labor Market

Figure 3: *Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model (Wood & Harris, 2015)*

Wood and Harris (2015) found that the ethos created by faculty members in class factors contributes more significantly to student success than students' characteristics and environmental pressures. In effect, the environment the faculty create for students matters more than other factors related to the students themselves. Furthermore, these researchers showed that faculty-student interactions are one of the most important keys to success. Feeling that faculty care about them, value their interactions and presence, and believe they belong in the class are significant contributing factors. It is also beneficial that students perceive a sense of belonging with other students as well.

Wood and Harris (2015) therefore posit, in their Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in Community Colleges, that the most important factor for student success is relational—which includes trust, mutual respect, and authentic care. This approach puts relationships before instructional strategies, illuminating that "relationships with men of color are the most important feature when interacting with faculty" (Palacios & Wood, 2016, p. 647) and that "personal

relationships typified by trust, mutual respect, and authentic care are necessary preconditions for effective teaching" (p. 652).

The figure below illuminates the elements of the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in Community Colleges, which places the relational domain at the foundation, upon which rests effective and engaging pedagogy, and finally student success.
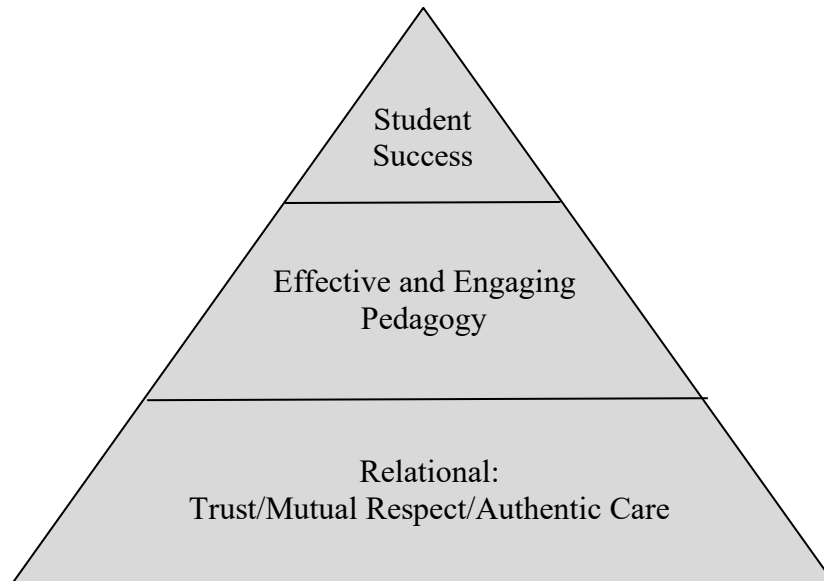
Figure 4: *Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in Community Colleges (Wood & Harris, 2015)*

Together, the Social Presence Model with a focus on social presence— "the degree to which online participants feel connected to one another" (Whiteside, 2017, p. 4) in online learning—and the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in the Community Colleges, which places enhanced instructor-student relationships as the foundational component of effective teaching and learning, provided the dual-lens conceptual framework to examine how students of color experience social presence in online courses, and how such experience relates to their perceptions of feeling connected to the learning community, and supported towards success in their online learning.

Literature Review Summary

Online instruction continues to increase rapidly, but without knowing more about best practices to inform course design and interaction, students taking these courses will continue to have lower success rates. Recent research points to the positive influence of social presence on student interaction, satisfaction, learning, and academic performance (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Bush, Castelli, & Lowry, 2010; Cox-Davenport, 2014; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999; Glazier, 2016; Jaggars, 2014; James, Swan, & Daston, 2016; Whiteside, 2015). Although social presence research is common, findings are varied. The complexity and multi-faceted nature of social presence and its interconnection to student interaction, satisfaction, and learning makes it a complex research topic. In the end, this literature review uncovers connections to varying degrees between social presence, student interaction, student satisfaction, perceived learning, and academic performance. Further understanding of the impact of social presence is especially important for community college students who have the most need of online coursework as it improves access to higher education, but also presents many challenges. In addition, though strides have been made overall in closing the success gap between traditional face-to-face classes and online classes, the gap for students of color remains higher. Research on social presence has emerged as a critical factor in the field of online (distance) education; understanding its intricacies, including applications to support all students through a more powerful online learning environment, is a valuable effort.

Complementing research on social presence in online learning, this study also includes research on students of color at a community college. The Socio-Ecological (SEO) Model (Wood & Harris, 2015), researched community college men of color, filling a gap in the literature and informing how institutions can create successful environments and experiences for men of color

in the community colleges. Key findings include that faculty-student interactions are the key to success. Feeling that faculty care about them, value their interactions and presence, and believe they belong in the class are significant factors. Wood and Harris (2015) therefore posit in their Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in Community Colleges that the most important factor for student success is relational, which includes trust, mutual respect, and authentic care. While these studies have centered on traditional face-to-face classes, they can inform research in the online setting as well. Taken together, online research into social presence, and community college research into relationships, these frameworks can inform understanding of experiences of students of color in the community colleges and minimize the opportunity gap that remains between face-to-face online instruction, especially for students of color in community colleges.

In the end, online courses support a wide variety of students across the nation, in public higher education, and especially in California Community Colleges. Bringing together best practices with social presence and relational foundations and applying them to course design and delivery will ensure that students of color will be as successful in online settings as they are in face-to-face classes. Then, equitable, humanized, online learning experiences will be in place to support student success and transform lives.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Overview

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the methodology of this study. I begin with the research design and then with a brief review of the conceptual framework and research questions. I also describe the study participants and setting. Afterward, I discuss the data collection in two parts. First, I discuss the recruitment survey including study participants, instrumentation, and data analysis. Next, I discuss the interviews including participants, instrumentation, and data analysis. Finally, I address safeguards and ethical considerations, my positionality, and limitations of the study.

Research Design

As a gap remains in the research related to online education for students of color in community colleges, this qualitative study explored the experiences of students of color in online courses in a community college in Southern California. Though the success and completion rates between face-to-face and online courses in community colleges have diminished over the past ten years, a gap remains for students of color, especially African American, Native American, Latinx and Filipino students. Findings may be helpful in identifying factors and recommendations to close the opportunity gap for students of color online. This study adds to the existing literature of community college students' experiences with online learning, especially students of color.

This study used a qualitative approach to learn about students of color experiences taking online community college courses. So far, the overwhelming body of research into online learning focuses on four-year universities. In addition, very few studies focus specifically on students of color. Those that do mainly focus on grades and a come from a deficit mindset about whether students were "prepared." Furthermore, there is a wealth of quantitative studies, but few

qualitative studies exist. Therefore, a qualitative research design was chosen to seek a better understanding of the experiences of students of color in online classes. Furthermore, a phenomenological approach was taken since the emphasis is on exploring the phenomenon (online learning) with a "group of individuals who have all experienced this phenomenon" (Cresswell, 2013, p. 78). This type of research is best to understand "individuals common and shared experiences." (Cresswell, 2013, p. 81). Understanding the shared experiences, through personal interviews, it is possible to gather data to develop practices and policies. As students of color, the study participants had unique and important insight to share about their experiences online.

Brief Description of the Conceptual Framework

This study utilized a dual-lens conceptual framework, merging the Social Presence Model with a focus on social presence— "the degree to which online participants feel connected to one another" (Whiteside, 2017, p. 4) in online learning—and the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in the Community Colleges, which places enhanced instructor-student relationships as the foundational component of effective teaching and learning. Together, they provided a dual-lens to examine how students of color experienced social presence in online courses, and how such experience related to their perceptions of feeling connected to the learning community, and supported towards success in their online learning.

In the Social Presence Model, social presence is examined as the most substantial factor to maximizing learning in online settings. It becomes the crucial factor that synchronizes all the components (instructor, students, content, teaching strategies, media, and outcomes) within the learning experience (Whiteside, 2017). The five related elements in the Social Presence Model include: affective association, community cohesion, interaction intensity, knowledge and

experience, and instructor involvement. This study centered social presence because research has revealed the relationship between social presence and higher student satisfaction (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Swan & Shih, 2005); more frequent student-student interactions (Tu, 2000; Stein & Wanstreet, 2003); and increased actual and perceived learning (Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003) in online learning.

The Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in the Community Colleges augmented the Social Presence Model and enabled me as the researcher to view experiences of community college students of color. The Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color contends that the relational aspects of teaching are foundational and critical towards success of men of color. Trust, mutual respect, and authentic care make up this enhanced instructor-student relationship. Faculty who integrated these relational strategies offset the external issues that face students of color and observe "greater levels of engagement, persistence, and achievement among their students" (Wood & Harris, 2015, p. 27). Examining the experiences of students of color in online learning through both the Social Presence Model and the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in the Community Colleges with its emphasis on relationships, may offer valuable insights and contribute to closing the opportunity gap between face-to-face and online instruction for students of color.

Research Question

The main research question to this study was the following: In what ways do social presence and relationships relate to success and program completion of students of color in online learning? The following sub-questions facilitated further data-gathering points related to the main question:

1. How do students of color describe their relationship with their online instructors?

a. What instructor behaviors influenced the students' perceptions of feeling a sense of trust, authentic care, and mutual respect online?

2 How do students of color experience social presence in online courses?

a. What elements of social presence (affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion) do students perceive support their success online?

Study Participants and Setting

For the purposes of this study, I focused on one mid-sized accredited community college in Southern California. The site has nearly 12,000 students, with 59% minority enrollment (majority Asian and Hispanic). The college's demographics include 23% Asian, 20% Hispanic, 6% Black, 41% White, 4% two or more races and 4% unknown. Similarly, to community colleges across the state and nation, the college has seen consistently growing numbers of online course offerings up to Spring 2020. With the advent of COVID-19, in mid-March 2020, all the courses at the college went fully online, including all student services. Study participants were self-identified as students of color, all taking online courses at the time of the study. Polkinghorne (1989) recommends that researchers interview between 5 to 25 participants, so interviewing 11 participants was appropriate for this study.

Recruitment Procedures

To recruit study participants, I first deployed a survey. Community college courses were chosen randomly from a convenience sample of instructors of online courses and aimed at a variety of disciplines. The survey was sent via email and posted on the Canvas courses with a link to a Qualtrics survey to 14 identified online class sections, covering eight different disciplines, with nearly 350 students. Course instructors shared the invitation email and link to the survey via email and Canvas announcements. I then identified 21 participants I invited for

36

personal interviews. Eleven study participants accepted my invitation, and I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews through Zoom.

Data Collection

I utilized a phenomenological approach to this qualitative study. Through personal, one-on-one interviews, the study aimed to gather and amplify the voices of students of color of a community college taking online courses, placing them at the center of the discussion with the purpose of learning what to do to make the online learning environment one where they can be most successful. Below, I describe the two parts to this study: Phase 1, the Recruitment Survey, and Phase 2, the Interviews.

Phase 1: Quantitative Data Collection (Recruitment Survey)

Study Participants

Participants were part of a convenience sample of online courses taught in Summer 2021 from instructors teaching at least one online course and who gave me permission to share the Recruitment Survey Instrument and invite students to take it. To gain as many participants as possible, the survey was given to all students in the selected courses, regardless of race or ethnicity. The pool of potential study participants was taken from a representative wide-range sample of disciplines and departments. The survey invitation and link were sent through email with a cover letter and posted on the instructors' Canvas courses after the mid-semester mark with a two-week period to complete it. A reminder email was sent one week after the initial email. The survey was confidential, but not anonymous. Students were asked to provide an email address and could indicate if they would like to be contacted later for a follow-up interview. The students could start, stop, and come back to the survey later and could also opt out of the survey at any time. The response rate for the survey was 28.3%. My goal in this initial data-gathering

was to cast a wide net and invite students of color for interviews. Therefore, I did not include survey results in this study as they did not yield any significant results related to my research questions.

Instrumentation

The Community of Inquiry Survey (CoI) Instrument (Garrison, 2009) was used since it is a validated tool that has been used in numerous research studies (See Appendix B). It is also an open-source instrument under Creative Commons license, for use, share, copy, adapt, merge, publish, or distribute the document in any medium or format for any purpose, provided that appropriate credit is given. The section used was the one on social presence which allowed respondents to consider the factors of affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion. Participants answered using a 5-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree. The survey was a self-rating instrument prepared in Qualtrics which protected data collected.

Originally, survey data provided the potential to give a window into adding to understanding participants' experiences with online learning and social presence. However, after collecting and analyzing the data, I realized data was not statistically significant since it did not answer research questions. Consequently, it did not add any meaningful value to the study. I then made the choice to focus on data collected from the interview questions. Thus, I concentrated my research on the qualitative part of the original data-collection plan, illuminating the voices of students of color, and giving more specific and relevant findings related to the research questions. Therefore, the survey's became as a recruitment tool, which allowed me to cast a wide net to identify and select a variety of students of color to interview.

Phase 2: Qualitative Data Collection (Study Participant Interviews)

Study Participants

The recruitment survey provided a sample from which to select study participants for the one-on-one interview. The survey asked respondents to indicate if they were willing to be contacted later for an interview. Since their demographic data were collected, students of color were self-identified from the volunteer pool, and a range of backgrounds were selected. Twenty-one students indicated they were open for the interview. All were contacted with a final number of 11 who participated in the interview. The interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom, a video-conferencing tool. Study participants at this time received an invitation through email, including interview questions at least one week before the interview so that they could have adequate time to prepare. The semi-structured interview questions focused on students' experiences with online instruction and explored their experiences specifically with social presence factors of affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion (without using these terms). To ensure confidentiality, the Zoom video recordings were saved and transcribed with Otter.ai and stored in a password-protected laptop and including the use of pseudonyms to protect study participants' identity.

Instrumentation

The proposed questions for the semi-structured interviews were open-ended to allow students to share their overall experiences in online classes. More structured questions were included related specifically to the areas of social presence about affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion. These terms were not used in the interviews; instead, easy-to-understand expressions and explanations were used so students could reflect on and share specific examples of interactions, assignments, and activities that supported them in online learning. For example, instead of using the phrase "affective communication," the interview

question posed asked "What types of communication and interaction have you had with instructors in your online courses?"

Individual interviews allowed me, as the researcher, to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of students of color. The interview questions and protocol were designed to be open-ended and directed to the social presence elements—affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion. The interview questions also sought to dive deeper into the relational areas of the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in Community Colleges (Wood & Harris, 2015) which complemented elements of social presence—trust, mutual respect, and authentic care.

The interviews were semi-structured, beginning with main questions and in some instances probing questions as needed (Patton, 2015). The semi-structured interview protocol allowed me to probe and explore specific topics as appropriate, such as types of communication and interaction with instructors, activities and assignments that helped study participants feel a part of the class, and experiences with groups and collaboration activities online. Interviews lasted an average of 60-75 minutes. The interview questions were also aligned with the main tenets of the Conceptual Framework, with specific focus on social presence and faculty-student interaction and relationships (See Appendix D). Each interview followed the same protocol and study participants were asked the same questions.

All interviews were conducted over Zoom, a video-conferencing platform. Participants received instructions (both text and video) on how to access and join Zoom. Zoom was used for two reasons: participants were taking online classes, and most likely were already familiar with this platform. In addition, because of COVID-19 limitations, in person face-to-face interviews were not safe at that time.

Qualitative Data Analysis

I carefully reviewed each Zoom transcription by viewing the interview recordings. Throughout the process, I took notes during the interviews and wrote detailed data memos immediately following each session. I reviewed transcriptions for accuracy, then cleaned the data. The data were analyzed and hand coded. I conducted open coding first and then thematic coding.

To analyze the interviews, I first completed an initial round of open coding by closely reading line by line (Given, 2008). Then, I looked for themes and patterns overall, without any preset codes to begin with. I created codes based on the emerging categories and began to link the codes to the categories in the Social Presence Model (Whiteside, 2015) and the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color (Wood & Harris, 2015) —the dual-lens conceptual framework. For the second round, I, again, closely read line by line, coding as themes merged to my existing code list. During this time, I employed color-coding and noticed other codes which I had also written down. For the following round, I specifically examined the transcripts for the codes related to the dual-lens framework. To validate my data analysis, I also conducted peer review and engaged in peer debriefing sessions. Cresswell (2103) defines the role of the peer reviewer as "an individual who keeps the research honest, asks hard questions about methods, meanings and interpretations" (Cresswell, 2013, p. 251). This was important to me as I have a background in online education as an online teacher and trainer, and I wanted to ensure my findings were objective. Finally, I reached back to study participants for member checking to confirm my interpretations of the findings (Cresswell, 2013). For each round of coding, I looked for consistencies, combined codes into sub-themes, and then organized sub-themes into bigger

general themes, many aligned to major tenets of the Social Presence Model and Pyramid of Student Success.

Safeguards and Ethical Considerations

I followed safeguards to ensure the confidentiality of study participants. The survey was built in Qualtrics, which has built-in protections. The survey results were kept on the researcher's password-protected laptop. The interviews, conducted using Zoom, a video-conferencing tool, were conducted in the researcher's home office without observers. The video recording and transcription were stored on the researcher's password-protected laptop. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all study participants. I was the primary researcher and working alone for this study, so there was a minor risk that others would have access to survey or interview information. Once data has been analyzed and dissertation contents approved, all information from this study will be permanently deleted from the researcher's computer.

In addition, I maintained high ethical standards when conducting this research. Study participants did not receive any payment or incentives from the researcher to complete the survey or to take part in the interview. Some instructors offered extra credit to the participants who completed it to help increase survey completion rates. Other extra credit opportunities were available in these classes, so this was not the sole way for participants to earn extra credit. I sent thank you cards to the students who I interviewed.

Positionality

My position and identity as a Filipina American faculty member, experienced online educator and trainer, and strong advocate of online instruction may affect my research findings and analysis. First, being a certified online instructor and having taught online for over seven years as well as serving as the Online Faculty Mentor at my institution, I am well-versed and

experienced in online instruction, mentoring, and training. Though I have years of experience in online instruction and do my best to provide equitable learning experiences to all my students, the opportunity gap between students of color in online courses continues to haunt me. I am extremely dedicated to finding ways to provide the best online experiences for all students to succeed. Additionally, since few studies with online and social presence factors have been conducted at the community college level, I was very curious and invested in the results of a study focused on this student population. As numbers of online courses rise and a greater number of community college students are students of color, it was imperative to hear students' experiences firsthand. Secondly, as a faculty woman of color, I strongly identify with students of color and want to do everything in my power to support all students.

Mindful of my positionality, it was important I did not try to relate or identify excessively with study participants (Patton, 2015). While I remained objective through careful interaction, it may also have been a benefit as a woman of color interviewing students of color. A level of comfort and familiarity was afforded which possibly allowed them to open up more easily. Also, my experience and knowledge of online courses allowed me to fully understand and navigate the interview discussions. To mitigate potential bias due to my positionality, I deeply reflected throughout the process, engaged in peer review, and member checking.

Limitations

Due to the limited research on students of color in online courses at the community college level, there was enormous need for this study. However, this research study was limited to just one community college, and the participants reflected a small sample size. The survey and interview responses were based on students' perceptions. Some students did not complete the survey, and/or not answer all the interview questions. In addition, instructors' previous online

teaching experience and students' previous experiences taking online classes varied.

Significantly, all courses at the time of the research study and writing of this dissertation were fully online because of COVID-19 and subsequent closure of on campus classes; therefore, this factor had additional and unknown consequences.

Chapter Summary

This qualitative study aimed to understand the experiences of students of color in online community college instruction by putting students' experiences at the heart of the study, amplifying their voices to understand best how they experience online courses. Ultimately, understanding the experiences of students of color in online learning will prove valuable to educators, instructional developers, administrators, and leaders as we work towards closing the equity gap in success and completion between face-to-face and online learning.

Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand and amplify the experiences of students of color in online instruction at one community college. By understanding these experiences, we can strive to close the equity gap in academic success and program completion between online and in-person courses, especially for students of color. The findings are organized as follows: (a) summary of survey responses, (b) summary of participants' profiles, and (c) primary themes and sub-themes that emerged from the study.

The following was the initial main research question for this study: In what ways do social presence and relationships relate to success and program completion of students of color in online learning? The following sub-questions facilitated data-gathering points to address this overarching question:

1. How do students of color describe their relationship with their online instructors?

   a. What instructor behaviors influenced the students' perceptions of feeling a sense of trust, authentic care, and mutual respect online?

2. How do students of color experience social presence in online courses?

   a. What elements of social presence (affective expression, community cohesion, interaction intensity, knowledge and experience, and instructor investment) do students perceive support their success online?

Additionally, a dual-lens conceptual framework was utilized to guide answers to research questions. The Social Presence Model (Whiteside, 2015) lens focused on five key factors intended to maximize online learning from the perspective of social presence. Additionally, the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in the Community Colleges (Wood & Harris, 2015) lens focused on faculty-student relationships and interaction. Taken together, they

represent the dual-lens approach to view the experiences of students of color in online instruction.

This chapter is organized as follows: first, it includes a brief review of the conceptual framework, an overview of the data collection and analysis, and the study participant profiles. Second, the chapter presents themes and sub-themes that emerged from interviews, reflections, and coding. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary.

Brief Review of the Conceptual Framework

This study utilized a dual-lens conceptual framework. First, the Social Presence Model (Whiteside, 2015) offered a deep examination of social presence, which addressed "the degree to which online participants feel connected to one another" (Whiteside, 2017, p. 4) in the online learning setting. In this model, social presence is examined as the most substantial factor to maximizing learning in online settings. It becomes the crucial factor that synchronizes all the components (instructor, students, content, teaching strategies, media, and outcomes) within the learning experience (Whiteside, 2015). As seen in Figure 2, which outlines the five elements of social presence.

In addition to the Social Presence Model, the Socio-Ecological (SEO) Model lens (Wood & Harris, 2015) also guided this study describing how faculty-student interactions becomes key to the success of men of color at community colleges; this may result in a more thorough understanding of how students of color experience with online instruction. Feeling that faculty care about them, value their interactions and presence, and believe they belong in the class are significant factors. Wood and Harris (2015) therefore posit, in their Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in Community Colleges, that the most important factor for student success is

relational, which includes trust, mutual respect, and authentic care. As seen in Figure 4, which described the Pyramid of Student Success (Wood & Harris, 2015).

Taken together, the Social Presence Model and the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color in the Community Colleges provided a useful dual lens to view how students of color experience online instruction, and how this dual lens relates to their perceptions of feeling connected to a community of learners and supported towards success in online education.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study included two data-collection phases. The first, a brief survey, which I used as a recruitment tool, followed by semi-structured interviews, which formed the basis of the qualitative part of the study. The survey was sent to a selection of online courses encompassing a variety of academic disciplines. All students in the selected courses were invited to complete the survey regardless of background. The survey asked about their experiences with online courses, especially with respect to social presence (Whiteside, 2015), and with the main purpose to recruit volunteers for semi-structured interviews—the qualitative phase the study. Instructors at the selected community college site shared the survey link through email and their Canvas course shells. From there, and based on positive survey responses, student volunteers were invited for Zoom interviews. Fourteen different online course sections, representing eight different disciplines, shared the survey and invited nearly 350 students to respond. The response rate was 28.3%.

The data analysis includes brief descriptive statistics of 93 prospective study participants (n=93), which resulted from the initial survey, followed by the initial survey data analysis, which profiles 11 study participants for the individual interviews. Next, emerging themes from the semi-structured interviews are presented, as they represent the focal point of the qualitative phase

of the study. The dual-lens theoretical framework—Social Presence Model (Whiteside, 2015) and the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color (Wood and Harris, 2015)—was utilized to examine the semi-structured interview data.

Quantitative Phase: Survey Results

Prospective Study Participants' Demographic Profile

Initially, ninety-seven (n=97) students took the survey, with four incompletes, resulting in ninety-three (n=93) actual responses. The ethnicities of the survey participants included the following: Asian or Filipinx 26.5%, Black or African American 4.82%, Latinx or Mexican 20.48%, Middle Eastern or Arab American 7.25%, White 24.10%, Multiple Race or Ethnicities 14.46%. No participants self-identified as Indigenous or American Indian or Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian. These demographics reflect the collegewide demographics which include Asian 12%, Filipino 6%, Latinx 30%, Multiracial 8%, Native American 0%, Pacific Islander 1%, and White 35% (San Diego Community College Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research Report). Figure 5 below summarizes the survey participant demographics.
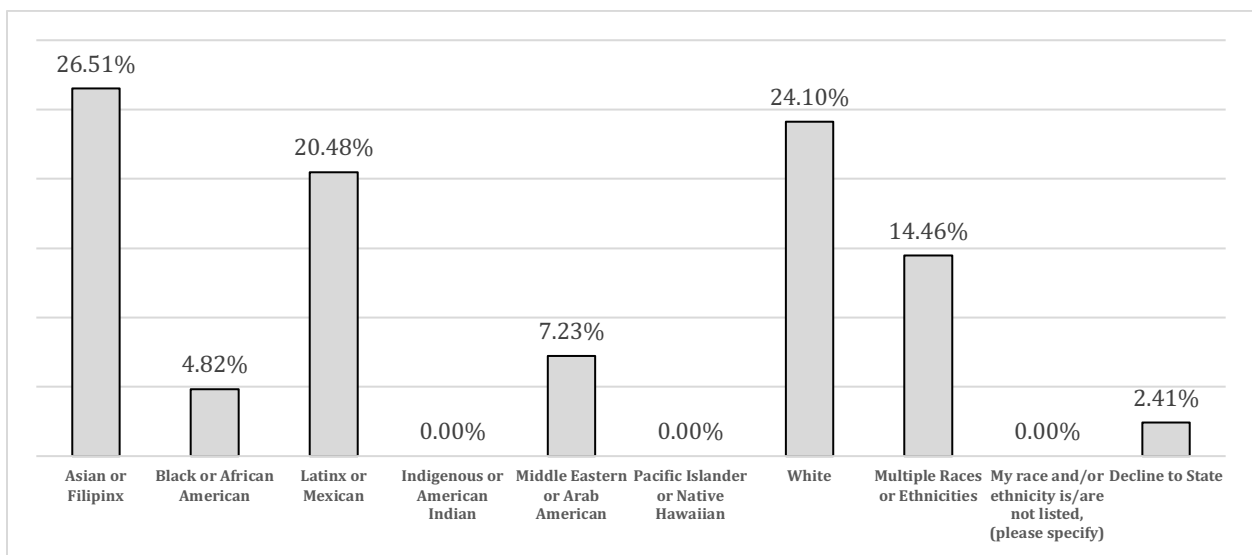
Figure 5: *Survey Participant Demographics*

Survey Information

The survey began with demographic questions, followed by two general questions about online experiences. The first question asked about the number of online classes taken, and the second asked about participants' overall feelings towards online learning. The main section of the survey included nine questions taken from the Community of Inquiry (COI) Survey Instrument (Garrison, 2009), deploying only the social presence section, which was divided into the elements of community cohesion, interaction intensity, instructor investment, and affective association. There were no survey questions related to knowledge and experience, the other two elements of COI, because the focus of this study was on social presence. It should be noted that the survey was deployed from July through August 2021 and reflected the impact of the COVID pandemic which, at the time, had pushed all in-person courses to online modality. At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to volunteer for a one-on-one interview with the researcher. Since the survey was utilized principally as a recruitment tool, data from this instrument were not analyzed nor included in this study, thus leaving the one-on-one interview with study participants as the main data source for the study. The full survey is included Appendix section (See Appendix A, B, C). The following segment describes the qualitative phase of the study.

<center>**Qualitative Phase: Interview Results**</center>

Study Participants' Profiles

The researcher interviewed 11 participants enrolled at a mid-sized community college in Southern California. All participants self-identified as students of color including the following sub-groups: two Black females, two Vietnamese females, one Middle Eastern female, two Latinx females, one Latinx male, one Black male, and two multiple-race males. The demographics loosely correlate to the overall population of the community college site. Further demographic

<center>49</center>

data such as age, work experience, program major, or career goals were not included in the questions since the focus was solely on online course experiences for students of color.

Study participants' experiences in online learning varied, with a few having taken online classes before the COVID-19 pandemic, but most only switching to online in March 2020. At the time of the interviews all community college students still had all their classes online. Online modalities also differed, with some students having online classes with synchronous meeting times on Zoom, and others having fully asynchronous classes with no live interaction. Students were in various stages of their education, with some recent high school graduates just starting community college and others a year or more into their studies. Five of the study participants are parents, and most mentioned working other jobs including being Marine Corps reservists. One study participant is living with multiple sclerosis, and several mentioned family responsibilities such as taking care of siblings and older and sometimes sick parents. Generally, the study participants represent typical community college students—adults with intersecting identities and a plethora of responsibilities. Table 1 below summarizes the study participants by pseudonym, self-reported gender, and race/ethnicity. Following the table is a short snapshot description of each participant, which adds a personal view.

Table 1: *Study Participant Basic Demographics Summary*

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
Tasha	Female	Black
Geneva	Female	Black
Mai	Female	Vietnamese
Nhu	Female	Vietnamese
Tara	Female	Middle Eastern
Mirabella	Female	Latinx
Carina	Female	Mexican
Russell	Male	Black
Benjamin	Male	Multiple Races (Peruvian + White)
Caleb	Male	Multiple Races (Asian + White)
Jared	Male	Mexican

Tasha

Tasha self-identifies as Black. She Zoomed into the interview from her closet which she had turned into an office. She had previously taken classes online before COVID, so when everything went remote, she reported it was not hard for her to convert to fully online. She lamented that the harder part was not being on campus. A single mom with two teenagers, she described herself as "mature." She likened online learning to having to "be your own manager."

Geneva

Geneva self-identifies as Black. At the time of her interview, she had a newborn baby who had arrived four days early. Her military husband deploys often so she described herself as "technically a single parent." She is also mother to a two-year old and a teenager. Zooming in

her from her hospital bed with the baby by her side, she openly stated, "I don't like online classes." The initial interview was cut short when the nurse came in to check her baby, but we reconnected a few weeks later to complete it.

Mai

Mai self-identifies as Vietnamese. She was a student at an area community college and has now transferred to a four-year university. Before COVID she had never taken an online class; she reported that when everything went online, she "literally freaked out." English is Mai's second language and she shared how she was surprised in the online environment but supported her in some other ways.

Ngoc

Ngoc self-identifies as Vietnamese. She is a mother to two and English is her second language. Her first time taking online classes was during COVID and she felt there were both negatives and positives to the setting. In the future, as the campus reopens, she plans to take both online and on-campus classes.

Tara

Tara self-identifies as Middle Eastern. A 2020 high school graduate, the pandemic turned her world upside down. She is a first-generation oldest daughter and reflected on the responsibilities she has to her parents, younger brothers, and extended family. For her family, she called herself "the second mom." She has multiple sclerosis and explained how under high stress environments her body "kind of like shuts down." She purposely chose only asynchronous classes so that she would not have required meeting times that were difficult with her health challenges and family responsibilities. Post-COVID, she plans to continue taking all her classes online.

Mirabella

Mirabella self-identifies as Latina. She had taken online classes before the pandemic because she was working a lot, so it fit her schedule. She mostly took asynchronous courses, but some had optional synchronous elements such as office hours on Zoom.

Carina

Carina self-identifies as Mexican. She Zoomed in on her phone from her car during a work break. She works, has adult children, and takes care of her mother and father—he has just been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Because of her busy life with work and family, online classes suit her well. She shared she really enjoys online because "I'm really good at knowing my priorities, and knowing what I need to do, and I dedicate my time." She also admitted to being a night owl, completing many assignments late at night and into the early morning hours. Carina's second language is English.

Russell

Russell self-identifies as Black. He reported enjoying the independence he has with online classes, including "rolling out of bed at 9 A.M." Recently out of the Marines earlier that year, he noted that he is older than most of the other students. He credited his discipline and work ethic as one reason for his success in online classes. Living farther from campus now, despite the drive, he plans to take classes on-campus the following semester.

Benjamin

Benjamin self-identifies as multiracial—Peruvian and White. A Marine Corps reservist, with a busy schedule, the day of the interview he had woken up that morning to head to base at 4:30 A.M. He had not taken any online classes before the pandemic; in fact, he recounted, "I was actually kind of against it because I really like the in-person format." However, he felt he got

used to the online format, and that over time while having five classes online, it started to feel "more normal."

Caleb

Caleb self-identifies as multiracial—Asian and White. He had never taken online courses but reported that he now prefers them. Working an irregular schedule, online asynchronous classes have allowed him to fit in school around his own time. Thinking forward to life post-pandemic, he urged colleges to continue to make online courses available.

Jared

Jared self-identifies as Mexican. He has since transferred to a four-year university. He experienced both asynchronous and synchronous classes, preferring those with a live Zoom component. He discussed experiences and challenges that first-generation students face such as needing laptops and juggling responsibilities.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews

I deployed a survey to gain insight into online instruction and recruit study participants for individual interviews (Appendix A). Twenty-one students responded and showed interest in being interviewed; thus, I contacted all 21. Eleven of those accepted my invitation. I proceeded to interview all 11 respondents, who all self-identified as students of color—the focal population of this research—taking online classes. I conducted the interviews via Zoom—a video-conference platform. The one-on-one interviews lasted between 60-75 minutes each. I utilized a semi-structured interview protocol, which I emailed to study participants before the interview so that they had time to prepare. The interview questions touched on topics of social presence, and relationships with instructors in online setting, specifically focused on trust, care, and respect

(Appendix B). Interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed via Otterai.com. I carefully reviewed each transcription by viewing the interview recordings. Throughout the process and in addition to the recordings, I took notes and wrote detailed data memos immediately following each interview session. I reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy, then cleaned the data. The data were analyzed and hand coded. I conducted open coding and then thematic coding.

To analyze the interviews, I first completed an initial round of open coding by closely reading line by line (Given, 2008). Then, I looked for themes and patterns overall, without any preset codes to begin with. I created codes based on the emerging categories and began to link the codes to the categories in the Social Presence Model (Whiteside, 2015) and the Pyramid of Student Success for Men of Color (Wood & Harris, 2015) —the dual-lens conceptual framework. For the second round of coding, I, again, closely read line by line, coding as themes merged to my existing code list. During this time, I employed color-coding and noticed other codes which I had also written down. For the following round, I specifically examined the transcripts for the codes related to the dual-lens framework. To validate my data analysis, I also conducted peer review and engaged in peer debriefing sessions. Cresswell (2103) defines the role of the peer reviewer as "an individual who keeps the research honest, asks hard questions about methods, meanings and interpretations" (Cresswell, 2013, p. 251). This was important to me as I have a background in online education as an online teacher and trainer, and I wanted to ensure my findings were objective. Finally, I reached back to study participants for member checking to confirm my interpretations of the findings (Cresswell, 2013). For each round of coding, I looked for consistencies, combined codes into sub-themes, and then organized sub-themes into bigger general themes, many aligned to major tenets of the Social Presence Model and Pyramid of Student Success. Below, Table 2 summarizes the emerging themes and sub-themes:

Table 2: *Summary of Themes and Sub-themes*

Emerging Themes	Sub-themes
The Magic of Human Connection	Informal videos
	Authenticity and vulnerability
	Validation and encouragement
The Importance of a Warm Welcome	First-touch communication
	Flexibility
The Value of Student-to-Student Interaction	Interaction in the LMS
	Student-initiated interaction outside of the LMS
	Removal of bias and judgement
The Significance of Instructor Presence	Announcements
	Feedback
The Clarity of Content Presentation	Course modalities
	Accessibility

Emerging Themes

Based on the analysis described above, five significant themes emerged from the interviews related to experiences of students of color in online classes. The themes include (a) the magic of human connection; (b) the importance of a warm welcome; (c) the significance of instructor presence; (c) the value of student-to-student interaction; and (d) the clarity of content presentation. Within each theme there are two to three sub-themes. Themes and sub-themes address the overall research question and sub-questions, as well as the role of authentic care, trust, and mutual respect as these interrelate with social presence.

Theme One centers on the magic of human connection in the online environment. It includes the following subthemes: informal videos, authenticity and vulnerability, and validation and encouragement. **Theme Two** focuses on the importance of a warm welcome online. This includes the subthemes of first-touch communication and flexibility. **Theme Three** highlights the value of student-to-student interaction, which includes the following subthemes: interaction in the LMS, student-initiated interaction outside of the LMS, and removal of bias and judgement in the online setting. **Theme Four** focuses on the significance of instructor presence, including

the following subthemes: announcements and feedback. Finally, **Theme Five** relates to the clarity of content presentation, including the following subthemes: asynchronous and synchronous course modalities, and accessibility.

Emerging Theme One: The Magic of Human Connection

This theme addresses how human connection is the connective tissue in online classes. In humanized online courses, this positive instructor-student relationship supports connection and ensures a positive online environment (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020). This theme directly relates to the definition of social presence, first defined as how one is seen as a "real" person in mediated communication (Gunwardena & Zittle,1997); and more simply as the degree to which online participants feel connected to each other and as a critical literacy for online learners (Whiteside, 2017). Every participant interviewed discussed the power of human connection with their online instructors. Regardless of whether the course was asynchronous, met on Zoom, and/or if participants had had prior online course experience, knowing, and feeling that there was a "real" human on the other side of the screen was important to them. Study participants reported that human connection was formed despite the digital distance, particularly through humanizing informal videos because it allowed instructors to show authenticity, vulnerability, and empathy. When instructors prioritized the human connection, participants perceived that their instructors cared about them.

Sub-theme: Informal Videos

The first sub-theme is informal instructor videos. Various studies concentrate on the way social presence is formed through the power of voice and video in adding in a human element to increase the teacher-instructor relationship (Borup, 2012; Jaggars, 2016; Marmon & Gordesky, 2014; Rucks et al., 2012). All study participants, who had instructors who shared informal videos

as part of their classes, reported that hearing from instructors this way was very impactful. Those that did not have instructors who shared videos admitted that they missed hearing from their instructors in this way. For example, Geneva bemoaned that none of her instructors posted videos, saying, "It would have been nice to see them." Because online courses can be text-heavy, or rely on long, content-focused lectures, short informal videos make a difference to break through and humanize the instructor. The hallway conversations, or chats with instructors before or after class, can be missed online. Students appreciated instructors who intentionally reached out and made a real connection. For example, Carina spoke about an instructor who would send short informal videos using the mobile app Pronto, which she would watch on her phone during breaks at work. She recognized, "And it's like, like chatting with your teachers. And then he will make videos which he was pretty funny to make videos, and he's making them for everybody, and his kids are in the back, playing ball." By moving beyond course content to reveal a bit about their personality and even showcasing their children or pets, instructors demonstrated their humanity. Being "real" was an aspect that helped students forge an emotional connection with their instructors.

Similarly, video reminders also let students know their instructor cared about them. In talking about the videos her instructor sent, Tara shared, "My instructor would send a video just saying like, 'Hey class, how are you?' and I really love that because you know, you're actually talking to a person. I'm watching the video like, 'hi,' back." Likewise, Tara reported she liked the video lectures when the instructor's face is in the corner too. She shared, "Because I see her there in the corner and I'm like nodding along with that. They're talking and teaching as if they're in the classroom making jokes, you know, just having that upbeat tone of voice, stuff like that." In both cases, seeing their instructors on video engaged them beyond the class content

while showing students they cared about them. Whether it is through informal videos showing a bit of personal life, quick reminders, or appearing through video in the lectures, Carina summed up the value of video to humanize the instructor best when she said: "I'll be watching the videos and it's cool. You know, that's the magic. I think that's the magic of being connected with someone when they care."

As a group, study participants whose instructors shared informal videos felt a close connection and cared for by their instructors. They recognized their instructors as "real" and that their class was a humanized experience which led to their success. In addition, instructors who showed authenticity and vulnerability fostered a feeling of connection.

Sub-theme: Authenticity and Vulnerability

This sub-theme focuses on how authenticity and vulnerability helped students feel a human connection to their instructors. Within the Social Presence Model, this factor is identified as affective association, which addresses emotional connection including emotions and personal self-disclosure (Whiteside, 2017). Participants sought out and felt connections with instructors who shared their whole true selves in addition to the course content. Far from posting talking-head professionally scripted video lectures, it was the instructors who showed up authentically in surprising ways that students felt most connected with. Especially online, students may not feel like they "know" their instructors' true selves in the same way they might in on-campus, in-person classes. Students craved this connection, and Benjamin put it best when he stated, "It comes to a point in life where it's like anything you do, you want to have a connection, a human connection. And I meant that's what we live for, we live for human connection." Furthermore, with respect to feeling an emotional connection to instructors, vulnerability emerged as a powerful component when communicating. This was especially important during the pandemic,

a time when students felt fear and concern above and beyond just keeping up with their coursework. Cues of vulnerability made students feel supported. Jared explained this in his interview: "You know, to be honest with you, especially during the COVID time when there's a level of vulnerability from the instructor, it helps me feel more connected when we're not in person. It feels more human, so not crossing that line of professionalism, yeah, but definitely keeping it real, because this is happening to me too." For Jared, and others, learning content from instructors was not enough–experiencing their instructors as whole people, even when that meant showing vulnerability is how students felt connection.

Overall, many participants touched on the topic of transparency. Tasha expanded on this when she remarked:

> So, I think transparency is even more important if we're talking about online learning. Like, I would rather see a video of you walking your dog, struggling with your kids, trying to figure out how you're going to put this lecture together, than coming with a straight face with everything all perfect. . . we are students, and we are humans, at the same time, and like, I'm an adult learner, you know I'm not, I'm not a high school graduate, and I'm not you know a 20 something year old. I'm an experienced human being. And so, I understand real life, real world. And I think teachers sometimes try to hide that, because you know there is a certain level of expectation and professionalism and I get that. Sure, you got to be, but sometimes you got to stray outside the box just a little bit, and, and figure out how you can connect.

As Tasha related, connections happened when students saw their instructors as humans, and they were seen as humans as well. The connections happened not through course content alone, but through a peek into instructors' everyday lives, which included the richness of pets and families. Also, since the interviews took place during the COVID pandemic, numerous participants related the stress and challenges of the times. Consequently, the instructors who recognized and shared their own struggles made a difference. Participants felt validated that these times were also

challenging for their instructors. By naming their vulnerability, participants felt a stronger emotional connection and such affective association bound them together.

Sub-theme: Validation and Encouragement

This sub-theme centers validation and encouragement to forge a human connection between instructors and students. According to Rendón (1994), "validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in-and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (p. 44). Further extensive research exists on the positive effects of validation and encouragement (Gay, 2018, Hammond, 2015, Kleinfeld, 1975, Ladson-Billings, 1994, Rendón, 1994). Specifically, for community college students of color, Wood and Harris (2015) point to the positive outcomes for students when they receive personal and specific validation and encouragement from their instructors. In fact, the authors purport that it is the "third strongest determinant of achievement (grades) for Black men" (Wood & Harris, 2015, p. 26). When instructors shared encouraging words and validation of their work, a sense of trust and care was affirmed. This need remains in all classes, but it is highlighted in online courses where the potential to feel isolated occurs. Participants' remarks supported the literature. Validation and encouragement, in any form, helped students feel cared for and connected to their instructors while also giving them inspiration to continue in the class. Sometimes this encouragement was shared publicly through whole class emails, and other times came through individual messages.

For example, Carina shared the following message a professor had sent to the entire class, "You guys did really good on the test, and I'm proud of you." Carina further explains why these types of messaging are vital even to college students stating, "I'm an adult but you know it actually feels good when teachers do that." Similarly, beyond messages of encouragement,

simply checking in with students mattered. Brandon shared that when instructors asked about how they were doing it felt like they were connecting with him as a human being. About his instructor, he said, "He shows he cares by asking how our days were and what we did over the weekend. It's like, you're a human being, I'm a human being, we understand each other, and it grows from there." Likewise, Russell shared a parallel feeling of connection and care when receiving encouragement from his instructor. He reported, "She encouraged us to do study groups at the beginning of the course, and she was very supportive, you know, telling us that we're doing a great job and stuff like that, and I was like, 'Wow, that's really nice, really encouraging' because I'm not the best at math, let me be the first to admit that. And it was nice to hear some positive feedback from the teacher." Russell goes on to acknowledge that coming from a military background he sees online interactions "almost like a business transaction" where he is just there to learn and continue his way. Even so, he admits, "It's nice to hear I am worthy of improvement and validation and feeling welcomed."

Time and again validation and encouragement closed the distance between students and their instructors. Supportive words whether individually, whole group, via text or video gave students encouragement to continue. These human connections eased students fears and made them feel close to their instructors. Showing up as real people, being vulnerable and authentic while offering encouragement made a difference in students' online learning experience.

Emerging Theme Two: The Importance of a Warm Welcome

This theme focuses on the importance of a warm welcome. The beginning of the course always matters, especially in the online environment. The initial communication from the instructor is the first way student connections are forged. By reaching out and inviting students in a welcoming tone, through email or video communication, the stage is set for students to feel

welcome and invited to the course community. Research from Wood and Harris (2015) demonstrates that a sense of belonging and welcomeness to engage are vital factors that influence student success, especially for men of color. In addition, the literature supports the importance of this first-touch communication as being vital to students feeling a sense of care even before the semester begins. Incorporating these kindness cues of social inclusion (Estrada et al., 2018) closes the distance in online learning and lowers the feelings of isolation. Welcoming language in the syllabi also matters, and accessing it in a web-based format, commonly called a liquid syllabus, helps with forming a positive first impression of the course and instructor (Pacansky-Brock, 2021; 2020; 2017; 2014). Every study participant discussed the importance of a welcoming introduction to the course from their online instructors. Regardless of whether the course was asynchronous, met on Zoom, or if participants had had prior online course experience, receiving a warm welcome inviting them to join the class community positively impacted them.

Sub-theme: First-touch Communication

This sub-theme is about the first communication that participants received before a class began. For many participants, this occurred days or up to a few weeks before class begins. Pacansky-Brock (2020) calls this time between registering for a course and the first day a "high opportunity zone." Wood and Harris (2015) also maintain that this early communication encourages students to feel a sense of belonging. Participants reported that instructor communication, syllabi language, and student introductions made a huge difference in feeling welcomed, cared for, and connected to their instructors. Within the Social Presence Model (Whiteside, 2015), instructor involvement is highly valued, and it includes establishing relationships and making connections. The earlier this happens, the better. For some study

participants, receiving the first-touch communication, usually an email, was a defining moment, and they sometimes made the decision to drop a course even before it began simply by the type of introduction they experienced.

For instance, Carina shared her experience reviewing a syllabus with positive messaging, "The thing that grabs you is when you read the syllabus and you see that the teachers are giving you a chance to pass the class." On the other hand, she went on to report negative experiences, "I had one of the classes, and I actually had to drop because the teacher she had strict deadlines and a schedule that I knew I couldn't meet." Based on her past experiences, Carina reported that she seeks out flexibility saying, "And now, you know, if I see something in the syllabus that they're very flexible then I choose that one." In sum, participants scanned first-touch communication for hints that instructors were understanding, flexible, and empathetic, knowing that was their best chance for success. If they did not catch those cues, they would drop the class even before it began.

As well as emails and course syllabi language, multiple participants mentioned welcome videos from instructors as their first introduction to the courses as particularly noteworthy and inviting. Caleb's reaction was an example of the power of the welcome video. He stated, "I've really enjoyed those videos and I actually get really hyped up for school. And so, the weeks approaching the next semester I'm usually a little bit as okay, I want to know what's going on." He explained further how receiving the welcome videos made him feel less anxious about what to expect in the class and that knowing a bit about his instructor made him feel excited to the being the class. Tara also shared similar feeling as she waited to begin the semester, "I'm the type to like, wait until like 12 AM for the classes to open, because I just I'm really excited to like look through like how they set it up and stuff." Knowing that students are "hyped" and waiting for the

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clock to strike 12:00 AM to log in shows the importance of the beginning of the online course setting. Putting a face and voice to their instructors before class began calmed students' anxiety, helped them feel welcomed and showed them they belonged.

Sub-theme: Flexibility

Another sub-theme under the importance of a warm welcome is about flexibility. In interviews, every participant mentioned instructor and course flexibility as a means of instructors showing they care. From the first communication from their professors, whether it was through email, video, or the course syllabus, students looked for indications of flexibility.

When looking at the course syllabus in particular, participants mentioned that any information which seemed to portray strict or inflexible deadlines would prompt them to drop the course before it even began, as opposed to being a welcoming document. This type of inflexible language on the syllabus turned participants off. Carina spoke to this directly when she reported how she analyzes a course syllabus, "For me I know right away like, oh, this is not gonna work for me because they're expecting too much of me and there's no flexibility, I'm going to get another class." Backing up this idea of actively seeking supportive instructors, Jared divulged that he looked for instructors who were "there to support us and they want us to be successful, rather than having the opposite, you have some professors that didn't care, and they have hard deadlines and yeah just set the tone of the class when there was lack of flexibility."

Empathy and understanding go hand and hand with flexibility, and participants pointed to the challenges of schooling during the pandemic. Mirabella, when asked how instructors demonstrated they cared about her, talked about asking for an extension to complete work after being in a bad car accident. She recalled, "They were supportive of it. They didn't ask me to like, send them notes or anything, they were like okay, I believe you; here's a few extra days, okay."

Having an instructor who believed her without supporting documents and quickly granted an extension showed flexibility, which to Mirabella indicated authentic care and trust. Tara also shared a similar experience when asking for an extension and her instructor responded with, "That's okay, it's okay. Take your time, like, just get it in before the semester ends, you know, that's such a relief, right, it takes the pressure off." This flexibility was especially important to Tara, living with multiple sclerosis, who relayed her gratitude for her instructors for being "super understanding." She shared that when hospitalized twice for her multiple sclerosis, her instructors were "really understanding and you know, just that communication allowed me to continue."

Along with instructor flexibility, specifically with deadlines and extensions, participants also reported that having flexibility in the course supported their success. While they differed, from having all course content and modules open from the start, to opening them in chunks, a theme also emerged of flexibility with course organization. Tara shared that having course modules open in advance helped her so that she could work ahead on "good days" because she knew that there would also be bad days or even weeks where she would fall behind due to her multiple sclerosis. Other participants shared that the twin responsibilities of parenting and working made any type of flexibility with course content helpful. In part, the online class setting is one where students expect more flexibility to start. Even before the pandemic, some participants had intentionally selected online classes for this very reason. For example, Carina discussed why online classes were so important to her: "Yes, I like having classes online because their flexibility, it's there. I work full time, and you know I take care of my mother and my father also. My father has Alzheimer's, and this year he started having more trouble. So, it's been tough." Living and schooling with disabilities, family responsibilities, and work are common for

the community college student population; therefore, participants needed the flexibility that some instructors and course organization provided.

Flexibility with both course design and instructor behavior is rooted in mutual respect. As participants sensed the instructor cared about and trusted them to complete the work at their own pace, it heightened their chance for success in online courses. In sum, study participants clearly stated the importance of first-touch communication. From syllabi language to welcome emails and video introductions, they had the power to make or break their feelings belonging, trust, and care. All these factors were more important than content.

Emerging Theme Three: The Value of Student-to-Student Interaction

The third emerging theme addresses the value of student-to-student interaction. The literature on student-student interaction calls it a critical component of the online learning environment (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Studies show that learner-to-learner interaction is both motivating and stimulating for students (Moore & Kearlsey, 2005). High levels of interaction then contribute to satisfaction (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998). Specific to community college students, a survey of nearly 15,000 students by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (2013) concluded that the feeling of "camaraderie" among students within the class contributes to persistence. In the Social Presence Model (Whiteside, 2015), community cohesion relates to the entire course community as a whole and becomes a pivotal component of social presence. As students feel part of a community, they have a higher chance of success. Wood and Harris (2015) refer to this as "Community-Centric," as an aspect that supports students of color specifically. They support collaborative learning as it can reduce feelings of isolation, lessen feelings of alienation, and cultivate a sense of mattering and belonging. There are many ways that student-to-student interaction occurs in an online setting.

The Learning Management System (LMS), in this case, Canvas, is one platform where it occurs most frequently in asynchronous classes. Synchronous classes usually offer live sessions, often using Zoom, where student-to-student interaction happens. In addition, participants reported non-instructor managed settings where student-to-student interaction thrived.

Sub-theme: Interaction in the LMS

The first sub-theme includes interaction in the LMS—Canvas. Overall, study participants shared that they appreciated the aspect of connection with each other and community building that happens when instructors built in introductory activities at the beginning of their online classes. Many instructors used the first discussion board as an icebreaker or welcome activity. Reflecting on one such introductory discussion board, Tasha reported, "It's really nice to meet other students who are from all walks of life, which is part of the college experience, and I'm one of those people that go through and read them and make some sort of a comment, not because the teacher requires it, but because I want to connect and build some sort of connection with my peers because we never know how we might be able to support one another. In the future, you know, or along the journey." In this way, community bonds can be forged and strengthened, perhaps even more so than in an in-person class where one might not learn as much extensive information about others on that first day. Other study participants further corroborated the significance of this type of interaction.

For example, Brandon talked about the student-to-student interaction positively when he reported, "Honestly, I found myself saying a lot more in an online class than in person, which was interesting. So yeah, I ended up saying more."

Sub-theme: Student-initiated Interaction Outside the LMS

This next sub-theme focuses on student-initiated interaction outside of the LMS. Although much of the literature focuses on student-to-student interaction, it is limited to arenas that are instructor-created, contained on the instructor LMS, in this case, Canvas, or mediated such as the mobile app Pronto, or Zoom. A surprising finding was student-initiated groups off the course and outside the presence of the instructor. Six of the 11 participants interviewed reported Discord as a place where student-to-student interaction thrived. Discord is a free social media app that allows for group texting as well as sharing of images, videos, and links. It is easy for form groups or "communities" on Discord. Participants reported that in many classes a Discord community is created by and for students in a particular class. This is done on their own, without prodding or inclusion of the instructor. After sharing the one-and-done feeling of discussion board forums, Russell said about Discord, "A lot of students have started on Discord servers, just, that's a cool way to interact." He explained that especially with coursework that is challenging, "So, you know, we'll go into voice chat for people working together and interact and joke around and just behave like we were in a real school."

Jared's comment supported this feeling of being able to interact informally as well. About student-initiated Discord groups, he revealed:

> So, for me what's been more beneficial or what I see more connecting with students is when students initiate, and we have a Discord. That's real popular right now in most of my classes. You're engaging with students that actually are actively trying to do well, and you know you can see their questions and stuff - things that you can't do otherwise because that's one limitation I think of Canvas is like we can't have those side conversations or chat. Right? Especially because you have the professor in the room, you know.

Jared's comment highlights not just the benefit of off-LMS student-to-student interaction to learning course content, but to connection with other students. In asynchronous discussion board

forums, or even in Zoom breakout rooms, the space for offside informal chat–where meaningful

connections and relationships form–is limited if not impossible.

In addition to Discord and Zoom, students mentioned Instagram and student-initiated

Zoom sessions as places where they interacted and collaborated with other students.

While some students used Discord, others used a more familiar tool, Zoom, to find ways to

connect with each other outside of the LMS. Geneva related how she proactively created this

space for private study groups on Zoom:

> Yeah, so, sometimes you know there has to be that weird student like myself
> that's like, "Hey do you guys want to get on a Zoom at seven and talk about
> chapter six?" You know, there has to be that student that's bold enough to be like,
> "Hey, I missed people. So, let's do this." You know, and again it's like you don't
> know if it's allowed or if it is or isn't allowed but my assumption is it's peer to
> peer, and it's a personal choice so it's not anything that's mandated and just putting
> it you know, in the, in the class chat like, "Hey we're gonna do a study group at
> six - anyone want to join?" I think it's it really boils down to the student, you
> know, if they're willing to step outside of that comfort zone, move from behind
> the screen and make something happen. And most of us aren't.

Again, Geneva and others reported that they sought out connections with their peers beyond the

class confines, without moderation from their instructors, and did not worry about whether it was

"mandated" or not. Interestingly, Geneva reported that she was "weird" in proposing these out-

of-class study groups, but it turned out to be spaces that many participants wanted.

Beyond using Discord and Zoom to support their learning, ask clarifying content

questions, or meet in study groups, participants also mentioned Instagram, a social media

platform. Participants indicated that one benefit of these groups was not just to seek support with

course content, but to chat, engage, and meet other students informally. Since the online setting

is often confined to interacting around class content, participants reported that they connected on

Instagram to follow each other and form community around commonalities and personal

experiences. Overall, participants interacted with other students outside of the LMS and not just around course content.

Sub-theme: Removal of Bias and Judgement

The next sub-theme, under student-to-student interaction, was the removal of bias and judgement. Wood and Harris (2015) point out that men of color may experience college marginalization and alienation in college due to stereotyping attributed to their race/ethnicity. Though their research focused specifically on men of color, female participants of color shared similar fears and biases. A unique component that several study participants reported was that the online course experience removed the barrier of visual judgement and bias they reported experiencing in on-campus, face-to-face classes. In discussing their experiences in online courses, study participants shared that they felt free from bias or judgment which comes with in-person classes. Depending on what the instructor required, students may not have shared photos, images, or videos to show their physical appearance or reveal their identity. Therefore, students' physical appearance and racial background were not readily apparent.

Therefore, Russell, who self-identifies as Black, exclaimed, "I definitely interact with people that I wouldn't normally interact with." He went on to explain that he became friendly with three white moms in the group chat and in course discussions during the semester of his online class. He stated, "If I was in class, I don't think they would talk to me because I'm six foot four, half Black, half White. I'm a killer dude. And you know, maybe I feel like in general people have been intimidated or assume things about me like 'you must be up to no good.'" Russell further reported that it was nice to interact with people who did not have bias against him and did not engage with him based on what they assumed about him. He believed if they had met in an on-campus class, they never would have become friends. Russell

summed it up when he stated, "I get to communicate with people that I don't normally communicate with." Russell's experience showcases an interesting perspective of the online setting–that students may actually form connections and community with each other in ways that they might not in the in-person setting. The distance allows for students to get to know each other who might not usually interact.

Tasha also related a similar experience. She said, "The beautiful thing about online learning is that it took away that visual judgment. […] You get to meet the person without seeing the person. And so, I think that has an effect on how people join forces because let's be honest, most of us will look first and make a judgment and then we engage in the conversation." Tasha continued that the removal of visual judgment took it away and, she added, "in online learning, you get to meet the individuals for who they are because it's all about what they want to put out there, so I think that is another way we're able to connect without judgments." Tasha related her experiences online with those experiences of being profiled by police on campus and celebrated "that's one thing that has been taken away from me with online learning." So, contrary to the assumption that connections are more challenging to forge online, some participants reported that they connected and engaged with their classmates in ways they had not in person. Beyond the classroom, participants like Tasha felt safer online than she did on campus where she reported being profiled by police. All in all, for some participants, the online setting provided a space where they were free from bias and prejudgment.

Emerging Theme Four: The Significance of Instructor Presence

This theme focuses on the significance of instructor presence. This is about the extent to which the instructor is an invested, active partner in the learning community. Research studies consistently suggest that instructor-student interaction is a significant factor to student success in

online courses (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Bush, 2010; Delmas, 2017; Jaggars, 2016; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rucks-Ahidiana, 2012). Other studies point to how frequent and effective student-instructor interaction encourages students to commit to the course, and in turn, perform better academically (Jaggars, 2016) as well as the importance of timely and personal feedback. Relatedly, the most common ways participants reported hearing from instructors were announcements and feedback. Wood and Harris (2015) put this most strongly when they state that "student success is more of a function of the environments created by faculty members than factors relevant to students themselves" (p. 17). There are some specific sub-themes which further describe the significance of instructor presence.

Sub-theme: Announcements

This sub-theme focuses on course announcements, which are available through the Learning Management System, in this case, Canvas, and sent through email. Regular announcements may include reminders, course content, as well as information about outside-of-class information. Students reported that announcements were one touchpoint with instructors that formed a sense of connection. Regarding announcements, Tara stated, "So there's that connection and then, you know, when they make announcements and it's just, it's nice because like I can communicate with them through like Canvas email. So, you know they're accessible." Tara then shared the importance of video announcements, "My professor would have announcements in the form of video. And I really love that, because yeah, you know, you're actually like talking to a person, I mean, you weren't talking you're watching the video. Yeah, it kind of just makes you feel like you know you're here you're in this online class but you're actually like interacting with the teacher and other students."

Other instructors utilized announcements to share out-of-class resources. While most instructor communication is usually around course content, participants responded well and remembered when instructors shared other resources. Participants reported that it was beneficial for them and their families when professors shared information about campus events and resources. Geneva affirmed this when she recalled a professor who did just that, "She's randomly, you know, sharing information. Just a reminder, this is happening at a school or that's happening or whatever so I appreciate that, because you know I wouldn't know I don't have. Yeah, her being so insightful and just giving out information. I knew what was going on on-campus and was like oh my school offers this, you know, if it helped me and my family and I still participate a little bit more."

A further example of how sharing outside resources helped students included when participants reported that hearing about job opportunities was impactful. Recalling hearing about an internship opportunity from a professor, Mai stated, "I also felt really connected with them that way because I felt like wow you actually care about what we're learning and how we're making the change in me as well, and actually got a job through one of the postings." Mai went on to share that hearing about outside resources not only helped her get a job but fostered a sense of connection with her professor. Announcements and sharing of outside resources beyond course content could be considered extra or unnecessary; however, participants reported that these types of interactions from their instructors made a difference in feeling connected and cared for. Instead of feeling isolated online, they felt seen and included in the course and wider college community. Furthermore, by impacting their personal and career growth through job opportunities and family resources, participants felt closely connected to their instructors.

Sub-theme: Feedback

This sub-theme focuses on the ways instructors interacted with students through feedback on assignments, papers, projects, and exams. The literature shows that students sense an instructor's social presence through the immediacy of response and type of feedback received (Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk, 2012). Immediacy behaviors in the online environment increased overall learning and course satisfaction (Gordon, 2016; Richardson and Swan, 2003). Posting announcements, reminders of assignments and deadlines, and messages about course logistics are also moves that help students feel connected to the instructor and the course (Jaggars, 2016). Participant responses mirrored the research so far; they cared about both timely feedback and personalized feedback.

Study participants expected feedback as part of their road to success. Benjamin reported, "We're here to learn like and reading the book and doing the assignment, whatever, whatever the assignment is, you know, without that feedback from the person who's supposed to be the master of this craft. It's hard to evolve and grow as a student." Benjamin's comment points to the value that students faced specifically from instructors. Even in spaces where peer review, or student-to-student interaction was present, participants remained adamant that hearing from instructors was necessary. Beyond remarks on their assignments, instructor posts in discussion board forums were another way that participants reported receiving instructor presence. Notably, few participants reported on instructor presence in the discussion board forums, which is one of the most common assignment and interaction activities in online asynchronous classes. When instructors did post, participants relayed their surprise. Tasha shared a positive, and surprising experience when a professor engaged in the discussion board forum:

> And like I said this semester, I would say is the first time I've really had a
> professor use the comment and discussion area on Canvas to engage with
> students, and I like that because, of course, they always want us to engage with
> each other, but I want to engage with my professor too because you're the one

with the knowledge, you know you're the one I'm here to see, you know, you're the one I'm here to learn from. I'm always gonna learn from my peers, but you're the one with the knowledge that I'm seeking to gain, right? So, I think he's the only one, over the last year and a half, I would say that that makes me feel like he cares, and also that he wants to have some sort of connection with his students, he's not just leaving us out.

As Tasha pointed out, engaging with her peers is one factor online, but she prioritized comments and feedback even on the discussion board from her instructor. Beyond the support for learning content, she specifically called out that it made her feel he cared about her and wanted to connect.

The next recurrent sub-theme, regarding Feedback, was waiting for such feedback. Participants reported that once they turned in an assignment, commented on a discussion board, or completed a quiz or other assessment, then waited to hear from their instructors. The amount of wait time concerned them, and when they received comments and feedback, they jumped to review it. Tara summarized that feeling well when she stated: "I get really excited actually, like, oh! There's a submission comment and I'll get a notification on my phone. So, I'll be like, scrolling through Tik Tok or something and, uh huh, notification! And I'm like, yep, I'm gonna click on that right now. You know, I just like seeing the comments, because I'm just like, okay, yeah, they actually looked at my work, right? They took the time to grade my work and look through it and these are their comments about it." Tara's observation and feelings are supported in the literature on timeliness of responses (Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk, 2012). Far from feeling a sense of despair, Tara felt excited and connected when she knew her instructor offered constructive feedback and that there was evidence that her instructors were reading her work.

Timeliness in feedback was not the only factor that mattered to participants. Individualized and personalized feedback signaled to participants that the instructor cared as

well. Benjamin commented on this when asked about how his instructors had shown they cared reported, "He cares by connecting with us asking us how our days were over the weekend and giving honest feedback about how we can improve our work in the class." The twofold communication of asking how he was doing coupled with honest feedback and practical suggestions for improvement offered both the human touch and a push towards excellence in the content.

In addition, feedback became even more important when it was the only individualized interaction that participants had with their instructors. Russell shared that it was "pretty much the only interaction" he had with his instructors. He remembered one instructor who gave extensive feedback on papers, with recommendations and specific suggestions for improvement. Accordingly, he stated, "So that, that's like one of those things where I think she cares. I think she's supporting my journey for college." In comparison with the instructors who did not give him feedback, even if he enjoyed the course content, and received grades the instructor Russell felt cared about him was the one who gave extensive feedback. This kept him engaged with and satisfied in the course.

Related to the Feedback sub-theme, the remark that came up repeatedly regarding connecting with instructors was receiving timely responses to emails and questions. Participants mentioned sending emails or messages and never hearing back, which eroded their sense of trust and left them with a sense of despair. Benjamin voiced it this way: "I would email them, but I would rarely get a response with certain professors. It's harder to create a relationship with any of them." At the very least, responding to emails is a connection point. Similarly, Benjamin reported on his frustration when not receiving timely responses from his instructors. He shared:

> Yeah, for me to send a response to a professor, it should be just etiquette to get a
> response in a timely manner. And, you know because there's a relationship, and if

you don't work on the relationship, then, you know, there's a disconnect. And that disconnect can be found with left alone email. It can be found in questions not being answered on a Zoom call. It can be found, you know, in bad grading of an assignment without any explanation or how to improve. You know that disconnect is just, you know, the main problem.

In sum, instructor feedback mattered greatly to participants. How they heard from instructors differed, but if it was timely and personalized, then participants perceived that their instructors cared about their success, and they felt connected to them. In fact, participants were on standby after submitting assignments, eagerly waiting for acknowledgement that their work had been received and read.

Emerging Theme Five: The Clarity of Content Presentation

The final theme is about the impact of clarity of course content presentation. This includes both the modality of the online setting, including synchronous versus asynchronous modalities, and whether the online course materials were accessible. Course organization mattered greatly to students. The second layer of Wood and Harris' Pyramid of Student Success contains "effective and engaging pedagogy" (2015). Such pedagogical element, after the base of relationships is set, highlights the significance of pedagogy. In the online setting, there are various ways that content is presented and made accessible to students. Two sub-themes emerged from this: course modality, including asynchronous and synchronous opportunities, and accessibility.

Overall organization was one benefit of online courses. The online LMS offered notifications and an overall outline that study participants reported aided them, perhaps even more than in an in-person class. Geneva spoke to this when she reported, "That is the positive about having online classes. Canvas will send you a reminder or like a calendar when you first log in. It kind of gives you an outline of what you need to do for the week, and I appreciate that

because I do need more organization in my life." As Geneva related, this tracking and notification supported her success in ways that were not present in in-person classes. Other participants noted turning on notification settings on their phones for due dates, announcements, and when instructors had graded their submissions.

Course content can be organized in various ways in an LMS. All the participants' instructors used the Canvas LMS, which allows for different access points to content. In terms of overall organization, participants preferred Modules to view content. Mirabella shared why in the following quoted segment:

> I definitely just prefer everything to be in modules and separated and everything like that, I think that's like the most ideal way to see what needs to be done and what you need to read through, I really enjoy having modules because sometimes they'll just put everything under 'Assignments,' and I don't really find it. I do wish that the modules would open up earlier and stay open for a little bit longer, because most of the modules that I have, there's one class that will do him, like, he'll do like two modules ahead of where we're at, which is very helpful, um, my other classes it's just modules will only open on Mondays, but I work so I always want to get ahead of my work and make sure that you know if I can do it, I will do it. Yeah, so it just it makes it a little harder, I guess, with like a working schedule.

When taking an online class, organization and access can be barriers to content. Participants such as Mirabella explained how she appreciated the clarity and separation that modules provided. In addition, having access to multiple modules at a time supported participants, especially those who were working or had other competing responsibilities.

In terms of the broader picture of course organization, a well-developed and well-organized course sets up students for success. The fear of isolation in online classes, of clicking around in the darkness, can be mitigated when a course is designed well. Carina mentioned, "I mean, it's been great in classes that are designed very well. To the point that it actually makes it dynamic, maybe actually doesn't let you get bored. It makes it like you want to do more like I just I can't wait to start doing that homework because I really like it, you know, and I will do it

two or three times, you know, the projects that he will give us." Once relationships, care, and

trust were provided as the basis, participants sought out and delighted in courses that were

thoughtfully designed, allowed for flexibility in accessing the content, and set them up for

success through course notifications and clear scheduling.

Sub-theme: Course Modality

The first sub-theme under the Clarity of Content Presentation refers to course modality;

namely, asynchronous and synchronous. Participants had experiences with both types of online

modalities, with varying responses. First, asynchronous interactions are those that are not tied to

any live time or space. Courses that are fully online and asynchronous have no set meeting times

on Zoom or requirements for times to be online. Therefore, students complete assignments and

interact on their own time. Students can post on a discussion board on Friday evening for

example, and receive replies in an hour, a day, or even a week later. In this type of interaction,

the delayed response can be challenging for interaction. On the other hand, it is the most flexible

type of interaction since it can occur at the students' convenience, and students have the time and

space they need to prepare and post their responses.

Asynchronous Classes

Overwhelmingly, participants reported that they preferred asynchronous classes because

of a myriad reasons including taking care of family members, work, and their own disability that

made it difficult to travel to campus. Others ended up in asynchronous classes during COVID

because those were the only option. For participants who selected asynchronous courses, they

rated them highly. One example is Caleb, who shared:

> So far, my favorite are definitely the asynchronous classes. Full disclosure—I
> haven't taken anything but asynchronous classes. I'm a quick learner so rather
> than having to sit through an hour of lecture I can usually play my lectures on 1.5
> speed and then I just can get more done. I can spend my time studying rather than

listening to lectures. I like that if I do come across a concept and I want to do some outside research on I can just pause right where I am, make sure I understand the concept, and then move on, especially when the concept builds on a foundation.

For Caleb, and other participants, the benefit of asynchronous courses went beyond the flexibility of time and convenience. The added benefit was personalized learning experiences. Participants made choices to fit their individual needs, which included viewing content at quicker playback speed and pausing, rewatching, and looking for supportive materials at the same time. In this way, participants' online learning experiences were at their fingertips.

In asynchronous classes, discussion board forums are one of the most common type of student-to-student interactions online. Though this type of discussion was where most of the interaction in online courses occurred, there were mixed reviews. Some study participants were not favorable of the forums, reported the overuse of discussion board forums, and questioned their purpose. Russell, for example, concedes that "boards are a good way to connect and interact," but added, "for most it's like this very one-time interaction like they post a discussion, and you comment on it, and there's rarely any like response to that comment that you've made. So, it's very, very one time-ish." Mirabella concurred, "You know, just like it doesn't really seem like anything's really going on and it's kind of just like, oh! Do this activity online and share your findings, like, yeah, I don't really see the point in it, except for like, I've points that I would get from it." Geneva spoke more plainly, "I hate discussion, I don't have time for that. Just give me my work and let me do it." Since discussion board forums continue to be a regular feature in online asynchronous courses, participants had a lot of exposure to them. The transactional nature of the usual, "post-once-reply-twice" assignment was often met with dread, and participants admitted they did them quickly and mostly just to earn points.

Despite the negative comments on discussion boards, there were some positive comments as well. One positive point was when instructors' course discussion topics went beyond the focus on content to tie it to participants' personal lives. Participants then enjoyed reading and learning about each other through their relationship to the course content. Geneva reflected, "That's the ones that positive I could say about a discussion board; it depends on when the question is related to real life you kind of get to see where people are from, their experiences, or something, and when you relate whatever the coursework is to personal experiences, it helps us understand that, oh, maybe we're not the only ones that's marginalized or going through so it kind of just puts you in the mind frame of like, we're not alone in certain situations." Instead of posting simply to show content, Geneva and others appreciated the opportunity to relate the course content to personal experiences, and then eagerly reviewed their peer's posts for signs of commonality and shared experience.

Another benefit of online discussion board forums is that they can be more equitable spaces where students have an opportunity to share at their own pace and without the pressure of in-person communication. Benjamin explained, "Honestly, I found myself saying a lot more in an online class than in person, which was interesting. Yeah. Yeah, so I ended up saying more." This equity component is significant; an in-person class discussion foregrounds extroverted students who think quickly and feel comfortable speaking up in a group. Asynchronous online discussions allow for thoughtful responses, time to prepare, and where everyone gets an equal voice. It does not matter who speaks first, and every one's voice is heard through the posts. Indeed, for participants like Benjamin, this space allowed them to contribute more to a discussion than they ever had in an in-person class.

Furthermore, interaction on the discussion board forums were viewed positively when instructors also engaged there. Tasha recollected, "I've rarely had a professor use the comment and discussion area on Canvas to engage with students, and I like that because, of course, they always want us to engage with each other, but I want to engage with my professor too." Discussion boards were the main asynchronous activity mentioned, though some participants mentioned other tools such as Padlet, VoiceThread, and Flip as ways they engaged with the asynchronous content. Like discussion board forums, the asynchronous space allowed for time and space to respond equitably, while these technology tools allowed for increased engagement through voice and video. Though not all participants experienced class assignments, those they did pointed to their impact and interest.

Synchronous Classes

Differing from asynchronous, synchronous classes have a required live meeting component, most commonly on Zoom. During these times, both students and the professor are all on at the same time, allowing for real-time interaction with chat, video, or audio. Not all study participants interviewed had online classes that met synchronously, but those that did felt Zoom was an interactive space that they benefited from. Russell summed this up well, "Zoom calls are really cool, really nice because you do feel like you're having this connection like right now like, it's nice to be able to talk to someone and hear someone else's voice and hear their comments or feedback immediately, so that's nice I think that definitely makes me feel connected." Participants pointed out exactly this—the real-time interaction supported their learning. They could ask questions, see other students in the same space, and engage with their instructors.

Benjamin, concurred, stating that in Zoom, "There's just a lot more discussion between the students and the teacher." Caleb added to the theme of instructor interaction, "In Zoom

meetings were where I feel like that was when I got the most interaction with my teacher." In terms of instructor interaction specifically, Jared recommended, "To feel connected, engaged in those online classes, I think it helps when there's opportunities for questions or just discussion portions. Rather than just the lecture and we're done." Other participants shared this sentiment that they appreciated getting their questions answered live without having to wait for a response to an email or post on a discussion board. Furthermore, they pointed to live discussions whether whole class or in Zoom breakout rooms as places for strong interaction.

Beyond course content, the live opportunity on Zoom to see each other was particularly useful for establishing community and connection. Jared talked about how his instructor started off asking how they are doing, "grounding" not about class content, but personally. He said, "we're all coming from different spaces and challenges, during that time, you know. So that was helpful because it makes it feel more human." Humanized interactions were previously discussed in the first theme as "The Magic of Human Connection," and here in course modality, it appears again. Participants valued instructors that utilized the live Zoom space to check-in with students, show up authentically and validate and encourage them. Because they could interact with their instructors in real time and see them, the human connection shone through.

For classes that met asynchronously, participants still looked for opportunities for live interaction. Participants appreciated instructors who provided Zoom office hours or other synchronous study sessions. When thinking about how instructors could offer these opportunities, Tasha shared:

> Sometimes you got to stray outside the box just a little bit, and, and figure out how you can connect like the online office hours, like that is not complicated. Okay, an hour or two of your day, maybe two days a week, where you let your students know I'm gonna sit in this Zoom Room. And if anybody wants to come, come, and we can talk and it's just an open space where the student can say, okay, my teacher's real, they care. They're here. You know, it doesn't always have to be

you know notes and books, I can talk to them about real world things, you know, I can maybe talk about internships or opportunities or what my future looks like in the industry. I mean, it's a part of realness that's required, and being an educator.

Overall, students sought out connections with their instructors whether it be around course content or not, and they appreciated timely and personalized feedback. Participants noted instructor presence and feedback as cues that their instructors cared about them.

Sub-theme: Accessibility

This sub-theme is about the accessibility online courses afforded. Study participants noted that online course materials were more accessible than what they had experienced in in-person settings. This surprised them. For example, Mai discussed this when she reported about her experience in synchronous Zoom sessions, "When professors have slides it is so much clearer to just look on the computer screen, and then when my classmates participate in an online environment I can hear them more clearly, because it was like larger classrooms like 40 plus people, sometimes it's just difficult to know what people are saying. Yeah, but online is easier and I can see their face and their names as well."

In addition, participants mentioned that instead of squinting in an in-person class to see slides or other course materials, on Zoom, when the instructor shared their screen, they saw it very closely, took screenshots to review later, and heard both the instructor and other students very easily. Though most of the participants who mentioned accessibility did not need accessibility support, they found that the online setting's accessibility components made the interaction with both the instructor and the other students better.

Additionally, having videos recorded with captions also supported not just students with accessibility needs, but all students. Caleb in talking about how accesses videos shared, "Yeah, I love, I always love when lectures are recorded, and I can access them later. It's definitely one of

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my favorite things in all my classes now." Jared's experience also mirrored this as he shared,

"And you know, an ideal for me is when the lectures are recorded, and I can review them later, especially if it's complex material. That I can reference and that's one advantage to being online versus in a lecture is because you're just writing notes and trying to understand, but with complex classes, I can read listen to them explain it." Audio books was another accessibility support mentioned. Carina explained, "So, I listen to audiobooks that as a really good tool for me because I get audiobooks from the classes, and then I just listened to them. And it just makes it so much easier." To conclude, accessibility may not have been needed for most participants, but the accessibility options that the online setting provided benefited them, nonetheless.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reported the findings from an analysis of interview data gathered from 11 study participants, all students of color who were taking online courses in a community college in Southern California. The voices of these students were the focus of this study, so interviews were video recorded, transcribed, reviewed, and coded to gain understanding of their experiences. All study participants were given the same questions before the interviews to prepare and given equal time and opportunity to answer them during the interviews. Nevertheless, some participants appeared to have more to say than others. All responses were analyzed, coded, and integrated into the emerging themes. Though each participant experience is unique, five significant themes about their experiences emerged from the interviews. The themes include (a) the magic of human connection; (b) the importance of a warm welcome; (c) the significance of instructor presence; (c) the value of student-to-student interaction; and (d) the clarity of course content presentation. These themes address both the main research question and both sub-questions. The findings are discussed through the dual lens of the Social Presence

Model (Whiteside, 2015) and the Pyramid of Student Success (Wood & Harris, 2015). Table 2

provides at-a-glance summary of these main themes.

Table 2*: Summary of Themes and Sub-themes*

Emerging Themes	Sub-themes
The Magic of Human Connection	Informal videos
	Authenticity and vulnerability
	Validation and encouragement
The Importance of a Warm Welcome	First-touch communication
	Flexibility
The Value of Student-to-Student Interaction	Interaction in the LMS
	Student-initiated interaction outside of the LMS
	Removal of bias and judgement
The Significance of Instructor Presence	Announcements
	Feedback
The Clarity of Content Presentation	Course Modality
	Accessibility

Each of these elements will be discussed in Chapter Five, especially as they relate to the

dual-lens of the Social Presence Model (Whiteside, 2015) and the Pyramid of Student Success

(Wood & Harris, 2015) along with implications and recommendations for stakeholders.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In this chapter, I review the statement of the problem, study goals, research questions, theoretical framework, methodology, and limitations. Findings from the study are discussed in connection to the research questions. Finally, I discuss recommendations and implications, areas for future research, and final thoughts.

Overview of the Statement of the Problem and Study Goals

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand and amplify the experiences of students of color in online instruction at one community college. Specifically, I utilized a qualitative methodology to understand the lived experiences of students of color in online classes. A qualitative approach, through one-on-one interviews, allows the researcher to have in-depth look at those lived experiences students (in this case students of color). By understanding these experiences, we can strive to close the equity gap in academic success and program completion between online and in-person courses, especially for students of color. The following questions assisted me in data-gathering.

The Research Questions

The main research question to this study was the following: In what ways do social presence and relationships relate to success and program completion of students of color in online learning? The following sub-questions facilitated data-gathering points related to the main question:

1. How do students of color describe their relationship with their online instructors?

    a. What instructor behaviors influenced the students' perceptions of feeling a sense of trust, authentic care, and mutual respect online?

2. How do students of color experience social presence in online courses?

a. What elements of social presence (affective expression, community cohesion, interaction intensity, knowledge and experience, and instructor investment) do students perceive support their success online?

Conceptual Framework

I used a dual-lens conceptual framework. The Social Presence Model focuses on online education and, by itself, does not consider the research around students of color in community colleges. Consequently, I also utilized the Pyramid of Student Success to focus on men of color. Its authors, Wood and Harris (2015; 2017), explain that practices which work for men of color also support students of all racial/ethnic and gender backgrounds. Combined, the two frameworks guided this research as I examined online education with community college students of color. The findings show that social presence factors can be viewed through the lens of trust, authentic care, and mutual respect.

Methodology

I used a qualitative methodology, with a focus on interviews, to understand better participants' experiences taking online community college classes. I deployed a survey to 14 online sections of nearly 350 students to recruit potential study participants. I then selected 11 participants for individual interviews, all self-identified as students of color taking online community college classes. I interviewed each participant via Zoom. The one-on-one interviews lasted between 60-75 minutes each. I utilized a semi-structure interview protocol, which was emailed to the participant before the interview so that they had time to prepare. The interview questions concentrated on topics of social presence, and relationships with instructors in the online setting, specifically focused on trust, care, and respect. Interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed via Otterai.com. I carefully reviewed each transcription by viewing the

interviews repeatedly. Throughout the process, I took notes during the interviews and wrote detailed data memos immediately following each session. The data were analyzed and hand coded. I first conducted open coding and then thematic coding. I validated my analysis through member checking and peer review.

Limitations

As a researcher, I acknowledge this study has limitations. First, the study included a small sample size of just 11 students of color and limited to just one semester at one community college. Therefore, the findings may not be generalized to all students of color in community college. Secondly, I also recognize my positionality as potential bias, including being a woman of color, leader and trainer for online instruction, and as a professional keenly interested in the study findings. Despite these potential limitations, study participants shared valuable data. Their experiences may add to existing literature, thus filling the gap where the voices of community college students of color have been missing. Such findings, also, may offer ideas on how to support students of color enrolled in online courses.

Overview of Research Findings: Emerging Themes and Connection to Research Questions

The findings of this research study generated five main themes. Theme One—The Magic of Human Connection—highlights human connection as the most important component in an online setting. Theme Two—The Importance of a Warm Welcome—focuses on the critical introductory period of a course, including first communication, syllabi, and information they received from their instructors. Theme Three—The Value of Student-to-Student Interaction— centers on the level of interactions participants had with each other in their online courses. Theme Four—The Significance of Instructor Presence—focuses on the actions of the instructor such as establishing relationships, making connections, modeling behaviors, and timely

feedback. Theme Five—The Clarity of Content Presentation—focuses on the way content was organized and delivered in online courses, including accessibility.

Overall, elements that appeared to matter most from this research study included human connections and relationships forged with authentic care and trust. Study participants valued instructors who showed up authentically and expressed vulnerability. Study participants also responded to validation and encouragement communicated individually and to the class community through text, voice, and video. The use of video appeared to close the distance gap, and hearing from instructors early gave study participants messages that they belonged and were welcome. Instructor investment was most important, with timely and personal feedback making the strongest difference. Student-to-student interaction was best when it was more fluid and informal; additionally, students found ways to create their own groups for interaction using outside LMS apps, such as Discord or Instagram—social media platforms. Once relationships were formed, pedagogy also mattered to students. For example, they valued flexibility both in coursework and instructor involvement, as well as the asynchronous modality which allowed for most convenience. They also appreciated the accessibility that the online setting provided.

Unique to this population was the finding that study participants in some cases felt safer online—they perceived that the online space allowed for a removal of bias and prejudgment when their race/ethnicity was not revealed. Participants felt that they interacted and formed connections with other students that they may not have in a face-to-face setting due to their race.

Findings mostly supported research literature and clarified that community college students of color also share the same components espoused by current literature. For example, existing research showcases the unique backgrounds of community college students who carry multiple responsibilities including work, family, mature ages, military status, and disability, are

first generation college students, and may have housing and food challenges. The backgrounds of study participants reflected these demographics. Shared identities included working while going to school, attending to family responsibilities, and stressors of the pandemic. Individual identities included mothering a newborn, living with multiple sclerosis, taking care of a parent with Alzheimer's, and English as a second language.

The following section connects research findings to the main research questions this study set out to answer.

Research Questions Connected to Research Findings

The overarching research question in this study was the following: In what ways do social presence and relationships relate to success and program completion of students of color in online learning? While many of the findings connect back to the literature on online learning, there are some specific takeaways that are unique for students of color. Thus, it was important to hear from students of color and confirm that many of their experiences mirror those of previous research, which had failed to include their voices. Study participants reported that both social presence factors and relationships mattered in persisting and succeeding in online classes as students of color. Rather than appearing as themes or factors relating specifically only to trust, care, and respect, these factors were like water where all social presence factors floated. Much like the Pyramid of Student Success (include research reference here), trust, authentic care, and mutual respect formed the basis and did not appear to exist as separate factors for students of color. They were, in fact, the underlying and most fundamental layer. Notably, the challenges of studying during the pandemic heightened the need for social presence and strong relationships. The two research questions and the findings associated with each are discussed next.

Research Question 1

How do students of color describe their relationship with their online instructors? This question included the sub-question: What instructor behaviors influenced the students' perceptions of feeling a sense of trust, authentic care, and mutual respect online?

Existing literature maintains that even before issues of pedagogy or content, strong instructor relationships are paramount. Jaggars and Xu (2016) found in their research that the most influential aspect of online student performance happened when students perceived their instructors cared about their learning. The findings from this study reflect the existing literature and add a critical perspective from students of color. Findings associated with Research Question 1 suggest that trust, authentic care, and mutual respect underlined every aspect of study participants' relationships with their online instructors. Instructors that humanized themselves led to participants feeling a sense of trust and care from their instructors. All the study participants prioritized human connection with their instructors and pointed out that informal videos were "magic" and created a sense of connection with their instructors. They felt welcomed into the online class setting and knew that their instructor was not a robot; they felt they belonged and could succeed. This finding is particularly relevant for students of color who may feel even more isolated or disconnected in the online setting. As research from Wood and Harris (2015) revealed, relationships with faculty was the most significant factor for success of men of color in the community colleges. Participants confirmed this as even more vital online.

Additionally, participants valued instructors that showed their whole authentic and vulnerable selves. Throughout the course, when instructors allowed a peek into their full selves for example showing vulnerability due to the COVID pandemic, or perhaps their children bouncing in the background, participants reported feeling connection and care. Participants also shared that validation and encouragement were factors that led them to feel their instructors

cared about them and their success, noting that even though they were adult learners, hearing

"This is challenging, but I know you can do it!" supported their success. In sum, foregrounding

human connection with their instructors was a defining factor for participants. This finding is

also associated with Research Question 2, as affective expression and community cohesion are

elements of social presence.

Findings indicate that participants placed a high value on communication and interaction

from their instructors and complained when they did not hear from them. Research studies

consistently suggest that instructor-student interaction is a significant factor to student success in

online courses (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Bush, 2010; Delmas, 2017; Jaggars, 2016;

Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rucks-Ahidiana, 2012). Hearing from their instructors regularly

through announcements, both about course content, deadlines, and outside activities mattered

greatly. In addition, participants expected and awaited instructors' feedback on assignments and

responses to emails. Participants brought up timeliness and personalization as key factors to their

communication. When instructors were communicative and present, participants felt that their

instructors cared about them and were invested in their success. Again, instructor presence was

particularly relevant for students of color and essential for supporting them to feel connected and

set up for success online. This supports research from Wood and Harris (2015) who shared, "The

ethos created by faculty members in class contributes significantly more to student success than

students' characteristics and environmental pressures" (p. 17). Through regular communication

and instructor investment, participants formed relationships with their instructors that were

ground in authentic care, trust, and mutual respect. This finding is also related to Research

Question 2, connecting within the social presence element of instructor involvement which

focuses on the actions of the instructor such as establishing relationships, making connections, modeling behaviors, and timely feedback.

In addition, findings also suggest that flexibility was an important factor in the relationship between instructors and study participants. Participants indicated that instructors who were openly flexible in their course policies, including attendance and deadlines for assignments, cared for them. They understood the challenges they faced, from disability to work and familial responsibilities and showed empathy and support for the participants. Study participants looked for cues of flexibility even before the course began—whether in email communication, syllabi, and video messages. Participants felt more confident of their success when they received messages about flexibility, interpreting that as care. When they read information that indicated strictness or lack of flexibility, some participants dropped the class preemptively. During the course, instructors who responded with empathy and flexibility around need for extensions to deadlines, missed work from illnesses, and challenges due to disability were perceived to care about, respect, and trust the study participants. These factors led to participants persisting and succeeding in their online courses.

Findings associated with Research Question 1 also relate to Research Question 2. Specifically, findings on human connection not only created a sense of trust of care for study participants, but also link to social presence elements of affective expression and community cohesion. Likewise, findings associated with instructor presence directly tie to the social presence element of instructor involvement.

Research Question 2

How do students of color experience social presence in online courses? The question included the following sub-question: What elements of social presence (affective expression,

community cohesion, interaction intensity, knowledge and experience, and instructor investment) did students perceive support their success online? Research on social presence illuminates the ways in which social presence supports success in online courses through increased student satisfaction, interaction, and depth of learning (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rovai & Barnum, 2003; Stein & Wanstreet, 2003; Tu, 2000). Overall, findings associated with Research Question Two add to the existing literature and suggest that students of color experience elements of social presence positively in ways that support their success online.

Findings regarding the social presence element of community cohesion confirm its significance. Community cohesion relates to the entire course community and includes greetings, salutations, sharing resources within the group, and seeing the group (Whiteside, 2015). Likewise, a sense of welcoming and belongness is a core principle of building trust and care. This finding is germane to students of color, as barriers to feeling welcomed, and involved as an active and included member of the college and course community can impact success. As Wood and Harris (2017) relayed, "One of the most critical predictors of persistence, achievement, and focus in college is positive messaging. Positive messaging is a key tool for building relationships with men of color that are typified by trust, mutual respect, and authentic care" (p. 99). Beginning online courses with positive messages that students belong and are welcome in the course community sets the ground for student success. Study participants expressed the impact of their first communications and information they received from their instructors. Study participants shared how they looked forward to hearing from instructors before class began, and how those first-touch communications either created anxiety or gave them a sense of welcomeness and belongingness. Some participants mentioned waiting on standby for the class

to open online; one mentioned feeling "hyped" when they saw the instructor video and excited about class starting. Overall, the importance of a warm welcome mattered greatly to participants.

Additionally, findings indicate that student-to-student interaction was helpful at times, but not the most important feature of their success. However, the literature on student-student interaction calls it a critical component of the online learning environment (Richardson & Swan, 2003) and studies contend that learner-to-learner interaction is both motivating and stimulating for students (Moore & Kearlsey, 2005). High levels of interaction then contribute to satisfaction (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998). Study participants discussed common interaction activities in asynchronous courses such as discussion board forums, as well as live sessions on Zoom that occurred in synchronous courses as supportive of their learning. In addition, participants disclosed that they created groups themselves outside of the course—mostly through Discord—to support each other not just with content but socially as well. Interestingly, findings suggest that this outside and independent student-to-student interaction mattered more and led to more impactful community cohesion amongst participants.

Moreover, the findings suggest that the online space is one where increased interaction can occur between disparate groups and that students of color may have more interaction with their peers than possible in in-person courses. This finding is a unique takeaway of the experiences of students of color. Navigating relationships as a student of color in college courses can be challenging and isolating. This finding suggests that the online setting provides an opportunity for relationships that would not previously develop easily. Study participants reported the ways that the online setting allowed them freedom from bias and judgement because their physical appearance and identity were often not immediately revealed. Some shared that they interacted—even becoming friends—with other students they felt probably would not have

been possible in a face-to-face class. Overall, participants shared the positive impact of interacting with their peers in online courses.

Furthermore, findings indicate that the social presence factor of knowledge and content influenced their success in a course. While experiences about the content and organization of their online courses surfaced, they mattered less to participants as the other factors of relationships and human connection. This mindset is supported in research by Wood and Harris (2015) who reported, "Regardless of how skillful faculty members may be in teaching content, men of color are not likely to be successful in their courses in the absence of relationships that are rooted in trust, mutual respect, and authentic care" (p. 29). Findings suggest that asynchronous and synchronous settings affected them differently. Study participants shared their experiences with asynchronous activities such as discussion board forums and synchronous activities such as Zoom sessions and live office hours and valued both types of experiences. Moreover, participants reported that the organization of course content through modules, and thoughtful structuring of materials, assignments, and assessments made a difference. Some mentioned the practical nature of projects and choice in their activities as opportunities that benefited their learning. Notably, although only one participant disclosed having a disability, numerous participants remarked how the accessibility of online content supported their learning online. In sum, the structure, delivery, and accessibility of course materials were factors in students' success.

Summary of Findings and Themes

In brief, the five themes draw upon one another, not as a linear progression, but linked to one another. Figure 5 below shows how themes appear within online courses. First, human connection is formed, even before the class begins, along with a warm welcome that confirms for

students that they belong both in the class and in college. Next, throughout the course, both student-to-student interaction and instructor investment mattered. Finally, online course presentation—the nuts and bolts of how a course was organized, including whether modules were open, how the schedule was shared, and the ways in which students accessed materials mattered—appeared to close the loop. The same Figure 6 also illustrates how, throughout the instructional process, trust, authentic care, and mutual respect grounded students perceived feelings of instructors caring for them.

Figure 6: *Linking of Themes Throughout a Course*
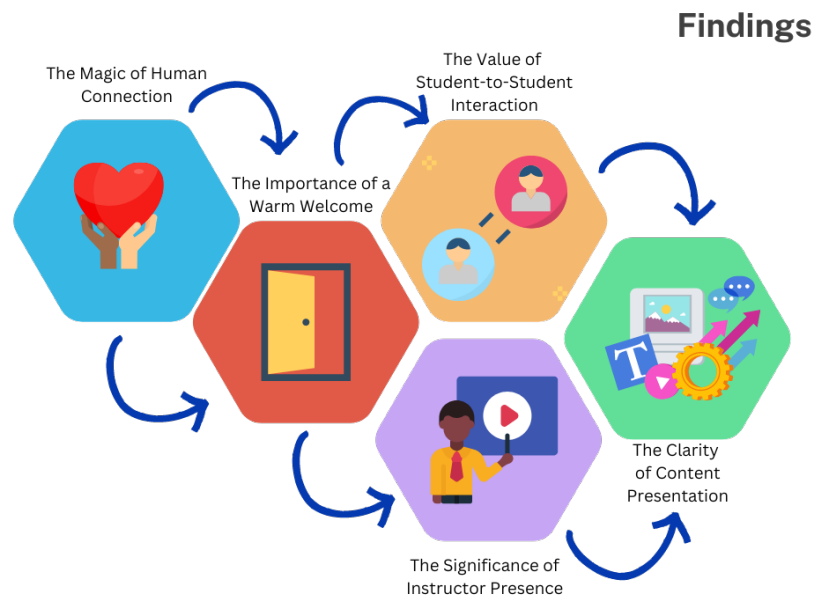
In conclusion, research shows that care and relationships are key factors for students of color to succeed. When linked together with actions that demonstrate social presence, they can arm instructors with the tools to create successful online learning experiences for students of color. Importantly, these same tools will support all students.

Recommendations and Implications

In this section, I discuss the recommendations and implications of research findings. I focus on implications for practice first, including those for instructors, college leadership, and California community colleges, followed by areas for further research.

Recommendations and Implications for Instructors

Even before a global pandemic pushed 100% of courses online, online instruction in the California Community Colleges was on a steady rise. Over 860,000 students were enrolled in an online course and one in three students had taken an online class in 2016-2017—well before the pandemic (Woodyard & Larson, 2017). As we return to a new "normal," online classes remain still a large component of the courses offered. At the district level of this research site, 77% of credit course enrollments were online in 2021-2022. Specifically, 81% of students took a course with an online component, and asynchronous courses accounted for 86% of online enrollments (SDCCD Distance Education Update, 2022). Students choose online courses for a variety of reasons including flexibility. However, recent research shows that, for community colleges, the gap in online courses remains true for students of color. The gap is largest for Black and Latinx students. Consequently, based on these research findings, instructors of online courses can do a lot to mitigate this gap and support students of color.

The magic of human connection emerged as the first theme. This is the essential component that appears to support students online, especially students of color. Research focused on humanizing the online course experience shows many benefits. Instructors can support students of color by humanizing themselves in the following ways: sharing more of their personal lives; creating and sharing informal videos; and showing up authentically as their real selves. This could mean a 30-second video with their dog to just say "hi." It also means being vulnerable and acknowledging the difficulties of this time. Encouragement and validation also

help students feel supported. Being human forms an essential bridge to cross the digital distance that can exist in online classes. The magic of human connection is the wand to cross it.

Next, and closely related, is the theme of a warm welcome. Research on the first-touch communication confirms its importance to students. The few days before the class begins are a high-opportunity zone and hearing from instructors lessens students' anxiety. Instructors should offer a first communication, whether via email, LMS announcement, or a warm-welcoming video. By inviting students in with messages of community and belonging instead of leading with rules and requirements, students start off the semester feeling that they belong and that their instructor cares about them. Likewise, a warm welcome includes messages of flexibility. When students look at the syllabus language and course requirements, the instructor's ability to be flexible, such as leeway on deadlines and trust matters.

Thirdly, instructor presence makes the difference once the course is underway. Clear communication plans support student success online. Making it clear how to contact the instructor, and what to expect in terms of timeliness to respond is important. Similarly, emails and messages should be responded to in a timely manner. Regular announcements keep students on track with the course and provide a sense of connection. Students benefit from comments and feedback on assignments, especially in a timely manner. Interacting in discussion board forums and other asynchronous activities also supports students. Giving personalized and timely feedback on assignments is always necessary. When possible, comments and specific details for improvement can be incorporated. Communicating with students the turnaround time for grading on assignments and expectations for types of feedback is useful.

The fourth theme centered on student-to-student interaction. Study participants reported mixed feelings on the ways and types of interactions they experienced in online classes. Since

discussion board forums are the most common place where student-to-student interaction takes place, instructors should plan them carefully to avoid burnout. Including a personal connection is helpful and participating in them from time to time indicates to students that all are involved. In addition to discussion boards, instructors can incorporate other technology tools such as Flip, VoiceThread, Pronto, and Padlet to name a few. In addition to interaction within the confines of the LMS, be aware of, and even encourage student-initiated groups using apps such as Discord or through social media such as Instagram. Within those groups, instructors should not expect to impose their own participation.

Finally, the fifth theme focuses on the way content is organized and presented. Although online courses are often delineated as asynchronous or synchronous, providing opportunities for both experiences are helpful. Offer as many asynchronous components as possible, including recordings, lectures, resources, and materials that students can peruse on their own time and return to review them as needed. In addition, synchronous components like Zoom sessions allow students to be able to check in and interact live and ask questions in real time. Even in fully online classes, Zoom office hours offer students a chance to meet individually with their instructor. Lastly, include accessibility as part of course design. Accessibility features support all students, not just students with disabilities. In Zoom meetings having live captions and having captions in recorded video lectures gives students the opportunity to read the captions when it may be difficult to hear the speaker and/or in settings where they cannot have their speakers and volume turned up. Table 3 below summarizes the recommendations for instructors.

Table 3: *Summary of Recommendations for Instructors*

Emerging Theme	Recommendations
The Magic of Human Connection	• Create and share warm, informal videos, not just professional lectures. • Be authentic and share vulnerable experiences. • Check in with students and ask how they are. Consider grounding or check-ins before leaping into content. • Explicitly encourage students. Tell them they are doing great work and can do challenging things.
The Importance of a Warm Welcome	• Send out a welcome email before the semester begins. Include a video if you feel comfortable. Introduce yourself and your class in a warm and personable way. • Begin the class with an introductory community-building activity. • Be flexible with due dates if possible and extend grace and trust.
The Value of Student-to-Student Interaction	• If using discussion boards, include a personal connection. Participate in them as possible. • Utilize other technology tools for discussions such as Flip, VoiceThread, Pronto, Padlet, and so on. • Provide opportunities for synchronous sessions (with Zoom or another tool). • Encourage and/or be aware of student-to-student interaction outside the LMS – but do not expect to be a part of it or monitor it.
The Significance of Instructor Presence	• Establish a clear communication protocol, so students know how to best contact their instructors and set expectations on when to hear from their instructors. • Provide comments (text, voice, or video) on assignments when possible. • Find ways to personalize your feedback and responses. • Share outside opportunities: information about campus, community events, and work opportunities.
The Clarity of Course Presentation	• Offer as much asynchronously as possible – provide videos, materials, and so on. • Provide opportunities for synchronous interactions, whether course sessions of optional office hours. • Strive for accessibility: captions on videos, recordings available, slides shared and so on.

Recommendations and Implications for College Leadership

Beyond the impact of individual instructors, there are also implications for college leadership. The online setting, though not new, is new for many instructors and leaders in that we did not grow up taking online classes. As we have adapted to this new educational landscape, we do not know *what we do not know*. Therefore, college leadership must provide professional

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development opportunities. Two different types are necessary: skills in the online teaching environment, and experience as students in this environment. First, continue to provide professional development opportunities for faculty about the technical skills that are needed to teach online. However, to supplement this, or even to supplant it, provides professional development opportunities that foreground the importance of social presence as the defining factor in supporting students of color in online classes. Instead of weeding out students with online readiness "quizzes," that discourage students from taking online courses and planting a seed of discomfort or despair, focus on sharing with faulty the ways in which they can ensure trust, care, and respect in their online classes. Beginning with the necessary elements and then supporting with the technical skills needs, will ensure instructors have the tools and mindset to close the success gap.

The second recommendation is to provide professional development opportunities that put instructors and leaders in the student's seat—only experiencing what it is like to receive announcements, post on a discussion board, submit an assignment and wait for feedback, can instructors and leaders really feel what is necessary in an online course. In other words, only when having a sense of a caring, interactive, and empathetic instructor in an engaging, well-designed online class, can an instructor and institutional leaders understand what is needed. We cannot teach how to teach online through in-person professional development.

Lastly, I encourage college leaders also to take an online class with an experienced online faculty member so they can understand the implications for funding and professional development needs. Before making any decisions, they need to understand the student experience.

Recommendations and Implications for California Community Colleges

The California Community Colleges (CCCs) system remains the largest higher education system in the United States, with 115 colleges from north to south, east to west, serving approximately 1.8 million students (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2017). Before the pandemic pushed instruction to 100% online, online courses already comprised 28% of the system's headcount (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2017). Even now, we can expect the number of online courses to remain high, providing educational access to the students who need the most flexibility. As we move forward, we cannot do so looking backwards. Instead of trying to spotlight in-person classes and on-campus communities, the CCCs must focus on how the online experience and setting can support all students and the system overall. The discussion must be around how the system responds to the needs of students. Instead of focusing on a deficit mindset that online education is subpar, temporary, or that students must be "ready" for online education, we should improve the way online courses and experiences are offered. Pulling back to an even broader scope, the community college campuses must reconsider how the virtual setting plays a role in counseling, student services, faculty load, and more. How will the colleges adapt to serve the needs of students and how will online education continue to be a strong factor in the student experience.

Areas for Future Research

This research study is just a drop in the bucket of possibilities to research students of color in an online instructional environment at a community college. There are several areas future research could focus on. First, this study was mainly qualitative; thus, future studies could be mixed methods to gain, potentially, a more complete picture of the experiences of students of color online. Further, one interesting finding was that participants created independent communities outside of the LMS or course and used them for content support and interaction.

Most commonly, participants reported using mainly Discord, and mentioned Instagram. Future research could focus on how social media and online communities support and supplement the online course experience. Finally, another distinct finding illuminated participant experiences in asynchronous versus synchronous classes. Further research could investigate experiences with those specific modalities, including challenges and benefits.

No matter the specifics of the study, I urge an emphasis on community colleges students of color. Much of the research in higher education centers on four-year universities and/or conflate all students with students of color. Importantly, when conducting research on students of color, we must avoid deficit-oriented perspectives. Instead of asking why students are underprepared, start with what faculty and institutions must do to create successful online learning experiences for all students, and especially students of color. By grounding community college research in asset-based inquiry we can focus on ways we can improve the online experiences for students of color. Furthermore, there is a need to disaggregate data such as race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual identity, and more, while also considering the intersectional identities and multilayered experiences of students. So far, there is scant literature on Asian, indigenous, multiracial, and trans student populations. Finally, focusing on faculty, staff, and administrative experiences will give another window into the experiences of online education.

Conclusion

This study put community college students of color at the center, highlighting their voices and their lived experiences. Mirroring this, I am a student of color pursuing my doctorate at the same time. Although the program was not an online program, in 2020, the pandemic also pushed my doctorate classes into an online setting. Despite my experience with online courses, I

encountered the same challenges participants faced, compounded, like them, by the stresses of a global pandemic. Parenting two teenage sons, working, and attempting to complete my studies stretched me and I often felt overwhelmed. Also, like my students, I found pockets of time to write my papers, conduct research, and read—rising for early mornings, squeezing in moments between classes and cooking dinner, writing late at night after my family was in bed, the kitchen clean, and the house quiet.

During this time, our doctoral classes and instruction were online, and I had the same experiences as community college students. The professor who sent the welcome video and syllabus with a warm welcome a week before the class began settled my anxiety about what to expect. My dissertation chair, who continually peppered his communications with encouraging messages and validated that I could do it, despite long periods of stops and starts, forged a feeling of trust, authentic care, and mutual trust that mirrors what Wood and Harris discuss in their Pyramid of Student Success (2015). Feedback was personalized and timely, and kindness and authentic care formed the basis of every communication. Just as my students, two of the themes—the magic of connection and the significance of instructor presence—were vital elements in how I experienced this dissertation process, as a student of color, and online once the pandemic hit.

This dissertation began before COVID, the research took place during COVID when everything was fully remote and is now being completed post-pandemic as colleges are reopening into a "new normal." How do we apply the lessons learned here to a new educational landscape where technology and online options are a given and a norm and no longer an anomaly? Online options continue to provide opportunities to students at the margins—students of color, working adults, returning students, parents, new mothers, and students with disabilities.

How do we incorporate community and connection even before courses begin to ensure equitable learning environments?

For many community college students of color, online courses offer the best and, sometimes, the only way to pursue their education, reach their career goals, and achieve their dreams. Online education can transform lives. Online education *can and must be* equitable and accessible. Much of the research and discussion about the success gap of students of color in online classes revolves around what students need to do or what students are missing when they come to the online setting. There are modules set up to address "Online Student Readiness" intended to weed out students who are not "ready" to be successful in the online setting. Articles, especially during COVID, bemoaned the students who were forced to learn online who did not select it and were not prepared. Instead of focusing on finding the perfect students who can be successful online, mostly those who are not students of color, this study wanted to find out the lived experiences of students of color so that instructors can be the ones to make the change. This mindset is highlighted in the following quote, attributed to Alexander Den Heijer, "When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower."

A recent article sounded the alarm about the declining enrollment of community colleges, decrying the current situation and questioning how to move forward. Though many recommendations were put forth, from high school corequisites to marketing and outreach, there was not one mention about online education. As community colleges move into this new normal, a return to the past is the last thing we should be pushing towards. Instead, we must encompass all that we have learned from the period of 100% online—the lessons, the good and bad, and plan for, encourage, lead, develop, and teach online courses that are truly humanized, connect students, and provide the opportunity for all of students to pursue their education and dreams.

Through intentional, systematic change, students of color—often those most in need of the flexibility of online courses—will reach their goals. Only when we approach these online courses based on trust, authentic care, mutual respect, and relationships, will we close the opportunity gap with students of color online.

Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in the Study (Survey)

Dear Participant,

My name is Denise Maduli-Williams and I am a doctoral student studying Educational Leadership in a joint doctoral program through UC San Diego and Cal State San Marcos. I am conducting research to learn about the experiences of students of color in online courses. I am using the Community of Inquiry Survey (Garrison, 2009) for the first part of my mixed-methods study. As a current student in an online class, regardless of race/ethnicity, you are invited to participate in this survey/questionnaire.

This is a 16- question instrument and should take you approximately 15 minutes to complete. If you decide you do not want to participate, you do not need to take the survey. The results of this confidential study will be used in my final dissertation.

Thank you for your interest and your willingness to participate. The link for this study will expire in two weeks.

Sincerely,

Denise Maduli-Williams

Appendix B: Survey Instrument

1. I agree to participate in this survey and understand the results will be included in the researcher's final dissertation.	● Yes, I agree and understand. ● No, I do not agree to participate in this survey.
2. I am currently a student taking an online class at San Diego Miramar Community College	● Yes ● No
3. I identify my race/ethnicity as:	● Asian/Pacific Islander ● Filipino ● Latinx ● Native American ● African American ● White ● Two or More Races ● Decline to State ● Other description _____
4. I self-identify as	● Female ● Male ● Other description: _____

Community of Inquiry Survey (Social Presence Section) These are the original COI Survey Questions
1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree
5. Getting to know other course participants gave me a sense of belonging in the course.
6. I was able to form distinct impressions of some course participants.
7. Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction.
8. I felt comfortable conversing through the online medium.
9. I felt comfortable participating in the course discussions.
10. I felt comfortable interacting with other course participants.

11. I felt comfortable disagreeing with other course participants while still maintaining a sen trust.

12. I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other course participants.

13. Online discussions help me to develop a sense of collaboration.

14. Please share any additional comments you have about your experiences as a student in online classes?	Open-ended
15. Would you be willing to be interviewed individually for this study?	• Yes, I would like to be considered for an interview. • No, thank you.
Thank you for agreeing to be considered for a future confidential interview. I will contact you within one month to let you know if you have been selected as an interview participant. Please provide your contact information below. All information provided will be held in strict confidence, and no one (except for the researcher) will have access to this information. Your contact information will be destroyed once the study has been completed. Again, thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.	Please provide your most updated and convenient contact information where you can be reached. Name: Email Address: Phone Number:

Appendix C: Invitation to Participate in the Interviews

Dear Participant,

My name is Denise Maduli-Williams and I am a doctoral student studying Educational Leadership in a joint doctoral program through UC San Diego and Cal State San Marcos. I am conducting research to learn about the experiences of students of color in online classes. I am currently looking for students of color who are willing to participate in my study. If you choose to participate, you'll be asked to take part in one interview to share your experiences in online courses.

The conversations will only be used for the purpose of my research and will not be shared with anyone else. Your name will be completely confidential. I will use pseudonyms in the student and your name will not appear in any document.

Educators and colleges need to learn how to support students in online environments, so I hope that you will consider being a part of my research, so that your voices can be heard.

Please feel free to email me at willi456@cougars.csusm.edu or call me at 619-755-4163 with any questions regarding this process. If you agree to participate, please sign the consent form.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Denise Maduli-Williams

Appendix D: Interview Protocol and Questions

Objective: To understand the experiences of students of color in online classes, specifically around the themes of social presence (the degree to which the online participants feel connected to one another) and relationships of trust, authentic care, and mutual respect.

Research Questions

The main research question to this study is following: In what ways do social presence and relationships relate to success and program completion of students of color in online learning?

The following sub-questions will further facilitate data-gathering points related to the main question:
1. How do students of color describe their relationship with their online instructors?
   a. What instructor behaviors influenced the students' perceptions of feeling a sense of trust, authentic care, and mutual respect online?
2. How do students of color experience social presence in online courses?
   a. What elements of social presence (affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion) do students perceive support their success online?

Introduction Script

Thank you for participating in this interview. I appreciate your time and thoughts. My name is Denise Maduli-Williams and I am a doctoral student studying Educational Leadership in a joint doctoral program through UC San Diego and Cal State San Marcos.

Today we'll be talking about your experiences in online classes at San Diego Miramar College. I want to hear about your overall experiences as well as about the types of activities and interaction, ways of communication, and any group and collaborative assignments. The goal of this interview is to try to understand your experiences online, and how we can best support students in online courses.

Our discussion will last approximately 60 minutes, and will be video and audio recorded to make sure I don't miss or misunderstand anything. After the interview, you can request a copy of the recordings as well as the transcripts.

Everything you share with me will be confidential and anonymous. Your name will never appear in any document resulting from this study.

If there is any question you do not want to answer, just let me know and we'll move on to the next question. Also, you can end the interview at any time.

Do you have any questions?
Ok, let's begin.

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself. How long have you been a student at Seacoast College? What is your major or academic and career goals?

2. Tell me about your overall experiences taking online courses. How many online courses have you taken? Which subjects? Why online?

3. What types of communication and interaction have you had with instructors in your online courses? Which ones were motivating and helpful to your success online?

4. What types of communication and interaction have you had with other students in your online courses? Which ones were motivating and helpful to your success online?

5. What were activities or assignments that helped you get to feel a part of online courses and know the other participants?

6. What were your experiences with groups and/or collaboration activities online?

7. What types of experiences or activities in your online courses were most challenging?

8. What types of activities and experiences in your online courses were most helpful to your success?

9. Is there anything you would like to tell me about your experiences as a student of color in online courses?

10. Are there any additional comments you would like to share about your experiences in online courses?

11. May I contact you in the future with follow-up questions?

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