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Black Leadership Ambassadors for Culture & Knowledge (B.L.A.C.K.):
Analyzing the B.L.A.C.K. Mentee Experience at UC Davis

By

KAYTON CARTER, M.A.

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

Educational Leadership

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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"I stand on the shoulders of those who poured into me so that I might pour into others."

Dedication

For MauMau—my youngest son, Kamau Zafar Carter, who transitioned from this earthly life on May 12, 2022, but whose spirit remains with me every day. This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine. Your presence continues to guide, inspire, and strengthen me.

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Abstract

Persistent inequities in enrollment, engagement, retention, and degree completion continue to shape the educational experiences of Black men in American higher education, particularly at predominantly White institutions. Nationally, Black male undergraduates experience some of the lowest baccalaureate completion rates of any demographic group, reflecting long-standing structural barriers, racialized campus climates, and uneven access to culturally affirming support. The University of California, Davis (UC Davis) reflects this broader national challenge. Despite its reputation as a highly ranked public research university, institutional data reveal persistent disparities in retention and graduation outcomes between Black male undergraduates and their peers, particularly when compared to White and Asian students who experience higher rates of degree completion. Acknowledging these disparities, UC Davis launched the Black Leadership Ambassadors for Culture and Knowledge (B.L.A.C.K.) program in 2013 as a culturally responsive initiative aimed at improving Black male retention through mentorship, proactive academic advising, community building, and identity-affirming support. Despite its sustained implementation, the program did not incorporate a formal evaluative framework to assess its impact on student experiences. This absence of formal evaluation underscores the need for qualitative inquiry into how participants experienced the program and the mechanisms through which it may have supported persistence and belonging.

While the persistence of achievement gaps in retention and graduation outcomes necessitates targeted interventions, this study addresses a related program evaluation gap by examining the lived and learned experiences of former participants in the B.L.A.C.K. program, taking a critical step in assessing its impact more than a decade after its inception. This research is guided by three questions: (a) How did participation in the B.L.A.C.K. program influence

sense of belonging for mentees? (b) How did participation in the B.L.A.C.K. program acknowledge and influence different forms of social capital? and (c) What role did B.L.A.C.K. play in shaping the mentees overall experience at UC Davis? Grounded in Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) Sense of Belonging theory and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model, the study draws on in-depth narrative interviews and thematic analysis to examine how participants navigated institutional barriers, developed resilience, and cultivated community.

Findings indicate that B.L.A.C.K functioned as a culturally grounding counter space that fostered belonging, activated aspirational, navigational, social, familial, resistant, and linguistic capital, and supported persistence by reframing success as a collective, community-based process rather than an individual endeavor. Participants' experiences demonstrate that belonging emerged not through institutional inclusion alone, but through identity-affirming relationships, mentorship, and shared cultural praxis. By centering the voices of Black men who persisted and graduated within a predominantly White institution, this study contributes an asset-based, relational understanding of Black male success. The findings offer implications for theory, practice, and policy, emphasizing sustained investment in culturally responsive mentorship programs, the integration of qualitative and disaggregated quantitative data, and institutional accountability for advancing equity in Black male degree attainment.

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Glossary

Asset-based refers to an approach that recognizes and builds upon the forms of cultural wealth Black men bring, positioning these strengths as central to their persistence and success within institutional contexts.

Belonging refers to students' perceived sense of being accepted, valued, and supported within the campus community, which in turn shapes their engagement, agency, and persistence.

Cultural Capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and social resources students bring from their cultural and community experiences that can support their success in educational settings.

Culturally Grounded mentorship refers to relational practices that center Black students' cultural identities and lived experiences, affirm their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019), and intentionally activate forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to support persistence.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum refers to academic content and pedagogy that connect learning to students' cultural identities and experiences.

Culturally Responsive is an approach that recognizes, respects, and utilizes students' or clients' diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives to enhance engagement, instruction, and service delivery

Deficit-oriented refers to perspectives that frame students' academic challenges as the result of inherent shortcomings, without considering the broader cultural, relational, and structural factors influencing their experiences.

Equitable Institutional Outcomes refer to student success metrics (e.g., retention, GPA, progression, graduation) that are achieved at comparable levels across racial groups because of intentional, equity-centered institutional practices and supports.

Equity in this study is understood as the attainment of comparable educational outcomes across student groups, achieved through institutional practices that recognize and address structural and historical disparities.

Hidden Curriculum refers to the implicit rules, expectations, and institutional knowledge that shape student success but are rarely explicitly taught, often privileging students who already possess familiarity with academic systems.

Miseducation refers to an educational process that misrepresents or excludes the histories, knowledge systems, and cultural identities of marginalized groups while positioning dominant perspectives as normative, thereby shaping how students understand themselves and their place within society.

Persistence is sustained progression toward degree completion through continued engagement and navigation of the institution.

Predominantly White Institution (PWI) is defined as a higher education institution in which White students constitute the numerical majority and/or where institutional norms, practices, and campus climate have historically been shaped by White cultural dominance/reflect historically White-centered norms.

Resilience refers to students' capacity to persist, adapt, and succeed in the face of academic, social, and structural challenges, drawing on internal strengths and external sources of support. It is the capacity to navigate and persist through challenges using personal and/or community-based strengths.

Symbolic Progress references the appearance of advancement created by highlighting exceptional individual achievements, without corresponding systemic change that would make such success common and equitable. It's the celebration of exceptional Black male achievement in ways that create the appearance of equity, while leaving intact the structural conditions that render such success rare.

Underserved means that the institution is not adequately meeting the academic, social, cultural, and structural needs of certain student populations—resulting in unequal outcomes despite overall institutional success. It is also the failure of an institution to adequately meet the needs of specific student populations, resulting in persistent disparities in access, support, and educational outcomes.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Despite decades of access-oriented reforms in higher education, Black male undergraduates continue to experience persistent disparities in retention, graduation, and sense of belonging at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Harper, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). National data consistently demonstrate that Black men enroll in four-year institutions at lower rates, experience higher rates of academic difficulty, and graduate at lower rates than their peers across racial and gender groups (Harper, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). While these disparities are evident across higher education broadly, they are often exacerbated within predominantly White institutions, where structural, cultural, and relational factors further shape Black male student outcomes.

These disparities are not solely academic in nature; rather, they are deeply embedded within institutional climates, racialized expectations, and uneven access to culturally affirming support structures (Harper, 2012; Solórzano, et al., 2000).

At large public research universities, Black male students frequently navigate environments characterized by racial isolation, underrepresentation among faculty and staff, and deficit-oriented narratives that frame their presence as anomalous rather than essential (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harper, 2012). Research has shown that these conditions contribute to diminished sense of belonging, weakened academic engagement, and increased vulnerability during key transition points such as the first year and moments of academic difficulty (Strayhorn, 2012; Brooms & Davis, 2017).

In response to these persistent inequities, institutions have increasingly invested in culturally grounded, identity-affirming initiatives designed to support Black male persistence. Black Male Initiatives (BMIs), mentoring programs, and cohort-based seminars have emerged as

promising interventions that foreground community, cultural affirmation, and relational support (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harper, 2012; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). However, while quantitative outcome data often demonstrate positive associations between program participation and retention or graduation, less is known about how Black male students experience these programs and why they matter within the social and cultural contexts of PWIs (Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

This study centered on the lived experiences of former participants in the Black Leadership Ambassadors for Culture and Knowledge (B.L.A.C.K.) program at the University of California, Davis (UC Davis). By foregrounding student narratives, it illuminates the mechanisms through which culturally responsive mentorship and community-based programming influenced Black male students' sense of belonging, persistence, and meaning-making across their undergraduate careers.

Problem Statement

Across the nation, Black men have achieved notable academic, civic, and professional success, serving as inventors, artists, scholars, elected officials, and, most visibly, the President of the United States in 2008. Yet these highly visible achievements coexist with persistent and well-documented educational inequities. As a group, Black male students continue to experience disproportionately lower outcomes across the educational pipeline when compared to men from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. National data indicate that Black men continue to experience lower rates of college enrollment and degree attainment than many of their peers across racial and gender groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024a). Labor market data similarly demonstrate persistent disparities in employment and economic outcomes for Black men (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). National research consistently demonstrates that Black male undergraduates remain underrepresented at many colleges and universities,

experience lower rates of persistence and degree completion, and encounter inequitable educational outcomes relative to their White peers (Harper, 2012).

These enduring patterns have prompted scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to examine more closely the structural, cultural, and institutional conditions shaping Black male success in higher education. Over the past 15 years, institutions have launched a range of targeted interventions—including BMIs, mentoring programs, and culturally grounded support structures—aimed at improving retention, academic performance, and holistic development (Brooms, 2018). While these efforts reflect growing recognition that persistent inequities require equity-driven institutional responses, Black male undergraduates continue to experience disparities in retention, engagement, and degree attainment across higher education contexts (Harper, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024b). Decades of scholarship have documented the need for systemic reform and student-centered institutional practices that move beyond access toward meaningful engagement, belonging, persistence, and degree completion (Allen, 1992; Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2006, 2012; Palmer et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2012). Meaningful engagement refers to students’ sustained, active, and relational involvement in academic, social, and institutional contexts that foster a sense of belonging and support identity affirmation. Prior research indicates that such forms of engagement contribute to the development of skills, relationships, and networks that support persistence and degree completion.

At the institutional level, these national trends are reflected at UC Davis, a predominantly White research university where Black male undergraduates remain disproportionately represented among students in academic difficulty, delayed graduation pathways, and non-

completion outcomes. Such disparities persist despite the availability of advising services, tutoring programs, and general retention initiatives.

A central limitation of many institutional interventions is their failure to address the racialized and gendered dimensions of students' experiences. Traditional retention strategies frequently emphasize individual academic behaviors while overlooking the cultural, relational, and structural conditions that shape belonging and persistence for Black men. Academic behaviors refer to observable student actions and habits associated with academic performance, including attendance, study practices, help-seeking, and course engagement (Robbins et al., 2004). By centering individual academic behaviors and overlooking broader cultural and structural conditions, institutions often reproduce deficit-oriented interpretations of Black male students, rather than recognizing them as knowledge holders whose lived experiences can inform institutional transformation.

Compounding this challenge, existing institutional data, while extensive, are often aggregated in ways that obscure the nuanced experiences of Black male students and are insufficient in capturing the relational, cultural, and contextual factors that shape persistence and success. Quantitative indicators alone cannot capture how Black men interpret academic setbacks, navigate hidden institutional norms, or locate belonging within environments where they are both numerically and culturally marginalized. Therefore, there is a critical need for qualitative research that centers Black male voices and examines how culturally grounded, asset-based programs support belonging, activate community cultural wealth, and foster resilience. Without such inquiry, institutions risk perpetuating deficit narratives and overlooking the very practices that support Black male persistence and success. Addressing this problem at UC Davis

is both timely and necessary, contributing not only to local equity efforts but also to broader national conversations about building inclusive, effective, and just systems of higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the lived and learned experiences of Black male undergraduates who participated in the B.L.A.C.K. program at UC Davis from 2014–2019 to understand how culturally grounded mentorship shaped students’ sense of belonging, pathways of persistence, and activation of community cultural wealth within a PWI context. Grounded in persistent national and institutional disparities in Black male retention and graduation at PWIs, this study explored how former B.L.A.C.K. mentees made meaning of their undergraduate experiences and navigated racialized and gendered institutional contexts.

By examining the narratives of Black men who persisted to upper-division coursework and graduation, the study examined how mentoring relationships, advising support, identity affirmation, and community connection influenced students’ sense of agency and belonging. Guided by Strayhorn’s (2012, 2019) Sense of Belonging (SoB) Theory and Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) Model, the research sought to illuminate whether and how culturally responsive programming functioned as a site where belonging was cultivated and cultural wealth was activated - that is, recognized, reinforced, and intentionally mobilized through mentoring relationships, peer networks, and institutional navigation - and sustained over time. The findings contribute to broader conversations about Black male persistence in higher education while providing qualitative evidence to inform institutional practice, advising strategies, and equity-driven program development at UC Davis.

This study is significant to scholarship, practice, and policy because it addresses enduring inequities in Black male persistence and degree attainment while contributing to an asset-based, relational understanding of Black male success consistent with established theoretical

frameworks. National research and accountability efforts continue to document substantial gaps in enrollment, retention, and completion for Black men, underscoring the need for institutions not only to implement targeted initiatives but also to critically examine how such efforts are experienced by students. By foregrounding student voices, this study challenges deficit-oriented narratives and contributes qualitative insight into how Black men interpret academic challenges, navigate institutional norms, and locate belonging within PWIs.

The study also holds particular significance for UC Davis, where long-standing disparities in Black male outcomes prompted the creation of the B.L.A.C.K. program as a culturally grounded mentoring and support initiative. Examining the program through the perspectives of former participants provides actionable insight into how culturally responsive interventions may shape belonging, resilience, and persistence, informing future assessment of program effectiveness, sustainability of culturally grounded mentorship initiatives, and institutional accountability for advancing equitable outcomes for Black male students, particularly in the context of UC Davis's designation as a California Black Serving Institution.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How did participation in the B.L.A.C.K. program influence sense of belonging for mentees?
2. How did participation in the B.L.A.C.K. program acknowledge and influence different forms of capital (e.g., aspirational, etc.)?
3. What role did B.L.A.C.K. play in shaping the mentees' overall experience at UC Davis?

Background of Study

Public narratives about Black men in the United States have long been shaped by selective visibility, often emphasizing exceptional achievement in highly visible domains such as athletics and entertainment while obscuring the structural conditions, including inequitable schooling, racialized expectations, and unequal access to resources, that shape educational opportunity and attainment (Harper, 2009; hooks, 2004; Woodson, 1933). Popular culture, media representation, and institutional storytelling often highlight individual success stories without examining the broader structural conditions that shape educational outcomes. The issue is not the presence of exceptional cases, but the tendency to treat them as evidence of equitable opportunity, thereby obscuring the systemic barriers that make such outcomes uncommon. As a result, conversations about Black male achievement frequently emphasize symbolic progress - such as highly visible individual successes or increases in representation - rather than sustained educational equity reflected in improved outcomes at the population level. While these structural issues are well documented in scholarship, this emphasis can divert attention from how they continue to shape Black men's experiences across the educational pipeline.

Such public visibility does not correspond to proportional success within the American educational system. Despite the landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, persistent racialized disparities continue to shape the educational trajectories of Black students nationwide. Nearly 70 years after *Brown*, academic success for Black learners remains deeply constrained by systemic inequities that limit opportunity, recognition, and access.

Research demonstrates substantial disparities in the availability of rigorous academic pathways, particularly in mathematics and science. Black high school students are significantly less likely to have access to the full spectrum of advanced courses required for college readiness

and successful participation in STEM fields. Black students continue to experience inequitable access to advanced coursework, including Advanced Placement and college-preparatory math and science sequences, which can shape college readiness and postsecondary opportunity (Conger et al., 2009; Oakes, 1985). This lack of access functions as a structural barrier that in many instances restricts college eligibility, major selection, and long-term academic mobility. Teacher characteristics also play a critical role in shaping Black students' academic engagement and persistence. In this study, "representation" refers not simply to the numerical presence of Black educators, but to students' access to educators whose racial and cultural identities, along with their pedagogical practices, affirm students' intellectual capacity and sense of mattering. Research indicates that shared racial identity, culturally responsive pedagogy, and caring instructional approaches are each associated with positive outcomes for Black students, including increased engagement, academic confidence, and persistence (Lee et al., 2003). These factors often co-occur in practice, though literature does not always isolate their independent or interactive effects. Their presence, individually and in combination, appears to support more affirming and effective learning environments, particularly in secondary contexts where increased engagement and academic confidence may influence course placement and tracking decisions that shape long-term opportunity structures.

Despite these documented benefits, Black students remain disproportionately underrepresented in advanced high school coursework even when accounting for prior academic preparation, including GPA, coursework, and standardized assessments (Souto-Maior & Shroff, 2024). These patterns suggest that observed disparities reflect not differences in ability, but inequities in opportunity produced by students' broader educational ecology - the interrelated system of institutional policies, advising practices, instructional norms, and racialized

expectations that shape how cultural assets are recognized, activated, and sustained across educational contexts.

Against this backdrop of structural constraints and persistent achievement disparities, it becomes essential to understand the conditions under which Black male students thrive academically. While deficit narratives dominate public and scholarly discourse, there remains a need to illuminate the lived experiences of Black males who successfully navigate educational systems - students who embody persistence, agency, and academic excellence despite systemic barriers.

Before any meaningful discussion about Black men in American higher education can take place, it is essential to establish a clear historical foundation, one that begins with an understanding of the Black presence in this country, then examines their existence and experiences in public schools, and only then traces our trajectories into higher education. The contemporary experiences of Black male students cannot be understood apart from the legacy of systemic exclusion, racialized oppression, and educational inequities that have shaped Black life in the United States since its earliest days.

For most of American history, Black people were legally and violently prohibited from learning to read or write. The educational history of Black students therefore begins not with opportunity but with denial - restricted access to learning, insufficient institutional support, chronic exposure to microaggressions, racial terror, and active threats to physical safety. These conditions formed one of the earliest pathways to freedom, where literacy itself functioned as an act of resistance, survival, and self-determination for Black communities (Anderson, 1988; Woodson, 1933). Understanding this context is paramount for interpreting Black experiences in contemporary educational systems.

Black Male Collegian Challenges

Education has long been described as the great equalizer - a pathway toward socioeconomic mobility and a mechanism for disrupting intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality. Yet emerging scholarship challenges this belief, revealing that the benefits of educational attainment are not evenly distributed across racial and socioeconomic groups. Recent scholarship suggests that educational attainment alone is insufficient to eliminate broader patterns of social and economic inequality, particularly when structural inequities continue to shape access, opportunity, and mobility (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 1985). Although schooling can equalize cognitive skills, upper-class families often possess socioeconomic buffers that prevent downward mobility even for low-performing children. Additionally, a substantial body of research demonstrates that rather than fully disrupting inequality, educational systems often reproduce existing social hierarchies through differential access to resources, institutional practices, and stratified pathways (Boliver, 2017). At the same time, scholars caution against positioning education as the sole or primary driver of socioeconomic equity, noting that broader structural factors, including labor markets, wealth distribution, and social policy, also shape mobility outcomes. Structural features such as standardized testing, school funding disparities, and unequal access to rigorous coursework contribute to the reproduction of educational inequality and differential opportunity structures for students across racial and socioeconomic groups (Conger et al., 2009; Oakes, 1985). For many student populations, including Black males, the promise of education as a meaningful equalizer, one that produces sustained and equitable improvements in academic outcomes and life opportunities, remains unrealized.

Implications for Understanding Black Male Success

The historical promise of education as a pathway to equality remains largely unrealized for Black men. Across the educational continuum—from K–12 access and preparation to postsecondary persistence, campus climate, and post-graduation employment—Black male experiences are shaped by interconnected systems of structural inequity. Yet within these constraints, many Black men develop strategies of resistance, draw upon cultural and communal assets, and achieve academic success.

Understanding how Black male students navigate structural inequities, negotiate institutional environments, and draw upon cultural and communal assets to persist is essential for contextualizing the present study, which explores the lived experiences of successful Black male undergraduates at UC Davis. Their narratives offer critical insight into the institutional structures, relational networks, and personal strengths that foster resilience and academic achievement in the face of systemic adversity.

Although Black male students navigate a complex educational terrain shaped by racialized barriers and constrained opportunity, many persist and achieve at high levels. Their success emerges not from isolated individual effort alone, but through the interaction of cultural assets, institutional conditions, relational support, and personal agency. Understanding these pathways requires moving beyond deficit-oriented narratives to examine the mechanisms and contexts that sustain Black male achievement across the educational pipeline

Retaining Black Male Students at UC Davis

Across the nation, colleges and universities have long struggled to retain and graduate African American students, particularly Black men, who are more likely to be first-generation, from low-income backgrounds. Decades of research demonstrate that Black male college students continue to experience lower rates of persistence and degree completion relative to

many of their White and Asian peers (Harper, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024b; Palmer et al., 2010). These disparities are evident across both two-year and four-year institutions and are shaped by broader structural, institutional, and socioeconomic inequities that influence Black male educational experiences and persistence (Bush & Bush, 2010). Lower academic performance, limited access to supportive social networks, racialized campus climates, and persistent structural inequities contribute to disparities in Black male college persistence and degree attainment (Harper, 2012; Palmer et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2012).

Mentorship and institutional support remain among the most effective interventions for addressing these disparities. Programs emphasizing culturally grounded mentoring, identity affirmation, and holistic student support have been associated with stronger engagement, belonging, persistence, and academic success among Black male students (Brooms et al., 2018 ; Harper, 2012; Palmer et al., 2010). These findings align with scholarship suggesting that educational environments and pedagogical practices that fail to acknowledge students' cultural identities and lived experiences can undermine belonging, engagement, and academic persistence among Black male students (Harper, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012). As a result, scholars have called for targeted institutional strategies that strengthen belonging, academic engagement, mentorship, and equitable educational outcomes for Black male students (Harper, 2012; Palmer et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2012).

Experienced Black male mentors provide relational and cultural connections that are often absent in higher education environments (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Miller, 2021). These mentors serve as important role models by demonstrating how to navigate academic and professional pathways while maintaining strong connections to cultural identity and community accountability (Brooms et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2010). Mentoring relationships provide

emotional support, validation, professional networking, and developmental guidance that contribute to Black male persistence, academic engagement, and career preparation (Brooms et al., 2018). Studies examining Black male initiatives and peer mentoring models have found positive associations with belonging, academic self-efficacy, college adjustment, and reduced impostor feelings among Black collegians (Brooms et al., 2018; Graham & McClain, 2019). At the same time, emerging scholarship highlights limitations within some Black male mentoring frameworks, particularly for Black gay, bisexual, and queer men who may not experience full affirmation within heteronormative or hypermasculine support spaces (Harris et al., 2011; hooks, 2004). These limitations in current mentoring models underscores the need for mentoring models that are inclusive, intersectional, and responsive to the full range of Black male identities.

Reviewed together, the literature demonstrates that mentorship—particularly when culturally grounded, intersectional, and relationally authentic—plays a pivotal role in fostering Black male student success. As Black men navigate environments characterized by racialized barriers and identity negotiations, mentorship provides the structural, emotional, and cultural scaffolding necessary to support their academic and personal development. During the early years of the B.L.A.C.K. program, Black male students represented a relatively small proportion of the undergraduate population at UC Davis and often navigated predominantly White academic and social environments with limited access to culturally affirming support structures, as few formal mentoring or advising initiatives explicitly centered their developmental, academic, and socio-cultural experiences.

B.L.A.C.K. as a Beacon of Hope

While national research clearly demonstrates the pivotal role of mentorship, belonging, and culturally grounded support in fostering Black male student success, these findings take on

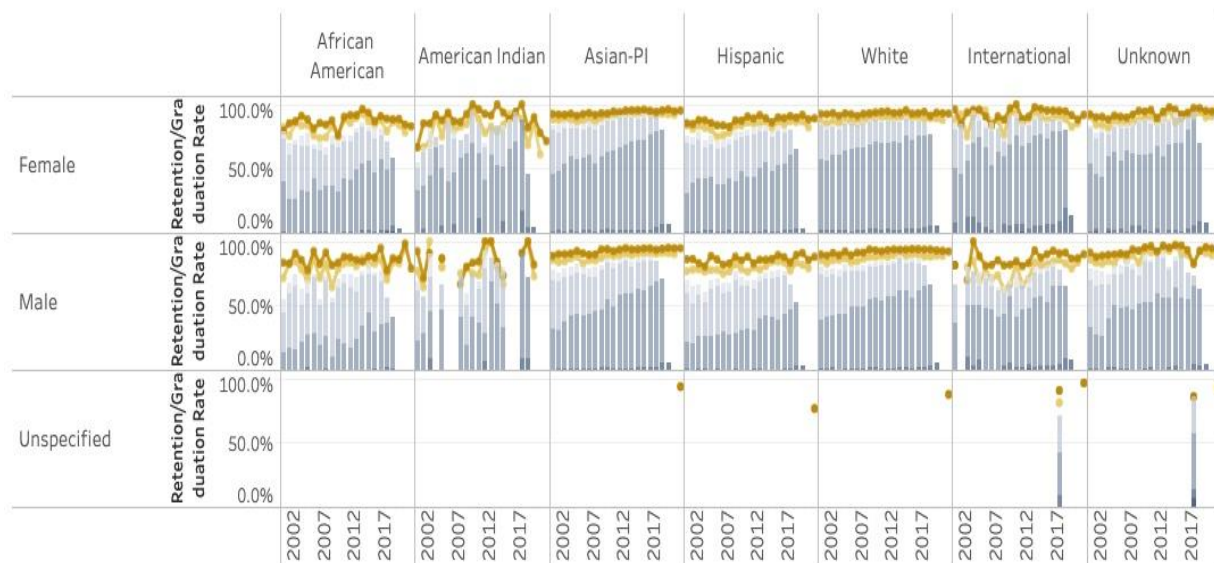
heightened significance when examined within specific institutional contexts. Within this national landscape, UC Davis provides a compelling and critical case for examining Black male success. UC Davis maintains many of the systemic challenges that Black male undergraduates encounter at similar PWIs, including limited cultural representation, racial isolation, and uneven access to mentoring networks. At the same time, UC Davis positions itself as a leader in undergraduate education, ranked highly for teaching, student experience, and overall institutional excellence. These accolades highlight UC Davis' strong academic foundation, as reflected in widely recognized indicators of institutional excellence such as rankings, research output, and student selectivity. However, these measures do not necessarily capture the distribution of outcomes across student populations. As a result, a point of tension emerges: Institutions may be considered excellent by conventional metrics while still producing inequitable outcomes for historically marginalized groups. Despite the university's strengths, Black men at UC Davis consistently experience lower retention and graduation rates relative to their peers, as illustrated in Figure 1. These disparities call into question the extent to which the institution's resources, structures, and pedagogical approaches meet the needs of one of its most vulnerable student populations. Within higher education scholarship and practice, particularly in equity-focused efforts addressing the persistence of historically underserved students, there is a growing argument that institutional effectiveness should be assessed through the outcomes of those who encounter the greatest structural, cultural, and systemic barriers (e.g., Bensimon, 2007). This study applies that line of inquiry, examining the experiences and trajectories of Black male undergraduates to provide a critical lens for assessing how well institutions translate stated commitments to equity into meaningful conditions that support belonging, persistence, and degree attainment.

Figure 1 illustrates retention and graduation trends at UC Davis across freshman cohorts from 2000 to 2021, disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender. While overall retention and graduation rates show gradual improvement over time, disparities remain evident across groups. Notably, Black/African American male students consistently demonstrate lower graduation rates relative to their peers, underscoring persistent equity gaps. These patterns reinforce the need to move beyond aggregate institutional success metrics and examine the structural and relational conditions shaping differential outcomes. These patterns position UC Davis as a critical site for examining the institutional conditions, support structures, and culturally responsive practices that shape Black male persistence and degree attainment. By centering the experiences of students who successfully navigated this environment, the present study seeks to identify the cultural, relational, and institutional factors that contribute to Black male academic success within a PWI.

Figure 1

Retention and Graduation Rate Trend

All Starting College(s), All Starting Majors
2000 to 2021 Freshman Cohorts



Note. This figure illustrates longitudinal retention and graduation rate trends for freshmen cohorts at UC Davis from 2000 to 2021, disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender across all

majors. Light gray bars represent first-year retention rates for each cohort. Dark gray bars represent six-year graduation rates. The yellow line indicates the overall trend in graduation rates across cohorts. Percentages reflect cohort-based outcomes for first-time, full-time freshmen.

Across the time span, graduation rates generally increase for most student populations, reflecting broader institutional and systemwide improvements in degree completion. However, persistent disparities remain evident, particularly among students categorized as African American in institutional reporting, many who identify racially as Black, whose graduation trajectories consistently lag behind those of their peers across racial and ethnic groups. As shown in Figure 1, African American female students demonstrate higher six-year graduation rates (dark gray bars and yellow trend line) than their male counterparts across cohorts. However, both African American male and female students exhibit greater year-to-year fluctuation in graduation rates (as reflected in variability of the yellow trend line) and lower overall completion rates relative to White, Asian/Pacific Islander, and international students, whose rates appear more stable and consistently higher across the same period. The visualization underscores the enduring nature of racialized and gendered inequities in persistence and degree attainment at UC Davis, highlighting the need for targeted interventions that address cultural misalignment between students' lived experiences and dominant institutional norms. In this study, culturally responsive approaches refer to practices that affirm students' identities, recognize diverse forms of cultural capital, and foster relational and identity-affirming environments that support persistence beyond aggregate institutional gains.

Despite clear evidence that Black male undergraduates at UC Davis continue to experience disproportionately low four-, five-, and six-year graduation rates, the institution has not remained passive in the face of these disparities. In direct response to the long-standing

inequities documented across multiple admission cohorts (2002 to 2012 specifically), UC Davis administrators launched the B.L.A.C.K. program in the fall of 2013 as a targeted intervention designed to improve the retention and academic success of Black male students. The program was intentionally structured around three integrated components: a two-unit seminar course co-taught by campus partners; a series of cocurricular workshops and programs tailored to the assessed academic, cultural, and developmental needs of Black men on campus; and a formal mentorship model pairing each participant with a Black male UC Davis alumnus, administrator, staff member, or faculty elder. By the 2014 academic year, B.L.A.C.K. had become a fully implemented campus-wide initiative that combined academic support, cultural affirmation, community engagement, and relational mentorship.

UC Davis as Institutional Context

At UC Davis, institutional narratives often emphasize national prominence and academic excellence. Recent rankings affirm this reputation. UC Davis is widely recognized as a leading public research university and consistently ranks among the nation's top public institutions (U.S. News & World Report, 2026). Currently, in the Times Higher Education's (2026) world report UC Davis is recognized as one of the nation's leading public research universities. In the 2026 Wall Street Journal/College Pulse rankings, UC Davis was ranked second among public universities and thirteenth overall for its ability to position graduates for long-term financial success. These indicators highlight a campus with robust academic resources, strong post-graduate outcomes, and a reputation for excellence in undergraduate teaching.

However, institutional prestige does not necessarily correspond with equitable outcomes for historically marginalized students (Harper, 2009; Palmer et al., 2010; Wood & Harris, 2015). Rather, prestige can coexist with, and at times obscure, inequities by emphasizing aggregate

performance metrics that mask disparities across student populations. Harper (2012) and Strayhorn (2015) show that even within high-performing institutions, Black male students face disproportionate barriers to retention, connection, and degree completion. These disparities do not suggest that institutions alone determine student success, but they do indicate that institutional structures, resources, and practices may not function equitably for students who encounter the greatest structural and cultural barriers.

While UC Davis' national standing highlights its institutional strengths, rankings alone cannot capture the lived realities or educational trajectories of all student groups. For Black male undergraduates, whose experiences often diverge from aggregate institutional patterns, disaggregated outcome data provides a more accurate reflection of how institutional structures and supports function for different student populations. This distinction also raises questions about how institutional success is represented, as aggregate outcomes may mask disparities across student populations. Examining trends in retention and graduation offers critical insight into whether the institution's celebrated excellence translates into equitable outcomes for those most historically underserved.

Although UC Davis consistently reports strong overall student outcomes, including a 93% first-year retention rate and an 86% six-year graduation rate, these aggregate figures obscure persistent equity gaps for historically marginalized populations. Recent publicly available institutional data indicate that African American/Black students at UC Davis graduate at lower rates (approximately 82%) than their White (89%) and Asian (90%) peers, reflecting a persistent degree-completion gap (College Factual, 2025). These figures represent unadjusted outcome differences and do not account for variation in prior academic preparation, socioeconomic background, or other factors that may influence student success.

However, even when such factors are considered, prior research suggests that disparities in outcomes often persist, pointing to the role of institutional conditions in shaping student experiences and trajectories. In this study, these differences are interpreted not as evidence of individual deficit, but as indicators of uneven access to resources, support, and opportunity structures within and beyond the university context. Here, equity is understood as the extent to which students, regardless of background, have access to the conditions necessary to achieve comparable educational outcomes.

Additionally, institutional reports indicate an approximately 20-percentage-point gap in four-year graduation rates between underrepresented minority (URM) students and their non-URM peers at UC Davis (University of California, Davis, Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, 2016). This difference appears more pronounced than the previously cited gap in overall completion rates, in part because four-year graduation metrics capture on-time completion, which tends to reflect greater disparities than six-year outcomes. Differences in population definitions (URM versus Black students specifically) and reporting methods may also contribute to variation in the size of observed gaps. These disparities persist despite the institution's national prestige and high rankings for undergraduate teaching, student outcomes, and financial mobility. When situated within national patterns of disproportionately lower Black male completion rates, this data indicates that Black male students at UC Davis are likely experiencing the same structural and cultural barriers documented across PWIs. Thus, the institutional indicators—retention, graduation, and equity metrics—provide compelling evidence that UC Davis' well-publicized excellence does not translate equitably for all student populations, particularly Black men. These figures reflect publicly reported, descriptive graduation rates and are not adjusted for differences in pre-college preparation, socioeconomic

status, or other covariates. While some research suggests that controlling for academic preparation and socioeconomic factors may reduce observed disparities, studies consistently demonstrate that these adjustments do not fully account for persistent racial gaps in educational outcomes (Harper, 2012; Souto-Maior & Shroff, 2024). From an equity perspective, the persistence of outcome disparities, regardless of contributing factors, signals the need to examine how institutional environments, structures, and supports shape differential student experiences and trajectories.

UC Davis provides a compelling context for examining the experiences and success strategies of Black male undergraduates because it reflects a tension observed across many high-performing predominantly White institutions: (a) strong overall student outcomes and national recognition, and (b) persistent inequities for racially minoritized populations. As a leading public research university with strong retention and graduation rates, UC Davis theoretically provides the academic infrastructure and resources conducive to student success. Yet disaggregated data reveals that African American students graduate at lower rates than their White and Asian peers, and URM students collectively experience significantly lower four-year graduation rates compared to non-URM students. This juxtaposition—prestige alongside inequity—creates a critical opportunity for qualitative inquiry, allowing for an investigation into how Black male students who do succeed at UC Davis navigate an environment where the institutional conditions for success exist, yet structural barriers and racialized experiences persist.

Methodologically, the study situates UC Davis as a distinct institutional context in which Black male students' experiences with advising, mentorship, campus climate, and culturally responsive support can be examined within the broader dynamics of a predominantly White research university. Studying Black male undergraduates at this institution therefore provides

insight not only into local dynamics but also into broader patterns of Black male achievement within highly ranked PWIs nationwide. Historical retention and graduation reports published by the UC Davis Office of Budget and Institutional Analysis document persistent equity gaps in persistence and degree attainment for Black students over the past two decades (University of California, Davis, Office of Budget and Institutional Analysis, 2021).

Table 1 reveals that the most pronounced and persistent equity gaps for Black male students at UC Davis occur at on-time graduation benchmarks (e.g., four- and five-year graduation for first-time freshmen and two-year graduation for transfer students) and are evident across both entry pathways between 2000 and 2021. This suggests that disparities are most acute in timely degree completion rather than eventual completion alone. The largest disparities appear in four-year graduation outcomes for first-year entrants, where Black men’s completion rates never exceeded 45% during this period, representing a gap of more than 25 percentage points relative to the overall UC Davis student population. Similarly stark patterns emerge among transfer entrants, particularly at the two-year and three-year marks, where Black men’s graduation rates consistently lagged behind institutional averages by 20 percentage points or more, and in some years by as much as 38 percentage points. While six-year graduation rates narrow the gap somewhat, Black men still averaged approximately 16 percentage points below the overall UC Davis rate across multiple entering classes. Collectively, these outcomes indicate that disparities are most severe during the institution’s normative time-to-degree benchmarks and suggest that early academic transitions rather than long-term persistence alone represent critical points of inequity for Black male students.

Table 1

Graduation Outcomes for Black Male Students at UC Davis by Entry Pathway and Time-to-Degree, 2000–2021

Entry pathway & graduation metric	Years included	Overall UC Davis rate	Black students rate	Black men rate	Equity gap: Black students vs. overall	Equity gap: Black men vs. overall
Overall UC Davis graduation rate (all entry pathways)	2000–2021	~70%	52%	≤45%	–18 pp	–25+ pp
First-time freshmen: 5-year graduation	2000–2018	~84%	72%	~63%	–12 pp	–21 pp
First-time freshmen: 6-year graduation	2000–2017	85–86%	71–80%	~69.9%	–6 to –15 pp	–16 pp
Transfer students: 2-year graduation	2000–2021	~65%	48%	≤45%	–17 pp	–20+ pp
Transfer students: 3-year graduation	2000–2021	~84%	74%	46.2%–81%	–10 pp	–38 to –3 pp
Transfer students: 4-year graduation	2000–2021	~88%	81%	63.6%–95%	–7 pp	–24 to +7 pp

Note: Table 1 reflects graduation rates of 2000 and 2011 entry cohorts of freshmen and transfer students who were tracked according to standard time-to-degree intervals. Values represent descriptive graduation rates across cohort years (2000–2021), not statistical estimates. Ranges

(e.g., 85–86%) indicate the observed minimum and maximum values across cohorts. Equity gaps are calculated as percentage point (pp) differences between group rates and overall UC Davis rates; ranges in equity gaps reflect variation across cohort years. Data from the UC Davis Office of Budget and Institutional Analysis.

As shown in Table 1, Black male students at UC Davis experience persistent graduation disparities across entry pathways and time-to-degree measures, with equity gaps reaching approximately 25 percentage points compared with the overall institutional average. These disparities demand more than surface-level reform. Instead, they call for intentional, identity-affirming programs that directly address the barriers Black male students face. Considering these systemic barriers, it is imperative for institutions to design culturally responsive, research-informed, and equity-driven interventions. B.L.A.C.K. exemplified such programs, purposefully designed to create spaces of belonging, build cultural capital, and counteract the academic and social alienation often felt by Black men in higher education.

B.L.A.C.K. Overview

B.L.A.C.K. was launched for the 2013–2014 academic year, supported by a collective of senior campus administrators, including Dr. Rahim Reed, Associate Executive Vice Chancellor; Estifanos (Steven) Baissa, Director of the Cross-Cultural Center; Jacques Boyer, Coordinator for the McNair Scholars Program; Ken Barnes, Program Coordinator in the Internship and Career Center; and Dr. Bedford Palmer, Coordinator of Services to Students of African Descent in Student Health and Counseling Services and myself (Kayton Carter) who served as the Advisor/Student Affairs Officer for the African American and African Studies major.

Through its combined emphasis on counseling support, holistic academic advising, and mentorship, B.L.A.C.K. was designed to cultivate multiple forms of capital across participants' personal, academic, and social lives. Group and individual counseling sessions encouraged

participants to explore their identities, aspirations, strengths, and challenges in reflective spaces designed to strengthen students' aspirational and navigational capital in the structurally, culturally complex campus life. Mentorship and community engagement activities enabled participants to build social and cultural capital—forming networks, engaging with role models, and developing a deeper sense of belonging and purpose within the UC Davis community. Academically, B.L.A.C.K. provided holistic and proactive advising that departed from traditional deficit-based models. Advising interventions were grounded in an appreciation of the cultural histories and lived experiences of Black men, offering tailored strategies, resources, and support that aimed to enhance academic capital and promote persistence toward graduation.

In later years, the B.L.A.C.K. program became a foundational component of a broader campus imperative to strengthen the retention and degree completion of students across the African diaspora. This work culminated in the development of the African American Strategic Retention Initiative (AASRI), described by UC Davis Student Affairs as the first Black student retention initiative within the University of California system (University of California, Davis, Student Affairs, 2015). Modeled after the evidence-based minority student retention framework developed by Swail, et al. (2003), AASRI formalized research-driven practices designed to address systemic and campus-specific barriers contributing to the attrition of African American students at UC Davis, particularly Black men. The initiative employed a data-informed and collaborative approach focused on identifying barriers to student success, strengthening campuswide support systems, increasing access to mentorship and academic resources, and fostering a greater sense of belonging among African American students (University of California, Davis, Division of Student Affairs, 2015). A key outcome of the initiative was the establishment of the Center for African Diaspora Student Success (CADSS), which became the

first retention center of its kind within the University of California system (Easley, 2015). Together, B.L.A.C.K. and AASRI reflect a sustained, responsive institutional effort to close longstanding equity gaps through culturally grounded, relationship-centered, and evidence-informed approaches.

These institutional efforts underscore the importance of understanding not only the barriers Black men face but also the supports and conditions that enable their academic and personal success. Building upon this foundation, the present study sought to examine the lived experiences of successful Black male undergraduates at UC Davis, with particular attention to the cultural, relational, and institutional factors that support their persistence and degree completion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

History of Blacks in the American Education System

Carter G. Woodson's early twentieth-century critique of the American educational system remains foundational for understanding the historical and contemporary barriers that Black men encounter in their educational journeys. His analysis of Black education's systemic inadequacies, particularly its failure to cultivate critical thinking and its reliance on rote learning, continues to resonate in scholarship examining racialized schooling in the United States.

Woodson articulated these critiques most prominently in two seminal works: *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* (1919) and *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933).

In *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*, Woodson (1919) documented the intellectual lives of Black people prior to the Civil War, revealing the resilience and ingenuity of Black communities in securing education despite legal, social, and violent constraints. Through clandestine literacy networks, faith-based instruction, and community-organized learning, Black learners resisted a system designed to suppress their intellectual development. Woodson's account challenges narratives that portray early Black educational engagement as passive or deficient; instead, it frames Black learning as an intentional act of resistance and self-determination.

In *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Woodson (1933) extended this critique into the post-Civil War era, examining how American schooling continued to marginalize Black students through Eurocentric curricula, distorted historical narratives, and pedagogical practices that reinforced notions of Black inferiority. He argued that the educational system not only misrepresented Black history but also obstructed Black students' ability to see themselves as intellectual agents and contributors to society. For Woodson, authentic education required

affirming learners' cultural identities, acknowledging their histories and positioning them as central—rather than peripheral—to the academic enterprise.

Modern Extensions of Woodson's Critique

A substantial body of contemporary scholarship underscores the profound influence educational environments exert on the psychological, social, and academic development of Black boys and men. Central to this influence is the presence—or absence—of representation and culturally affirming curriculum. In this case, culturally affirming curriculum refers to instructional content and practices that reflect and validate students' cultural identities and experiences, thereby supporting their engagement, development, and sense of belonging. Scholars have extended Woodson's critique, demonstrating its enduring relevance across modern educational systems. Ladson-Billings (1995, 2006), for example, argues that the failure to implement culturally relevant pedagogy continues to disenfranchise Black students by privileging White cultural norms and disengaging Black learners from instructional content. For example, in a culturally relevant classroom, students might engage with course materials that reflect Black intellectual traditions and lived experiences while critically analyzing structural inequities and connecting academic content to their own communities, thereby fostering both academic achievement and cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995). She contends that culturally relevant teaching both affirms students' identities and cultivates academic excellence, precisely the educational vision Woodson advanced decades earlier. Her work reinforces Woodson's argument that miseducation is not accidental but structurally designed to maintain inequitable power relations. Building on this perspective, King (1991) introduces the concept of dysconscious racism, illustrating how educators may unconsciously accept racial inequities in

schooling as normal or inevitable. This framework aligns with Woodson's observation that educational systems often reproduce, rather than disrupt, racial hierarchies.

Anderson's (1988) historical analysis in *The Education of Blacks in the South* further situates Woodson's critique within a broader tradition of Black educational struggle. Anderson demonstrates how Black educational aspirations have continually clashed with institutional structures that restrict access to rigorous training, leadership development, and culturally grounded curriculum. Although these dynamics were most visible in earlier periods of formal exclusion, contemporary higher education contexts reveal enduring echoes of these structural constraints. Black students, and Black men in particular, remain underrepresented in high-impact academic pathways, including honors programs, undergraduate research, and competitive majors, while often navigating advising systems and institutional environments that are not designed to support their success. Additionally, the continued absence of culturally affirming curriculum and mentorship structures in many institutional contexts reinforces a misalignment between students' aspirations and the opportunities available to them. These contemporary patterns suggest that, while the forms of exclusion have evolved, the structural conditions shaping Black educational experiences continue to reflect the tensions Anderson identified.

Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992) provides a critical legal and historical lens for understanding the structural permanence of racism within American institutions, including education. Bell argued that racism is not aberrational but foundational to U.S. society, tracing its roots to an era in which enslaved Africans were legally defined as property rather than human beings. According to Bell, property rights, not human rights, formed the cornerstone of early American legal and social systems, a logic that continues to shape contemporary educational inequities. In K–12 education, this persistence is reflected in school funding structures tied to

property taxes, which systematically advantage communities with greater accumulated wealth and disproportionately disadvantage Black communities historically affected by segregation, discriminatory housing practices, and economic disinvestment. These inequities contribute to unequal educational preparation, access to rigorous coursework, and college readiness, shaping the conditions under which Black students later enter and navigate higher education institutions such as UC Davis. These structural inequities extend beyond K–12 schooling and continue to influence college access, campus experiences, and persistence outcomes for Black students within predominantly White higher education institutions.

Despite these barriers, Black educational leaders have long resisted oppressive structures and built institutions that affirm and advance Black learners. Their efforts reflect enduring traditions of community uplift, intellectual resistance, and educational advocacy. Scholars have documented how Black communities and educational leaders established and sustained schools despite persistent political, social, and financial barriers (Anderson, 1988; Walker, 1996). They thus function as boundary spanners and change agents, operating both within and beyond traditional institutions to mitigate the effects of exclusion, inequity, and community disinvestment (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Research highlights how Black educational leaders often employ liberatory, care-centered, and community-oriented leadership approaches grounded in social justice and equity, while Black female superintendents have been described as tempered radicals and servant leaders who navigate institutional resistance while centering student well-being and educational equity (Alston, 2005; Dantley & Tillman, 2010).

These efforts are rooted in the historical legacy of segregated Black schools, where strong school–family–community relationships often functioned as essential sources of educational support, protection, and collective advancement (Walker, 1996; Siddle Walker, 2000).

Contemporary Black educational leadership efforts also reflect the enduring intellectual contributions of Carter G. Woodson, whose work challenged the systematic exclusion of Black history and knowledge from American education. Through his scholarship, organizing, and advocacy, Woodson demanded educational frameworks that honor Black narratives, cultures, and knowledge systems, challenging curricular erasure and affirming Black humanity and intellectual capacity.

Understanding this history marked by exclusion, resistance, miseducation, and intellectual agency is essential for interpreting contemporary Black male educational experiences. The pathways Black boys navigate through public schools, and Black men traverse into higher education, are shaped by both the enduring barriers identified by Woodson and Bell and the resilient leadership traditions identified by Wilson, Johnson, Murtadha, Watts, and others. The narratives of successful Black male students must therefore be understood not as isolated achievements but as continuations of a long-standing struggle for educational freedom, self-determination, and institutional belonging.

The Evolution of Black Male Educational Access Post–Brown v. Board

The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision marked a monumental shift in American educational policy by declaring racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. While the ruling represented a symbolic victory in the struggle for civil rights, its implementation revealed deep ambivalence and resistance across the nation. For Black male students in particular, *Brown* initiated a complex and often contradictory educational journey—one in which legal rights to integrated schooling did not translate into equitable access, representation, or success.

Following *Brown*, states and school districts across the South engaged in massive resistance efforts designed to delay or undermine integration. These tactics included closing

public schools, establishing private segregation academies, and manipulating district boundaries (Anderson, 2007). Even when Black students gained access to formerly all-White schools, they frequently encountered hostile educational environments characterized by racial antagonism, lowered expectations, marginalization, and unequal academic opportunities. Scholars have documented how these conditions often produced experiences of isolation and exclusion for Black students navigating predominantly White educational spaces (Anderson, 1988; Harper, 2009).

Structural resistance also persisted through more subtle institutional mechanisms. Tracking systems, disciplinary disparities, gifted program gatekeeping, and exclusionary curricula often functioned to reproduce racial inequities within formally integrated schools (Couvson, 2016; Oakes, 1985). These practices restricted Black students' access to advanced coursework, including college-preparatory math and science pathways, contributing to educational opportunity gaps that later shaped college access, persistence, and representation in fields such as STEM.

The post-*Brown* era also ushered in major shifts in educational policy. The 1965 passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), followed by No Child Left Behind (2001), introduced federal accountability measures intended to close achievement gaps. However, scholars argue that these policies often intensified disparities for Black boys through several interrelated mechanisms. The increased emphasis on standardized testing led schools to prioritize performance metrics, often limiting access to rigorous coursework and enrichment opportunities for students perceived as unlikely to improve aggregate scores. Simultaneously, the narrowing of curriculum reduced opportunities for culturally relevant and engaging learning experiences, contributing to student disengagement. Accountability pressures also incentivized

exclusionary disciplinary practices, as schools sought to manage student populations in ways that protected performance outcomes. The rise of zero-tolerance policies in the 1990s further reinforced these dynamics by institutionalizing punitive responses to behavior, disproportionately removing Black male students from learning environments and contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline. Collectively, these policy shifts constrained educational access, disrupted academic trajectories, and reinforced structural inequities in schooling.

While desegregation efforts expanded Black students' access to previously exclusionary institutions, access alone did not ensure belonging or equitable educational experiences. Contemporary scholarship demonstrates that Black male students continue to encounter racialized stereotypes, hyper-surveillance, curricular marginalization, and limited academic support across educational settings (Howard, 2014; Harper, 2009). Although Black female students also encounter significant forms of racialized and gendered bias, research suggests that Black boys are more likely to experience heightened disciplinary scrutiny and exclusionary practices, which can disrupt academic engagement and access to opportunity. These gendered patterns of early educational experience may contribute to divergent academic trajectories and help explain persistent disparities in persistence and completion observed in higher education. Even within formally integrated educational settings, Black boys often remain academically and socially marginalized, reflecting what Bell (1992) described as the permanence of racism within American institutions.

Despite these barriers, many Black male students persist and achieve academic excellence by drawing upon community cultural wealth, familial support, perseverance, and strategic navigation skills (Yosso, 2005; Harper, 2012). Their success represents not only

individual accomplishment but also the continuation of a historical legacy of resistance, agency, and intellectual striving.

The evolution of educational access following *Brown* underscores the complex interplay between structural inequities and Black resilience. Understanding this evolution is essential for situating the experiences of Black male students at PWIs such as UC Davis. Their academic and personal success must be interpreted in relation to a broader historical continuum that includes the struggle for literacy during enslavement, the harms of miseducation, the inequities of segregated and resegregated schools, and the leadership traditions rooted within Black communities.

This historical arc informs the present study's focus on the lived experiences of successful Black male undergraduates - students who have navigated and resisted systemic barriers and whose narratives offer critical insights for advancing equity in higher education.

Challenges Specific to Black Men

Psychosocial and Campus Climate Challenges

Black male students in higher education frequently encounter racialized experiences that can undermine persistence and academic success. Across academic, social, and campus environments, they often navigate racial stereotyping, microaggressions, hyper-surveillance, and marginalization (Smith et al., 2007; Harper, 2009). Such experiences generate psychological distress, heighten feelings of isolation, and undermine students' sense of belonging—an essential factor for academic achievement and well-being. Scholars argue that the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of campus life profoundly shape students' academic experiences, influencing motivation, help-seeking behaviors, engagement, and perceptions of belonging (Brooms, 2016, 2018; Harper, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012; Wood & Palmer, 2015).

Inadequate mentoring, representation, and culturally responsive support structures further intensifies these challenges (Palmer et al., 2009). Compounding these realities are persistent deficit narratives and negative social representations of Black men, which shape both institutional responses and students' self-perceptions (Howard, 2014). Despite these barriers, many Black male collegians demonstrate resilience by drawing upon community cultural wealth, peer networks, and campus leadership opportunities to support their success (Harper, 2015). Brooms' scholarship (2016, 2018) emphasizes the importance of culturally affirming counterspaces where Black men can cultivate identity, develop community, and resist deficit-oriented institutional narratives. His research demonstrates that Black men experience campus climate not as a neutral context, but as a racialized environment that shapes how they interpret their place within the institution. Similarly, scholars have found that supportive peer networks, affirming mentorship, and culturally grounded community spaces can help mitigate the effects of hostile or indifferent institutional climates for Black male students (Brooms, 2018; Wood & Palmer, 2015).

Persistence, Completion, and Pipeline Inequities

National data indicate that approximately 40% of Black students graduate within six years from four-year institutions, compared to approximately 64% of White students, reflecting persistent racial disparities in degree attainment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Similar or higher completion rates are often observed among Asian students, further underscoring persistent inequities in educational outcomes across racial groups. Students who leave college prior to degree completion frequently do so while carrying substantial financial burdens and reduced long-term economic opportunity (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022; Scott-Clayton, 2018). Lower completion rates reflect not a lack of ability, but a

constellation of structural and institutional conditions that shape persistence, including inequities in prior educational opportunities and preparation as well as institutional factors such as inadequate advising, diminished belonging, racial battle fatigue, underrepresentation among faculty and staff, and financial and policy constraints related to time-to-degree.

For many, the inequities also persisted earlier in the educational pipeline. Despite widespread recognition of the importance of advanced coursework for college readiness, Black and Hispanic students remain underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, gifted programs, and other accelerated academic pathways (Conger et al., 2009; Oakes, 1985; Souto-Maior & Shroff, 2024). The underrepresentation persists even after controlling for prior academic achievement and related educational indicators (Conger et al., 2009). School racial composition and socioeconomic status strongly influence access to Advanced Placement (AP) and other advanced coursework, with schools serving predominantly Black and low-income communities often offering fewer rigorous academic opportunities (Conger et al., 2009; Oakes, 1985). Rooted structural inequity shapes how educational resources, opportunities, and institutional capacity are distributed across schools, which is closely tied to racial and socioeconomic segregation. Research suggests that disparities in Advanced Placement participation are shaped not only by student preparation, but also by unequal access to rigorous coursework opportunities, institutional gatekeeping, and broader educational inequities (Conger et al., 2009; Oakes, 1985). Conger et al. (2009) suggest that when Black and Hispanic students are provided equitable access to advanced coursework opportunities, their rates of participation and achievement can more closely resemble those of their peers, underscoring the role of opportunity structures in shaping educational outcomes.

Moreover, in many low-income communities, under-resourced schools, limited economic opportunity, and disproportionately high incarceration rates intersect to shape the broader structural conditions influencing Black men's educational and life trajectories (Alexander, 2012; Western & Pettit, 2010). These intersecting structural barriers underscore the need for comprehensive policy interventions and the dismantling of deficit-oriented educational frameworks that individualize failure while obscuring broader systemic inequities (Howard, 2014). Without intentional reform, the structural conditions that constrain Black male educational and economic mobility will continue to persist across generations.

The Absence of African-Centered Curriculum and Its Impact on Black Male Students

Black male students frequently enter higher education after years of K–12 schooling in environments where their cultural identities, knowledge systems, and histories are peripheral or entirely omitted. This curricular erasure produces identity displacement and undermines the development of an academic self-concept. Dominant curriculum patterns often:

- center White, Eurocentric narratives as normative;
- confine African American history to isolated or superficial units; and
- frame Black men primarily through deficit-oriented depictions of criminality, athleticism, or struggle.

This narrow representational landscape contributes to what scholars describe as cultural misalignment—a disconnect between Black students' identities, lived experiences, and the educational environments they navigate (Howard, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In the absence of meaningful representation in curriculum, pedagogy, or institutional culture, many Black boys internalize the message that education is not designed for them. As Howard (2014) argues, schools that fail to acknowledge and affirm the cultural identities of Black males often produce

environments that are uninviting, unwelcoming, and at times antagonistic to their lived experiences and identities.

The emotional and psychological consequences of such invisibility align directly with Strayhorn's SoB Theory (2012, 2019), which asserts that students must feel valued, respected, and recognized in order to fully engage and thrive in academic environments. When curricular and institutional contexts fail to affirm Black male identity, belonging is compromised, with cascading effects on motivation, engagement, and persistence.

Howard's broader body of scholarship further demonstrates how racialized narratives, such as the persistent but empirically inaccurate claim that more Black men are incarcerated than enrolled in college, shape educator expectations and students' internalized beliefs. Although public discourse in the mid-2000s frequently suggested that more Black men were incarcerated than enrolled in college, subsequent national data indicated that Black male college enrollment had surpassed incarceration rates during that period (Roberts et al., 2013). The persistence of this myth reflects a broader societal tendency to pathologize Black male identity. For many Black male collegians, this deficit discourse creates an additional psychological burden: the pressure to disprove stereotypes while simultaneously serving as symbols of hope for their families and communities. These sociocultural pressures are not peripheral; they directly shape students' self-perception, academic engagement, and persistence trajectories.

Structural Barriers in Education, Opportunity, and Workforce Outcomes for Black Men

Research consistently demonstrates that Black men face significant and intersecting barriers across educational and employment pathways. Even among individuals with comparable levels of educational attainment, Black men continue to experience disparities in employment outcomes and access to high-paying occupations (Carnevale et al., 2016; U.S. Bureau of Labor

Statistics, 2024). These inequities reflect the enduring influence of structural racism rather than individual deficiencies. Racial microaggressions, hostile campus climates, and environmental stress within predominantly White institutions (PWIs) can further undermine Black male students' academic engagement, well-being, and career preparation (Smith et al., 2007), compounding historical legacies of slavery, segregation, and systemic exclusion that continue to shape educational and labor market outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Disparities in degree completion further illustrate these challenges. Students who leave college without completing degrees frequently incur substantial student loan debt without realizing the economic benefits typically associated with degree attainment, contributing to long-term financial instability and constrained mobility (Huelsman, 2015). Although HBCUs have long fostered academic achievement, leadership development, and identity affirmation among Black men (Palmer & Gasman, 2008), scholars caution against treating these institutions as uniformly affirming or universally beneficial, noting the complex social and institutional dynamics that shape student experiences and outcomes (Harper, 2008).

Inequities emerge well before college entry. Access to rigorous academic preparation, particularly advanced placement and college-preparatory coursework, remains uneven across racial and socioeconomic lines. Research consistently demonstrates that Black and Hispanic students are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP) coursework and gifted education programs, even after controlling for prior academic achievement, suggesting that disparities in access are shaped by institutional opportunity structures rather than student ability alone (Conger et al., 2009; Darity et al., 2001).

Beyond schooling, the convergence of under-resourced K–12 education, limited early employment opportunities, and disproportionately high incarceration rates constrains educational

and employment pathways for many young Black men, particularly those from low-income communities (Harris, 2013). Howard (2014) contends that addressing these systemic inequities requires moving beyond deficit-oriented frameworks toward policies and practices that acknowledge structural barriers while promoting equity, affirmation, and opportunity.

Institutional Barriers and the Need for Culturally Grounded Support

Despite systemic barriers, many Black male students enter college with aspirations not only for personal achievement, but also to transform family trajectories and contribute to broader forms of community uplift and advancement (Howard, 2014). Yet institutions of higher education frequently lack the culturally responsive structures necessary to support their holistic development. PWIs often provide limited access to Black male faculty, mentors, and advisors; insufficient culturally relevant curriculum; and few structured opportunities for identity-affirming engagement. Absent intentional institutional intervention, these conditions can reproduce patterns of alienation, disengagement, and attrition among Black male students (Brooms, 2016; Wood & Palmer, 2015).

Scholarship on Black male collegians at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) documents a persistent paradox of racialized invisibility and hypervisibility. Black men are frequently marginalized within academic spaces - through exclusion from curriculum, limited mentoring access, and diminished intellectual recognition - while simultaneously subjected to heightened surveillance and scrutiny within behavioral, disciplinary, and symbolic domains of campus life (Harper, 2009; Smith et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). This dual condition undermines students' sense of mattering and belonging, contributing to disengagement and attrition. Invisibility erodes recognition and affirmation, while hypervisibility reinforces surveillance and deficit narratives, positioning Black men as risks rather than scholars.

Edward Bush, President of Cosumnes River College and co-founder of the African American Male Education Network and Development (A²MEND), contends that persistent inequities in the educational pipeline reflect institutional structures that were not intentionally designed to support the success and persistence of Black male students (Bush & Bush, 2010). A²MEND's work illustrates how structural exclusion from culturally grounded learning environments, mentorship networks, and community-based affirmation contributes to persistent inequities for Black male students in California and beyond. Like Howard, Bush emphasizes that Black male students bring substantial cultural capital to educational spaces, yet institutions frequently lack mechanisms to recognize, leverage, or cultivate that capital. Substantial cultural capital refers to the significant knowledge, skills, and community-based resources students bring that are often overlooked by educational institutions.

Together, this scholarship illuminates the systemic, curricular, and psychological dimensions of educational inequity confronting Black males. These insights underscore the necessity of culturally responsive programs, such as the B.L.A.C.K. initiative at UC Davis, that intentionally cultivate belonging, affirm cultural identity, and leverage community cultural wealth as assets rather than deficits.

Deficit Narratives, Stereotypes, and the Educational Positioning of Black Males

The literature on Black males in American education consistently documents the persistence of deficit-oriented narratives that portray Black boys and men as academically disengaged, intellectually deficient, behaviorally problematic, or uninterested in schooling (Brown & Donnor, 2011; Harper, 2009). Rooted in longstanding racist tropes, these deficit-oriented narratives continue to permeate media discourse, educational policy, classroom practice, and even social science research concerning Black boys and men (Brown & Donnor, 2011).

Historically, Black males have been depicted as brutes, criminals, entertainers, or hypersexual beings, representations that have shaped public perception and institutional responses since the nation's founding.

Such portrayals profoundly shape how Black males are positioned within educational systems, contributing to lowered academic expectations, disproportionate disciplinary practices, and persistent forms of marginalization (Skiba et al., 2011). Over time, these narratives may be internalized, creating psychological burdens that undermine academic confidence and contribute to self-fulfilling prophecies.

Scholars have widely critiqued deficit discourse for obscuring systemic racism and structural inequality. Brown and Donnor (2011) argue that deficit-oriented frameworks divert attention away from institutional failures by locating responsibility primarily at the individual level rather than examining how school structures, curricular practices, and educator bias systematically disadvantage Black male learners. For example, Black male students are often disproportionately placed into remedial or less rigorous academic tracks based on standardized assessments and subjective evaluations that do not fully capture their potential. Similarly, advising and instructional practices may steer these students away from advanced coursework, while disciplinary systems disproportionately penalize behaviors that are interpreted through racialized lenses. These practices reflect deficit-oriented assumptions about ability and motivation, while simultaneously limiting access to opportunity and reinforcing inequitable educational trajectories. Scholars argue that schools often prioritize disciplinary surveillance over the academic and developmental needs of Black boys, frequently treating them as adults rather than children deserving of care, guidance, and intellectual support (Howard, 2014). Although these dynamics are most extensively documented in K–12 settings, emerging research

suggests that similar patterns of surveillance, marginalization, and misrecognition may persist in higher education, shaping Black male students' experiences of belonging and support. This imbalance is reflected in the disproportionate representation of Black males in suspensions, expulsions, and special education classifications (Skiba et al., 2011).

Ethnographic research has at times complicated dominant deficit narratives by illuminating the lived experiences of Black male students; however, Brown and Donnor (2011) caution that such scholarship can inadvertently reproduce deficit-oriented assumptions if not carefully situated within broader histories of racial oppression and structural inequity. This tension highlights the need for methodological approaches that emphasize agency, resilience, and community context rather than pathologizing Black male behavior.

In response, a growing body of scholarship has called for strengths-based and asset-oriented frameworks. Harper (2009) and Warren et al. (2016) advocate for approaches that foreground how Black males persist and succeed despite structural barriers, emphasizing the importance of cultural, familial, and community assets in supporting achievement and resilience. Scholars similarly urge educators and researchers to reimagine educational pathways by rejecting deficit-oriented language, acknowledging students' cultural contexts, and critically examining institutional inequities that shape educational opportunity (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Brown & Donnor, 2011). Scholars further argue for analytical frameworks that recognize the heterogeneity of Black male experiences rather than treating Black men as a monolithic population (Brown & Donnor, 2011; Harper & Nichols, 2008).

Howard (2014) further emphasizes the psychological consequences of racial stereotyping, arguing that societal portrayals shape both how Black males perceive themselves and how they are viewed by educators and institutions. Many Black male collegians carry a profound sense of

responsibility to uplift their families and communities, yet they are often situated within environments that fail to address their holistic needs. The scarcity of Black male faculty, culturally grounded mentorship, and targeted academic support structures contributes to campus climates that often fail to fully affirm Black male students' identities, experiences, and aspirations (Howard, 2014; Howard & Reynolds, 2013).

Collectively, this literature calls for a fundamental narrative shift - from pathologizing Black males to embracing multidimensional understandings of Black masculinity, cultural resilience, and structural context. Educational research must critically examine how race, class, gender, and institutional power shape Black male educational experiences while advancing culturally centered, strengths-based frameworks that affirm Black men's humanity, agency, and potential (Brown & Donnor, 2011; Howard, 2014). This shift is central to the present study, which examines how Black men at UC Davis draw upon cultural wealth, community networks, and affirming institutional supports to persist and succeed within a predominantly White institutional context.

Preparation, Access, Retention, and Persistence of Black Male Collegians

Higher education scholarship on Black male students consistently documents longstanding inequities in college preparation, access, retention, persistence, and educational outcomes (Fleming, 1984; Flowers, 2004; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; Palmer et al., 2014; Wood, 2013). These disparities reflect both structural inequalities embedded in K–12 schooling and differential treatment within postsecondary institutions. Fleming's (1984) seminal work identified racialized schooling conditions and unequal academic socialization as foundational contributors to the uneven preparation of Black male students entering college. Subsequent scholarship has continued to demonstrate that Black male students often encounter restricted access to rigorous coursework, inconsistent advising, and uneven college-going support. These

challenges are not isolated, but cumulative, shaping students' academic trajectories over time and influencing their capacity to navigate institutional systems and persist in higher education (Harper, 2012; Palmer et al., 2014).

Retention and persistence remain central concerns across institutional contexts. Wood (2013) argues that Black men's persistence is not solely a function of individual effort, but is also shaped by how institutions structure opportunity, respond to racialized experiences, and foster academic engagement and support. Kimbrough and Hutcheson (1998) and Palmer et al. (2014) further emphasize the pivotal role of institutional agents - including faculty, staff, and mentors - in fostering environments that support Black male students' engagement, persistence, and success. When institutions fail to create such conditions, Black male students are disproportionately affected by academic disengagement, diminished sense of belonging, and elevated attrition rates.

The Role of Student Engagement and Out-of-Class Experiences

Beyond formal academic settings, out-of-class engagement serves as a critical determinant of student success, particularly for Black males navigating predominantly White institutional environments. Bonner and Bailey (2006) argue that co-curricular involvement - including participation in student organizations, leadership experiences, and culturally centered programs - can foster identity affirmation, leadership development, and community building. Such spaces frequently function as counterspaces that provide relational, cultural, and psychological affirmation often absent from traditional academic environments and are not optional supplements; rather, they function as essential supports that enable Black men to manage racial battle fatigue, negotiate identity threats, and sustain persistence toward degree completion. Collectively, this research highlights the importance of intentionally designed

campus structures that affirm Black male identity, foster community bonding, and provide opportunities for leadership and mentorship—conditions central to programs such as B.L.A.C.K.

Black Male Initiatives (BMI) as National Models

In response to persistent educational inequities, mentoring and Black Male Initiative (BMI) programs have emerged as critical institutional strategies for supporting Black men in higher education. Scholars note that Black male collegians navigate complex intersections of race, masculinity, and identity that shape their educational experiences within predominantly White institutional environments (Dancy & Brown, 2012; Harper, 2015; Harris et al., 2022). In turn, BMI programs seek to address the structural, psychological, and academic barriers influencing Black men's collegiate trajectories. These initiatives recognize that Black male student success is shaped not only by individual motivation, but also by the cultural, social, and institutional contexts in which learning and development occur.

Decades of research document how Black men in college navigate competing constructions of masculinity, academic ambition, and societal expectation (Dancy & Brown, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2007). While dominant cultural norms often privilege toughness and emotional stoicism, these expectations are neither universal nor uncontested. Black gay, bisexual, and queer men, in particular, may challenge heteronormative constructions of masculinity while facing distinct complexities within higher education environments (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Scholars further emphasize the importance of culturally affirming counterspaces where Black men can redefine masculinity, express vulnerability, and cultivate community, belonging, and support (Brooms, 2018; Harper & Quaye, 2007).

Research consistently demonstrates that mentoring relationships—whether peer-based, faculty-led, staff-driven, alumni-supported, or community-centered—provide Black male

students with affirmation, emotional support, academic reinforcement, professional development, and critical forms of navigational guidance within higher education environments (Kendricks et al., 2013; Herridge & Hobley, 2019). These forms of support are particularly critical within predominantly White institutional (PWI) environments, where Black men often encounter racial isolation, stereotype threat, racialized stress, and limited access to culturally affirming support networks (Harper, 2009; Smith et al., 2007). Culturally responsive mentors - characterized by their ability to affirm cultural identity, cultivate trust-based relationships, adopt asset-based perspectives, and provide critical navigational and advocacy support - offer Black male students important models for navigating academic environments while maintaining cultural integrity and self-definition (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harris, 2010; Palmer et al., 2014). Moreover, Black Male Initiative (BMI) and peer mentoring programs have been shown to strengthen students' sense of belonging, support college adjustment, reduce feelings of isolation, and promote positive academic outcomes (Brooms, et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2012).

The Importance of Black Male Mentorship in College

Research on Black male college students highlights the complex interplay among masculinity, racial identity, and academic achievement. Within predominantly White institutional contexts, Black men often navigate racialized stereotypes and social expectations while striving for academic success (Harper, 2009; Harper & Harris, 2010). Constructions of Black manhood are frequently shaped by narratives of toughness, responsibility, leadership, and academic performance (F. Harris et al., 2022; Dancy & Brown, 2012). These constructions, however, are not monolithic. Black gay, bisexual, and queer men may challenge, negotiate, and redefine dominant masculine norms while navigating intersecting racial, gendered, and sexual identities (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).

Despite these complexities, successful Black male collegians often resist deficit-oriented stereotypes through leadership involvement, participation in academic and cultural organizations, and engagement in affirming campus communities (Harper, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2007). Such engagements create opportunities for identity exploration and affirmation, particularly within counterspaces that allow Black men to negotiate and define masculinity on their own terms (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Harper & Quaye, 2007). Recognizing the intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class is essential for designing institutional supports that effectively respond to the diverse experiences and realities of Black men in higher education (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).

Within this broader context of identity negotiation, mentorship emerges as a critical determinant of Black male student success. While prior research has demonstrated the importance of mentoring for Black male students' academic persistence and well-being (Kendricks et al., 2013; Gibson, 2014), this study extends existing scholarship by examining how culturally grounded mentoring relationships operate as counterspaces that foster identity affirmation, community building, and navigational support within a predominantly White university context. Within predominantly White institutions (PWIs), where racial isolation and microaggressions are common, mentorship often functions as a protective and affirming support mechanism by providing validation, guidance, and assistance navigating institutional environments (Smith et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). Strong mentoring relationships mitigate social and occupational barriers, helping students cultivate academic confidence and a sense of agency.

Studies indicate that mentorship is associated with increased graduation rates and academic persistence across student populations. For Black male collegians, mentoring may

function as a critical source of guidance, advocacy, and identity affirmation that supports students' ability to navigate institutional barriers and maintain engagement within predominantly White institutional environments (Herridge & Hobley, 2019). At Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), mentoring plays a similarly vital role, particularly within STEM disciplines, where HBCUs continue to serve as significant producers of Black graduates and professionals (Kendricks et al., 2013). Effective mentoring programs must acknowledge the racialized stressors, socioeconomic constraints, and identity-related pressures Black male students often encounter while providing culturally responsive and affirming support structures. Institutions seeking to reduce educational outcome disparities should prioritize the development and expansion of structured mentoring initiatives for historically underrepresented students (Girves et al., 2005; Palmer et al., 2014).

A substantial body of scholarship critiques the U.S. educational system's longstanding failure to equitably serve Black students, identifying both historical and contemporary mechanisms of exclusion. Ladson-Billings (1998, 2006) reframed discussions of racialized achievement disparities through the concept of the education debt, arguing that contemporary inequities reflect the cumulative effects of longstanding economic, sociopolitical, moral, and historical injustices. Rather than interpreting lower test scores or graduation rates as isolated "achievement gaps," this framework highlights systemic neglect, chronic underfunding of Black schools, discriminatory policy, and the erasure of Black cultural knowledge as foundational contributors to persistent inequity.

Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy further asserts that educational excellence requires affirmation of students' cultural identities and the cultivation of critical consciousness. Critical consciousness refers to students' ability to recognize and critically

analyze structural inequities and to understand their position within broader systems of power. When Black students, particularly Black boys, are misrepresented, misdiagnosed, or misunderstood in classrooms, the consequences extend beyond academic performance to include diminished self-worth and weakened sense of belonging.

Consistent with this critique, scholars argue that educational institutions continue to reproduce racial stratification despite legal reforms and broader political advancements (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Milner, 2012). These inequities manifest not only through discriminatory disciplinary practices and disproportionate special education placements (Skiba et al., 2011), but also through curricular structures that normalize Eurocentric knowledge while marginalizing African and diasporic histories. As Ladson-Billings (1995) observed, the persistent omission of Black contributions from curriculum denies Black learners the opportunity to see themselves as intellectual agents, cultural contributors, and historical actors.

Mentoring and Black Male Initiatives

Given the persistent structural, educational, and social barriers shaping Black male experiences across the educational continuum, scholars and practitioners have increasingly emphasized interventions that foster identity affirmation, belonging, and academic success. Mentorship and BMI programs have emerged as critical institutional strategies designed to counter hostile campus climates, expand social and cultural capital, and provide targeted guidance to Black male collegians navigating PWIs. These initiatives reflect a growing recognition that Black men thrive when supported by empowering relationships, culturally grounded communities, and programs that challenge deficit narratives while promoting agency, resilience, and academic engagement.

National scholarship on Black male collegians highlights the complex interplay among masculinity, identity formation, and academic performance, underscoring the need for intentional support structures such as mentoring and Black Male Initiatives (BMIs). Black men often navigate societal stereotypes that portray them as intellectually deficient, emotionally detached, or hypermasculine while simultaneously striving to meet expectations of academic achievement, resilience, and leadership within predominantly White institutional (PWI) environments (Harper, 2009; Dancy & Brown, 2012). Constructions of Black manhood - often rooted in narratives of toughness, responsibility, resilience, and perseverance - shape how Black college men understand themselves and their educational experiences (Dancy & Brown, 2012). However, these constructions are not monolithic. Black gay, bisexual, and queer men, for example, navigate intersecting identities that can complicate access to belonging, peer support, and mentoring relationships, underscoring the need for more nuanced, inclusive, and affirming approaches to student engagement and support (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).

Despite these challenges, research demonstrates that Black male students actively resist deficit-oriented stereotypes by engaging in leadership, community involvement, academic achievement, and culturally affirming spaces that support identity development and collective empowerment (Harper, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2007). Many Black Male Initiatives (BMIs) intentionally cultivate counterspaces where Black men can explore, affirm, and redefine identity while fostering psychological well-being, community, and resistance to dominant racialized narratives (Brooms, 2018; Strayhorn, 2012). Such spaces are particularly critical within institutional environments where Black men remain underrepresented, hyper-surveilled, and marginalized. Consequently, attention to the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class is

essential for designing inclusive programs that respond to the diversity and complexity of Black male experiences (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).

Mentorship as a Mechanism for Black Male Success

Particularly within predominantly White institutional (PWI) contexts, mentorship offers Black men emotional affirmation, academic and social navigation, and access to supportive networks that can help counter experiences of racial isolation, marginalization, and racialized stress (Harper, 2009; Smith et al., 2007). At Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), mentoring relationships have likewise been associated with strong academic outcomes, particularly in STEM disciplines where HBCUs continue to play a disproportionate role in producing Black graduates (Kendricks et al., 2013).

Black male mentors can be especially impactful because they often provide shared cultural understanding, experiential knowledge, and forms of affirmation and belonging that may be absent elsewhere on campus (Brooms & Davis, 2017). These mentors serve as tangible models of success, demonstrating how to navigate academic and professional environments while maintaining cultural identity and community accountability (Brooms, 2018; Harris, 2010). Mentoring relationships further support professional development, networking, self-efficacy, and institutional navigation - factors consistently associated with persistence and academic achievement among Black male students (Palmer et al., 2014).

Institutionalization of Black Male Initiatives (BMIs)

The emergence and expansion of African American Male Initiatives (AAMIs) and BMIs reflect a growing national recognition that structural inequities, rather than individual deficiencies, underlie Black male underachievement. Harper and Kuykendall (2012) describe Black Male Initiatives (BMIs) as institutional responses to systemic inequities affecting Black male students through culturally relevant, community-centered programming. BMI programs

frequently integrate mentoring, academic support, leadership development, social-emotional learning, and identity-affirming experiences designed to strengthen belonging, persistence, and educational success among Black men (Palmer et al., 2014; Washington, 2016).

These initiatives draw upon multiple theoretical foundations. Harper's Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework redirects attention away from perceived deficiencies and toward the strengths, resilience, cultural wealth, and success strategies Black men employ while navigating higher education institutions, encouraging scholars and practitioners to examine how Black male students persist and thrive despite systemic barriers (Harper, 2012).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a framework for examining how systemic racism shapes educational structures and experiences while emphasizing the importance of counternarratives that disrupt deficit-oriented stereotypes of Black masculinity and illuminate the intersectional realities of Black male students (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014). Student development, identity development, and social capital theories similarly inform programmatic approaches designed to foster belonging, leadership capacity, institutional engagement, and supportive intra-institutional networks for Black male students (Strayhorn, 2012; Yosso, 2005).

Together, these frameworks reinforce the need for holistic programs that validate Black men's lived realities while equipping them with tools to navigate, and challenge, inequitable institutional structures.

Components and Impact of Black Male Initiatives

(BMIs) commonly incorporate several core components designed to support students' academic, personal, and psychosocial development. Brooms (2018) identifies six foundational elements frequently present across these initiatives: (a) personal development, (b) service, (c) academic support, (d) financial affairs, (e) spiritual enrichment and/or social support, and (f)

membership and public engagement. Participation in these programs can foster forms of sociocultural capital and institutional knowledge that are essential for navigating higher education environments, yet are often less accessible to Black men within predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Brooms, 2018).

A growing body of empirical research demonstrates the positive outcomes associated with participation in Black Male Initiatives (BMIs) and culturally grounded mentoring programs. Studies have linked these interventions to increased persistence and retention, improved academic performance, stronger self-efficacy, enhanced leadership development, and greater levels of belonging and institutional engagement among Black male students (Brooms, 2018; Sutton, 2006; Palmer et al., 2014). BMIs also support mental health and well-being by creating spaces where Black men can express vulnerability, develop emotional literacy, and engage in culturally relevant wellness practices (Watkins, 2019; Brooms, 2018). At the same time, scholars caution that such initiatives must avoid reproducing narratives of Black male exceptionalism that place undue pressure on participants or reinforce narrow and restrictive definitions of success (Harper, 2009).

Examples of Black Male Initiatives (BMIs) Across U.S. Colleges and Universities

Numerous colleges and universities across the United States have developed structured BMIs to address the academic, social, and cultural challenges experienced by Black male students. Collectively, these programs demonstrate the potential for institutionally supported, culturally grounded interventions to improve Black male persistence, retention, and degree completion. Several college-based BMIs have achieved national visibility and serve as influential models for institutional support.

Virginia Tech: Black Male Excellence Network (BMEN) and Black Male Initiative

At Virginia Tech, the BMI and the Black Male Excellence Network (BMEN) function as coordinated institutional efforts to improve the retention and graduation rates of Black male students. In collaboration with Inclusive Virginia Tech, BMEN seeks to cultivate an environment in which Black male undergraduates can explore authentic identity development while advancing academically, professionally, and personally. The program works across academic and student affairs units to proactively identify and remove barriers to student progression. Through community-building, mentoring, and leadership development, BMEN operates as a counter space that affirms Black male identity and promotes persistence. Early assessments indicate that participation in Virginia Tech’s BMI programs is associated with increased retention and an enhanced sense of belonging among Black male students.

Georgia State University: African American Male Initiative (AAMI)

Georgia State University’s African American Male Initiative (AAMI) is widely recognized as one of the most comprehensive and effective Black male support models in higher education. AAMI integrates academic coaching, structured mentoring, intrusive advising, and career development to improve persistence and graduation outcomes. The initiative is embedded within Georgia State’s broader data-informed student success infrastructure, which has contributed to the elimination of racial gaps in graduation rates. AAMI emphasizes early-alert interventions, academic skills development, and culturally responsive advising—approaches shown to significantly improve semester-to-semester retention for African American male students. As a result, AAMI has become a national model for institutions seeking to close opportunity gaps for Black men.

My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) Scholars Programs

Originating from the Obama Administration’s national My Brother’s Keeper initiative, MBK Scholars programs have been adapted across numerous college campuses to cultivate community, leadership, and academic success among Black male students. MBK programs typically combine academic support services, peer and adult mentoring, and structured leadership development. Institutional reports consistently document positive outcomes, including improved GPA, increased academic engagement, strengthened self-efficacy, and higher retention and graduation rates. MBK’s holistic emphasis on social, academic, and interpersonal development aligns closely with research highlighting the importance of culturally grounded mentorship in supporting Black male success.

Clemson University: Call Me MISTER® Program

Clemson University's Call Me MISTER® (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models) program was established to recruit, support, and prepare Black men for careers in education. The program has been recognized nationally for increasing the number of Black male teachers and addressing persistent disparities in teacher diversity through a cohort-based model emphasizing mentorship, academic support, leadership development, and community engagement (Jones, 2019).

City University of New York (CUNY) Black Male Initiative

One of the longest-running and most widely cited BMIs, the City University of New York’s (CUNY) Black Male Initiative has demonstrated measurable gains in retention and graduation rates for Black male students across the university system. Core programmatic areas include institutional commitment—emphasizing collaboration with senior leadership—and socioemotional programming focused on emotional intelligence, self-management, and wellness.

CUNY's BMI illustrates the impact of systemwide, multi-campus approaches to supporting Black male success.

Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color

The Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color, recommended by Sáenz and Ponjuán (2016) as a statewide model, provides coordinated professional development, program evaluation, and technical assistance to colleges serving men of color. The consortium supports institutions in developing evidence-based practices that address equity gaps through mentoring, data use, and institutional accountability.

Minority Male Community College Collaborative (M2C3)

Founded by Dr. Frank Harris III and Dr. J. Luke Wood, the Minority Male Community College Collaborative (M2C3) has surveyed tens of thousands of community college men of color and produced evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and institutions. State-level recommendations include disaggregating academic data by gender within racial groups, expanding ethnic classifications, increasing the number of full-time faculty in gatekeeper courses, and implementing early alert systems for underperforming students. M2C3's work has significantly influenced equity-focused reform across community colleges nationwide.

A²MEND: A California Model for Black Male Success in Community Colleges

Within California, one of the most influential and enduring support structures for Black male students is the African American Male Education Network and Development (A²MEND). Established by African American male administrators, faculty, and educational leaders within the California Community College system, A²MEND functions as both a student success model and a statewide professional network committed to addressing persistent equity gaps affecting African American men.

A²MEND's student cohort model pairs Black male collegians with experienced mentors who provide academic guidance, cultural affirmation, career exploration, and emotional support. The annual A²MEND Student Leadership Conference, one of the largest gatherings of Black male community college students in the nation, offers workshops, keynote addresses, professional networking, and community-building experiences that participants frequently describe as transformational. Research indicates that A²MEND participants demonstrate stronger academic engagement, increased motivation, and improved persistence as a result of culturally relevant programming and exposure to mentors who share and understand their lived experiences (A²MEND, 2020, Buul, et al., 2020).

Beyond direct student support, A²MEND operates as a policy and leadership consortium influencing statewide conversations on equity, anti-racism, and student success. The organization advocates for systemic reforms such as equity-focused professional development, disaggregated data reporting, and culturally sustaining pedagogical practices. These efforts align closely with recommendations advanced by M2C3, Harper, and other scholars emphasizing institutional responsibility for Black male student success. A²MEND stands as a national exemplar of how mentoring, leadership development, and structural advocacy can be integrated to support Black male student success, particularly through its focus on data-informed practice, institutional accountability, and culturally sustaining approaches. While specific outcome statistics are not uniformly reported across all participating institutions, A²MEND's model has been widely recognized for advancing institutional practices that support Black male student success.

Summary and Bridge to the Current Study

Collectively, these national examples underscore the critical importance of culturally responsive, identity-affirming mentoring and support programs tailored to the experiences of Black male students. Whether focused on retention, leadership development, teacher

diversification, or community building, BMIs consistently demonstrate positive outcomes, including improved academic performance, enhanced self-efficacy, and greater persistence toward graduation. The literature affirms that mentorship, particularly from experienced Black men, plays an indispensable role in supporting Black male students as they navigate racial discrimination, socioeconomic inequities, and complex identity formation processes.

As Harper (2012) argues, no single initiative can dismantle the academic, social, financial, and political forces shaping Black male achievement. Improving outcomes therefore requires coordinated, institutionally grounded, and evidence-based approaches. His call for institutional responsibility emphasizes that universities must intentionally design, evaluate, and sustain structures that affirm Black men's identities, promote meaningful engagement, and address systemic inequities. Within this context, examining the experiences of Black male participants in the B.L.A.C.K. program at UC Davis is essential for understanding how culturally grounded mentorship initiatives operate within a PWI. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach guiding this study, including the qualitative research design, participant selection, data collection strategies, and analytic procedures used to examine the lived experiences of Black men who successfully navigated UC Davis with the support of B.L.A.C.K.

Woodson's (1919, 1933) early critiques of racialized educational structures underscore the enduring importance of culturally affirming learning environments, a principle later reflected in Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework and Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) theory of Sense of Belonging. The historical patterns of exclusion, curricular marginalization, and racial misrepresentation identified by Woodson—and later extended through the scholarship of Ladson-Billings, King, and Anderson—provide an important context for understanding the

contemporary educational experiences of Black male students within predominantly White institutional environments.

This qualitative study builds on that historical analysis by examining the lived and learned experiences of successful Black male students at the UC Davis. Their narratives illuminate how Black men navigate institutional constraints first articulated by Woodson nearly a century ago, revealing the assets, supports, relationships, and internal resources that contribute to academic persistence and personal development. By situating these experiences within a long continuum of struggle and resilience, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the conditions that foster Black male achievement in PWIs and offers guidance for creating educational environments that affirm, empower, and sustain Black student success.

Chapter 3: Theoretical/Conceptual Frameworks

Conceptual Framework: Integrating Sense of Belonging and Community Cultural Wealth

Strayhorn (2012) conceptualizes SoB as a fundamental human need characterized by perceived social support, mattering, and connection within institutional contexts. For Black male students at PWIs, belonging is not guaranteed through enrollment alone, it must be cultivated through relationships, representation, and culturally congruent environments.

Yosso's (2005) CCW model challenges deficit-based interpretations of marginalized students by identifying six forms of capital—aspirational, navigational, social, familial, resistant, and linguistic—that students of color bring into educational spaces. Rather than viewing Black male students as lacking preparation, CCW positions their lived experiences, community knowledge, and resilience as assets.

Together, these frameworks allow for a relational and asset-based analysis of Black male persistence. In this study, belonging functioned as the mediating condition through which CCW became actionable. Participation in the B.L.A.C.K. program provided students with culturally affirming spaces where their existing capital could be activated (the process through which forms of CCW are intentionally recognized, supported, and mobilized within institutional contexts), expanded, and translated into persistence, leadership, and academic momentum.

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the experiences of Black men in higher education, emphasizing the cultural, relational, and institutional conditions that shape their academic trajectories. Research on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) further illustrates how culturally affirming educational environments cultivate the social and cultural capital that support Black male student success (Allen, 2002; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Additional scholars argue for recognizing the strengths, assets, and cultural knowledge that Black men and other men of color bring into higher education environments rather than framing

their experiences through deficit-oriented perspectives (Harper, 2012; Yosso, 2005).

Collectively, this scholarship advances an asset-based approach that challenges deficit narratives and affirms the diverse forms of capital Black men possess as they navigate college environments.

These frameworks center the lived realities of Black male collegians by illustrating how students draw upon cultural assets, relational supports, and identity-affirming institutional structures to persist and thrive in college settings. CCW provides a lens for understanding the forms of capital Black men bring with them and develop through programming such as the B.L.A.C.K. program, while SoB illuminates the psychological and social conditions that influence Black male students' feelings of mattering, inclusion, and connectedness on campus. By integrating these frameworks, the study foregrounds the strengths, agency, and cultural knowledge of Black male students while examining how campus programs can promote belonging, support identity development, and foster resilience within predominantly White institutional contexts.

Community Cultural Wealth Model (Yosso, 2005)

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework offers a powerful counternarrative to traditional conceptions of cultural capital that privilege White, middle-class norms and frequently pathologize students of color. Rather than centering deficits, CCW foregrounds the cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and networks that marginalized communities cultivate and pass on intergenerationally. These forms of capital serve as critical resources for navigating educational institutions that were not originally designed to support or affirm students of color, including Black male collegians.

Yosso identifies six interrelated forms of capital that students from communities of color bring into educational spaces:

Aspirational Capital: The capacity to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of structural barriers and limited institutional support. For Black male students, aspirational capital often reflects the influence of families, mentors, and communities that encourage possibility and purpose despite systemic inequities.

Navigational Capital: The skills required to maneuver through social institutions, such as universities, that were historically exclusionary. Black men frequently draw on navigational capital to overcome racialized barriers, microaggressions, and bureaucratic systems within PWIs.

Social Capital: Networks of people and community relationships that provide instrumental and emotional support. Within the B.L.A.C.K. program, social capital emerges through mentorship, peer relationships, and community-building experiences that offer guidance, affirmation, and belonging.

Linguistic Capital: Intellectual and social competencies cultivated through storytelling, dialects, and multilingual communication practices. Black male collegians often rely on linguistic capital to articulate identity, build relationships, and navigate diverse campus settings.

Familial Capital: Cultural knowledge and memory nurtured among kin and chosen family networks. This form of capital carries community values, resilience, and collective identity that fortify Black men's sense of purpose in higher education.

Resistant Capital: Knowledge and skills gained through oppositional behaviors that challenge inequality and affirm cultural identity. Black male students often utilize resistant capital to navigate racist or exclusionary institutional norms while advocating for themselves and their communities.

Together, these six forms of capital provide a framework for understanding how Black men draw upon and build cultural resources throughout their participation in the B.L.A.C.K.

program. CCW enables this study to illuminate strengths and assets that traditional deficit-oriented analyses often overlook, framing participants as active, agentic contributors to their own educational success. The program's mentorship, community-building practices, holistic advising, and identity-based curriculum likely foster students' navigational and resistant capital as they learn to navigate and challenge institutional barriers, while simultaneously strengthening aspirational and social capital through affirming relationships and networks.

Sense of Belonging Theory (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019)

Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging (SoB) theory provides a critical framework for understanding the experiences of college students, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds. Strayhorn (2012, 2019) conceptualizes sense of belonging as a fundamental human need characterized by feelings of being valued, respected, supported, and connected within educational environments. For students navigating racialized institutional contexts, belonging influences engagement, persistence, identity development, and overall well-being. In higher education, belonging is not merely a social preference; it is a demonstrable predictor of academic success, persistence, and psychological well-being.

Strayhorn (2012, 2019) emphasizes that sense of belonging is contextual, dynamic, and culturally situated. It must be understood within specific institutional environments, such as predominantly White institutions, where Black male students may experience heightened racial isolation, stereotype threat, and structural barriers. Belonging is not static; it shifts over time in response to relationships, experiences, and institutional interactions. For Black male collegians, belonging must also include identity affirmation, psychological safety, and environments that resist anti-Blackness.

Research consistently shows that Black men at PWIs often struggle to find spaces where they feel recognized, validated, and fully included. Mentorship, culturally grounded support

systems, and peer communities are therefore essential for fostering belonging. Through its relational structure, identity-affirming curriculum, and community-building opportunities, the B.L.A.C.K. program provides the conditions Strayhorn identifies as necessary for cultivating a robust sense of belonging. This framework is especially relevant to the study's first research question, which examines how participation in B.L.A.C.K. influenced Black male students' sense of belonging at the UC Davis.

Integrating Sense of Belonging and Community Cultural Wealth

SoB and CCW function as complementary lenses through which to examine the experiences of Black male undergraduates participating in the B.L.A.C.K. program. While Yosso's (2005) model illuminates the cultural strengths, assets, and forms of capital that Black men bring into higher education—and continue to develop through mentorship and community—Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) theory explains the psychological and relational conditions necessary for those assets to be activated and sustained within institutional contexts. Together, these frameworks illuminate how culturally affirming relationships and environments can strengthen persistence, identity development, and student success among Black men in higher education. Moreover, these frameworks reveal that cultural wealth alone is insufficient in environments where students experience marginalization or invisibility; rather, cultural assets become actionable when cultivated within spaces where belonging is intentionally fostered.

Within this integrated framework, the B.L.A.C.K. program functioned as a mediating structure that simultaneously activated CCW and cultivated a sustained sense of belonging. Culturally responsive mentorship, peer brotherhood, and identity-affirming practices create conditions in which students' cultural assets are recognized, shared, and expanded. Belonging operates not merely as an outcome, but as the relational mechanism through which cultural wealth is mobilized into persistence, leadership, and academic engagement. In this way,

belonging enables aspirational and navigational capital to translate into sustained action, while cultural wealth reinforces belonging through shared identity, collective meaning-making, and community accountability. While the B.L.A.C.K. program was not originally designed using these specific theoretical frameworks, its structure and practices align closely with the principles of community cultural wealth and sense of belonging. Within this integrated framework, the program can be understood as a mediating structure that activates cultural assets while cultivating a sustained sense of belonging.

This integrated conceptual framework positions Black male persistence as a community-based, relational process rather than an individual act of resilience, underscoring the importance of culturally grounded programs that intentionally align mentorship, community, and institutional navigation to support Black men's success. Together, the frameworks that supported this research:

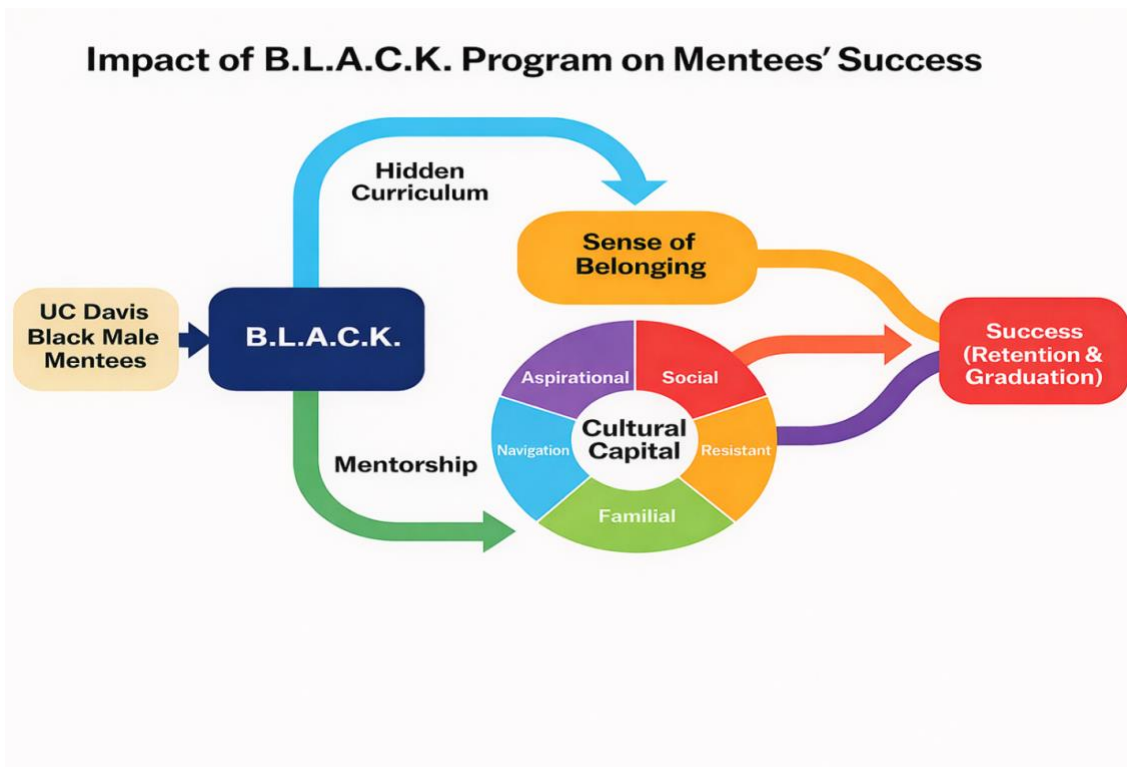
- Highlight the cultural and communal resources that Black men draw upon as they navigate UC Davis.
- Reveal how identity-affirming spaces and relationships cultivate belonging and resilience.
- Provide a structure for analyzing how B.L.A.C.K. supported persistence, academic engagement, and personal development.
- Challenge deficit narratives by centering agency, cultural wealth, and institutional responsibility.

Figure 2 presents an integrated conceptual framework illustrating how participation in the B.L.A.C.K. program supported Black male undergraduate retention and graduation at UC Davis. The framework positions B.L.A.C.K. as the central intervention through which culturally

responsive mentorship, relational support, and access to the hidden curriculum were delivered. Engagement in the program fostered a sustained sense of belonging—characterized by feelings of mattering, affirmation, and social connection—while simultaneously activating multiple forms of community cultural wealth, including aspirational, navigational, social, familial, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). Together, these interconnected developmental processes strengthened participants’ capacity to persist and successfully navigate the institutional environment. These processes are mutually reinforcing: Belonging strengthens students’ capacity to mobilize cultural wealth, and cultural wealth, in turn, sustains belonging within a PWI context.

Figure 2

Impact of B.L.A.C.K Program on Mentees’ Success



Note. Conceptual model illustrates the role of the B.L.A.C.K. program as a mediating structure. Solid arrows indicate directional influence. Cultural capital and sense of belonging function as

interconnected mediating processes contributing to student success outcomes (retention and graduation).

Integrated Conceptual Framework: Implications for the Study

By integrating Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework (2005) and Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging (SoB) theory (2012, 2019), this conceptual framework positions Black male participants not as passive recipients of institutional support, but as active agents in their own educational success and identity development. Their stories, strengths, lived experiences, and cultural knowledge are treated as legitimate and valuable forms of knowledge that deepen scholarly and practical understandings of the conditions that foster Black male persistence, belonging, resilience, and achievement within predominantly White institutional environments.

Together, these frameworks offer a holistic approach to examining the lived experiences of Black male undergraduates at the UC Davis. Yosso's CCW Model (2005) foregrounds the assets, resources, and forms of capital that Black men bring with them into higher education, while Strayhorn's SoB Theory (2012, 2019) centers the institutional conditions, relationships, and campus environments that either support or impede students' psychological integration and academic persistence. When used in tandem, these perspectives allow for a nuanced analysis that captures both individual agency and institutional responsibility.

Specifically, the dual-framework approach employed in this study accomplished three critical objectives. First, it recognized Black male students as agents who possess rich community-based resources, cultural knowledge, and adaptive strategies that support their success. Second, it acknowledged that persistent systemic inequities - such as racialized campus climates, limited access to culturally responsive programming, and uneven academic support structures - must be intentionally countered through targeted, equity-centered interventions.

Third, it elevates the experiential knowledge of Black male mentees, positioning their narratives as essential contributions to understanding student experience, informing institutional policy, and shaping equity-centered practices related to engagement, retention, and graduation. The relevance of this conceptual framework is underscored by persistent educational outcome disparities at UC Davis. Despite periodic institutional efforts aimed at improving equity, Black men continue to graduate at significantly lower rates than their peers, with degree completion rates consistently trailing campus-wide averages by approximately 20 percentage points. These disparities should not be interpreted as evidence of diminished motivation or ability. Instead, they reflect the cumulative effects of structural inequities that shape how academic potential is developed, recognized, and supported over time, including unequal access to rigorous college preparation, uneven institutional support systems, racialized campus climates, and the historical absence of sustained, culturally responsive programming designed specifically to support Black male student success.

These conditions highlight the necessity of targeted interventions that address both academic progress and psychosocial integration. Programs such as B.L.A.C.K. respond directly to these needs by fostering belonging, strengthening cultural capital, and providing structured mentorship and guidance tailored to Black male students' lived realities. Within this context, the conceptual framework guiding this study offers a lens for understanding not only *whether* such programs matter, but *how* and *why* they contribute to improved outcomes for Black men at UC Davis.

By situating Black male success at the intersection of cultural wealth and institutional belonging, this framework establishes a foundation for examining the ways in which B.L.A.C.K. functions as a culturally grounded, asset-based intervention. The following chapter builds upon

this foundation by outlining the qualitative research design, participant selection, data collection methods, and analytic procedures used to explore the lived experiences of Black male students who participated in the B.L.A.C.K. program.

Chapter 4: Research Design and Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with phenomenological influence to examine how Black male alumni from the University of California, Davis made meaning of their participation in the Black Leadership Ambassadors for Culture & Knowledge (B.L.A.C.K.) program. The inquiry centered participants' retrospective accounts of belonging, persistence, identity development, and institutional navigation within a predominantly White institutional (PWI) context. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it foregrounds contextualized meaning-making and captures the relational, cultural, and institutional dimensions of participants' experiences that are not fully reflected in quantitative outcome measures alone. Semi-structured interviews were selected to elicit rich narrative accounts aligned with the study's research questions while allowing flexibility to probe participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes in greater depth (Patton, 2015). Interviews were conducted via Zoom to facilitate alumni participation across geographic locations.

Setting

The study was situated at the University of California, Davis, a large public land grant research university enrolling more than 32,000 undergraduate students. As is common among many PWIs, Black undergraduate students comprise a relatively small proportion of the campus population (less than 4%), contributing to conditions of underrepresentation, racialized visibility, and constrained access to culturally affirming spaces and support systems. UC Davis' institutional scale, decentralized student support structures, and limited Black student representation provided a salient context for examining the role of the B.L.A.C.K. program in supporting Black men's sense of belonging, persistence, identity development, and educational success.

Methodological Approach

This study privileged participant voice, narrative meaning-making, and interpretive understanding to examine how Black men made sense of their undergraduate experiences and the perceived influence of the B.L.A.C.K. program on their persistence, identity development, and sense of belonging (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Consistent with the study's anti-deficit orientation, the methodological approach centered participants' lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and relational understandings rather than deficit-based assumptions about Black male achievement. The approach further aligns with Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) Sense of Belonging (SoB) theory and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework, which collectively emphasize the role of relationships, campus climate, culturally grounded support, and community cultural assets in shaping Black male persistence and success within higher education contexts.

Researcher Positionality and Insider Status

My positionality was shaped by my dual role as founder of the B.L.A.C.K. program and researcher examining its longer-term influence. Since joining UC Davis in 2012, I have maintained professional relationships with many Black male students and alumni through student success work and equity-focused programming. This proximity supported rapport and depth in interviews; participants could reference shared campus contexts and program features without extensive explanation.

At the same time, insider status may introduce risks including overidentification, assumed meaning, and interpretive bias. To mitigate these concerns, I engaged in intentional reflexive practices—including bracketing, analytic memoing, and systematic documentation of analytic decisions—to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived experiences and narratives rather than my prior knowledge of the program or its participants. My

broader professional background in student affairs retention, academic advising, and culturally responsive student development informed my commitment to equity-minded and anti-deficit practice. It also shaped my alignment with Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) Sense of Belonging theory, Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, and Swail et al.'s (2003) Geometric Model of Student Persistence and Achievement, all of which emphasize the relational, cultural, and institutional dimensions of student persistence and success.

Participants

Ten former B.L.A.C.K. mentees participated in the study. To capture variation in lived experience, the sample reflected diversity across identity, background, and educational pathway characteristics. Participants included individuals who identified as LGBTQIA+, former student-athletes, first-generation college graduates, legacy students, out-of-state or international students, neurodivergent and biracial participants, and members of Black Greek-letter organizations. Participants also represented a range of disciplinary pathways, including STEM, social sciences, and the humanities.

For the purposes of this study, legacy students were defined as Black undergraduates whose parent(s) or legal guardian(s) previously attended UC Davis, regardless of degree completion. Legacy status was used descriptively to acknowledge potential intergenerational familiarity with the institution and possible access to informational or social networks; it was not treated as a marker of merit, privilege, or uniform advantage. To be eligible for participation in the study, individuals were required to:

- Self-identify as Black or of African descent
- Have participated in B.L.A.C.K. as a UC Davis undergraduate
- Have completed a bachelor's degree at UC Davis

Participant Recruitment and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify information-rich cases aligned with the study's research questions (Patton, 2015). I sought mentees who could provide rich, reflective insight into the program's influence on belonging, persistence, and identity development. Because participants were alumni, practical considerations (e.g., available contact information and willingness to participate) also shaped recruitment. Snowball sampling was used to broaden participation across cohorts, disciplines, and identity backgrounds. Potential homogeneity introduced through shared networks was mitigated through intentional outreach to alumni from different graduating years and academic pathways.

Data Collection

Primary data sources included:

- Semi-structured interviews (45–90 minutes) conducted via Zoom
- A brief demographic questionnaire completed prior to interviews

Participants were recruited through targeted email outreach and social media posts directed at B.L.A.C.K. alumni (Appendix A). Twenty individuals initially expressed interest and received study materials (demographic questionnaire and informed consent documentation approved under IRB-exempt status). Ten individuals completed all required materials, remained responsive to follow-up communication, and participated in interviews; these individuals comprised the final analytic sample. Interviews were scheduled based on participant availability.

Interview questions were designed to elicit narrative reflection across two developmental phases (Appendix B):

- Pre-college socialization and academic readiness

- Academic, personal, and identity development during and after participation in B.L.A.C.K.

In addition to interviews, relevant program artifacts and participant-generated materials were reviewed to support contextual understanding and triangulation.

Use of Pseudonyms

To protect participant confidentiality and maintain compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements, all participants in this study are identified using pseudonyms. The names used throughout the participant vignettes, findings, and discussion chapters do not reflect the participants' actual identities. Pseudonyms were intentionally selected to preserve anonymity while allowing readers to follow individual narratives across the study.

In addition to replacing participants' names, identifying details that could reasonably reveal participants' identities were omitted, generalized, or modified when necessary. These measures were taken to ensure confidentiality while preserving the integrity, authenticity, and meaning of participants' experiences. While pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter, the stories, experiences, and quotations presented remain faithful to the participants' accounts and are intended to honor the authenticity of their lived experiences.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed an iterative qualitative process in which data collection and analysis informed one another (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Reflexive notes and analytic memos were generated beginning with the first interview to capture emerging patterns and guide subsequent data collection.

After all interviews were completed, transcripts were prepared verbatim to preserve narrative integrity. Audio recordings were reviewed as needed to confirm tone and emphasis.

Analysis proceeded through:

1. Open coding of transcripts line-by-line to identify salient meanings (Saldaña, 2016)
2. Code clustering into broader conceptual categories
3. Theme development through iterative comparison, memoing, and refinement across participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Hatch, 2002; Saldaña, 2016)

Some categories aligned with existing scholarship on Black male persistence and belonging, while others emerged from participants' descriptions of B.L.A.C.K. as a culturally grounded mentoring context. Throughout analysis, analytic memos documented interpretive decisions and supported transparency and conceptual alignment (Saldaña, 2016).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Given my insider role, reflexive safeguards were used to support analytic rigor, including bracketing, analytic memoing, and an audit trail documenting methodological decisions and theme development. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across data sources (interviews, field notes/memos, and follow-up communications) and member checking to confirm accuracy of preliminary interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Peer debriefing with the dissertation chair/committee further supported analytic clarity.

All research activities were conducted under IRB-exempt status. Participation was voluntary and independent of UC Davis administrative or program evaluation. Informed consent was obtained prior to interviews; participants could withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was protected through pseudonyms and secure, password-protected storage of recordings, transcripts, and files.

Transferability

Transferability was supported through rich description of the institutional context, participant characteristics, and program features, enabling readers to assess applicability to similar PWI contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Participant vignettes and cross-case themes were situated within Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) and Yosso's (2005) frameworks to connect local experiences to broader constructs relevant across institutions.

Chapter 5: Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with ten former mentees of the Black Leadership Ambassadors for Culture & Knowledge (B.L.A.C.K.) program at the University of California, Davis. The findings illuminate how participants made meaning of their experiences as Black male undergraduates navigating a predominantly White institutional (PWI) environment and how participation in B.L.A.C.K. influenced their sense of belonging, persistence, identity development, leadership, and post-graduate trajectories.

The participants represented a diverse range of identities, educational pathways, and lived experiences. The sample included first-generation college students, student-athletes, LGBTQIA+ participants, immigrant and multiracial students, neurodivergent learners, STEM and non-STEM majors, members of Black Greek-letter organizations, and students from both rural and urban communities. Although participants entered UC Davis through varied pathways and encountered distinct personal and institutional challenges, they consistently described the importance of culturally affirming relationships, mentorship, and community-centered support systems in shaping their undergraduate experiences.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do former B.L.A.C.K. mentees describe the influence of the program on their sense of belonging at UC Davis?
2. In what ways do former mentees describe the role of B.L.A.C.K. in supporting their academic persistence, development, and navigation of institutional barriers?
3. How do former mentees make meaning of the long-term impact of the B.L.A.C.K. program on their leadership, professional development, and post-graduate lives?

Analysis of participant narratives revealed several interconnected themes reflecting both the challenges participants encountered at UC Davis and the culturally grounded support that sustained them. The findings are organized into five major thematic sections: (a) Entering UC Davis: Isolation, Transition, and Institutional Dislocation; (b) Belonging Through Counterspaces and Community; (c) Mentorship as Cultural Navigation; (d) Activating Community Cultural Wealth; and (e) Persistence, Leadership, and Transformation. Across these themes, participants described experiences of racialized isolation, invisibility, conditional belonging, and institutional ambiguity, while also highlighting the transformative role of culturally affirming counterspaces, mentorship, peer accountability, and community cultural wealth in fostering persistence and self-definition.

The findings are interpreted through the combined conceptual lenses of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework and Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) Sense of Belonging (SoB) theory. Together, these frameworks provide a lens for understanding how participants drew upon aspirational, navigational, social, familial, and resistant forms of capital while simultaneously seeking spaces of affirmation, connection, and recognition within a predominantly White institutional context. Throughout the chapter, participants' narratives demonstrate how belonging was not experienced passively, but rather constructed relationally through culturally responsive mentorship, counterspaces, shared identity, and collective support.

The chapter begins with participant vignettes that provide contextualized portraits of each participant's educational journey and involvement in the B.L.A.C.K. program. These vignettes are followed by thematic findings sections that examine recurring patterns across participant narratives and illuminate the broader meanings participants attributed to their experiences at UC Davis.

Participant Vignettes

In qualitative inquiry, participant vignettes provide an important method for presenting narrative data in ways that honor both individual complexity and collective meaning. Rather than reducing experiences solely to thematic categories, they center participants' voices and lived realities, allowing readers to better understand the social, cultural, and institutional contexts shaping their educational journeys. The narrative accounts in this study illuminate how participants made meaning of belonging, identity, persistence, and success within predominantly White institutional environments.

This section introduces ten former mentees of the B.L.A.C.K. (Black Leadership Ambassadors for Culture & Knowledge) program at the University of California, Davis. Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview reflecting on the pathways that led them to and through UC Davis, the challenges they encountered as Black male students within a predominantly White institution, and the ways the B.L.A.C.K. program supported their academic persistence, cultural affirmation, identity development, and personal growth. The vignettes draw from participants' narratives and highlight formative experiences, critical transitions, and sources of support that shaped their undergraduate trajectories.

Although participants represented diverse identities and experiences—including first-generation college students, student-athletes, LGBTQIA+ students, neurodivergent learners, STEM majors, humanities and social science majors, immigrant students, and multiracial participants—they shared a common recognition of B.L.A.C.K. as a culturally affirming space that fostered mentorship, belonging, accountability, and community. Collectively, these narratives illustrate the transformative potential of culturally responsive, identity-affirming programs designed to support Black male collegians within predominantly White institutional contexts.

Table 2

Overview of the ten (former) B.L.A.C.K. mentees included in this study

Pseudonym	Background / Upbringing	Academic Path	Key Themes / Contributions
Marcus Greene	South Central LA; Upward Bound; queer	Psychology → Political Science	Mentorship, advocacy, resilience
Brandon Ellis	Oakland; student-athlete; private high school	Kinesiology → Cognitive Science	Belonging, mental health advocacy, peer networks
Jordan Pierce	Family legacy; dual enrollment	Managerial Economics	Community, identity affirmation, leadership
Jalen Thompson	College-educated family; rural background	Pre-med → Community Health	Belonging, mentorship, peer support
Eli Grant	San Diego; first-generation; low-income	Managerial Economics	Familial capital, mentorship, mental health
Elijah Brooks	South Central LA; first-generation	Political Science / Law & Society	Belonging, activism, family aspiration
Malik Jordan	San Diego; student-athlete; private high school	Managerial Economics → Sociology	Resilience, self-navigation, peer support
David Okoro	Nigerian immigrant; STEM-focused background	Biological Sciences → Psychology	Leadership, community, institutional navigation
Julian Reed	Oakland; queer; neurodivergent	Civil Engineering	Intersectionality, affirmation, advocacy
Cameron Blake	Rural Texas; first-generation	Biological Sciences	Perseverance, community building, mentorship

Note. This table summarizes participants' backgrounds, academic trajectories, and key thematic contributions that informed the cross-vignette analysis and findings presented in this chapter.

Marcus Greene

Marcus Greene, a first-generation college graduate raised in South Central Los Angeles, grew up navigating educational environments shaped by racial and structural inequities. Born in Indiana and raised by his mother and grandmother, Marcus became aware early of disparities between honors-track and standard-track classrooms in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Participation in Loyola Marymount University's TRIO Upward Bound program strengthened his academic identity and reinforced higher education as a pathway toward opportunity and upward mobility.

Marcus chose to attend UC Davis seeking both academic opportunities and personal growth. Although he entered the university believing he was academically prepared, the transition proved emotionally challenging as he navigated feelings of isolation and underrepresentation within the predominantly White institutional environment. Initially majoring in psychology before transitioning to political science and public service, Marcus gradually developed a stronger sense of purpose connected to advocacy and educational equity.

Marcus described the B.L.A.C.K. program as a significant source of cultural affirmation, mentorship, and community during his undergraduate experience. Through relationships with mentors, exposure to Black faculty and professionals, and participation in culturally affirming programming, he developed stronger confidence in his academic abilities and a deeper sense of belonging within the institution. These experiences contributed to his persistence, leadership development, and commitment to educational policy work focused on advancing equity for historically marginalized communities.

Marcus graduated from UC Davis with a degree in Sociology and currently works in education policy. His experiences reflect the importance of culturally grounded support systems, mentorship, and affirming community spaces in shaping Black male persistence and identity development within predominantly White institutions.

Elijah Brooks

Elijah Brooks graduated from UC Davis in 2020 with a degree in Political Science, Public Service, and currently works as a compliance officer for the San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing. Raised primarily in South Central Los Angeles after being born in Indiana, Elijah described growing up acutely aware of educational inequities shaped by race, class, and opportunity structures. Programs such as Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) played an important role in nurturing his academic aspirations and exposing him to higher education as a viable pathway for social mobility and public service.

As a Black, gay, first-generation, low-income student, Elijah entered UC Davis carrying both strong academic ambition and significant personal pressure to succeed. Although he initially viewed college as a transformative opportunity, the transition to UC Davis proved emotionally and academically challenging. He encountered feelings of isolation, underrepresentation, and diminished academic confidence while navigating the demands of a predominantly White institutional environment.

Elijah identified the STEP program, Black student organizations, and eventually the B.L.A.C.K. seminar as critical sources of support and connection during his undergraduate experience. Through culturally affirming relationships, mentorship, and exposure to Black faculty, staff, and peers, he developed stronger navigational skills, leadership capacity, and a deeper understanding of his own identity and purpose. Participation in B.L.A.C.K. also connected him to broader opportunities in Black pre-law programming, racial equity initiatives,

and community-based advocacy work. Looking back, Elijah described the B.L.A.C.K. program as central to both his persistence and personal transformation at UC Davis.

Cameron Blake

Cameron Blake grew up in rural Texas, where he attended a predominantly White high school and navigated educational environments marked by racial and cultural isolation. Despite these challenges, he excelled academically through gifted programs, Advanced Placement coursework, and dual credit classes. As a first-generation college student, Cameron's educational aspirations were shaped by both personal ambition and encouragement from his family, particularly his parents' emphasis on higher education as a pathway toward broader opportunities.

Initially considering Texas A&M University, Cameron ultimately chose UC Davis after becoming concerned about racial climate issues at other institutions and developing an interest in UC Davis's nationally recognized biology and veterinary science programs. Arriving at UC Davis as an aspiring veterinarian, he quickly encountered the challenges of navigating a predominantly White STEM environment where Black students were significantly underrepresented. Feelings of isolation, academic pressure, and uncertainty about help-seeking complicated his transition into university life.

Cameron identified the B.L.A.C.K. program and the Linda Frances Alexander (LFA) Scholars Program as transformative sources of support during his undergraduate experience. Through mentorship, peer relationships, and culturally affirming spaces, he developed stronger navigational skills, rebuilt confidence following academic dismissal, and became increasingly involved in mentoring and community-building efforts. He later co-founded "Blurred Out Black Nerds," a student space centering Black students interested in STEM, anime, cosplay, and gaming culture, reflecting his commitment to creating affirming environments for others

navigating similar experiences. Today, he continues mentoring and advocating for underrepresented students pursuing careers in science and higher education.

Jalen Thompson

Jalen Thompson graduated from UC Davis in 2017 with a degree in Environmental Science and Management. Raised in the rural town of Esparto, California, Jalen attended a high school with limited Advanced Placement coursework and minimal college preparatory resources. His early exposure to higher education came primarily through the Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP), which helped introduce him to college pathways and reinforced his interest in pursuing a university education. Although his educational environment offered limited academic resources, Jalen entered UC Davis with a strong sense of purpose shaped by a multigenerational family legacy connected to higher education.

Initially interested broadly in environmental sustainability and natural resources, Jalen entered UC Davis seeking opportunities to explore research and scientific inquiry. Early participation in a faculty-led summer research program helped him acclimate to the expectations of a research university while strengthening his academic confidence. At the same time, he navigated the social and cultural complexities of being a Black male student within a predominantly White institutional environment, particularly within STEM and research spaces where Black representation remained limited.

Jalen identified the B.L.A.C.K. program as a transformative source of belonging, mentorship, and cultural affirmation during his undergraduate experience. Through relationships with peers, faculty, and program staff, he developed stronger confidence, leadership skills, and a deeper understanding of Black history, identity, and community accountability. His involvement in the program also shaped his commitment to mentoring younger students, particularly through

athletics, outreach programs, and transition support efforts for incoming Black students navigating UC Davis.

Eli Grant

Eli Grant graduated from UC Davis in 2017 with a degree in managerial economics. Raised in San Diego, California, Eli attended a Middle College High School located on the Mesa College campus, where he gained early exposure to college coursework and professional environments through internships and dual-enrollment opportunities. Although these experiences strengthened his academic discipline and introduced him to higher education pathways, he also recognized the limitations of his school's academic offerings, particularly in advanced math and science preparation. As a first-generation college student, Eli's aspirations were shaped in part by mentors who encouraged him to pursue opportunities beyond his immediate environment and helped expand his sense of what was possible.

Originally entering UC Davis with plans to major in computer science and pursue video game development, Eli later transitioned into managerial economics after discovering stronger interests in Black studies, finance, analytics, and public-facing professional work. His arrival at UC Davis, however, was marked by feelings of cultural isolation and uncertainty about belonging within a predominantly White institutional environment. Having never visited the campus before move-in day, Eli struggled initially to find community and culturally affirming spaces where he felt fully seen and understood.

Eli identified the B.L.A.C.K. program as a transformative source of support, belonging, and identity affirmation during his undergraduate experience. Through mentorship, peer relationships, culturally grounded dialogue, and exposure to Black history and cultural frameworks, he developed stronger confidence, emotional resilience, and clarity regarding his academic and professional goals. Participation in B.L.A.C.K. also strengthened his willingness to

advocate for himself, support younger students, and engage more openly in conversations surrounding identity, masculinity, mental health, and persistence within predominantly White institutional spaces.

Malik Jordan

Malik Jordan graduated from UC Davis in 2015 with a degree in sociology and a minor in psychology. Raised in San Diego, California, Malik attended both public schools and the elite Francis Parker School, where athletics and informal financial support provided access to advanced coursework, SAT preparation, and individualized academic support. His family consistently emphasized the importance of education, even as Malik initially envisioned athletics as the primary pathway to shaping his future.

Recruited to play Division I football at UC Davis, Malik entered the university with a strong sense of identity tied to athletics and academic opportunity. Originally majoring in Managerial Economics, he later transitioned into sociology after recognizing that the discipline better aligned with his academic strengths and emerging interests in social systems and inequality. Over time, however, his experiences within the football program became increasingly disillusioning, and by the end of his junior year he chose to leave the team. The loss of football significantly disrupted his sense of identity, belonging, and connection to the university.

Malik identified the B.L.A.C.K. mentoring seminar as a critical source of grounding and support during this transition. Through culturally responsive mentorship, advising, and peer relationships, he developed stronger academic confidence, greater self-awareness, and a renewed sense of direction following his departure from athletics. Participation in B.L.A.C.K. helped him engage more intentionally in academics, career planning, and identity development while providing a community where he felt seen and supported beyond his role as a student-athlete.

Malik's experiences illustrate the fragile and often conditional nature of belonging for Black male student-athletes within predominantly White institutions. His story highlights the importance of culturally affirming mentorship, relational care, and community-centered support systems in helping Black men navigate institutional transitions, reconstruct identity, and persist through periods of uncertainty and disconnection.

Julian Reed

Julian Reed graduated from UC Davis in 2018 with a degree in civil engineering. Raised in Oakland, California, Julian developed an early fascination with transportation systems and infrastructure, interests that ultimately shaped his aspirations to pursue engineering. He attended Bay Area Technology School (BayTech), a charter school designed to prepare students for college, though he later recognized that limited academic resources in math and science left him underprepared for the rigor of a UC engineering program. As a Black student navigating both educational inequities and later-identified neurodivergence, Julian often relied on masking and self-adaptation strategies to navigate academic and social expectations.

Julian chose UC Davis after encouragement from family members and mentors who believed the campus would offer a supportive environment for his academic and personal growth. Although he initially arrived optimistic about engineering and campus life, the transition proved academically and socially challenging. He experienced feelings of isolation within predominantly White STEM environments and struggled to navigate the unspoken expectations and decentralized support systems of a large research university. These challenges were compounded by the emotional exhaustion associated with masking and navigating social interactions as an autistic Black male student.

Julian identified the B.L.A.C.K. program as a significant source of grounding, mentorship, and cultural connection during his undergraduate experience. Through relationships

with mentors, counselors, and other Black male students, he developed a stronger sense of self-awareness, cultural identity, and community connection. Participation in the program also helped him expand his professional and social networks while deepening his understanding of leadership, Black identity, and the importance of culturally affirming support structures for students navigating multiple intersecting identities. Julian's experiences highlight the complex intersections of race, neurodivergence, identity, and institutional belonging within predominantly White STEM environments.

David Okoro

David Okoro graduated from UC Davis in 2020 with a degree in psychology with a biological emphasis and minors in African Studies and Public Health. Born in Lagos, Nigeria, David spent his early childhood within a culturally homogeneous environment shaped by strong family support, collective identity, and rigorous educational expectations. His transition to Los Angeles at age 13 introduced him to a vastly different educational and social context, where he became increasingly aware of racialized inequities within American schooling systems. Influenced strongly by his parents' emphasis on higher education and professional achievement, David entered college with aspirations toward medicine and public service.

David chose UC Davis because of its strong science programs and quieter campus environment, initially pursuing biological sciences with plans for medical school. Over time, however, he experienced both academic and personal transitions that reshaped his goals and sense of identity. Feelings of isolation, cultural invisibility, and difficulty navigating the decentralized support systems of a predominantly White institution complicated his early college experience. His eventual transition into psychology reflected a broader shift toward academic pathways that felt more personally meaningful and aligned with his growing interests in human behavior, leadership, and community well-being.

David identified the B.L.A.C.K. program as a transformative source of community, cultural affirmation, and mentorship during his undergraduate experience. Through participation in the seminar, relationships with peers and mentors, involvement with CADSS, and engagement with Black Greek-letter organizations, he developed stronger confidence, leadership skills, and a deeper understanding of Black identity, history, and community responsibility. These experiences became especially significant as he navigated personal loss, family responsibilities, and the emotional challenges of college life.

Jordan Pierce

Jordan Pierce graduated from UC Davis in 2020 with a degree in Managerial Economics and a minor in Technology Management. Raised in Northern California, Jordan identified as multiracial Filipino and Black and described an educational background shaped by creativity, academic ambition, and self-directed learning. His early schooling at Redding School of the Arts emphasized visual and performing arts, while his later transition to Red Bluff High School revealed limitations in access to advanced coursework. In response, Jordan proactively enrolled in community college classes to strengthen his academic preparation and expand future opportunities. Initially interested in STEM and aerospace careers, his academic interests gradually shifted toward business, analytics, and management through exposure to internships and career exploration programs.

Jordan selected UC Davis both for its academic reputation and for its personal and familial connections to the university system. Before arriving on campus, he intentionally sought out culturally grounded support systems, joining the Linda Frances Alexander (LFA) Scholars Program and selecting culturally themed housing through the C2 residence community. These decisions reflected his desire to establish community, affirmation, and support within a predominantly White institutional environment.

Participation in the B.L.A.C.K. Seminar, LFA, and the Center for African Diaspora Student Success (CADSS) became central to Jordan's undergraduate experience. Through culturally affirming peer relationships, mentorship, and community-building spaces, he developed stronger confidence in his multiracial Black identity, expanded his professional aspirations, and cultivated leadership skills that later shaped his mentoring and advocacy efforts with younger students. His involvement in organizations such as the National Association of Black Accountants (NABA) and Management Leadership for Tomorrow (MLT) further strengthened his exposure to professional pathways and networks of support.

Brandon Ellis

Brandon Ellis graduated from UC Davis in 2021 with a degree in Cognitive Science and a minor in African American Studies. Raised in Oakland, California, Brandon attended Bishop O'Dowd High School, where athletics and academic rigor played central roles in shaping his early identity and aspirations. Initially envisioning a future connected to sports medicine and athletics, he entered UC Davis as a Division I student-athlete majoring in kinesiology before later transitioning into cognitive science and pursuing interests in psychology, mental health, and youth wellness.

Brandon's early years at UC Davis were marked by academic pressure, cultural isolation, and the challenges of balancing the demands of Division I athletics with university coursework. Academic probation, coupled with feelings of invisibility and emotional exhaustion within predominantly White academic environments, led him to question both his place within the institution and his long-term professional goals. As he reconsidered the role athletics would play in his future, he increasingly sought culturally affirming spaces and relationships that could provide stability, guidance, and belonging.

Brandon identified the B.L.A.C.K. program and the Center for African Diaspora Student Success (CADSS) as transformative sources of mentorship, emotional support, and identity affirmation during his undergraduate experience. Through culturally responsive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff, he developed greater confidence, academic clarity, and emotional resilience. Participation in these spaces also supported his growing interest in mental health advocacy, adolescent well-being, and community-centered leadership, ultimately shaping his decision to pursue doctoral study in clinical psychology. His transition from student-athlete to scholar-practitioner reflects the transformative role that culturally responsive community spaces can play in helping Black men navigate institutional challenges while redefining success, purpose, and leadership on their own terms.

Theme 1: Entering UC Davis: Transition, Isolation, and Institutional Dislocation

1.1 Navigating Racialized Underrepresentation

One of the earliest and most persistent realities described by former B.L.A.C.K. mentees was the experience of racialized underrepresentation at UC Davis. Although the men in this study arrived with strong academic credentials, ambitious goals, and confidence in their ability to succeed, many quickly encountered environments where Black representation was limited and belonging felt uncertain. Their accounts suggest that the transition to college involved more than adapting to academic rigor; it required learning how to navigate institutional spaces in which they were frequently one of very few Black students and, in some cases, the only Black student present.

For several alumni, underrepresentation became visible almost immediately upon arrival. Classrooms, residence halls, laboratories, and social spaces often served as reminders of their numerical marginalization within the institution. Julian reflected on his experience as an engineering student, explaining, “There were quarters where I didn’t see a single Black face in

any of my engineering classes.” While the absence of representation may appear at first glance to be a demographic reality, Julian’s reflection points to a deeper issue. The lack of visible peers affected how he understood his place within the academic community and reinforced questions about whether students like him truly belonged within highly competitive STEM environments.

This distinction between access and belonging emerged repeatedly across narratives. Although these men had successfully gained admission to a highly selective university, admission alone did not resolve questions of membership, recognition, or mattering. David captured this tension when he described his first year at UC Davis: “Freshman winter quarter was probably the toughest. I was walking around campus, seeing people but not feeling seen.”

David’s reflection highlights an important nuance often overlooked in institutional conversations about diversity. Physical presence within a university does not necessarily translate into meaningful inclusion. His experience suggests that belonging is not simply a function of enrollment or participation, but of recognition. Students may be surrounded by thousands of peers and still experience profound social and cultural isolation if they do not encounter environments where they feel acknowledged, valued, or understood.

Other mentees described similar experiences. Brandon recalled that he “didn’t see [himself] in most of the spaces” he occupied, while Eli remembered arriving on campus and immediately wondering, “Where are my people?” Their comments reveal that underrepresentation extended beyond numbers. It shaped how students interpreted campus culture, evaluated their own legitimacy, and searched for points of connection within the institution. For many, the challenge was not simply being different from the majority population; it was navigating an environment where Blackness often felt peripheral to the dominant culture of the university.

These dynamics appeared especially pronounced in STEM and research-intensive settings. Jalen described routinely being “the only Black person in almost every research setting,” while Cameron recounted similar experiences in biology and pre-veterinary spaces. Such narratives suggest that underrepresentation can function as a constant reminder of one's outsider status, creating additional emotional and psychological burdens beyond the academic demands of the discipline itself. The issue was not a lack of capability or preparation. Rather, mentees often found themselves navigating environments where few visible examples existed of people who shared their racial identities and experiences.

Notably, several alumni responded to these conditions by intentionally seeking culturally affirming communities. Jordan described prioritizing relationships with Black peers early in his college experience because “it was really affirming to have people around me who looked like me and were going through the same stuff.” His observation suggests that community served not merely a social function but a protective one. Finding others with shared experiences helped mitigate isolation and provided an alternative source of validation when broader institutional environments felt less affirming.

Taken together, these narratives challenge simplistic assumptions that representation alone is sufficient for fostering inclusion. The experiences of these former mentees indicate that racialized underrepresentation operates not only as a demographic condition but also as a relational and psychological one. Being one of few Black students on campus influenced how they interpreted visibility, legitimacy, and belonging throughout their transition to college.

Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) theory of Sense of Belonging provides a useful lens for understanding these experiences. However, the findings from this study also extend his work by suggesting that belonging among Black men at PWIs may be shaped as much by cultural

recognition as by social connection. The men in this study were not simply searching for friendship or involvement; they were searching for spaces where they could see themselves reflected, affirmed, and understood. Their narratives suggest that the challenge facing institutions is not merely increasing representation but creating conditions in which representation is accompanied by meaningful recognition, visibility, and mattering.

1.2 Transition Shock and Institutional Adjustment

Although racialized underrepresentation shaped many mentees' early experiences at UC Davis, their narratives suggest that another challenge emerged simultaneously: learning how to navigate the institution itself. Across interviews, former B.L.A.C.K. participants described a transition that was far more complex than adjusting to academic rigor alone. For many, the most difficult aspect of the first year was not coursework, but understanding the unwritten rules, expectations, and systems that governed success within a large research university.

A striking pattern across the narratives was that most of the men entered UC Davis with histories of academic achievement. They had been honor students, athletes, leaders, Advanced Placement students, valedictorians, and high performers in their previous educational settings. Yet many found themselves unexpectedly struggling during their transition to college. Their experiences raise an important question: What happens when students arrive academically prepared but institutionally unprepared?

Julian's reflection captures this tension clearly. As his high school valedictorian, he expected that previous success would translate naturally into college achievement. Instead, he encountered a very different reality: "I thought being valedictorian meant I'd be ready, but I realized quickly that I didn't know how to navigate the system." Julian's statement reveals a distinction that emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews. Academic achievement and

institutional navigation are not synonymous. While students may arrive with the intellectual capacity to succeed, they may possess far less familiarity with the organizational structures, social norms, bureaucratic processes, and help-seeking behaviors that universities often assume students already understand.

Cameron described a similar realization during his first years at UC Davis. Despite a strong academic background that included Advanced Placement and dual-enrollment coursework, he struggled to access support resources because he had never been taught how those systems functioned. Reflecting on that experience, he stated: “I didn't know help-seeking was allowed.”

At first glance, this statement appears deceptively simple. Yet it reveals a significant institutional assumption embedded within higher education. Universities frequently encourage students to seek support while simultaneously operating under the expectation that students already understand when, why, and how to access available resources. For students entering college without extensive exposure to higher education culture, these expectations can remain invisible.

Two alumni described this challenge through what they referred to as the “hidden curriculum.” David characterized UC Davis as “a big machine that didn't know I was there,” while Jalen described navigating “the hidden curriculum nobody teaches you.” Their accounts suggest that success often depended upon acquiring forms of institutional knowledge that existed outside formal coursework. Understanding office hours, developing relationships with faculty, locating research opportunities, networking effectively, interpreting academic bureaucracy, and advocating for oneself were all treated as essential skills, yet many mentees reported learning them through trial and error rather than intentional instruction.

However, these challenges were not merely procedural. They carried significant emotional consequences. Several of the men described periods of self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and uncertainty regarding their place within the institution. Because many had been high-achieving students before college, academic struggles were often interpreted initially as personal failures rather than predictable outcomes of navigating unfamiliar systems.

Brandon's experience illustrates this dynamic. Academic probation deeply affected his confidence, not because he lacked ability, but because he was attempting to balance Division I athletics with institutional expectations that often felt inflexible and difficult to navigate. Similarly, Malik described the disorientation he experienced after leaving football, explaining: "I'm not tied to anything at Davis."

Malik's reflection highlights how institutional adjustment involved more than learning academic expectations. It also required reconstructing identity, community, and purpose within a new environment. For many mentees, transition challenges were simultaneously academic, social, emotional, and existential.

These experiences were particularly pronounced among first-generation students and those from under-resourced educational backgrounds. Several alumni described arriving at UC Davis without familiarity regarding office hours, advising structures, faculty engagement practices, research opportunities, or graduate school pathways. While these forms of knowledge are often treated as common sense within university environments, the narratives suggest they function more accurately as forms of cultural and institutional capital that are unevenly distributed.

Viewed through this lens, transition shock appears less a reflection of student deficiency and more a reflection of institutional design. The university often assumed familiarity with

norms that many students had never previously encountered. As a result, adjustment difficulties frequently emerged not because students lacked motivation or capability, but because they were expected to navigate complex systems without sufficient guidance or transparency.

Over time, however, many mentees developed strategies that enabled them to navigate these challenges successfully. Rather than learning primarily through formal institutional channels, they frequently acquired critical knowledge through relationships—with mentors, peers, faculty, staff, and culturally affirming communities. These networks helped demystify university expectations, normalize struggle, and provide practical guidance for navigating systems that initially felt inaccessible.

Yosso's (2005) concept of navigational capital offers a particularly useful framework for understanding this process. The findings suggest that persistence was strengthened not simply through academic effort, but through access to relationships that translated institutional culture and made the hidden curriculum visible. What many of these men ultimately gained was not additional intelligence or motivation; it was access to knowledge that allowed them to move through the institution more confidently and strategically.

These narratives challenge conventional understandings of college transition that focus primarily on academic readiness. The experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that persistence depends equally upon institutional fluency—the ability to understand and navigate systems that are often invisible to those without prior exposure. Their stories raise an important implication for higher education: if success requires mastery of knowledge that institutions rarely teach explicitly, then universities must reconsider where responsibility for adjustment truly resides.

1.3 Hypervisibility, Invisibility, and Campus Climate

One of the most striking tensions emerging from the narratives was the simultaneous experience of hypervisibility and invisibility. At first glance, these conditions appear contradictory. Yet for many former B.L.A.C.K. mentees, both realities existed at the same time. As Black men attending a predominantly White institution, they were often highly visible because of their racial identities, yet they frequently felt unseen as individuals. Their stories suggest that campus climate was shaped not only by who was present, but by whose humanity, complexity, and experiences were fully recognized.

Mentees described becoming acutely aware of their visibility in classrooms, laboratories, residence halls, and professional spaces where Black representation remained limited. In these environments, visibility often carried heightened scrutiny. Rather than feeling free to engage authentically, many felt pressure to carefully manage how they presented themselves to others. Brandon's reflection captures this experience powerfully. He described wearing what he called a "mask" in order to make himself "legible" within spaces where he felt cultural misunderstanding was common. Similarly, Eli discussed code-switching as a necessary survival strategy: "Emotionally it wasn't sustainable."

Although code-switching and masking often helped these men navigate institutional environments successfully, their narratives reveal the significant emotional labor associated with those adaptations. Belonging, in many instances, appeared conditional. Acceptance often required careful management of language, behavior, emotion, or identity. Rather than entering spaces where authenticity was encouraged, mentees frequently felt responsible for reducing discomfort, correcting assumptions, or preemptively navigating stereotypes.

The findings suggest that hypervisibility functioned as more than simple visibility. It carried representational weight. Several alumni described feeling that their actions reflected not

only upon themselves but upon Black students more broadly. Cameron discussed the exhaustion of routinely being one of the only Black students in STEM and pre-veterinary spaces, while Jalen described similar experiences within research settings. Their accounts indicate that visibility often came with an unspoken expectation to perform competence, professionalism, and success in ways that exceeded what was expected of their peers.

This dynamic limited opportunities for vulnerability. Mistakes, struggles, or moments of uncertainty were rarely experienced as purely individual events. Instead, mentees frequently described feeling pressure to avoid confirming stereotypes or contributing to negative perceptions of Black students. As a result, the burden of representation often became another layer of labor accompanying academic success.

Yet hypervisibility existed alongside profound experiences of invisibility. Several alumni recalled periods during which they felt socially present but emotionally unseen. David's description of "seeing people but not feeling seen" captures this contradiction. Likewise, Brandon reflected that he often failed to see himself represented in the spaces he occupied, while Julian described what he called a "technical sense of belonging" - an experience in which he appeared integrated into university life externally but remained disconnected internally.

These accounts suggest that inclusion and belonging are not synonymous. The men in this study were enrolled, engaged, and often successful within the institution. However, institutional participation did not necessarily translate into experiences of recognition, affirmation, or mattering. In many cases, mentees felt visible as Black men while simultaneously feeling invisible as complex human beings.

The experiences of Julian and Eli further reveal how this paradox became even more complicated at the intersection of multiple identities. Julian described the exhaustion associated

with masking his autistic identity while simultaneously navigating racial isolation within engineering spaces: “Masking was exhausting. Being around people all day... trying to figure out conversations... trying not to stim too much. It took everything out of me.” His reflection highlights the cumulative burden of negotiating multiple forms of visibility simultaneously. Similarly, Eli’s experiences as a Black queer man revealed the complexities of navigating environments where vulnerability often felt risky and authenticity required careful calculation. Their narratives underscore the importance of approaching Black male experiences through an intersectional lens rather than treating Black men as a monolithic group.

A broader critique of campus climate also emerged from these accounts. Several alumni suggested that institutional norms frequently centered whiteness as the unspoken standard against which students were expected to adapt. Belonging often appeared contingent upon assimilation rather than affirmation. Malik described environments that felt performance-based, while Jordan emphasized the relief he experienced when entering culturally affirming spaces where he no longer felt compelled to monitor how he was perceived.

What makes these findings particularly significant is that they shift attention away from simple questions of representation and toward questions of recognition. The issue was not merely whether Black students were present on campus. Rather, it was whether institutional environments created conditions where Black students could exist fully and authentically without carrying the burden of constant self-monitoring, stereotype management, or identity negotiation.

This distinction helps explain why culturally affirming spaces such as B.L.A.C.K., CADSS, Black student organizations, and culturally themed housing communities became so important in the lives of these men. Mentees consistently described these environments as places where surveillance diminished, authenticity increased, and belonging felt less conditional. In

these spaces, they were not expected to serve as representatives, symbols, or exceptions. They were simply allowed to be themselves.

Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) work emphasizes that belonging is rooted in experiences of mattering, acceptance, and connection. The findings of this study deepen that understanding by suggesting that belonging among Black men at PWIs may also require freedom from performative identity management. For many of the men in this study, the absence of belonging was not experienced as exclusion alone. It was experienced as exhaustion.

Viewed in this way, hypervisibility and invisibility are not separate phenomena but interconnected features of campus climate. Together they reveal the emotional costs associated with navigating institutional environments where students are highly visible as racial subjects yet insufficiently recognized as whole people. The experiences of these former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that genuine inclusion requires more than access, representation, or participation. It requires environments where students can be visible without being scrutinized, recognized without being stereotyped, and valued without needing to perform belonging.

Theme 2: Belonging Through Counterspaces and Community

2.1 B.L.A.C.K. as a Counterspace

The experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that the program functioned as far more than a supplemental support initiative within the broader UC Davis environment. While the concept of counterspace provides a useful starting point for understanding its role, the narratives in this study indicate that B.L.A.C.K. operated as a complex developmental ecosystem where belonging, mentorship, identity affirmation, emotional well-being, and community cultural wealth intersected. For many of the men in this study, the program was not simply a place they attended; it became a place through which they learned to navigate the institution, understand themselves, and imagine new possibilities for their futures.

Much of the existing literature conceptualizes counterspaces as environments where students from historically marginalized groups find validation, support, and resistance to dominant institutional narratives (Solórzano et al., 2000). The experiences described by mentees certainly align with this understanding. Many recalled entering B.L.A.C.K. after spending months - or in some cases years - navigating environments where they felt isolated, misunderstood, or culturally disconnected. Within the program, they encountered something fundamentally different: a space where their experiences did not require explanation.

Brandon's reflection captures this distinction: "The only place where I didn't feel like I had to explain my existence." His statement reveals more than comfort or social connection. It speaks to the relief of entering an environment where one's identity is not treated as an exception requiring justification. Throughout the interviews, mentees repeatedly contrasted the emotional labor required in many institutional spaces with the ease they experienced within B.L.A.C.K. The significance of the program was not simply that Black men were present together; it was that shared experiences created a foundation of understanding that reduced the burden of constant self-translation.

Eli articulated a similar sentiment when he described B.L.A.C.K. as "the first time I felt like I could talk without code-switching." His observation highlights an important dimension of the program's impact. The value of the space was not solely that it offered support, but that it reduced the need for performance. Mentees frequently described navigating classrooms, organizations, and professional environments where they carefully managed language, behavior, and self-presentation. Within B.L.A.C.K., those pressures diminished. Authenticity became possible because acceptance did not depend upon assimilation.

This dynamic was particularly significant for individuals navigating multiple forms of marginalization. Julian's account illustrates how the program created relief from the constant work of masking identities in order to fit institutional expectations. Reflecting on his experience as an autistic Black student, he described B.L.A.C.K. as “a place where fitting in didn’t take as much effort.” His statement suggests that the value of the counterspace was not merely social inclusion. It was the reduction of emotional and psychological strain associated with continually adapting oneself to institutional norms.

Mentees also described the program as restorative. David referred to B.L.A.C.K. as “a frustration safe space,” explaining that it became: “A place where you could drop the mask, breathe, and be around brothers who got it.” The language of restoration appeared frequently throughout the interviews. This is significant because it reframes how the role of Black Male Initiatives is often understood. Programs such as B.L.A.C.K. are frequently justified through retention metrics, graduation rates, or academic outcomes. Yet the narratives in this study suggest that their most immediate impact may be psychological and relational. Before they could thrive academically, many mentees first needed spaces where they could recover from the emotional demands of navigating a predominantly White institution.

The findings further suggest that B.L.A.C.K. functioned as a site of narrative reclamation. Through discussions of Black history, leadership, resilience, and achievement, mentees encountered representations of Blackness that challenged many of the deficit-oriented messages they encountered elsewhere. David reflected that learning about Black historical figures was not simply educational: “It wasn’t just about learning Black history... it was about seeing myself in that history.” Similarly, Eli described realizing that “my story wasn’t an accident.” These reflections suggest that the program offered more than cultural affirmation. It provided

alternative narratives through which mentees could interpret their experiences, identities, and aspirations. Rather than viewing themselves through the lens of institutional stereotypes or social assumptions, they began locating themselves within broader traditions of Black excellence, resistance, and achievement.

Equally important was the relational infrastructure that sustained the program. Mentees consistently described belonging as something produced collectively through shared experience, accountability, mentorship, and care. Their language frequently invoked concepts such as family, brotherhood, home, and community. These descriptions suggest that the program's influence extended beyond individual development. B.L.A.C.K. created a network of relationships through which students could access emotional support, institutional knowledge, encouragement, and affirmation.

What emerges from these accounts is a more expansive understanding of the role culturally responsive programs play within predominantly White institutions. B.L.A.C.K. did not eliminate racialized challenges, institutional barriers, or experiences of marginalization. Rather, it created conditions that enabled mentees to navigate those realities differently. The program provided affirmation in the face of invisibility, community in response to isolation, and opportunities for authentic self-expression within environments that often demanded adaptation and performance.

Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) work helps explain why these experiences mattered. His theory suggests that belonging is rooted in experiences of mattering, connection, and recognition. The findings from this study extend that perspective by illustrating how belonging was cultivated through culturally specific environments rather than through the institution broadly. For many mentees, B.L.A.C.K. became the primary location where belonging was experienced rather than

merely desired. At the same time, Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework provides insight into why the program's impact extended beyond emotional support. Within B.L.A.C.K., mentees strengthened social, familial, navigational, aspirational, and resistant forms of capital through relationships and shared experiences. The program did not simply respond to deficits; it activated existing strengths and created opportunities for those strengths to flourish.

In essence, B.L.A.C.K. was more than a counterspace. It functioned as a culturally affirming ecology that connected belonging, mentorship, identity development, leadership, and community cultural wealth into a coherent developmental experience. The significance of the program lies not only in what it helped Black men overcome, but in what it made possible. It created a space where they could be recognized, challenged, supported, and transformed - not despite their identities as Black men, but through them.

2.2 Psychological Safety and the Freedom to Be Authentic

One of the most significant findings emerging from this study is that psychological safety functioned as a prerequisite for authenticity, vulnerability, and meaningful belonging among former B.L.A.C.K. mentees. While discussions of student success often focus on academic support, mentoring, or engagement, the narratives in this study suggest that a more fundamental need existed beneath these outcomes: the need for environments where Black men could exist without constantly managing how they were perceived. For many of the men in this study, psychological safety created the conditions that made deeper forms of connection, self-expression, and personal growth possible.

Throughout the interviews, mentees described spending considerable energy navigating predominantly White institutional spaces where they felt pressure to regulate aspects of themselves to avoid misunderstanding, stereotyping, or social exclusion. The challenge was not

simply navigating racial difference; it was managing the emotional labor associated with continually monitoring how one appeared to others.

Eli's reflections illustrate this dynamic particularly well. Describing his experience in B.L.A.C.K., he explained: "The first time I felt like I could talk without code-switching." Although code-switching often served as an effective strategy for navigating classrooms, professional environments, and social interactions, Eli emphasized that maintaining this constant adaptation came at a cost. "Emotionally it wasn't sustainable." His statement highlights an important distinction. Code-switching is frequently discussed as a skill or strategy, yet the narratives in this study suggest it may also function as a form of emotional labor. The effort required to continually modify speech, behavior, and presentation can become exhausting when authenticity feels conditional rather than accepted. For many mentees, the significance of B.L.A.C.K. was not simply that it provided support; it provided relief from the expectation of constant self-monitoring.

Brandon described a similar experience. Prior to finding culturally affirming spaces on campus, he often felt as though he was "wearing a mask" in both academic and athletic settings. Reflecting on his experiences within B.L.A.C.K. and CADSS, he explained that these were among the few places where he did not feel obligated to justify who he was or explain his lived experiences. "The only place where I didn't feel like I had to explain my existence."

This observation reveals a deeper dimension of psychological safety. Safety was not merely the absence of hostility. Rather, it was the presence of understanding. The men in this study frequently distinguished between spaces where they were tolerated and spaces where they were genuinely known. B.L.A.C.K. became meaningful because it reduced the burden of translation that many carried elsewhere within the institution.

For some mentees, psychological safety also involved relief from the pressures associated with managing multiple marginalized identities. Julian's narrative offers an important example. As an autistic Black student navigating predominantly White engineering environments, he described the exhaustion associated with masking both socially and culturally: "Masking was exhausting. Being around people all day... trying to figure out conversations... trying not to stim too much. It took everything out of me."

Yet when discussing B.L.A.C.K., Julian described something markedly different: "A place where fitting in didn't take as much effort." What makes this statement particularly significant is that it shifts the discussion away from assimilation and toward acceptance. Many institutional environments implicitly ask students to adapt themselves in order to belong. Julian's experience suggests that belonging becomes more attainable when environments adapt to students rather than requiring students to continually adapt to environments.

Mentees emphasized that authenticity became possible because trust existed within the relational culture of the program. David described B.L.A.C.K. as "a frustration safe space" where students could: "Drop the mask, breathe, and be around brothers who got it." The phrase "brothers who got it" speaks to the importance of shared understanding. Psychological safety emerged not because difficult conversations were avoided, but because participants trusted that those conversations would be met with empathy rather than judgment. This trust allowed discussions about race, masculinity, grief, mental health, failure, and vulnerability to occur in ways that many alumni had not previously experienced within the university.

Jordan described a similar process when reflecting on classroom discussions surrounding Black masculinity and identity. He recalled moments that "opened something up" emotionally because "it felt safe to be real." Such reflections suggest that authenticity was not simply

encouraged within B.L.A.C.K.; it was cultivated through intentional relationships, dialogue, and community-building practices that normalized vulnerability.

These experiences are particularly important given dominant cultural narratives surrounding Black masculinity. Several mentees described arriving at UC Davis with implicit beliefs that Black men were expected to be strong, self-reliant, emotionally controlled, and perpetually resilient. Within B.L.A.C.K., however, they encountered alternative models of masculinity that made room for uncertainty, help-seeking, emotional expression, and interdependence. What emerged was not a rejection of strength, but a broader definition of it.

Brandon reflected on the significance of simple yet meaningful interactions in which faculty and staff asked, “How are you, really?” Such moments mattered because they communicated genuine care rather than institutional obligation. Likewise, Malik described mentorship relationships that helped reduce feelings of shame associated with struggle and help-seeking after leaving football and losing the primary identity structure that had organized much of his collegiate experience.

An important implication of these findings is that psychological safety appears closely connected to academic and social engagement. Several alumni suggested that once they no longer felt consumed by identity management, isolation, or emotional guardedness, they became more willing to seek mentorship, pursue leadership opportunities, participate in campus life, and invest in their academic development. Jordan described culturally affirming spaces as providing the emotional grounding necessary to remain focused despite experiencing microaggressions and racialized assumptions elsewhere. Cameron similarly reflected on the relief of existing in community without constantly defending or explaining himself.

Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) work emphasizes that belonging requires more than physical inclusion; it requires individuals to feel valued, respected, and connected within their environments. The experiences described here deepen that understanding by suggesting that psychological safety may be one of the mechanisms through which belonging is produced. Before mentees could experience connection, they first needed environments where authenticity felt possible.

Taken together, these narratives suggest that psychological safety should not be viewed as a secondary outcome of successful programs. Rather, it appears to be a foundational condition upon which many other developmental outcomes depend. The ability to build relationships, seek support, explore identity, express vulnerability, and engage fully in campus life was often linked to whether students felt safe enough to bring their full selves into a space. For the men in this study, authenticity was not simply about self-expression; it was about freedom. B.L.A.C.K. provided one of the few environments where that freedom could be experienced consistently, allowing mentees to move beyond survival and toward genuine connection, growth, and belonging.

2.3 Brotherhood, Relational Accountability, and Community

A recurring theme throughout the narratives was that persistence was rarely experienced as an individual endeavor. While much of the higher education literature emphasizes personal motivation, resilience, and self-efficacy as drivers of student success, the men in this study described their journeys in fundamentally relational terms. Their accounts suggest that belonging within B.L.A.C.K. was not simply a feeling of inclusion; it was participation in a community where accountability, encouragement, vulnerability, and collective care became central to persistence.

For many former mentees, one of the most powerful aspects of the program was the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with other Black men navigating similar institutional realities. In contrast to the isolation that characterized much of their broader campus experience, B.L.A.C.K. provided access to a community where shared understanding reduced the burden of constantly explaining oneself. David captured this sentiment when he described the program as a place to be around: “Brothers who got it.” Although simple, this statement reflects a deeper reality that surfaced repeatedly across interviews. Shared experiences created a level of understanding that often did not require extensive explanation. Mentees spoke openly about racism, belonging, family pressures, academic struggles, and uncertainty because they trusted others in the room would understand the context from which those experiences emerged.

Malik described a similar sense of connection following his departure from football, a transition that left him feeling disconnected from many of the relationships that had previously structured his college experience. Reflecting on the role B.L.A.C.K. played during that period, he explained: “It felt nice knowing that we had people who were in our circle.” His comment highlights an important dimension of community that extends beyond social support. The circle he describes functioned as a source of stability during a period of personal transition and identity disruption. For several mentees, brotherhood provided continuity when other institutional connections felt fragile or uncertain.

What is particularly striking across the narratives is that brotherhood was consistently described as active rather than passive. Relationships were not valued simply because they existed; they mattered because they generated accountability. Jordan explained: “Being surrounded by other brothers doing their thing just kept me going.” Unlike competitive environments where success is framed as an individual accomplishment, the relational culture

described by mentees encouraged mutual investment in one another's progress. Witnessing peers persist through challenges, pursue ambitious goals, and navigate adversity became a source of motivation. Success was rarely framed as outperforming others. Instead, it was experienced as growing alongside them.

This finding complicates traditional narratives surrounding Black male achievement in higher education. Much of the discourse surrounding persistence emphasizes exceptional individuals who overcome adversity through personal determination. The experiences described here suggest a different interpretation. Persistence was often sustained because mentees were embedded within relationships that normalized struggle while simultaneously reinforcing responsibility to oneself and others.

Several alumni described this process through examples of relational accountability. Brandon recalled periods of academic difficulty and identity uncertainty during which peers, faculty, and staff consistently checked in on him. Reflecting on those interactions, he explained: “It wasn’t just about tutoring. It was about being seen, being understood, and having someone ask, ‘How are you, really?’” What stands out in Brandon's reflection is the distinction between academic intervention and relational investment. The support he received extended beyond solving immediate academic problems. It communicated that his well-being mattered. Such interactions reinforced the idea that persistence was not solely his responsibility; it was something supported and sustained through community.

A broader pattern becomes visible when considering how mentees described loneliness and isolation prior to finding culturally affirming spaces. Eli recalled spending time in CADSS “just to see Black faces,” emphasizing the emotional significance of existing in environments where he no longer felt culturally disconnected. Cameron similarly reflected that B.L.A.C.K. was

“the first time I felt like I didn’t have to explain myself,” while Julian described finally encountering a space where “fitting in didn’t take as much effort.”

These reflections suggest that community itself functioned as a form of protection. The significance of brotherhood was not limited to friendship or camaraderie. It created emotional refuge within environments where many mentees otherwise felt hypervisible, isolated, or misunderstood. The relationships they developed reduced the psychological burden associated with navigating predominantly White institutional spaces alone.

Equally important was the intentional vulnerability that characterized these relationships. Brotherhood was not built solely through shared racial identity. Rather, it emerged through conversations that encouraged honesty, self-reflection, and mutual support. Discussions about Black masculinity, mental health, grief, leadership, family expectations, and racial identity created opportunities for mentees to engage one another more deeply than many had previously experienced.

Jordan recalled a discussion about Black masculinity that “opened something up” emotionally because participants could engage authentically without fear of judgment. Eli similarly reflected on conversations in which students debated: “What kind of Black man you want to be.” These exchanges reveal that brotherhood was not simply about affirmation; it was also about growth. Through dialogue, mentees challenged one another to think critically about identity, purpose, responsibility, and leadership. Community became a site of development rather than merely support.

Another noteworthy finding involves the intergenerational nature of these relationships. Several alumni described mentorship not as a separate component of the program but as an extension of brotherhood itself. Relationships with faculty, staff, alumni, and older peers

expanded mentees' understanding of what was possible for Black men within and beyond the university. David reflected on how the mentorship he received influenced his relationships with younger family members: "Everything I learned in the program, I brought back to my siblings." Similarly, Brandon described feeling increasingly responsible for supporting younger students navigating challenges similar to those he had experienced. These examples suggest that the benefits of community extended beyond individual persistence. Brotherhood cultivated a sense of obligation to contribute to the success and well-being of others.

Viewed through the lens of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, these experiences illustrate the activation of both social and familial capital. Relationships provided access to encouragement, guidance, information, and emotional support while simultaneously reinforcing collective responsibility and cultural connectedness. Yet the findings also extend beyond the framework by highlighting how these forms of capital were continually strengthened through reciprocal relationships rather than simply possessed by individuals.

Perhaps most importantly, the narratives challenge assumptions that belonging is primarily an individual psychological state. For the men in this study, belonging was produced through relationships. It emerged through accountability, shared experience, mutual care, and collective investment in one another's success. Brotherhood was not simply an outcome of the B.L.A.C.K. program; it was one of the mechanisms through which persistence became possible. Rather than navigating UC Davis alone, mentees described moving through the institution alongside a community that reminded them they were capable, valued, and accountable to something larger than themselves. Their stories suggest that persistence is often sustained not by individual resilience alone, but by the relationships that make resilience possible in the first place.

2.4 Identity Affirmation and Reclaiming Self-Definition

Among the most transformative outcomes described by former B.L.A.C.K. mentees was the opportunity to redefine themselves outside the constraints of dominant narratives surrounding Black masculinity, achievement, and success. While many entered UC Davis carrying aspirations for their futures, they also arrived within institutional environments that often communicated narrow and contradictory messages about what it meant to be a Black man. The findings suggest that participation in B.L.A.C.K. provided more than affirmation; it created opportunities for self-authorship. Through dialogue, mentorship, historical engagement, and community, mentees began critically examining externally imposed identities while constructing more authentic understandings of themselves and their place within the university.

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the tension between how mentees understood themselves and how they believed they were perceived by others. Several described entering classrooms, athletic spaces, and professional environments where assumptions about race and masculinity shaped interactions before they had an opportunity to define themselves on their own terms. Brandon reflected on feeling pressure to present a version of himself that was more easily understood within predominantly White academic and athletic settings. Likewise, Eli recalled carefully managing aspects of his identity in order to navigate environments where difference often felt scrutinized rather than embraced.

What makes these accounts significant is that they reveal identity work as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed characteristic. The challenge was not simply being Black within a predominantly White institution; it was navigating spaces where Blackness was frequently interpreted through stereotypes, assumptions, and deficit-oriented narratives that limited how Black men could be seen and understood. Against this backdrop, B.L.A.C.K. became a space

where those assumptions could be questioned. Rather than asking mentees to conform to preexisting expectations, the program encouraged them to examine where those expectations originated and whether they reflected their own values, aspirations, and experiences.

Several alumni identified conversations about Black masculinity as particularly influential in this process. Jordan recalled a seminar discussion that “opened something up” emotionally because it challenged assumptions he had long accepted regarding strength, vulnerability, and manhood. Eli described similar conversations in which students debated “What kind of Black man do you want to be?” This question represents an important shift. Rather than asking how to meet societal expectations, mentees were encouraged to consider how they wished to define themselves. Such discussions created opportunities to move beyond externally imposed identities and toward more intentional forms of self-definition.

A broader pattern emerges when considering how participants discussed masculinity throughout the interviews. Many arrived with implicit beliefs that Black men were expected to be emotionally restrained, self-sufficient, and perpetually resilient. Yet within B.L.A.C.K., these assumptions were often challenged through dialogue, mentorship, and shared vulnerability. Mentees encountered peers and mentors who demonstrated that strength and vulnerability could coexist, that leadership could include empathy, and that seeking support was not evidence of weakness. This shift is particularly important because it reframes how success was understood. Rather than measuring achievement solely through grades, prestige, athletic accomplishment, or professional status, many alumni began developing definitions of success rooted in authenticity, purpose, well-being, and community responsibility. The process of identity affirmation therefore extended far beyond feeling accepted. It involved critically reevaluating whose definitions of success they had been pursuing and why.

Historical and cultural engagement played a significant role in this transformation. Several mentees described exposure to Black history, intellectual traditions, and narratives of resistance as pivotal moments in their development. David reflected: “It wasn’t just about learning Black history—it was about seeing myself in that history.” His observation points to the power of representation beyond visibility alone. Learning about Black leaders, scholars, activists, and innovators provided alternative narratives through which mentees could understand their own experiences. Rather than viewing themselves as isolated individuals navigating institutional barriers, they began situating their journeys within broader histories of resilience, achievement, and collective struggle.

Eli expressed a similar realization when he explained that engaging with Black historical and cultural content helped him understand that: “My story wasn’t an accident.” This statement reflects a profound shift in perspective. The challenges, questions, and aspirations mentees experienced were no longer interpreted solely as personal experiences. They became connected to larger social, historical, and cultural realities. Such connections strengthened both identity and purpose.

For some alumni, reclaiming self-definition also involved embracing dimensions of identity that institutional environments had encouraged them to suppress. Julian's experiences illustrate this complexity particularly well. As an autistic Black student in engineering, he often felt pressure to manage multiple identities simultaneously. Yet within culturally affirming spaces, he described feeling less compelled to hide aspects of himself in order to gain acceptance. Similarly, Jordan reflected on the significance of openly embracing his identity as a multiracial Black man within communities that recognized and affirmed complexity rather than demanding simplistic categories.

These narratives suggest that identity affirmation was not merely about validating existing identities. It was about creating space for exploration, growth, and integration. Mentees repeatedly emphasized the importance of environments where multiple dimensions of their identities could coexist without contradiction.

The process of self-definition also influenced academic and professional trajectories. Several alumni described making educational and career decisions that reflected deeper clarity regarding who they wanted to become. Brandon's movement from kinesiology and athletics toward cognitive science and clinical psychology represented more than a change in major. It reflected a broader shift toward aligning his educational pursuits with emerging understandings of purpose, mental health, and personal meaning. David described a similar transition from biology to psychology, framing it as movement away from external expectations and toward a future that felt more authentic. These examples suggest that identity affirmation had tangible consequences. As mentees developed greater confidence in their values, interests, and aspirations, they became more willing to make choices grounded in authenticity rather than validation from others.

An additional contribution of the program involved helping mentees resist dominant institutional narratives surrounding Black men. Several described arriving at UC Davis aware of stereotypes portraying Black men as athletically confined, academically disengaged, emotionally detached, or socially threatening. Within B.L.A.C.K., however, they encountered counternarratives emphasizing intellectualism, leadership, vulnerability, cultural knowledge, and collective responsibility. Cameron reflected that his experiences within the seminar helped him envision himself not simply as a student surviving in STEM environments but as someone capable of mentoring future generations of Black students pursuing similar paths. Brandon

similarly described eventually embracing identities that were both “academic and Black without being questioned,” challenging the false distinction between Blackness and intellectual legitimacy that many participants encountered throughout their educational experiences.

Yosso's (2005) concept of resistant capital offers a useful lens for understanding these experiences. Mentees did not merely reject negative stereotypes; they actively constructed alternative narratives rooted in community, culture, history, and lived experience. Yet the findings also suggest something broader. Resistance was not solely oppositional. It was generative. Through relationships, reflection, and cultural affirmation, mentees created new understandings of themselves that expanded what they believed was possible.

Perhaps the most significant insight emerging from these narratives is that identity development occurred collectively rather than in isolation. Self-definition was cultivated through conversations, mentorship, accountability, storytelling, and shared vulnerability. Seeing peers wrestle with questions surrounding race, masculinity, family, mental health, and purpose helped normalize complexity and encouraged deeper self-reflection.

The experiences described by former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that identity affirmation is not simply about helping students feel good about who they are. It is about creating opportunities for them to decide who they wish to become. The program provided a space where Black men could challenge inherited narratives, reclaim marginalized dimensions of themselves, and author more expansive visions of their futures. In doing so, B.L.A.C.K. fostered not only belonging, but the freedom to define success, masculinity, leadership, and possibility on their own terms.

Theme 3: Mentorship as Cultural Navigation

3.1 Advising Beyond Transactions

One of the clearest findings emerging from this study is that mentees distinguished sharply between transactional forms of institutional support and relationships that felt genuinely invested in their growth and well-being. Although advising is traditionally associated with course selection, degree requirements, and academic planning, the experiences described by former B.L.A.C.K. participants suggest that these functions alone were insufficient for meeting the needs of Black men navigating a predominantly White institution. What students valued most were relationships that acknowledged their humanity, recognized the complexity of their lives, and provided guidance that extended beyond procedural matters.

Several alumni described their early interactions with institutional support systems as confusing, impersonal, or difficult to navigate. While resources existed across campus, many were uncertain about how to access them or whether those resources were intended for students like them. Cameron captured this uncertainty when he reflected: “I didn’t know help-seeking was allowed.” At first glance, this statement appears simple. Yet it reveals a significant institutional assumption. Universities often operate as though students naturally understand when and how to seek assistance. The narratives in this study suggest otherwise. For many mentees, the challenge was not the absence of support services but uncertainty regarding how to engage them. In environments where independence was implicitly valued, asking for help sometimes felt like evidence of weakness rather than a normal component of student success.

David described a similar sense of disconnection, characterizing UC Davis as: “A big machine that didn’t know I was there.” His observation highlights a broader theme that surfaced throughout the interviews. Institutional systems were often experienced as bureaucratic rather than relational. Students understood where they fit administratively, yet many struggled to

identify individuals who genuinely knew them, understood their experiences, or were invested in their development beyond academic metrics.

Against this backdrop, mentorship within B.L.A.C.K. represented something fundamentally different. Rather than focusing exclusively on academic performance, mentors engaged mentees as whole people whose educational experiences were inseparable from questions of identity, belonging, family, mental health, purpose, and personal growth. Brandon's reflection illustrates this distinction particularly well: "It wasn't just about tutoring. It was about being seen, being understood, and having someone ask, 'How are you, really?'" The significance of this statement lies in what it reveals about advising itself. Meaningful support was not defined by the transmission of information alone. It emerged through recognition. Mentees repeatedly described relationships that communicated, both explicitly and implicitly, that they mattered beyond their academic performance. Such interactions created trust and encouraged deeper engagement with the university.

Alumni described mentorship relationships that blurred traditional institutional boundaries. David referred to the B.L.A.C.K. instructor as: "A father figure." Reflecting on the relationship, he explained: "You listened without judgment and gave advice that felt real." His emphasis is on authenticity. The guidance David received resonated because it acknowledged the realities of his life beyond the classroom. During periods marked by grief, family responsibilities, and uncertainty about his future, mentorship was valuable not because it solved administrative problems but because it provided stability, perspective, and encouragement.

A similar pattern emerged in Malik's narrative. Following his departure from football, he experienced significant emotional and identity-related challenges that affected his academic engagement. He recalled that mentorship within the program: "Eliminated some of the guilt of

me asking.” This comment points to an often-overlooked dimension of support. Before students can utilize resources effectively, they must believe they are worthy of receiving support. For Malik, mentorship reduced feelings of shame associated with vulnerability and help-seeking. The relationship did more than provide guidance; it transformed how he understood himself in relation to support systems.

Several mentees also emphasized that effective mentors served as interpreters of institutional culture. For example, Julian reflected that many of his struggles stemmed not from a lack of ability but from uncertainty regarding how the university operated. “I didn’t know how to navigate the system.” Mentors helped make invisible institutional expectations visible. They explained processes, clarified norms, identified opportunities, and translated aspects of university culture that often remained inaccessible through formal advising structures alone. Likewise, Jalen described mentorship relationships that opened pathways to research experiences, professional networks, and opportunities he might not have discovered independently. Viewed through this lens, advising was not simply about information transfer. It was about helping students make sense of environments that often felt opaque and unfamiliar. The most impactful mentors did not merely answer questions; they helped mentees interpret the institution itself.

Another notable aspect of these relationships involved accountability. Several alumni described mentors who challenged them, encouraged them, and refused to allow them to disengage during difficult periods. Jordan reflected on how mentors and peers consistently encouraged him to remain focused on his goals while affirming his identity and potential. Brandon similarly recalled that mentors continued to see strengths and possibilities in him even when he struggled to recognize them himself.

This combination of challenge and support is particularly important. Accountability within B.L.A.C.K. was not experienced as surveillance or punishment. Instead, it emerged through relationships rooted in care. Mentees understood that expectations existed because people were invested in their success, not because they were being monitored.

A broader implication emerges from these findings. The experiences described by former B.L.A.C.K. participants challenge conventional distinctions between advising, mentoring, counseling, teaching, and community-building. In practice, these functions frequently overlapped. Weekly conversations moved fluidly between academic concerns, mental health, family responsibilities, racialized experiences, career aspirations, and questions of identity. Mentees rarely separated these dimensions of their lives, and the support they valued most reflected that reality.

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework helps illuminate why these relationships were so influential. Mentors strengthened navigational and social capital by helping students access information, opportunities, and networks often unavailable through formal channels alone. Yet the findings suggest that mentorship provided more than access. It offered interpretation, affirmation, and relational grounding that enabled students to use those resources effectively.

The significance of these relationships also extends Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) work on belonging. The narratives suggest that belonging was cultivated not merely through inclusion within institutional spaces but through relationships where students felt genuinely known, valued, and cared for. Before mentees could fully engage the institution, many first needed individuals who helped them believe they belonged within it.

Rather than functioning as a transactional exchange of information, mentorship within B.L.A.C.K. operated as a form of cultural navigation rooted in trust, care, and human connection. For many of the men in this study, the most influential advisors were not simply those who knew institutional policies. They were the individuals who helped students make sense of themselves, their experiences, and their possibilities within the institution. In doing so, mentorship became one of the primary mechanisms through which persistence, belonging, and personal transformation were sustained.

3.2 Accessing the Hidden Curriculum

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was that success at UC Davis required far more than academic ability. While mentees entered the university with strong intellectual capacity and considerable determination, many quickly discovered that thriving within a large research institution depended upon understanding a complex set of unwritten rules, cultural expectations, informal networks, and institutional norms. These forms of knowledge—often described in higher education literature as the hidden curriculum—were rarely taught explicitly, yet they shaped access to opportunities, resources, and pathways to success.

Several alumni reflected on the realization that academic preparation and institutional fluency were not the same thing. Julian's experience illustrates this distinction clearly. Having entered UC Davis as his high school valedictorian, he initially assumed that previous academic achievement had adequately prepared him for college. "I thought being valedictorian meant I'd be ready." Yet as he navigated his first years at the university, he reached a different conclusion: "I didn't know how to navigate the system." Julian's reflection highlights a central tension that emerged throughout the study. Many mentees arrived academically capable but unfamiliar with the cultural and institutional knowledge required to move confidently through the university.

Their struggles were not rooted in intellectual deficiency; rather, they reflected unequal access to information that institutions often assume students already possess.

This pattern surfaced repeatedly across interviews. Mentees described uncertainty regarding office hours, research opportunities, faculty engagement, internships, networking, leadership development, and graduate school preparation. These were not isolated gaps in knowledge. They represented broader questions about how universities operate and who is expected to understand those operations instinctively. Jalen referred to these dynamics directly as: “The hidden curriculum nobody teaches you.” His observation is particularly revealing because it shifts attention away from students and toward institutional structures. The issue was not that mentees failed to learn important information. The issue was that much of the information essential to success remained unspoken, informal, and unevenly distributed.

A broader pattern becomes visible when considering how several alumni described their earliest experiences at UC Davis. Cameron recalled arriving on campus unaware that seeking support was even encouraged. “I didn’t know help-seeking was allowed.” This statement reveals how deeply cultural assumptions shape students' experiences. Universities frequently encourage students to utilize resources, attend office hours, and seek guidance. Yet those expectations often presume prior familiarity with higher education environments. For students without access to such knowledge through family, community, or educational background, navigating institutional systems can feel like deciphering an unfamiliar language.

David offered a similar perspective when he described UC Davis as: “A big machine that didn’t know I was there.” His observation captures the sense of disorientation many mentees experienced during their transition to college. Resources existed, but locating and effectively utilizing them often required insider knowledge that was not readily available. For first-

generation students in particular, institutional navigation frequently involved learning through trial and error rather than through intentional guidance.

Against this backdrop, mentorship became valuable because it functioned as a form of cultural translation. Mentors did more than answer questions or provide procedural guidance. They helped mentees interpret the institution itself. Through conversations, relationships, and shared experiences, mentors transformed abstract systems into understandable pathways. Cameron's description of B.L.A.C.K. as his: "UC Davis Green Book" offers one of the most compelling illustrations of this process. By invoking the historical guide used by Black travelers to navigate segregated America safely, Cameron framed mentorship as a navigational resource that helped him identify opportunities, avoid pitfalls, and move through unfamiliar environments with greater confidence. The metaphor suggests that institutional navigation was not simply a technical task. It involved understanding where support existed, whom to trust, and how to navigate spaces that were not always experienced as welcoming or transparent.

Other alumni described similar forms of guidance. Jalen explained that mentorship relationships introduced him to research opportunities, professional networks, and academic pathways he had not previously known existed. Jordan credited B.L.A.C.K., CADSS, NABA, and MLT with expanding his understanding of internships, leadership development, and corporate career pathways. These examples demonstrate that access to opportunity was frequently mediated through relationships rather than formal institutional channels alone.

What makes these findings particularly significant is that mentors often helped students reinterpret their struggles. Brandon reflected on how academic probation initially led him to question his place within the university. Over time, however, culturally responsive mentors helped him understand that adjustment challenges were not necessarily evidence that he lacked

ability or potential. Instead, they encouraged him to recognize how institutional complexity, transition stress, and unfamiliar expectations contributed to those experiences. Malik described a similar process after leaving football. Mentorship helped reduce the guilt and shame he associated with seeking support, allowing him to engage university resources more intentionally. In both cases, mentors were not merely providing information. They were helping students make sense of their experiences and repositioning challenges as navigational rather than personal failures.

Another noteworthy finding involves the normalization of struggle. Several mentees described arriving at UC Davis believing they were uniquely unprepared or uniquely overwhelmed. Through conversations with peers and mentors, however, they learned that uncertainty, confusion, and adjustment difficulties were common experiences. Eli reflected that many students initially assumed they were the only ones struggling until community conversations revealed otherwise. When students understand that challenges are shared rather than individualized, they are less likely to internalize difficulty as evidence that they do not belong. Mentorship therefore functioned not only as a source of information but also as a mechanism for reframing institutional navigation as a learned skill rather than an innate ability.

Yosso's (2005) concept of navigational capital provides a useful lens for understanding these experiences. However, the narratives in this study suggest that navigational capital was not simply something students possessed. It was cultivated through relationships that made institutional expectations visible and accessible. Mentors, peers, and culturally affirming communities served as translators who helped mentees develop the confidence and knowledge necessary to move through environments that initially felt opaque and intimidating.

These findings also deepen Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) work on belonging. The experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that belonging is connected not only to social acceptance but also to institutional competence. As students gained greater understanding of how the university functioned, they reported increased confidence, agency, and engagement. Learning the hidden curriculum was therefore about more than accessing resources—it was about learning how to see oneself as capable of navigating the institution successfully.

The hidden curriculum represented one of the most consequential yet least visible challenges confronting many of the men in this study. Their stories suggest that persistence depended not simply on academic talent, but on access to relationships capable of translating institutional culture into something understandable and navigable. Through mentorship, community, and culturally responsive guidance, mentees acquired more than information; they developed the institutional fluency necessary to transform uncertainty into confidence and possibility into opportunity.

3.3 Emotional Accountability and Relational Care

One of the most powerful findings emerging from this study is that emotional accountability and relational care were not peripheral aspects of mentorship; they were central to how mentees experienced support, belonging, and persistence. While universities often emphasize academic advising, skill development, and resource utilization as pathways to student success, the narratives shared by former B.L.A.C.K. participants suggest that relationships grounded in genuine care were equally, if not more, influential. For many of the men in this study, persistence was sustained not only through access to information and opportunity, but through relationships that communicated, consistently and authentically, that they mattered.

Across interviews, alumni frequently distinguished between institutional interactions that felt procedural and relationships that felt personal. While formal support structures often focused on academic performance, deadlines, and compliance requirements, mentors within B.L.A.C.K. engaged mentees as whole individuals whose educational experiences were intertwined with questions of identity, family, grief, mental health, purpose, and personal growth. Brandon's reflections capture this distinction particularly well. When discussing the support he received, he emphasized that its value extended far beyond tutoring or academic intervention. "How are you, really?" What made this question meaningful was not its wording, but what it communicated. Brandon interpreted it as evidence that someone was interested in his well-being rather than simply his academic outcomes. The question acknowledged that success and struggle are rarely confined to the classroom. In doing so, it created space for conversations that many mentees felt were largely absent elsewhere within the institution.

A similar dynamic emerged in David's account. Reflecting on his relationship with the B.L.A.C.K. instructor, he described him as: "A father figure." He elaborated further: "You listened without judgment and gave advice that felt real." The significance of this relationship became especially apparent during a period marked by profound personal loss following the death of his mother. For David, mentorship was not limited to academic guidance. It provided emotional grounding during one of the most difficult periods of his life. His experience illustrates an important point: students do not leave their personal challenges at the classroom door. Academic persistence is often inseparable from emotional well-being, and the relationships mentees valued most recognized that reality.

These narratives redefine accountability. Traditional institutional models often associate accountability with monitoring performance, enforcing expectations, or correcting deficiencies.

The experiences described here suggest a different understanding. Emotional accountability emerged through care rather than surveillance. Malik's reflection provides a compelling example. Following his departure from football, he experienced significant uncertainty regarding identity, purpose, and belonging. During this period, he recalled that mentorship relationships within B.L.A.C.K.: “Eliminated some of the guilt.” His statement speaks to the emotional barriers that often prevent students from seeking support. Shame, self-doubt, and fear of judgment can discourage help-seeking even when resources are available. What mentors provided was not merely encouragement to utilize services; they helped create conditions in which vulnerability felt acceptable rather than embarrassing. Accountability became possible because trust existed first.

This distinction surfaced repeatedly throughout the interviews. Several alumni described mentors who challenged them directly, asked difficult questions, and encouraged self-reflection. Yet those conversations were rarely experienced as punitive. Instead, they were interpreted as evidence of investment. Mentees understood that expectations emerged from relationships rooted in care rather than institutional obligation.

The significance of these interactions becomes even clearer when viewed alongside broader campus experiences. Many alumni described environments where independence, productivity, and resilience were implicitly celebrated. While these qualities were valued, they often carried unintended consequences. Students sometimes felt pressure to appear composed, self-sufficient, and unaffected by adversity, even when they were struggling.

Julian's experiences illustrate this dynamic particularly well. As an autistic Black student navigating engineering environments with limited racial representation, he described the exhaustion associated with constant masking and emotional regulation. “Masking was

exhausting.” Julian highlights the often-invisible labor required to navigate environments where authenticity feels risky. Within B.L.A.C.K., however, he encountered relationships and spaces that reduced the pressure to perform. Emotional honesty became possible because acceptance was not contingent upon appearing perpetually strong or successful.

Jordan also reflected that discussions surrounding Black masculinity and identity created opportunities for conversations he had rarely encountered elsewhere on campus. He recalled moments that: “Opened something up.” The phrase is particularly revealing because it captures the transformative potential of emotionally safe dialogue. Rather than suppressing uncertainty, fear, grief, or self-doubt, mentees were encouraged to engage those experiences openly. Emotional accountability therefore involved more than support; it required honest reflection regarding who they were, who they wished to become, and how they wanted to navigate the challenges before them.

Another noteworthy finding involves the role of peer relationships in sustaining emotional care. While mentorship is often conceptualized as a vertical relationship between experienced mentors and less experienced students, many alumni described accountability as something that also occurred horizontally among peers. Jordan explained: “Being surrounded by other brothers doing their thing just kept me going.” Similarly, Cameron reflected on the comfort of knowing there were: “People in our circle.” These comments suggest that emotional accountability became embedded within the culture of the community itself. Mentees checked on one another, shared struggles, celebrated successes, and encouraged persistence during difficult moments. Support was not concentrated in a single mentor; it was distributed across a network of relationships.

This communal dimension is particularly significant because it reframes persistence as a collective process. Rather than viewing success as an individual accomplishment, mentees often described it as something sustained through mutual investment and shared responsibility. Their stories reveal that emotional well-being was strengthened through community, not merely through individual resilience.

The impact of these relationships extended beyond graduation. Several alumni described carrying the lessons of relational care into their professional, familial, and community lives. David reflected: “Everything I learned in the program, I brought back to my siblings.” Likewise, Brandon described becoming increasingly intentional about mentoring younger students and creating spaces where discussions about vulnerability and mental health could occur openly. These examples suggest that the practices modeled within B.L.A.C.K. were not confined to the university context. They became part of how mentees understood leadership, responsibility, and community.

Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) theory of belonging helps explain why these experiences were so influential. His work emphasizes that students are more likely to thrive when they feel valued, accepted, and connected within their environments. The findings from this study deepen that understanding by suggesting that care itself may be one of the mechanisms through which belonging is cultivated. Before mentees could fully engage academically, many first needed relationships that affirmed their humanity.

Yosso's (2005) concepts of familial and social capital offer additional insight. The relationships described by mentees functioned as resources that provided encouragement, guidance, emotional support, and collective wisdom. Yet the findings also suggest that these

forms of capital were actively produced and reinforced through ongoing practices of care rather than existing as static assets.

In fact, emotional accountability and relational care were not supplemental features of the B.L.A.C.K. experience. They were foundational elements of the developmental environment mentees described. Through relationships characterized by empathy, honesty, vulnerability, and mutual responsibility, participants learned that persistence did not require navigating adversity alone. Instead, they experienced success as something sustained through community, care, and the conviction that their lives and well-being mattered.

3.4 Visibility of Black Faculty, Staff, and Professionals

One of the most powerful forms of mentorship described by former B.L.A.C.K. mentees involved simply encountering Black faculty, staff, administrators, researchers, and professionals occupying positions of influence and expertise. While representation is often discussed as a matter of diversity or inclusion, the experiences shared in this study suggest that its significance extends much further. For many mentees, visibility expanded possibility. Seeing Black professionals thriving within academic and professional spaces challenged assumptions about who belonged, who could succeed, and what futures were attainable.

Several alumni reflected on arriving at UC Davis having rarely encountered Black professors, academic advisors, researchers, or institutional leaders. Within this context, the presence of Black professionals carried both symbolic and practical significance. Representation provided evidence that success within higher education was not merely theoretical. It was visible, tangible, and embodied in people whose experiences often resonated with their own. Brandon captured this realization succinctly when he reflected: “You could be both academic and Black without being questioned.” His statement speaks to a tension that surfaced repeatedly

throughout the interviews. Many mentees entered environments where Blackness and intellectual legitimacy were implicitly positioned as separate or even contradictory identities. The visibility of Black faculty and professionals disrupted that narrative. Their presence challenged assumptions regarding who could occupy spaces associated with expertise, scholarship, leadership, and authority.

A broader pattern emerges when considering how mentees discussed representation across different institutional contexts. For students navigating environments with limited Black presence, visibility often carried heightened meaning because it countered feelings of isolation. Julian, for example, described academic quarters in engineering during which he: “Didn’t see a single Black face.” Brandon’s reflection highlights the reality that underrepresentation was not merely a demographic condition. It shaped how students understood their place within academic spaces. In settings where Black representation was minimal, encountering a Black professor, graduate student, staff member, or professional often became a powerful reminder that they were not alone.

Yet the findings suggest that visibility alone was rarely sufficient. What mentees found most transformative were relationships that combined representation with engagement. David reflected that interactions with Black mentors felt different because: “You understood where you were coming from without you having to explain every little thing.” This observation reveals an important distinction between visibility and recognition. Representation mattered not simply because Black professionals were present, but because many brought forms of cultural understanding that reduced the burden of explanation and self-translation. Mentees frequently described conversations in which race, family expectations, grief, belonging, or institutional challenges could be discussed openly without first establishing their legitimacy.

These relationships often provided counternarratives to messages mentees encountered elsewhere within the institution. Eli reflected that prior to joining B.L.A.C.K., many of the examples available to him suggested that Black men were expected to endure higher education rather than fully flourish within it. Through relationships with Black mentors, however, he encountered alternative models of Black masculinity grounded in scholarship, vulnerability, leadership, and service. Such experiences expanded his understanding of what Black success could look like. This is particularly significant because it shifts the conversation away from representation as a matter of symbolism and toward representation as a developmental resource. The Black faculty, staff, and professionals described by mentees were not simply examples of achievement. They became evidence of possibility.

Jordan's experiences illustrate this process clearly. Through organizations such as B.L.A.C.K., NABA, and MLT, he encountered Black professionals working in corporate, entrepreneurial, and leadership roles that he had not previously considered accessible. Exposure to these individuals broadened his professional imagination and helped transform abstract aspirations into concrete goals. Likewise, Jalen described interactions with Black researchers and STEM professionals that strengthened his confidence pursuing research opportunities and envisioning himself within scientific spaces. Their presence communicated something powerful: success within those environments was not reserved for others. It was achievable.

The significance of these encounters can be understood through the concept of possible selves—the idea that individuals develop motivation and direction partly through their ability to imagine future versions of themselves. For many mentees, Black faculty and professionals expanded the range of futures they could envision. Representation helped bridge the gap between aspiration and belief.

Another noteworthy dimension of these relationships involved leadership modeling. Several alumni emphasized that Black faculty and staff demonstrated forms of leadership grounded in care, accessibility, and community responsibility. David's description of the B.L.A.C.K. instructor as: "A father figure" reflects more than admiration. It highlights how leadership was experienced relationally rather than hierarchically. Similarly, Brandon recalled mentors who routinely checked on students' emotional well-being rather than focusing exclusively on grades or performance. These examples offered alternative models of leadership that mentees would later seek to emulate in their own professional and personal lives.

Across interviews, many alumni described carrying these lessons forward after graduation. Exposure to Black professionals not only expanded their aspirations but also influenced how they understood responsibility. Several expressed commitments to mentoring younger students, supporting Black communities, and creating opportunities for future generations. In this sense, representation generated a ripple effect. Visibility inspired possibility, and possibility fostered responsibility.

At the same time, the narratives reveal important limitations. Several mentees acknowledged the disproportionate burden often placed upon a relatively small number of Black faculty and staff. These individuals frequently served as mentors, advocates, advisors, role models, and cultural translators simultaneously. Their impact was substantial, yet their availability remained constrained by institutional realities. This observation underscores the importance of viewing representation not as an individual solution but as an institutional responsibility.

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework provides a useful lens for understanding these experiences. Relationships with Black faculty, staff, and professionals

strengthened aspirational, social, and navigational forms of capital by providing encouragement, access, knowledge, and expanded visions of possibility. Yet the findings also suggest something broader. These relationships helped mentees imagine futures that previously felt distant or uncertain.

Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) work similarly helps illuminate why visibility mattered. Belonging is influenced not only by participation within institutional environments but by the extent to which individuals feel recognized and reflected within those environments. For many mentees, encountering Black professionals signaled that their presence at UC Davis was not anomalous. It affirmed that they, too, had a place within the university's intellectual and professional landscape.

The visibility of Black faculty, staff, and professionals did far more than provide symbolic reassurance. These individuals expanded the horizons of what mentees believed was possible. Through mentorship, representation, and relational engagement, they transformed abstract aspirations into attainable futures. Their presence helped students see themselves not only as survivors of the institution, but as scholars, leaders, researchers, professionals, and future mentors capable of shaping institutions themselves.

Theme 4: Activating Community Cultural Wealth

4.1 Aspirational Capital

A central finding of this study is that B.L.A.C.K. did not create aspirations where none existed; rather, it strengthened, protected, and expanded aspirations that mentees already carried with them when they arrived at UC Davis. Many of the men in this study entered college with ambitious goals shaped by family expectations, community influences, educational outreach programs, athletic experiences, and personal determination. Yet their narratives suggest that aspirations alone were not enough. Sustaining those aspirations within environments marked by

racial isolation, institutional complexity, and questions of belonging often required intentional reinforcement. One of the most important functions of B.L.A.C.K. was helping mentees maintain a sense of possibility during periods when institutional experiences threatened to narrow their vision of what was achievable.

Several alumni described arriving at UC Davis with strong educational ambitions rooted in messages they had received long before college. David recalled growing up in a Nigerian household where educational attainment was viewed as non-negotiable, while Jordan reflected on family members who consistently encouraged him to pursue opportunities beyond the limitations of his immediate environment. Cameron similarly described parents and educators who framed higher education as both a pathway to personal advancement and a means of creating broader opportunities for future generations.

These accounts are significant because they challenge deficit-oriented assumptions that marginalized students arrive at college lacking motivation or ambition. The men in this study entered UC Davis with aspirations already in motion. The more important question, therefore, is not whether they possessed aspirations, but how those aspirations were sustained when confronted with institutional barriers and moments of doubt.

A broader pattern becomes visible when examining the experiences of mentees who encountered transition challenges, academic setbacks, or racial isolation during their undergraduate years. Julian entered engineering with considerable confidence, having graduated as his high school's valedictorian. Yet over time, persistent feelings of isolation and uncertainty regarding how to navigate the institution led him to question whether he truly belonged within the field. Brandon described similar moments of doubt during periods of academic probation and emotional exhaustion when his future felt increasingly uncertain.

These experiences reveal an important reality: aspirations are not static. They can be strengthened, weakened, expanded, or constrained depending on the environments students encounter. Several mentees described periods when their confidence diminished and their futures felt less certain. What emerges from their narratives is the importance of having communities capable of protecting aspirations when institutional experiences undermined them.

Within this context, B.L.A.C.K. functioned as a space where possibility was continually reinforced. Through mentorship, dialogue, representation, and community affirmation, mentees encountered alternative narratives regarding what their futures could look like. Rather than focusing exclusively on persistence as remaining enrolled, the program encouraged students to think expansively about leadership, professional identity, graduate education, community impact, and personal purpose.

Cameron's experience illustrates this shift particularly well. Initially focused on surviving demanding STEM environments, he gradually began imagining himself as someone capable of creating opportunities for future Black students in science and technology fields. Likewise, Jordan described how involvement with B.L.A.C.K., NABA, and MLT broadened his understanding of leadership, entrepreneurship, and professional success. These experiences suggest that mentorship did more than sustain aspirations—it enlarged them.

Another mechanism through which aspirations expanded involved exposure to Black professionals, faculty, alumni, and community leaders. As discussed in the previous section, visibility mattered not merely because representation existed, but because representation made new futures imaginable. Brandon reflected that interacting with Black scholars and mental health professionals helped him envision a pathway that connected his interests in psychology, wellness, and community advocacy. Similarly, David described how mentorship relationships

encouraged him to move beyond externally imposed expectations surrounding medicine and toward a career trajectory that felt more aligned with his own interests and sense of purpose.

What makes these examples particularly noteworthy is that aspirations became increasingly authentic over time. Rather than simply pursuing conventional markers of prestige or status, many mentees began aligning their goals with deeper understandings of identity, meaning, and contribution. Exposure to mentors and role models expanded not only what seemed possible, but also what felt desirable.

Perhaps the most significant transformation involved the evolution of aspirations from individual achievement toward collective responsibility. Several alumni described entering college focused primarily on personal success. By graduation, however, many spoke about leadership, mentorship, advocacy, and community uplift as central components of their future goals. Eli reflected that his aspirations gradually shifted from simply "making it out" to helping younger Black students navigate challenges similar to those he had experienced. David described bringing lessons learned through B.L.A.C.K. back to his younger siblings, while Jordan emphasized the importance of "lifting as I climb." These accounts suggest that aspirations became increasingly communal rather than purely individual. This finding is particularly important because it reveals one of the mechanisms through which B.L.A.C.K. produced long-term developmental outcomes. The program did not simply help students imagine successful futures for themselves. It encouraged them to imagine futures in which their success could benefit others. Aspirations became connected to service, mentorship, representation, and social responsibility.

Yosso's (2005) concept of aspirational capital provides a useful lens for understanding these experiences. However, the findings suggest that aspirational capital was not merely

maintained through individual resilience. It was activated and strengthened through relationships, community affirmation, culturally responsive mentorship, and exposure to alternative narratives of Black possibility. Mentees sustained hope because they were embedded within environments that continually reminded them their futures remained expansive.

These findings also echo Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) work on belonging. The ability to imagine a future within an institution is closely connected to whether students believe they have a place within it. As mentees experienced greater belonging through B.L.A.C.K., they also described broader and more ambitious visions for themselves. Belonging did not simply support persistence; it expanded possibility.

I found that aspirational capital functioned as more than hope for a better future. It served as a developmental resource that connected identity, belonging, mentorship, and purpose. Through culturally affirming relationships and community-based support, B.L.A.C.K. helped mentees preserve aspirations during difficult moments, broaden their visions of success, and ultimately reimagine what was possible both for themselves and for the communities they hoped to serve.

4.2 Navigational Capital

A central question emerging from this study is not whether Black male students possessed the ability to succeed at UC Davis, but how they learned to navigate an institution whose expectations, norms, and pathways were often unfamiliar and largely unspoken. Across interviews, mentees consistently described arriving at the university with strong academic abilities yet limited understanding of how to move strategically through a large research institution. Their experiences suggest that persistence depended not only on academic talent, but on developing institutional fluency - the ability to understand how the university worked, where

opportunities existed, and how to access them. One of the most significant contributions of B.L.A.C.K. was that it helped transform institutional uncertainty into navigational confidence.

Several alumni reflected on the realization that academic preparation and institutional preparation were not the same thing. Julian's experience illustrates this distinction clearly. Having entered UC Davis as his high school valedictorian, he assumed that previous academic success would naturally translate into success at the university level. "I thought being valedictorian meant I'd be ready." Over time, however, he reached a different conclusion: "I didn't know how to navigate the system." Julian's reflection highlights a challenge that surfaced repeatedly throughout the interviews. Mentees were capable of meeting academic expectations, yet many had never been taught how to interpret the informal rules, relationships, and institutional structures that shape success in higher education. Their struggles were not rooted in intellectual deficiencies. Rather, they reflected unequal access to the knowledge that allows students to move confidently through complex educational environments.

A recurring theme across narratives was the existence of information that seemed essential to success but remained largely invisible. Mentees described uncertainty surrounding office hours, faculty relationships, research opportunities, internships, leadership development, graduate school preparation, and professional networking. Jalen referred to these dynamics as: "The hidden curriculum nobody teaches you." This observation is significant because it redirects attention away from individual students and toward institutional structures. Universities often assume familiarity with practices that many students—particularly first-generation students and those from historically marginalized communities—have never been exposed to. As a result, opportunities frequently become accessible only to those who already know how the system works.

David captured this experience when he described UC Davis as: “A big machine that didn't know I was there.” His statement reflects more than frustration. It conveys the disorientation that many mentees felt during their transition to college. The challenge was not simply locating resources. It was learning how to interpret an institution whose pathways often appeared fragmented, decentralized, and difficult to understand.

What distinguishes the experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees is the way they learned to navigate these challenges. Institutional fluency rarely emerged through formal systems alone. Instead, it developed through relationships. Mentors, peers, faculty, staff, and alumni served as translators who helped students decode expectations, identify opportunities, and understand how to position themselves for success. Cameron's description of B.L.A.C.K. as his: “UC Davis Green Book” offers a particularly powerful illustration of this process.

The metaphor evokes the historical guide used by Black travelers to safely navigate segregated America. In a similar way, Cameron viewed the program as a resource that helped him move through institutional environments that often felt confusing, unpredictable, or unwelcoming. What made B.L.A.C.K. valuable was not simply the information it provided. It helped mentees understand where to go, whom to trust, and how to access opportunities that might otherwise remain hidden.

This mechanism appeared repeatedly across interviews. Jalen described mentorship relationships that introduced him to research opportunities and academic pathways he would not have discovered independently. Jordan credited B.L.A.C.K., NABA, and MLT with teaching him how to network, pursue internships, and navigate professional environments. These examples reveal that institutional knowledge was often transmitted relationally rather than bureaucratically.

Another important finding involves how mentorship reshaped mentees' interpretations of challenge. Several alumni initially viewed academic difficulties, confusion, or setbacks as evidence that they did not belong. Through mentorship, however, many began reframing those experiences as common features of navigating a complex institution. Brandon's story illustrates this shift. During periods of academic probation, he questioned both his abilities and his future at UC Davis. Yet mentors helped him understand that struggling to navigate institutional systems was not equivalent to lacking potential. Similarly, Malik described how mentorship reduced the guilt he associated with asking for help, allowing him to engage available resources more intentionally after leaving football.

These experiences suggest that navigational capital was activated through two interconnected processes. First, mentors provided practical knowledge regarding how the institution functioned. Second, they helped mentees reinterpret challenges in ways that preserved confidence and belonging. Information alone was important, but information combined with affirmation proved transformative.

Peer relationships also served as critical mechanisms for developing navigational capital. Several alumni emphasized that they learned as much from one another as they did from formal mentors. Conversations about professors, internships, campus resources, graduate school, and professional opportunities created informal networks through which knowledge circulated. Jordan reflected that: "being surrounded by other brothers doing their thing" continually exposed him to opportunities, strategies, and pathways he may not have encountered on his own. Likewise, Eli described how conversations within B.L.A.C.K. normalized confusion and uncertainty while reinforcing that institutional navigation was a learned process rather than an innate ability.

Over time, these experiences produced more than competence. They produced agency. Julian described becoming increasingly comfortable advocating for accommodations, communicating with faculty, and managing the demands of engineering environments. Brandon eventually moved from feeling disconnected academically to envisioning doctoral study in clinical psychology. David similarly credited mentorship with helping him navigate personal and professional transitions while clarifying his leadership aspirations.

Yet navigational capital did not remain individualized. Many mentees described sharing what they learned with younger students, siblings, peers, and community members. David reflected: “Everything I learned in the program, I brought back to my siblings.” Cameron similarly discussed mentoring younger Black students interested in STEM because he understood how difficult those environments could be without guidance. These accounts suggest that navigational capital functioned less as a personal possession and more as a communal resource that circulated through networks of mentorship and support.

Yosso's (2005) framework helps illuminate why these processes mattered. Yet the findings from this study suggest that navigational capital was not simply something students brought with them to the university. It was cultivated, strengthened, and activated through culturally responsive relationships that translated institutional culture into something understandable and accessible.

The experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that persistence depended not only on determination, intelligence, or effort. It depended on learning how to move through the institution with confidence and purpose. B.L.A.C.K. played a critical role in that process by transforming uncertainty into knowledge, isolation into connection, and confusion into agency. Through mentorship, peer learning, and culturally grounded guidance, mentees developed the

institutional fluency necessary not only to survive UC Davis, but to navigate it strategically and successfully.

4.3 Resistant Capital

A central question emerging from the experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees is: What narratives were they being asked to accept, and which ones did they ultimately reject? Across interviews, alumni described navigating institutional and societal messages that often positioned Black men through deficit-oriented lenses. These narratives appeared in assumptions about academic ability, intellectual legitimacy, leadership potential, emotional expression, and belonging within predominantly White educational spaces. Yet the findings suggest that resistance was not limited to opposing these messages. Through mentorship, critical dialogue, cultural affirmation, and community, mentees actively reconstructed alternative narratives about who they were and who they could become.

Several alumni described becoming acutely aware of how Black men were perceived within institutional environments. Brandon reflected on the pressure to present a version of himself that felt professionally acceptable, academically non-threatening, and institutionally "legible." Likewise, Eli discussed code-switching as a strategy that helped him navigate classrooms and professional settings, while simultaneously acknowledging: "Emotionally it wasn't sustainable." These experiences reveal that resistance often began with recognizing the existence of external expectations. Mentees became increasingly aware that many institutional spaces carried implicit assumptions regarding how Black men should speak, behave, perform, and succeed. The challenge was not simply navigating those assumptions but deciding whether to accept them.

A broader pattern emerges when examining how mentees described their relationships with academic achievement. Several alumni encountered narratives suggesting that Black men occupied peripheral rather than central positions within intellectual spaces. These messages were rarely communicated explicitly. Instead, they appeared through underrepresentation, lowered expectations, isolation, and the absence of visible role models.

Cameron's experiences in STEM environments illustrate this dynamic. Navigating biology and pre-veterinary spaces with limited Black representation often intensified feelings of hypervisibility and self-consciousness. Yet mentorship and community affirmation helped him reject the notion that intellectual achievement and Black identity existed in tension with one another. Rather than simply persisting within STEM, he began reimagining himself as someone capable of creating opportunities for future Black students interested in science and technology. His later efforts to co-found Blurred Out Black Nerds represent an important example of resistant capital in action. The organization did more than challenge stereotypes. It expanded cultural understandings of Black identity by creating space for interests and forms of expression often excluded from dominant representations of Black masculinity. Resistance, in this context, involved producing new narratives rather than merely rejecting old ones.

Another mechanism through which narrative reconstruction occurred was historical consciousness. Several mentees described engagement with Black history, African American Studies, and culturally grounded dialogue as transformative experiences that altered how they interpreted their own lives. David reflected: “It wasn’t just about learning Black history—it was about seeing myself in that history.” This highlights a profound shift in perspective. Prior to these experiences, challenges associated with race, belonging, and marginalization could easily be interpreted as individual struggles. Through engagement with Black history and culture,

however, mentees began locating their experiences within broader social, political, and historical contexts. Eli described a similar realization: “My story wasn’t an accident.” This observation reflects an important act of resistance. Rather than internalizing institutional barriers as evidence of personal inadequacy, mentees developed frameworks that allowed them to understand those barriers as products of larger structural realities. Such shifts transformed how they understood both struggle and success.

The narratives also reveal that resistant capital frequently involved challenging dominant constructions of Black masculinity. Several alumni recalled arriving at UC Davis with assumptions that Black men were expected to be emotionally guarded, perpetually resilient, and reluctant to seek help. Within B.L.A.C.K., however, these assumptions were repeatedly questioned. Jordan described discussions that: “opened something up.” The significance of this reflection lies in its simplicity. Conversations about identity, vulnerability, fear, mental health, and purpose created opportunities for mentees to explore dimensions of themselves that often remained hidden elsewhere. Similarly, Eli recalled collective conversations about “what kind of Black man you want to be.” This question represents a fundamental act of resistance because it shifts authority away from external expectations and toward self-definition. Rather than conforming to inherited narratives, mentees were encouraged to determine for themselves what masculinity, leadership, and success would mean in their lives.

For some alumni, resistance also involved rejecting pressures toward assimilation. Julian's experiences as an autistic Black student highlight the complexity of navigating multiple forms of marginalization simultaneously. Reflecting on engineering environments, he explained: “Masking was exhausting.” Yet within B.L.A.C.K., he encountered a community where: “Fitting in didn’t take as much effort.” His experience demonstrates that resistant capital was not only

about confronting racism. It also involved resisting expectations that required individuals to suppress aspects of themselves to gain acceptance. The freedom to exist more authentically became a form of resistance in its own right.

Perhaps most importantly, mentees repeatedly reframed persistence itself as a challenge to dominant narratives. Malik's decision to remain enrolled after leaving football required rejecting the belief that his value was tied solely to athletics. Brandon's persistence through academic probation involved resisting narratives that questioned his intellectual potential. In both cases, success was not merely academic. It represented an assertion of agency in environments that frequently undermined confidence and belonging.

Resistance also became collective. Several alumni described feeling a responsibility to mentor younger students, increase representation, and create opportunities for future generations. Jordan emphasized the importance of "lifting as I climb," while David discussed sharing lessons learned through B.L.A.C.K. with younger siblings and peers. These commitments reveal that resistant capital extended beyond personal survival. It became a mechanism for community transformation.

Yosso's (2005) framework helps explain why these experiences matter. Yet the findings suggest that resistant capital operated through a process more expansive than opposition alone. Mentees were not simply rejecting deficit narratives. They were constructing alternative narratives grounded in cultural affirmation, intellectual legitimacy, vulnerability, leadership, and collective responsibility.

Viewed holistically, resistant capital functioned as a process of narrative reconstruction. Through critical reflection, mentorship, historical engagement, and community dialogue, former B.L.A.C.K. mentees challenged assumptions about what it meant to be Black, male, successful,

educated, and worthy of belonging. In doing so, they transformed resistance from an act of survival into a source of empowerment, agency, and possibility.

4.4 Familial and Social Capital

A central question emerging from this study is: Who helped sustain mentees when institutional challenges, personal struggles, and questions of belonging threatened their persistence? Across interviews, former B.L.A.C.K. participants consistently pointed to relationships as one of the most important resources supporting their success. While universities often focus on programs, services, and interventions as mechanisms for student retention, the experiences of these men suggest that relationships themselves functioned as a form of capital. Family members, mentors, peers, faculty, staff, and culturally affirming communities provided emotional support, institutional guidance, accountability, encouragement, and opportunity throughout their educational journeys.

For many mentees, these resources originated long before arriving at UC Davis. Several alumni described family members who instilled strong beliefs regarding education, perseverance, leadership, and collective responsibility. David reflected that educational achievement was deeply embedded within his family's expectations, while Cameron described parents who consistently encouraged him to pursue opportunities beyond the limitations imposed by underrepresentation and structural inequity. These early messages served as important foundations, shaping how mentees approached higher education and reinforcing the belief that their success carried significance beyond themselves.

Yet the findings suggest that familial support extended well beyond biological relationships. Several alumni described educators, outreach programs, mentors, and community advocates as critical figures in their development long before college. Eli credited EOP and

TRIO with helping him imagine educational possibilities that previously felt distant, while Jalen emphasized the importance of EAOP in expanding his awareness of higher education pathways. These accounts complicate traditional understandings of family by illustrating how support networks often included individuals and organizations committed to nurturing students' growth and aspirations.

Once at UC Davis, many mentees described experiencing a profound shift in how familial and social capital operated. In response to racial isolation, institutional complexity, and questions of belonging, they actively sought relationships capable of providing connection and affirmation. For many, B.L.A.C.K., CADSS, and other Black community spaces became what several participants described as a "chosen family." David's description of B.L.A.C.K. as a place to be around: "brothers who got it" captures this sentiment powerfully. His statement reflects more than friendship. It speaks to the comfort of existing among people who understood experiences that often required explanation elsewhere. Similarly, Jordan described CADSS as a "home base" during difficult periods of his undergraduate experience, while Eli recalled days when he entered Black community spaces simply: "to see Black faces." These reflections suggest that community provided something fundamental: reassurance that mentees did not have to navigate the institution alone.

A broader pattern becomes visible when considering the language alumni used to describe these relationships. Terms such as "brothers," "family," "home," "circle," and "community" appeared repeatedly throughout the interviews. Such language is significant because it reveals how participants understood support not as a service they received, but as a relationship they inhabited.

Malik's experience illustrates this dynamic clearly. Following his departure from football, he described feeling disconnected from many of the relationships that had previously organized his collegiate experience. Reflecting on the support he found through B.L.A.C.K., he explained: “It felt nice knowing that we had people who were in our circle.” The significance of this statement lies in its emphasis on collective belonging. During a period marked by uncertainty and identity disruption, community provided stability. Relationships became a source of continuity when other structures felt fragile or uncertain.

These findings suggest that familial and social capital operated through multiple mechanisms simultaneously. Relationships offered emotional care, practical guidance, institutional knowledge, professional opportunities, and accountability. Rather than existing as separate forms of support, these dimensions frequently overlapped. Jordan's experiences provide a useful example. Through B.L.A.C.K., NABA, and MLT, he gained access to professional networks, internships, leadership opportunities, and career pathways that significantly expanded his understanding of future possibilities. Yet those opportunities emerged through relationships rather than through institutional systems alone. Likewise, Jalen described mentorship relationships that connected him to research experiences and STEM opportunities that initially felt inaccessible. These examples reveal that social capital functioned not merely as access to people, but as access to opportunity through people. Networks became conduits through which information, encouragement, and institutional resources flowed.

Another important finding involves the protective role these relationships played during periods of difficulty. Several alumni described moments when emotional, academic, or personal challenges threatened their persistence. During such periods, community often served as a stabilizing force. David relied heavily upon mentorship and peer support following the death of

his mother. Brandon described emotional care from peers and mentors as essential during periods of academic probation and identity-related uncertainty. Malik similarly credited community relationships with helping him regain a sense of purpose after leaving athletics. These narratives suggest that familial and social capital functioned as a protective buffer against isolation, self-doubt, and disengagement.

Perhaps most importantly, these relationships were reciprocal rather than transactional. Mentees consistently described receiving support while simultaneously feeling responsible for supporting others. Jordan captured this ethos through the phrase: “lifting as I climb.” David similarly reflected: “Everything I learned in the program, I brought back to my siblings.” Cameron discussed intentionally mentoring younger Black students interested in STEM because he understood firsthand the challenges associated with navigating those spaces without guidance or representation. These examples reveal one of the most distinctive features of familial and social capital within B.L.A.C.K.: it circulated. Support was not simply consumed by individuals. It was shared, reproduced, and extended outward to others. Relationships generated obligations rooted not in institutional requirements, but in community responsibility.

Yosso's (2005) framework provides an important lens for understanding these dynamics. Familial and social capital were clearly evident throughout the experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees. However, the findings also suggest something broader. These forms of capital were not static resources that students either possessed or lacked. They were continually produced and strengthened through ongoing relationships grounded in trust, care, reciprocity, and shared experience.

The narratives also deepen Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) perception of belonging by illustrating how connection is sustained through community rather than through institutional

affiliation alone. Mentees often described feeling connected to people before they felt connected to the university itself. Relationships became the bridge through which belonging was cultivated.

In essence, familial and social capital functioned as the relational infrastructure supporting persistence. Family members nurtured aspirations, mentors provided guidance, peers offered accountability, and culturally affirming communities created spaces where students felt recognized and valued. Together, these relationships formed a network of support that sustained mentees academically, emotionally, and professionally. The experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. participants suggest that persistence was rarely an individual accomplishment. Rather, it emerged through communities that continually reminded students that they were seen, supported, and never expected to navigate the institution alone.

Theme 5: Persistence, Leadership, and Transformation

5.1 Redefining Success

One of the most significant transformations described by former B.L.A.C.K. mentees involved a fundamental shift in how they understood success. Many arrived at UC Davis with definitions of achievement shaped by academic performance, athletic accomplishment, professional prestige, family expectations, or external validation. These understandings were not inherently problematic; indeed, they reflected aspirations cultivated through years of hard work and encouragement. However, the realities of navigating a predominantly White institution often complicated these assumptions. As mentees encountered academic setbacks, identity challenges, racial isolation, and questions of belonging, many began reexamining whether the measures of success they had inherited were sufficient for sustaining personal well-being and long-term fulfillment.

For several alumni, college became the first environment that disrupted previously unquestioned assumptions about achievement. Brandon entered UC Davis as a Division I

student-athlete with aspirations tied closely to athletics, performance, and external recognition. Similarly, Malik described football as the primary structure through which he understood identity, purpose, and future opportunity. In both cases, success was initially associated with accomplishment, visibility, and institutional validation.

Yet moments of disruption forced both men to reconsider these assumptions. Brandon's experiences with academic probation and emotional exhaustion challenged the belief that achievement alone could provide a stable foundation for self-worth. Likewise, Malik's departure from football created what he described as a profound identity rupture. "Once I did part ways, I'm like, I'm not tied to anything at Davis." His reflection captures a critical turning point. When a primary source of identity disappeared, previously accepted definitions of success no longer provided adequate direction or meaning. What followed was not simply a period of adjustment, but a process of reconstruction.

A broader pattern emerges across the narratives when examining how mentees responded to these moments of uncertainty. Rather than abandoning ambition, they began redefining its purpose. Success gradually became less about meeting external expectations and more about aligning achievement with authenticity, personal growth, and meaningful contribution. Brandon's educational and professional trajectory illustrates this transformation particularly well. Over time, he moved away from narrowly performance-oriented understandings of success and toward a vision grounded in psychological well-being, community impact, and service. His interest in clinical psychology and youth mental health advocacy reflected more than a career decision. It represented a broader reorientation toward work that felt personally meaningful and socially consequential.

Similar shifts appeared throughout the interviews. David described moving away from externally imposed expectations surrounding medicine and prestige toward professional goals connected to psychology, leadership, and community health. What changed was not the presence of ambition, but its source. Rather than pursuing pathways primarily because they signaled success to others, mentees increasingly pursued pathways that reflected their evolving values and identities.

Authenticity emerged as a particularly important theme within these redefined understandings of success. Several alumni reflected on the emotional labor required to navigate environments where aspects of their identities often felt constrained, questioned, or misunderstood. Through participation in B.L.A.C.K., many began questioning whether achievement that required constant self-suppression could truly be considered success. Eli's reflections are especially instructive in this regard. Earlier sections of this chapter described his experiences with code-switching, identity negotiation, and navigating expectations surrounding Black masculinity. Over time, however, he began embracing a different understanding of achievement - one that prioritized authenticity, meaningful relationships, and community engagement alongside professional accomplishment. This developmental shift appears throughout the narratives. Mentees increasingly rejected the notion that success required sacrificing identity, emotional well-being, or cultural authenticity. Instead, they began envisioning futures in which achievement and self-definition could coexist.

Another important transformation involved the movement from individual accomplishment toward collective responsibility. Early aspirations were often framed in personal terms: obtaining a degree, securing employment, achieving financial stability, or advancing

professionally. By contrast, alumni frequently described their post-B.L.A.C.K. definitions of success using language centered on service, mentorship, representation, and community uplift. Jordan captured this evolution through the phrase: “lifting as I climb.” The significance of this statement extends beyond mentorship. It reflects a broader philosophical shift in how success was understood. Advancement was no longer viewed solely as an individual outcome. It became meaningful because of its potential to benefit others.

Cameron's experiences provide another compelling example. Through mentorship and community affirmation, he began envisioning himself not simply as a Black student succeeding within STEM environments, but as someone capable of creating opportunities for future Black students interested in science, technology, gaming, and creative spaces. Likewise, David described carrying lessons learned through B.L.A.C.K. back to younger siblings and peers. These accounts suggest that success became increasingly connected to responsibility rather than recognition.

Mental health and emotional well-being also emerged as important dimensions of this transformation. Several alumni described realizing that traditional definitions of achievement often neglected questions of wellness, balance, and personal fulfillment. Jordan reflected that conversations surrounding Black masculinity and vulnerability challenged assumptions that success required emotional suppression. Julian similarly described learning that persistence involved more than academic endurance; it required environments where he could navigate both his racial and neurodivergent identities without constant exhaustion.

These insights reveal a noteworthy shift. Success was no longer defined solely by outcomes. It became defined by the quality of life, relationships, and sense of purpose accompanying those outcomes. The significance of these findings lies in the way they challenge

dominant narratives surrounding Black male achievement in higher education. Public discourse frequently celebrates persistence as evidence of resilience while paying less attention to how students themselves define meaningful success. The experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that educational success cannot be fully understood through graduation rates, grade point averages, or career outcomes alone. Such measures capture achievement but often fail to capture transformation.

Yosso's (2005) concepts of aspirational and resistant capital provide useful insight into this developmental process. Mentees sustained ambitious goals despite institutional barriers while simultaneously resisting narrow societal narratives regarding what Black male success should look like. Yet the findings also suggest something broader. Through culturally affirming relationships, mentorship, and critical reflection, they reconstructed more expansive definitions of achievement that integrated purpose, authenticity, wellness, leadership, and community responsibility.

Notably, the transformation described by former B.L.A.C.K. mentees was not a movement away from success, but a reimagining of it. The question shifted from "How do I prove that I belong?" to "What kind of life, impact, and legacy do I want to create?" Through this process, success became less about external validation and more about living in alignment with one's values, supporting others, and contributing meaningfully to communities beyond oneself. In this sense, one of the most enduring outcomes of the B.L.A.C.K. experience was not simply helping mentees achieve success but helping them decide what success truly meant.

5.2 Leadership Development and Collective Responsibility

A significant transformation emerging from the experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees involved not simply whether they became leaders, but how they came to understand

leadership itself. Many entered UC Davis with conventional assumptions that associated leadership with visibility, authority, formal positions, or individual accomplishment. By contrast, the leadership philosophies they described by graduation were rooted in service, accountability, mentorship, and community responsibility. Their narratives suggest that B.L.A.C.K. did more than develop leadership skills; it reshaped how leadership was defined and practiced.

Leadership development did not occur through formal workshops, titles, or institutional recognition. Instead, it emerged through relationships. Observing peers navigate challenges, witnessing mentors invest in students, and participating in culturally affirming conversations gradually altered their understanding of what it meant to lead. Jordan's reflection captures this shift particularly well: "Being surrounded by other brothers doing their thing just kept me going." At first glance, his statement appears to describe motivation. Yet it also reveals something deeper. Leadership was not experienced as an individual pursuit. Seeing other Black men persist, grow, and support one another created a model of leadership grounded in collective advancement rather than personal distinction. That philosophy appeared repeatedly throughout the interviews. Advancement was rarely framed as an endpoint. Instead, success created an obligation to support others navigating similar pathways. Leadership became less about reaching a destination and more about creating access for those following behind.

A broader pattern emerges when considering how mentees discussed the influence of mentors throughout their undergraduate experiences. Several alumni described receiving encouragement, guidance, and emotional support during periods when they questioned their abilities, identities, or futures. Over time, many began reproducing those same practices in their own relationships with younger students, siblings, peers, and community members.

David reflected: “Everything I learned in the program, I brought back to my siblings.” His observation highlights one of the most important mechanisms through which leadership developed. Mentees did not simply receive mentorship; they internalized it. The care, accountability, and guidance they experienced became templates for how they would later engage others. Leadership emerged through replication. Students who had once been supported gradually became sources of support themselves.

Brandon's story illustrates a similar progression. During periods of academic probation and emotional exhaustion, mentors helped him recognize strengths and possibilities that he struggled to see in himself. As his confidence grew, so did his commitment to supporting younger Black students, particularly those navigating mental health challenges and questions of belonging. Leadership, in this context, was not rooted in expertise alone. It was rooted in empathy born from lived experience.

Another notable transformation involved the relationship between leadership and identity. Several mentees described arriving at UC Davis uncertain whether they belonged within academic, professional, or leadership spaces. Experiences of underrepresentation often reinforced these doubts, particularly within STEM environments and other spaces where Black visibility remained limited.

Cameron's narrative provides a compelling example. Early experiences in STEM frequently left him questioning whether he truly belonged within those environments. Through mentorship, community affirmation, and exposure to alternative models of Black achievement, however, he began envisioning himself differently. Rather than focusing solely on his own success, he became increasingly committed to creating opportunities for others. His later efforts co-founding Blurred Out Black Nerds illustrate this transformation. The organization did more

than provide social connection. It challenged narrow assumptions regarding Black identity while creating affirming spaces for students whose interests often fell outside dominant cultural narratives. Leadership became an act of community creation. Rather than waiting for institutions to provide belonging, Cameron helped build spaces where belonging could flourish.

This finding reveals that leadership frequently emerged through cultural affirmation. Mentees who learned to embrace their identities more fully also became more willing to lead authentically. Leadership was no longer about conforming to institutional expectations. It became an extension of self-definition and community commitment.

Several alumni also described leadership development as a process of critical reflection. Conversations surrounding race, masculinity, vulnerability, and responsibility encouraged mentees to think deeply about the type of leaders they wanted to become. Jordan reflected that discussions about Black masculinity: “opened something up.” Similarly, Eli described conversations focused on: “what kind of Black man you want to be.” These exchanges reveal that leadership development was inseparable from identity development. Rather than focusing exclusively on technical skills or professional advancement, B.L.A.C.K. encouraged students to consider questions of character, values, and purpose. Leadership became a process of deciding not only what one hoped to achieve, but who one hoped to become.

The narratives also suggest that advocacy became an increasingly important component of leadership. Several alumni described growing awareness of the structural barriers affecting Black students within higher education. Through mentorship, community dialogue, and lived experience, they began recognizing that many challenges commonly interpreted as individual shortcomings were rooted in broader institutional conditions. Eli reflected that culturally affirming spaces helped him understand that many struggles facing Black students were

institutional rather than personal. Julian similarly became increasingly committed to advocating for students with intersecting marginalized identities after navigating challenges associated with both race and neurodivergence. In these cases, leadership evolved beyond self-development and toward social awareness.

This shift represents an important developmental outcome. Early in their college experiences, many mentees focused understandably on their own adjustment and survival. Over time, however, they began directing attention outward. Leadership increasingly involved identifying inequities, supporting others, and contributing to institutional change.

Perhaps most importantly, the leadership described by mentees was profoundly communal. Unlike institutional environments that often reward competition, individual performance, and personal achievement, B.L.A.C.K. cultivated an alternative leadership model grounded in mutual support and shared success. Across interviews, alumni emphasized encouragement, accountability, collaboration, and collective growth. They celebrated one another's achievements, shared opportunities, and viewed progress as something that could be expanded rather than competed over. This orientation fundamentally challenged scarcity-based assumptions that Black students must compete for limited opportunities or recognition.

Yosso's (2005) framework helps illuminate the foundations of this transformation. Leadership development was nurtured through aspirational, social, familial, and resistant forms of capital that reinforced both possibility and responsibility. Yet the findings also point toward something larger. Leadership emerged through relationships that continually connected personal achievement to community well-being.

The experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that leadership was not understood as status, authority, or visibility. It was understood as stewardship. Through

mentorship, cultural affirmation, critical reflection, and collective accountability, mentees developed leadership identities grounded in service, advocacy, and responsibility to others. The question gradually shifted from “How can I succeed?” to “How can my success create opportunities for someone else?” That transformation may represent one of the most enduring outcomes of the B.L.A.C.K. experience.

5.3 Advocacy, Resistance, and Institutional Critique

Former B.L.A.C.K. mentees described a shift in how they interpreted their experiences within higher education. Many entered UC Davis viewing academic struggles, feelings of isolation, uncertainty, and questions of belonging through an individual lens. When challenges emerged, they often assumed the problem resided within themselves. Over time, however, participation in B.L.A.C.K., engagement with culturally affirming communities, and exposure to critical conversations about race and power encouraged a different interpretation. Mentees increasingly learned to distinguish between personal challenges and structural realities. In doing so, they developed the capacity not only to navigate institutions, but also to question them.

Several alumni described initially internalizing institutional difficulties as evidence that they were somehow unprepared, inadequate, or out of place. Academic setbacks, imposter syndrome, racial isolation, and emotional exhaustion were often interpreted as personal shortcomings rather than predictable consequences of navigating environments where representation, support, and belonging were unevenly distributed. Eli's reflection captures this shift in understanding particularly well: “My story wasn't an accident.” Although brief, this statement reflects a significant intellectual and emotional transformation. Rather than viewing his experiences as isolated events, Eli began recognizing patterns connecting his individual journey

to broader institutional and historical realities. Challenges that once felt personal increasingly appeared structural.

A similar evolution emerged in David's narrative. Reflecting on his experiences navigating UC Davis, he observed: "UC Davis was not built to help students unfamiliar with the hidden curriculum." His statement is noteworthy because it redirects attention away from students and toward institutions. The issue was no longer whether students possessed sufficient motivation or ability. The more pressing question became whether institutions were organized in ways that equitably supported all students. This shift from self-blame to structural awareness surfaced repeatedly throughout the interviews.

For many mentees, B.L.A.C.K. provided the space where this transformation began. Conversations surrounding race, masculinity, representation, educational inequity, and campus climate offered frameworks for understanding experiences that had previously felt confusing or isolating. Rather than encouraging students to simply adapt to institutional realities, the program invited them to examine those realities critically. Jordan reflected that discussions about Black masculinity and belonging: "Opened something up." The significance of this observation extends beyond personal growth. Through dialogue and reflection, mentees gained language for understanding how institutional environments shaped identity, opportunity, and belonging. Experiences that once felt individualized became connected to larger conversations regarding power, race, and equity.

Historical engagement played a particularly important role in this process. Several alumni described learning Black history as more than an academic exercise. It became a lens through which contemporary experiences could be interpreted and understood. David explained that studying Black history was transformative because it connected present-day challenges to longer

histories of exclusion, resistance, and resilience. Rather than viewing their struggles as isolated incidents, mentees began recognizing continuities between their experiences and broader social realities. This historical perspective expanded their understanding of both institutions and themselves.

As critical awareness deepened, several alumni became increasingly skeptical of institutional narratives surrounding diversity and inclusion. Their critiques were rarely dismissive. Instead, they reflected a growing recognition of the gap between symbolic commitments and lived realities. Eli questioned why Black students were frequently expected to create their own support systems despite institutional rhetoric emphasizing equity and inclusion. Likewise, Brandon reflected on the tension between celebrating Black achievement publicly while leaving many of the structural and emotional burdens associated with Black student success largely unaddressed. These observations reveal an important developmental shift. Mentees were no longer evaluating institutions solely based on stated intentions. They were evaluating them based on outcomes, structures, and lived experiences. Institutional critique emerged from engagement rather than disengagement.

Another form of resistance involved challenging dominant narratives surrounding Black men themselves. Earlier sections of this chapter described how mentees confronted assumptions regarding intelligence, legitimacy, masculinity, and belonging. Here, those acts of resistance evolve into broader forms of advocacy and cultural intervention. Cameron's creation of Blurred Out Black Nerds offers a compelling example. Rather than simply rejecting stereotypes regarding Black masculinity, he created an alternative space where Black students interested in STEM, gaming, anime, and creative subcultures could see themselves reflected and affirmed. His actions demonstrate that resistance was not solely oppositional. It was productive. New

possibilities emerged because old narratives were challenged. Brandon described a similar process when reflecting on the realization that he could be: “Both academic and Black without being questioned.” What began as personal affirmation gradually developed into a commitment to expanding those possibilities for others. Resistance became advocacy.

Several alumni also described advocacy as a direct response to their own experiences navigating institutional barriers. Having struggled with uncertainty, isolation, and limited representation, they became increasingly committed to helping younger students avoid similar challenges. Cameron intentionally mentored younger Black students pursuing STEM pathways because he understood how difficult those environments could be without guidance or representation. David described supporting younger siblings and peers using lessons learned through B.L.A.C.K., while Jordan repeatedly emphasized the philosophy of: “lifting as I climb.” These examples reveal that advocacy often emerged from lived experience. Students who had once benefited from culturally affirming support became advocates for creating those same conditions for others.

Another important dimension of resistance involved authenticity. Several mentees described gradually rejecting pressures to conform completely to dominant institutional expectations regarding professionalism, emotional expression, and identity. Eli acknowledged that code-switching often functioned as a useful survival strategy, yet he also recognized: “Emotionally it wasn't sustainable.” Similarly, Julian described the exhaustion associated with constantly masking aspects of both his racial and neurodivergent identities. Over time, both men became increasingly intentional about seeking and creating environments where authenticity required less sacrifice. These acts may appear subtle, but they represent significant

forms of resistance against institutional cultures that reward conformity while marginalizing difference.

Perhaps most importantly, advocacy increasingly extended beyond the university itself. Several alumni connected their professional aspirations directly to broader commitments toward equity, representation, and community well-being. Brandon's interest in psychology and mental health advocacy emerged from a desire to address challenges he observed among Black students and Black communities. David connected his interests in psychology and public health to larger questions of community wellness. Jordan envisioned success in business and technology not merely as personal achievement, but as an opportunity to increase access and representation for marginalized populations. These trajectories suggest that institutional critique did not produce cynicism. Instead, it cultivated responsibility. As mentees developed greater awareness of systemic inequities, they also became more committed to addressing them.

Yosso's (2005) concept of resistant capital provides a valuable lens for understanding these experiences. Yet the findings suggest that resistance operated through a broader developmental process than opposition alone. Mentees cultivated critical consciousness, questioned institutional assumptions, challenged deficit narratives, and created alternative pathways for belonging and success. Resistance became both analytical and practical.

Ultimately, the experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees reveal a transformation in how they understood institutions themselves. What began as efforts to survive challenging environments gradually evolved into the capacity to analyze, critique, and influence those environments. The question shifted from “How do I fit into this institution?” to “How might this institution become more equitable, humane, and responsive?” That shift in consciousness may represent one of the most enduring legacies of the B.L.A.C.K. experience, shaping not only how

mentees navigated UC Davis, but how they engaged the communities and institutions they would encounter long after graduation.

5.4 Post-Graduation Meaning-Making

Perhaps the most revealing question posed by this study is not what B.L.A.C.K. meant while mentees were enrolled at UC Davis, but what it means to them now. Looking back from the vantage point of adulthood, professional careers, graduate education, family responsibilities, and community leadership, former mentees consistently described the program as something far greater than a student support initiative. While participants often entered B.L.A.C.K. seeking community, mentorship, or guidance, many now interpret the experience as a formative chapter in the development of their identities, values, relationships, and life trajectories. Their reflections suggest that the significance of the program extends well beyond persistence and graduation. It continues to shape how they understand themselves and their responsibilities to others.

A recurring pattern across the interviews involved the reinterpretation of college experiences through time and distance. Events that once felt isolated or difficult often acquired new meaning when viewed retrospectively. Academic struggles, racial isolation, identity conflicts, and periods of uncertainty were no longer remembered solely as obstacles. Instead, many alumni described them as experiences that contributed to personal growth, self-awareness, and a deeper understanding of purpose.

Brandon's reflections illustrate this process particularly well. Looking back, he no longer viewed his undergraduate years primarily through the lens of athletics, grades, or achievement. Instead, he emphasized how those experiences reshaped his understanding of identity, emotional well-being, and service. "I could be both academic and Black without being questioned." What began as a realization about belonging eventually influenced his professional aspirations, leading

him toward doctoral study and a commitment to supporting Black youth through psychology and mental health advocacy. His reflection demonstrates how the significance of B.L.A.C.K. evolved over time. The program did not simply help him persist through college; it helped shape the kind of professional and community leader he hoped to become.

A similar pattern emerged in David's narrative. Reflecting on his undergraduate experiences, he described B.L.A.C.K. as transformative because it altered how he understood both education and identity. “It wasn't just about learning Black history—it was about seeing myself in that history.” This observation carries particular weight when viewed retrospectively. Years after graduation, David no longer framed his college experience solely as a period of academic development. Instead, he understood it as a process of locating himself within larger cultural, historical, and community traditions. That shift continued influencing how he approached family, mentorship, public health, and community engagement long after leaving the university.

Several alumni also described post-graduation meaning making as a process of reconciling achievement with authenticity. During college, many felt pressure to navigate institutional expectations surrounding professionalism, race, masculinity, and success. Looking back, however, they increasingly emphasized the importance of living in alignment with their values rather than conforming to external definitions of accomplishment. Eli's reflections are especially illustrative in this regard. Earlier chapters described his experiences with code-switching, invisibility, and navigating multiple identities within predominantly White spaces. Yet when discussing the long-term impact of B.L.A.C.K., his focus shifted away from survival and toward self-understanding. Reflecting on conversations about race, masculinity, and identity, he explained that the program helped him consider: “what kind of Black man you want to be.”

What makes this statement significant is its enduring relevance. The question was not answered during college and then forgotten. Instead, it continued guiding personal and professional choices well beyond graduation. For Eli, the most lasting impact of B.L.A.C.K. was not a specific skill or opportunity. It was a framework for thinking about identity, purpose, and responsibility.

A broader pattern becomes visible when considering how alumni discussed mentorship years later. Many no longer viewed mentorship solely as something they received. Instead, they described it as something they now felt obligated to provide. David reflected: “Everything I learned in the program, I brought back to my siblings.” Likewise, Jordan continued to frame his professional and personal decisions through the philosophy of: “lifting as I climb.” These reflections suggest that one of the enduring legacies of B.L.A.C.K. is the reproduction of mentorship across generations. Support received during college became support extended to others. The impact of the program therefore continued far beyond the original participants themselves.

Another important dimension of post-graduation meaning making involved representation and possibility. Several alumni described recognizing, with greater clarity over time, the importance of seeing Black faculty, staff, professionals, and mentors during critical moments of their undergraduate experience. Cameron reflected that those relationships fundamentally altered what he believed was possible within STEM and professional spaces. Similarly, Jalen described how exposure to Black researchers and professionals expanded his understanding of potential career trajectories. Looking back, both recognized that representation had influenced not only their educational decisions but also their willingness to envision themselves occupying leadership roles within their respective fields.

For some alumni, retrospective reflection also deepened their understanding of institutional inequity. Experiences that once felt confusing or frustrating became easier to contextualize through time, education, and professional experience. Several participants acknowledged ongoing concerns regarding racial underrepresentation, campus climate, and the disproportionate burden often placed on culturally affirming spaces.

Yet these critiques were rarely expressed through cynicism. Instead, they reflected a nuanced understanding of both institutional limitations and institutional possibility. Alumni recognized that programs such as B.L.A.C.K. existed because students, educators, and advocates intentionally created spaces capable of addressing needs the institution had not fully met. This recognition strengthened many participants' commitments to advocacy, mentorship, and institutional change. Malik's reflections provide another example of how meaning evolved over time. During college, leaving football felt disorienting and deeply painful. Yet years later, he interpreted that transition differently. What once appeared as loss became an opportunity for self-discovery. The experience forced him to reconstruct identity beyond athletics and develop greater clarity regarding purpose, values, and personal direction. His story illustrates how meaning-making often involved revisiting difficult experiences and understanding them through new lenses.

Perhaps the most striking finding across the interviews is that alumni consistently described B.L.A.C.K. as influencing who they became rather than simply what they achieved. Degrees, careers, and professional accomplishments were important. Yet when asked to reflect on the program's significance, participants repeatedly returned to themes of identity, belonging, community, mentorship, responsibility, and self-understanding. Eli captured this sentiment most directly: "The program didn't just help me stay in school - it helped me understand who I was

becoming.” His statement serves as a fitting synthesis of the broader narratives presented throughout this study. The value of B.L.A.C.K. cannot be measured solely through retention, persistence, or graduation rates, although those outcomes matter. Its deeper significance lies in the ways it shaped participants' understanding of themselves, their communities, and their futures.

Together, alumni reflections reveal that B.L.A.C.K. became far more than a college program. It became a reference point through which mentees interpreted growth, leadership, belonging, and purpose. Years after graduation, participants continued drawing upon lessons learned through mentorship, cultural affirmation, community accountability, and shared experience. The enduring meaning of B.L.A.C.K. lies not simply in helping Black men succeed within an institution, but in helping them imagine - and ultimately become - the people they aspired to be.

Cross-Theme Synthesis

Overall, the findings suggest that Black male persistence at UC Davis was not the product of individual resilience alone. Rather, persistence emerged through a developmental process initiated by belonging and sustained through culturally affirming relationships, mentorship, and community cultural wealth. Across narratives, experiences of recognition and connection created conditions that allowed mentees to access institutional knowledge, strengthen identity, cultivate leadership, and ultimately transform how they understood themselves and their futures.

Belonging as the Catalyst for Transformation

The findings suggest that belonging functioned as the central catalyst in participants' developmental journeys at UC Davis. Although themes such as mentorship, leadership, Community Cultural Wealth, identity affirmation, and persistence emerged throughout the

narratives, these experiences did not operate independently. Rather, they appeared connected through a developmental process in which belonging served as the critical turning point. For many mentees, transformation began not when they acquired new knowledge or accessed institutional resources, but when they encountered environments where they felt recognized, valued, and affirmed as Black men. Belonging created the conditions through which trust, engagement, identity development, leadership, and persistence became possible.

Across participant narratives, the undergraduate experience often began with various forms of institutional dislocation. Many mentees entered UC Davis carrying strong aspirations and academic potential, yet quickly encountered environments characterized by racial underrepresentation, social isolation, and uncertainty regarding their place within the institution. Experiences of hypervisibility and invisibility frequently coexisted, leaving participants feeling simultaneously scrutinized and overlooked. Academic challenges, unfamiliar institutional expectations, and limited representation often reinforced questions regarding whether they truly belonged within the university community. These early experiences were not simply social inconveniences; they shaped how participants interpreted themselves and their relationship to the institution.

A consistent pattern emerged across narratives. Before participants could fully engage academically or socially, they first needed experiences that disrupted feelings of isolation and affirmed their legitimacy within the university. For many, that disruption occurred through B.L.A.C.K., CADSS, and relationships with Black faculty, staff, mentors, and peers. These spaces provided more than social connection. They offered recognition. Participants repeatedly described the significance of entering environments where they no longer felt compelled to

explain their identities, defend their presence, or navigate institutional spaces entirely alone. Through these experiences, belonging shifted from an uncertain aspiration to a lived reality.

Importantly, belonging was not merely an outcome of participation in B.L.A.C.K.; it functioned as a developmental catalyst that initiated subsequent forms of growth. Once participants experienced a sense of acceptance and mattering, they became increasingly willing to engage with opportunities, seek support, form mentoring relationships, and participate more fully in campus life. Trust emerged where skepticism had previously existed. Vulnerability became possible where self-protection had once been necessary. Rather than focusing exclusively on survival, participants began investing in their academic, professional, and personal development.

This shift is particularly evident when examining the relationship between belonging and mentorship. Participants consistently described mentorship as one of the most influential aspects of their college experience, yet mentorship itself was often made possible through belonging. Students were more likely to seek guidance, disclose challenges, and accept support when they felt emotionally safe and culturally understood. Belonging created the relational foundation upon which meaningful mentorship could develop. In turn, mentoring relationships deepened belonging by reinforcing participants' sense of mattering, visibility, and institutional connection. The relationship was reciprocal, with each process strengthening the other.

Belonging also served as a gateway to the activation of Community Cultural Wealth. As participants developed stronger connections with mentors, peers, and culturally affirming communities, they gained access to forms of aspirational, navigational, social, familial, and resistant capital that supported their success. These resources did not emerge in isolation. Rather, they flowed through relationships rooted in trust and community. Participants learned how to

navigate institutional systems because they felt connected to people who were willing to guide them. They expanded their aspirations because they encountered individuals who broadened their visions of possibility. They developed resistant capital because they engaged in communities that encouraged critical reflection and cultural affirmation. In this way, belonging functioned as the relational foundation through which Community Cultural Wealth became activated and sustained.

As belonging deepened, participants increasingly moved beyond persistence alone. The findings reveal a developmental progression in which belonging contributed to identity affirmation, leadership development, and critical consciousness. Participants began redefining success, embracing more authentic understandings of themselves, and envisioning futures grounded not only in personal achievement but also in community responsibility. Leadership emerged as an extension of belonging, as mentees who once sought support increasingly became sources of support for others. Similarly, advocacy and institutional critique developed as participants gained the confidence and critical awareness necessary to question inequitable structures and imagine alternatives.

Perhaps most significantly, belonging transformed participants' relationships with themselves. Early narratives frequently reflected uncertainty regarding identity, legitimacy, and place. Later narratives revealed greater confidence, self-definition, and purpose. Through culturally affirming relationships and experiences, participants came to understand that they did not need to diminish aspects of themselves in order to succeed. They learned that academic excellence, Black identity, leadership, vulnerability, and authenticity were not mutually exclusive. This realization fundamentally reshaped how they understood both success and possibility.

Viewed as a whole, the findings suggest that belonging was not simply one theme among many. It was the organizing force connecting the broader developmental experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees. Belonging transformed isolation into connection, connection into engagement, engagement into growth, and growth into leadership and advocacy. The narratives reveal a developmental process through which culturally affirming environments enabled participants to move from questioning whether they belonged to actively shaping communities where others could belong as well. In this sense, belonging was not merely a desirable outcome of the B.L.A.C.K. experience - it was the catalyst through which transformation occurred.

How Transformation Occurred: Belonging, Mentoring, and Community Cultural Wealth

While the preceding sections identified belonging as the catalyst for transformation, an equally important question emerges from the findings: **How did that transformation actually occur?** Across participant narratives, the developmental outcomes associated with B.L.A.C.K.—including persistence, identity affirmation, leadership development, critical consciousness, and post-graduate meaning-making - did not emerge from any single intervention. Rather, transformation resulted from the dynamic interaction of three interconnected processes: belonging, culturally responsive mentorship, and the activation of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW). Together, these elements formed a developmental pathway through which participants moved from institutional uncertainty to confidence, agency, and purpose.

The findings suggest that belonging functioned as the foundation upon which other developmental processes were built. Before participants could fully engage with mentors, access institutional opportunities, or envision expansive futures for themselves, they first needed environments where they felt recognized and valued. Experiences of belonging reduced the emotional burden associated with racial isolation, hypervisibility, and self-doubt, creating

conditions in which participants could engage more authentically with both themselves and others. Belonging therefore served as more than an emotional outcome; it established the relational trust necessary for deeper forms of learning, growth, and engagement.

Mentorship emerged as the primary mechanism through which that trust was translated into action. Unlike transactional advising models focused primarily on academic compliance and procedural guidance, the mentoring relationships described by participants were holistic, culturally responsive, and relational. Mentors helped students make sense of institutional environments, navigate challenges, clarify goals, and interpret experiences that often felt confusing or isolating. They provided guidance that addressed not only academic concerns, but also identity development, emotional well-being, professional aspirations, family responsibilities, and questions of purpose.

Importantly, mentorship did not operate independently of belonging. Rather, belonging and mentorship reinforced one another recursively. As participants experienced stronger connections with mentors, their sense of belonging deepened. As belonging increased, participants became more willing to seek support, disclose challenges, and engage in meaningful mentoring relationships. The developmental process was therefore cyclical rather than linear. Trust facilitated mentorship, and mentorship strengthened trust.

Within this relational context, Community Cultural Wealth became activated. The findings suggest that mentorship served as the vehicle through which participants gained access to forms of capital that supported persistence and growth. Aspirational capital was strengthened when mentors and role models expanded participants' visions of what was possible academically, professionally, and personally. Navigational capital developed as participants learned how to interpret institutional expectations, access opportunities, and move strategically through

university systems. Social and familial capital emerged through relationships characterized by care, accountability, reciprocity, and shared experience. Resistant capital was cultivated through critical dialogue, cultural affirmation, and opportunities to challenge deficit-oriented narratives regarding Black identity, masculinity, and success.

What makes these findings particularly significant is that these forms of capital rarely operated in isolation. Participants did not first acquire aspirational capital and then later develop navigational capital. Rather, multiple forms of capital were activated simultaneously through participation in culturally affirming relationships and communities. A conversation with a mentor might simultaneously reinforce aspirations, provide institutional guidance, strengthen social connections, and challenge deficit-oriented assumptions. The developmental benefits participants described emerged from the interaction of these resources rather than from any single form of support.

This interconnected process helps explain why B.L.A.C.K. produced outcomes extending far beyond academic persistence. The program did not simply help students remain enrolled. It created conditions through which participants could reconstruct identity, develop confidence, cultivate leadership, and imagine broader futures. As belonging increased, participants became more engaged. As engagement increased, they gained access to mentors and community networks. As those relationships deepened, multiple forms of Community Cultural Wealth were activated. The result was a developmental process that strengthened both institutional competence and personal transformation.

The findings also reveal that transformation became self-reinforcing over time. Participants who benefited from belonging and mentorship frequently became sources of belonging and mentorship for others. Students who once relied upon guidance increasingly

assumed leadership roles, supported younger peers, and contributed to culturally affirming communities themselves. In this way, the developmental process extended beyond individual outcomes. The resources activated through B.L.A.C.K. circulated through networks of relationships, creating opportunities for collective growth and community sustainability.

Another important insight emerging from the findings is that belonging, mentorship, and Community Cultural Wealth addressed different dimensions of the student experience simultaneously. Belonging responded to participants' need for recognition, acceptance, and connection. Mentorship addressed the need for guidance, interpretation, and support. Community Cultural Wealth provided the resources necessary to navigate institutions, maintain aspirations, resist deficit narratives, and access opportunities. Together, these processes created a comprehensive developmental environment capable of responding to the academic, emotional, cultural, and social realities participants encountered at UC Davis.

The findings suggest that transformation was neither accidental nor solely the result of individual resilience. Rather, it emerged through an intentional developmental process rooted in culturally affirming relationships and community-based support. Belonging provided the foundation. Mentorship supplied the mechanism. Community Cultural Wealth offered the resources. Working together, these elements created the conditions through which participants moved from isolation to connection, from uncertainty to confidence, and from persistence to leadership and advocacy. Understanding how these processes interacted provides important insight into why B.L.A.C.K. was so influential and offers a framework for understanding how culturally responsive initiatives can foster meaningful transformation among Black male collegians at predominantly White institutions.

From Student Deficits to Institutional Responsibility

One of the most significant insights emerging from this study is that the challenges experienced by Black male collegians at UC Davis were not primarily the result of individual deficiencies, lack of motivation, or insufficient preparation. Rather, participants' narratives consistently pointed toward a different conclusion: many of the obstacles they encountered were products of institutional structures, cultural norms, and environmental conditions that failed to fully recognize and support their experiences. Viewed collectively, the findings challenge deficit-oriented explanations of Black student success and instead shift attention toward questions of institutional responsibility, responsiveness, and equity.

Historically, discussions of Black male persistence in higher education have often focused on what students lack. Research and institutional discourse have frequently emphasized academic preparation gaps, retention risks, help-seeking behaviors, or deficiencies in social and cultural adjustment. While such perspectives may identify real challenges, they often obscure the ways institutions themselves contribute to those challenges. The experiences described by former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that the more relevant question is not whether Black men possess the capacity to succeed, but whether institutions create conditions that allow them to thrive.

Across narratives, participants demonstrated considerable resilience, ambition, and determination long before arriving at UC Davis. Many entered the university with strong academic records, leadership experiences, family support systems, and aspirations for future success. Yet despite these strengths, they frequently encountered environments characterized by racial underrepresentation, institutional ambiguity, limited representation, and a lack of culturally affirming support. These experiences reveal a critical disconnect between institutional assumptions and student realities. The issue was rarely an absence of potential; it was the absence of structures capable of fully supporting that potential.

The findings are particularly instructive when considering participants' experiences with the hidden curriculum. Numerous mentees described arriving academically prepared but institutionally unprepared. They understood how to earn admission to a highly selective university but lacked familiarity with many of the unwritten expectations governing success once they arrived. Navigating faculty relationships, research opportunities, professional networking, internships, graduate school preparation, and institutional bureaucracy often required forms of knowledge that universities assumed students already possessed. Participants' experiences suggest that what is frequently interpreted as a student deficit may instead reflect an institutional failure to make critical information accessible and transparent.

Similarly, many narratives challenge assumptions regarding help-seeking behavior. Participants did not describe an unwillingness to seek assistance. Rather, they often described uncertainty regarding where support existed, whether support was intended for students like them, and whether seeking help would be perceived as weakness. Such findings suggest that institutional cultures often place responsibility on students to navigate complex systems independently while paying insufficient attention to the barriers that make engagement difficult. In this context, the challenge was not reluctance to seek support, but the absence of culturally responsive structures that normalized and facilitated help-seeking.

The findings also reveal how institutional responsibility extends beyond academic systems to include campus climate and representation. Participants repeatedly described the emotional consequences of being one of few Black students within classrooms, departments, laboratories, athletic programs, and professional spaces. These experiences frequently produced feelings of hypervisibility, invisibility, and isolation that required significant emotional labor to

navigate. Yet these burdens often remained unrecognized within institutional narratives that measured inclusion primarily through enrollment numbers or symbolic diversity initiatives.

Participants' reflections regarding representation further illuminate this point. The transformative impact of Black faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, and professionals was not simply a matter of preference. Their significance reflected the scarcity of opportunities for Black students to see themselves reflected within positions of expertise, leadership, and authority. The powerful influence these relationships exerted suggests that representation should not be understood as an optional enhancement to the student experience, but as an essential component of equitable educational environments.

Another important implication concerns the emotional labor required of Black students within predominantly White institutions. Participants consistently described the demands associated with code-switching, stereotype management, masking, self-monitoring, and navigating environments where aspects of their identities often felt misunderstood or marginalized. These experiences highlight forms of work that remain largely invisible within traditional measures of student success. While institutions frequently celebrate persistence as evidence of resilience, the findings suggest that such persistence often occurs despite conditions that require students to expend considerable psychological and emotional energy simply to maintain a sense of belonging.

Importantly, participants' critiques were rarely framed as wholesale condemnations of UC Davis. In fact, many described meaningful relationships with faculty, staff, mentors, and programs that significantly shaped their success. However, their narratives consistently distinguished between individual acts of support and institutional structures. Programs such as B.L.A.C.K., CADSS, EOP, and TRIO frequently functioned as culturally affirming spaces that

addressed needs not adequately met elsewhere within the university. While participants expressed deep appreciation for these programs, they also recognized that such spaces often operated as corrective mechanisms rather than fully integrated institutional priorities.

This distinction is critical because it reframes the conversation from one focused on exceptional interventions to one focused on systemic responsibility. If culturally affirming support consistently emerges as essential to Black student success, then such support should not be viewed as supplemental. Instead, it should be understood as central to creating equitable educational environments. The findings suggest that institutions must move beyond approaches that celebrate diversity symbolically while leaving students responsible for constructing their own pathways to belonging, support, and community.

The experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees also challenge institutions to reconsider how success is measured. Traditional indicators such as retention rates, graduation rates, and academic performance remain important. However, the findings suggest that equitable student success also requires attention to belonging, identity affirmation, psychological safety, representation, mentorship, and community connection. These dimensions are not peripheral to educational outcomes; they are foundational conditions that shape whether students can access opportunities, develop confidence, and fully engage the institution.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce Yosso's (2005) critique of deficit-oriented frameworks and affirm the importance of asset-based approaches that recognize the strengths students bring with them to higher education. Participants consistently demonstrated aspirational, navigational, social, familial, and resistant forms of capital. The challenge was not the absence of these strengths, but whether institutional environments recognized, valued, and supported them. Similarly, the findings extend Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) work by demonstrating

that belonging is not solely an individual psychological outcome. It is also a reflection of institutional choices regarding representation, support structures, campus climate, and relational engagement.

Ultimately, the findings invite a fundamental shift in perspective. Rather than asking why Black men struggle to persist within predominantly White institutions, educators and administrators might instead ask what institutional conditions make persistence unnecessarily difficult. The narratives presented throughout this study suggest that Black male students possess tremendous resilience, talent, and cultural wealth. The responsibility of institutions is not to remediate perceived deficiencies, but to create environments where those strengths can flourish. In this sense, the central lesson emerging from participants' experiences is clear: the future of Black male student success depends not only on what students bring to institutions, but on what institutions are willing to become.

B.L.A.C.K. as a Culturally Affirming Ecology

Viewed collectively, the findings suggest that the impact of B.L.A.C.K. cannot be adequately explained through any single theoretical construct or programmatic intervention. Participants did not attribute their persistence solely to mentoring, belonging, leadership development, identity affirmation, or access to Community Cultural Wealth. Rather, their experiences reveal that these processes operated simultaneously and recursively within a broader developmental environment. The findings therefore support understanding B.L.A.C.K. not merely as a mentoring program or Black Male Initiative, but as a culturally affirming developmental ecology that fostered multiple dimensions of growth at the same time.

This distinction is important because many higher education interventions focus on discrete outcomes. Some programs emphasize academic support, while others prioritize

mentoring, leadership development, retention, or cultural engagement. The experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that these dimensions were not experienced separately. Instead, participants described a developmental environment in which belonging, mentorship, identity affirmation, community, leadership, and critical consciousness continually reinforced one another. The effectiveness of the program emerged not from any individual component, but from the interaction among them.

The ecology began with belonging. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, participants frequently entered UC Davis experiencing varying degrees of isolation, uncertainty, and institutional dislocation. Within B.L.A.C.K., however, they encountered environments characterized by recognition, affirmation, and psychological safety. These experiences reduced the emotional burden associated with hypervisibility, code-switching, stereotype management, and racial isolation. More importantly, belonging created conditions under which deeper developmental processes could occur. Participants who felt recognized and valued became more willing to trust mentors, engage authentically with peers, and participate fully in opportunities that supported their growth.

Mentorship functioned as the connective tissue of this ecology. Rather than operating as a separate intervention, mentoring linked participants to opportunities, resources, relationships, and forms of knowledge that might otherwise have remained inaccessible. Mentors provided guidance, accountability, emotional support, and institutional interpretation. They helped students understand not only how to navigate the university, but how to navigate themselves within the university. In this sense, mentorship served as both a relational and developmental bridge connecting belonging to action.

Through these relationships, multiple forms of Community Cultural Wealth became activated. Aspirational capital expanded as participants encountered examples of Black achievement and possibility. Navigational capital developed through guidance regarding institutional systems, professional pathways, and educational opportunities. Familial and social capital emerged through networks of support grounded in reciprocity, accountability, and shared experience. Resistant capital grew through critical dialogue, cultural affirmation, and opportunities to challenge deficit-oriented narratives surrounding Black identity and success. These resources were not delivered independently. They circulated through the ecology itself, reinforcing participants' capacity to persist and thrive.

The findings further suggest that identity development served as a central organizing feature of the ecology. Participants repeatedly described experiences that encouraged them to reconsider inherited assumptions regarding Black masculinity, achievement, vulnerability, leadership, and belonging. Through culturally grounded dialogue and relational engagement, they developed more expansive understandings of themselves and their futures. Identity was therefore not a byproduct of participation. It was one of the primary sites through which transformation occurred.

Leadership development emerged naturally from this process. As participants gained confidence, belonging, and institutional fluency, many assumed increasing responsibility for supporting others. The findings suggest that leadership within B.L.A.C.K. was rarely framed as authority or status. Instead, it was expressed through mentorship, advocacy, representation, and collective responsibility. Participants increasingly viewed their own success as connected to the success of others, creating a cycle in which those who benefited from the ecology eventually contributed to sustaining it.

Perhaps most significantly, the ecology fostered critical consciousness. Participants did not simply learn how to succeed within existing institutional structures; they learned how to analyze, critique, and challenge those structures. Through engagement with Black history, cultural dialogue, mentorship, and community reflection, many developed more sophisticated understandings of race, power, representation, and equity within higher education. This awareness transformed persistence from a purely individual accomplishment into a form of advocacy and institutional engagement.

What emerges from the findings, therefore, is a developmental model characterized by mutual reinforcement rather than linear progression. Belonging strengthened mentorship. Mentorship activated Community Cultural Wealth. Community Cultural Wealth supported identity development and institutional navigation. Identity affirmation fostered confidence and leadership. Leadership encouraged advocacy and collective responsibility. In turn, these experiences deepened belonging and reinforced the broader ecology. Transformation occurred because each developmental process strengthened the others.

Importantly, the ecology did not eliminate the structural inequities participants encountered at UC Davis. Students continued to navigate racial underrepresentation, institutional ambiguity, and environments that often required significant emotional labor. What B.L.A.C.K. provided was not insulation from these realities, but a culturally affirming context through which they could be interpreted, navigated, and resisted. The ecology functioned as a developmental counterbalance to institutional conditions that frequently undermined belonging and well-being.

Taken together, the findings suggest that B.L.A.C.K. represents more than an effective support program. It represents a model of culturally responsive student development. The program's impact was rooted in its ability to integrate belonging, mentorship, Community

Cultural Wealth, identity affirmation, leadership development, and critical consciousness within a single relational environment. Through this ecology, participants did not simply persist academically. They developed the knowledge, confidence, relationships, and sense of purpose necessary to reimagine themselves, contribute to their communities, and challenge the conditions that had once made them question whether they belonged. In this sense, B.L.A.C.K. functioned not merely as a program within the university, but as a transformative developmental ecosystem that reshaped how Black men experienced higher education itself.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings from interviews with ten former participants of the Black Leadership Ambassadors for Culture & Knowledge (B.L.A.C.K.) program at the University of California, Davis. Through analysis of participants' narratives, a consistent developmental process emerged connecting experiences of belonging, mentorship, identity development, Community Cultural Wealth, leadership formation, and long-term transformation.

The findings revealed that many participants entered UC Davis experiencing varying degrees of racial isolation, institutional uncertainty, and questions regarding their place within a predominantly White university environment. Experiences of underrepresentation, hypervisibility, invisibility, and unfamiliar institutional expectations often complicated their transition to college and contributed to challenges associated with belonging and persistence. These experiences reinforced the importance of culturally responsive environments capable of affirming students' identities while providing meaningful opportunities for connection and support.

For many mentees, B.L.A.C.K. functioned as a critical counterspace where belonging became possible. Through relationships with mentors, peers, faculty, staff, and alumni, participants encountered environments characterized by psychological safety, authenticity,

cultural affirmation, and collective accountability. These relationships helped participants develop a stronger sense of connection to both the university and the broader Black community while simultaneously reducing feelings of isolation and marginalization.

The findings further demonstrate that mentorship played a central role in participants' development. Mentors provided more than academic guidance; they served as cultural navigators, role models, advocates, and sources of emotional support. Through these relationships, participants gained access to institutional knowledge, professional opportunities, and culturally grounded forms of guidance that supported both academic persistence and personal growth.

Using Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, the findings illustrated how B.L.A.C.K. activated and strengthened multiple forms of capital. Participants expanded their aspirations, developed greater confidence navigating institutional systems, cultivated supportive social and familial networks, and strengthened their capacity to challenge deficit-oriented narratives regarding Black identity and success. These forms of capital were not experienced independently but were activated through relationships and community engagement that reinforced belonging and persistence.

As participants progressed through the program, they increasingly redefined success, developed leadership identities, cultivated critical consciousness, and embraced broader commitments to mentorship, advocacy, and community responsibility. Leadership was understood less as individual achievement and more as a responsibility to support others. Likewise, participants increasingly interpreted their experiences through structural rather than individual lenses, developing greater awareness of the institutional conditions shaping Black student success within higher education.

The cross-theme synthesis revealed that belonging functioned as the catalyst connecting these developmental experiences. Belonging fostered trust; trust enabled mentorship; mentorship activated Community Cultural Wealth; and these resources collectively supported identity development, leadership formation, advocacy, and long-term transformation. Taken together, the findings suggest that B.L.A.C.K. operated as a culturally affirming developmental ecology that integrated belonging, mentorship, cultural wealth, identity affirmation, and leadership development within a single relational environment.

While this chapter focused on presenting and synthesizing the findings, the next chapter shifts toward interpretation and meaning making. Chapter 6 examines how these findings contribute to existing scholarship on Black male collegians, belonging, Community Cultural Wealth, mentorship, and student persistence at predominantly White institutions. Drawing upon Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging theory and Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth framework, the discussion explores the broader implications of the findings for higher education practice, academic advising, Black Male Initiatives, and institutional transformation. The chapter concludes by considering recommendations for policy and practice, limitations of the study, directions for future research, and the enduring significance of B.L.A.C.K. as a model for fostering Black male success in higher education.

Chapter 6: Discussion of Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of former participants in the Black Leadership Ambassadors for Culture & Knowledge (B.L.A.C.K.) program at the University of California, Davis and to understand how participation influenced their sense of belonging, academic persistence, identity development, leadership formation, and overall collegiate experience. Guided by Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) Sense of Belonging framework and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, this study explored how Black male collegians made meaning of their participation in a culturally affirming Black Male Initiative situated within a predominantly White institutional context.

The findings presented in Chapter 5 reveal that the impact of B.L.A.C.K. extended beyond traditional measures of student success. Participants described experiences of belonging, mentorship, cultural affirmation, leadership development, critical consciousness, and community accountability that collectively shaped how they navigated the university and understood themselves within it. While previous scholarship has frequently examined these constructs independently, the findings from this study suggest that they operated as interconnected developmental processes that mutually reinforced one another throughout participants' collegiate experiences.

A central insight emerging from this research is that belonging served as the catalyst through which other developmental outcomes became possible. Participants' narratives indicate that experiences of recognition, validation, and community preceded many of the academic, social, and personal outcomes associated with persistence. Once students experienced a sense of belonging, they became more willing to engage with mentors, access institutional opportunities, develop leadership identities, and cultivate forms of Community Cultural Wealth that supported

their success. These findings suggest that belonging should not be understood merely as an outcome of successful integration into the university; rather, belonging functioned as a foundational condition that enabled students to engage more fully with the institution and with their own developmental potential.

The findings also expand existing understandings of Community Cultural Wealth. Consistent with Yosso's (2005) framework, participants demonstrated aspirational, navigational, social, familial, and resistant forms of capital throughout their collegiate journeys. However, the findings suggest that these forms of capital were not static resources students either possessed or lacked. Instead, they were activated, strengthened, and circulated through culturally affirming relationships and communities. Mentorship, peer support, cultural affirmation, and shared experiences created conditions through which Community Cultural Wealth became accessible, meaningful, and transformative.

Similarly, the findings extend scholarship on Black male collegians attending predominantly White institutions. Prior research has documented the challenges associated with racial isolation, underrepresentation, campus climate, stereotype threat, and questions of belonging among Black men in higher education (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012; Palmer et al., 2014). The experiences described by participants in this study reinforce these findings while simultaneously highlighting the importance of culturally responsive environments that affirm Black identity, facilitate authentic relationships, and cultivate opportunities for leadership and community engagement. Rather than positioning Black male success as a product of individual resilience alone, the findings suggest that success emerges through relationships, structures, and environments intentionally designed to support students' holistic development.

Perhaps most importantly, this study contributes to a growing body of literature that challenges deficit-oriented narratives regarding Black male achievement. Throughout the interviews, participants demonstrated considerable resilience, aspiration, leadership potential, and cultural wealth. Their stories suggest that the primary challenge was not a lack of motivation, ability, or commitment. Instead, participants frequently encountered institutional environments that were insufficiently responsive to their experiences and needs. The significance of B.L.A.C.K. lies in its ability to create an alternative developmental ecology where Black men were recognized as assets rather than problems to be solved.

This chapter interprets these findings within the context of existing scholarship and the study's conceptual frameworks. First, the discussion examines belonging as foundational to persistence and explores how participants' experiences extend Strayhorn's theory of belonging. Next, the chapter considers B.L.A.C.K. as a culturally affirming counterspace ecology and examines how the program activated Community Cultural Wealth through mentorship, identity affirmation, and community engagement. The discussion then explores the role of mentorship as cultural navigation, the ways participants redefined Black masculinity and success, and the developmental pathways that led to leadership, advocacy, and collective responsibility.

Following the discussion of findings, the chapter considers implications for higher education practice, academic advising, Black Male Initiatives, student affairs, and institutional transformation. Recommendations for policy and practice are presented, followed by a discussion of the study's limitations and directions for future research. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the enduring significance of B.L.A.C.K. and the broader implications of creating culturally affirming environments that support Black male collegians in navigating, surviving, and ultimately transforming predominantly White institutions.

Belonging as Foundational to Persistence

A central finding of this study is that belonging functioned as a foundational condition for persistence among former participants of the B.L.A.C.K. program. While persistence is often examined through academic indicators such as retention, GPA, and graduation rates, participants' narratives suggest that persistence was deeply connected to relational, cultural, and psychological experiences that preceded academic outcomes. The findings indicate that students were more likely to remain engaged, seek support, develop confidence, and pursue opportunities when they experienced a sense of belonging within the university environment. In this way, belonging was not merely a byproduct of successful adjustment to college; it was a prerequisite for many of the developmental outcomes that followed.

This finding strongly supports Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) assertion that belonging represents a basic human need and a critical component of student success. Strayhorn argues that students who feel accepted, respected, valued, and included are more likely to engage with their institutions and persist through challenges. The experiences of participants in this study reinforce this claim while extending it in important ways. Rather than describing belonging as a generalized feeling of connection to the university, participants often located belonging within specific people, relationships, and culturally affirming spaces. For many mentees, belonging emerged through community before it emerged through institution.

This distinction is particularly important within the context of predominantly White institutions. Consistent with existing scholarship (Harper, 2012; Palmer et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2012), participants described experiences of racial isolation, underrepresentation, hypervisibility, and uncertainty regarding whether they truly belonged at UC Davis. These experiences often complicated their transition to college and reinforced feelings of disconnection from the broader campus environment. Yet the findings reveal that culturally affirming spaces such as B.L.A.C.K.

functioned as alternative sites of belonging where participants experienced validation, recognition, and psychological safety.

The findings also suggest that belonging served as a catalyst for engagement. Once participants felt accepted and valued within culturally affirming communities, they became more willing to seek mentorship, utilize resources, participate in leadership opportunities, and invest in their own development. This observation extends Strayhorn's framework by illustrating the developmental sequence through which belonging contributed to persistence. Belonging fostered trust; trust encouraged engagement; engagement facilitated access to relationships and resources that supported academic and personal success.

Another important contribution of this study involves the relationship between belonging and identity affirmation. Participants frequently described belonging as connected to their ability to exist authentically as Black men within the university environment. Rather than feeling pressure to suppress aspects of themselves to gain acceptance, mentees valued spaces where their identities were recognized as strengths rather than liabilities. These findings suggest that belonging among Black male collegians cannot be fully understood apart from questions of race, culture, masculinity, and representation. The experience of belonging was not merely social; it was deeply connected to identity and self-definition.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that belonging should be viewed as a central component of persistence efforts aimed at supporting Black male students. While institutions often focus on academic interventions designed to improve retention, the experiences of participants indicate that persistence is equally influenced by students' ability to locate meaningful communities of support and affirmation. The findings therefore reinforce Strayhorn's argument that belonging

matters while simultaneously demonstrating that culturally affirming environments play a critical role in cultivating that belonging for Black men attending predominantly White institutions.

B.L.A.C.K. as a Counterspace Ecology

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the finding that B.L.A.C.K. functioned as more than a traditional Black Male Initiative, mentoring program, or co-curricular support service. Participants consistently described the program as an interconnected environment where multiple developmental processes occurred simultaneously. Rather than operating through isolated interventions, B.L.A.C.K. provided a culturally affirming ecology that integrated belonging, mentorship, identity affirmation, leadership development, emotional support, and Community Cultural Wealth within a single developmental context.

This finding aligns closely with Critical Race Theory's concept of counterspaces (Solórzano et al., 2000), which describes environments where students from marginalized communities can challenge dominant narratives, affirm their identities, and cultivate resistance to oppressive structures. Consistent with prior scholarship, participants described B.L.A.C.K. as a space where they could engage authentically, share experiences, and find validation among individuals who understood the realities of navigating a predominantly White institution. However, the findings suggest that B.L.A.C.K. functioned as something even more expansive than a counterspace alone.

Participants' experiences indicate that the program served as a developmental ecosystem in which various forms of support reinforced one another. Psychological safety enabled vulnerability. Vulnerability strengthened relationships. Relationships facilitated mentorship. Mentorship activated Community Cultural Wealth. Access to cultural wealth strengthened confidence, leadership, and persistence. These interconnected processes suggest that B.L.A.C.K.'s effectiveness cannot be attributed to any single programmatic component. Rather,

its impact emerged from the interaction of multiple developmental experiences operating simultaneously.

This finding contributes to scholarship on Black Male Initiatives by suggesting that successful programs may be most effective when they move beyond isolated interventions and instead create integrated developmental environments. The experiences of former mentees indicate that belonging, mentorship, identity affirmation, leadership development, and cultural validation should not be treated as separate domains of student support. Instead, these dimensions appear to work most effectively when intentionally connected within a cohesive framework.

The concept of a culturally affirming ecology therefore offers a useful lens for understanding how Black Male Initiatives can support persistence and success. Rather than asking whether mentoring works or whether belonging matters, the findings suggest a broader question: How can institutions create environments where multiple developmental resources are simultaneously available and mutually reinforcing? B.L.A.C.K. provides one example of how such an ecology can be constructed and sustained.

Mentorship as Cultural Navigation

The findings of this study suggest that mentorship functioned as a critical mechanism through which participants learned to navigate institutional environments, interpret university expectations, and access opportunities often obscured by the hidden curriculum. While traditional academic advising frequently focuses on course selection, policy interpretation, and degree completion, participants described mentorship relationships that extended far beyond transactional guidance. Mentors served as cultural navigators who helped students make sense of both the institution and their place within it.

This finding extends existing scholarship on mentoring among Black male collegians (Harper, 2012; Palmer et al., 2014) by emphasizing the cultural dimensions of mentorship. Participants did not simply seek information; they sought interpretation. Mentors translated institutional norms, explained unspoken expectations, and helped students navigate environments that often felt unfamiliar or inaccessible. Through these relationships, mentees developed greater confidence in their ability to move strategically through the university while maintaining authenticity and cultural integrity.

Yosso's (2005) concept of navigational capital provides a particularly useful framework for understanding this process. The findings suggest that navigational capital was not acquired independently but was activated through relationships. Mentors functioned as bridges between students and the institution, providing access to knowledge, networks, and opportunities that facilitated academic and professional advancement.

Importantly, participants frequently described mentorship as relational rather than transactional. The most influential mentors were not simply those who possessed institutional knowledge; they were individuals who demonstrated genuine care, cultural understanding, and investment in students' success. These findings suggest that effective mentorship involves both informational and relational dimensions. Students were more likely to accept guidance when they trusted the individuals providing it.

The findings therefore contribute to advising and mentoring scholarship by illustrating how culturally responsive mentorship can serve as a mechanism for activating Community Cultural Wealth while simultaneously strengthening belonging and persistence. For Black male collegians navigating predominantly White institutions, mentorship functioned not merely as support but as a pathway toward institutional fluency, confidence, and agency.

Reframing Black Masculinity and Success

One of the most significant interpretive insights emerging from this study is that participation in B.L.A.C.K. facilitated a process through which mentees reconsidered and reconstructed dominant understandings of Black masculinity and success. Participants did not simply acquire new skills, expand their networks, or improve their academic outcomes. They also engaged in a deeper process of self-definition that challenged inherited assumptions regarding what it meant to be a successful Black man within higher education and beyond. This finding suggests that identity development was not peripheral to persistence; it was central to how participants understood their educational journeys and future aspirations.

The findings align with scholarship suggesting that Black men at predominantly White institutions frequently navigate competing expectations regarding race, masculinity, achievement, and belonging (Harper, 2012; Palmer & Maramba, 2012). Participants described environments where Black masculinity was often narrowly constructed through stereotypes emphasizing athleticism, hypermasculinity, emotional stoicism, or deficit-oriented assumptions regarding academic ability. Such narratives frequently constrained how Black men were perceived by others and, at times, how they perceived themselves.

What distinguishes the experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees is that the program created opportunities to critically examine these narratives rather than simply adapt to them. Through mentorship, dialogue, cultural affirmation, and community engagement, participants were encouraged to explore questions of identity that extended beyond academic performance or professional achievement. Conversations about race, vulnerability, mental health, leadership, purpose, and community responsibility created space for participants to define success on their own terms rather than relying exclusively on externally imposed standards.

These findings extend Yosso's (2005) concept of resistant capital by illustrating how resistance operated not only through opposition to deficit narratives but also through the creation of alternative narratives. Participants did not merely reject stereotypes regarding Black men; they actively reconstructed more expansive understandings of Black identity, leadership, and achievement. Resistance became a process of authorship. Mentees developed the capacity to define themselves rather than accept definitions imposed by institutions, media representations, or societal expectations.

The findings further suggest that success itself underwent a process of transformation. Many participants entered college with definitions of success centered on individual accomplishment, academic achievement, professional prestige, or athletic performance. While these goals remained important, they became increasingly integrated with broader commitments to authenticity, well-being, service, and community impact. Success was no longer measured solely by what participants achieved for themselves but also by how they contributed to the growth and success of others.

This developmental shift has important implications for scholarship on Black male success in higher education. Much of the existing literature focuses on persistence, retention, and degree completion as primary indicators of success. While these outcomes remain critically important, the experiences of participants in this study suggest that a more holistic understanding is necessary. Success encompassed identity affirmation, emotional well-being, purpose, leadership, and the ability to live authentically while navigating institutional environments that often challenged one's sense of self.

Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) work on belonging provides additional insight into this transformation. Participants' ability to reconstruct more expansive understandings of Black

masculinity and success was closely connected to environments where they felt accepted and valued. Belonging created space for exploration, reflection, and growth. In the absence of belonging, identity development often became constrained by the pressures of survival and adaptation. Within culturally affirming communities such as B.L.A.C.K., however, participants were able to envision broader possibilities for who they could become.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that one of B.L.A.C.K.'s most enduring contributions was helping participants move beyond deficit-oriented and externally imposed definitions of Black masculinity and achievement. Through culturally grounded relationships and opportunities for critical reflection, mentees developed more authentic, expansive, and self-determined understandings of success. In doing so, they transformed persistence from an act of endurance into a pathway toward purpose, fulfillment, and self-definition.

Leadership, Advocacy, and Collective Responsibility

Another important contribution of this study concerns the developmental relationship between persistence, leadership, and community responsibility. The findings suggest that participation in B.L.A.C.K. did not simply support students in reaching educational milestones; it cultivated a broader orientation toward leadership grounded in service, advocacy, and collective uplift. As participants developed stronger senses of belonging, confidence, and identity, many also began reimagining their responsibilities to others. Leadership emerged not as an outcome separate from persistence but as a natural extension of the developmental experiences fostered through the program.

This finding expands existing scholarship on leadership development among Black male collegians. Traditional leadership models often emphasize authority, positional leadership, or individual accomplishment. By contrast, participants consistently described leadership through relational and communal terms. Their narratives emphasized mentorship, accountability,

representation, advocacy, and the responsibility to create opportunities for others. Leadership was less about holding formal titles and more about contributing to the well-being and advancement of one's community.

The findings suggest that this leadership orientation emerged through exposure to mentors and role models who embodied similar values. Participants frequently described observing Black faculty, staff, professionals, and community leaders who demonstrated forms of leadership rooted in service and relational care. These examples challenged dominant leadership paradigms that privilege competition and individual advancement. Instead, participants encountered models emphasizing reciprocity, responsibility, and collective growth.

This developmental process also reflects an important extension of Yosso's (2005) framework. While Community Cultural Wealth identifies various forms of capital that support educational success, the findings suggest that these resources often generated a sense of obligation to share knowledge, opportunities, and support with others. Participants did not view the benefits they received as solely personal assets. Rather, many described a desire to circulate those resources within their families, communities, and professional networks. Leadership became one mechanism through which Community Cultural Wealth was reproduced and sustained across generations.

The findings additionally reveal a strong connection between leadership development and critical consciousness. As participants gained greater awareness of institutional inequities and structural barriers affecting Black students, many developed commitments to advocacy and social change. Their experiences encouraged them to move beyond individual achievement and toward broader questions regarding equity, representation, and institutional transformation. This progression aligns with scholarship on transformational leadership and critical consciousness

development, both of which emphasize the relationship between personal growth and social responsibility.

Importantly, participants' advocacy was not limited to formal activism. While some engaged directly in efforts to improve institutional conditions, others expressed advocacy through mentorship, community engagement, professional service, and efforts to support younger Black students. These forms of leadership often operated quietly but carried significant impact. Participants repeatedly described a desire to become the mentors, role models, and advocates they themselves had needed during their transition to college.

The findings further suggest that leadership development was closely linked to belonging. Participants who experienced affirmation and support within B.L.A.C.K. frequently developed greater confidence in their ability to contribute meaningfully to their communities. In this sense, belonging served not only as a catalyst for persistence but also as a catalyst for leadership. Feeling valued and recognized enabled participants to envision themselves as individuals capable of influencing others and creating change.

From a higher education perspective, these findings challenge institutions to reconsider how leadership development is conceptualized and supported. Leadership programs frequently emphasize skill acquisition, networking, and professional advancement. While valuable, such approaches may overlook the importance of cultural affirmation, community accountability, and identity development. The experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that leadership is often most transformative when it emerges from environments that connect personal growth to collective responsibility.

Taken together, the findings indicate that leadership development within B.L.A.C.K. was not simply about preparing students for future positions of influence. It was about cultivating a

commitment to service, advocacy, and community uplift. Participants increasingly understood their success as interconnected with the success of others, transforming leadership from an individual pursuit into a collective endeavor. This orientation toward collective responsibility represents one of the most enduring outcomes of the B.L.A.C.K. experience and offers an important model for leadership development among Black male collegians navigating predominantly White institutions.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for higher education institutions, academic advising, student affairs practice, Black Male Initiatives (BMIs), and efforts to improve student persistence and belonging at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Collectively, the experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that Black male success is not simply a function of individual resilience or academic preparation. Rather, success emerges through culturally affirming environments that intentionally cultivate belonging, mentorship, identity development, leadership, and community. These findings challenge institutions to reconsider how they conceptualize student success and how they design systems intended to support historically marginalized populations.

Implications for Predominantly White Institutions

One of the clearest implications emerging from this study is that predominantly White institutions must move beyond diversity as representation alone and toward belonging as an institutional responsibility. Participants consistently demonstrated that admission and enrollment do not automatically produce inclusion. While UC Davis successfully recruited Black students, many mentees described experiences of racial isolation, underrepresentation, invisibility, and uncertainty regarding whether they belonged within the institution.

These findings suggest that institutions must critically examine the environments students enter after enrollment. Recruitment without belonging risks creating conditions in which students are physically present but psychologically disconnected. Institutions committed to equity should therefore assess campus climate, representation, mentoring opportunities, and opportunities for culturally affirming engagement as seriously as they assess enrollment and retention metrics.

The findings further suggest that belonging should be viewed as a measurable institutional outcome rather than an incidental byproduct of student engagement. Efforts to improve Black student success should include systematic assessment of belonging, mattering, psychological safety, and community connection.

Implications for Academic Advising

The experiences of former mentees challenge traditional approaches to academic advising that focus primarily on course selection, policy interpretation, and degree completion. Participants repeatedly described their most impactful advising relationships as those that addressed the whole student rather than merely academic requirements.

The findings suggest that culturally responsive advising must move beyond transactional interactions toward developmental relationships grounded in trust, care, and cultural understanding. Advisors play a critical role not only in helping students navigate institutional processes but also in helping students interpret experiences, identify opportunities, and maintain confidence during periods of uncertainty.

For advising professionals, this means recognizing that belonging, identity, and emotional well-being are not separate from academic success. Rather, they are deeply intertwined with persistence and achievement. Advisor training programs should therefore

include cultural humility, identity-conscious advising, sense of belonging theory, and strengths-based approaches informed by Community Cultural Wealth.

For institutions such as UC Davis, these findings reinforce the importance of continuing investments in advisor professional development through initiatives such as Academic Advising Enrichment (AAE), Advising for Equity, and culturally responsive advising frameworks that center student belonging and holistic development.

Implications for Black Male Initiatives

Perhaps the most direct implications of this study concern the design and implementation of Black Male Initiatives within higher education.

The findings suggest that the effectiveness of B.L.A.C.K. was not attributable to any single intervention. Participants did not identify one workshop, one mentor, or one event as transformative. Rather, they consistently described the cumulative impact of a culturally affirming developmental ecology that integrated belonging, mentorship, identity affirmation, leadership development, cultural engagement, and community accountability.

These finding challenges deficit-oriented approaches to Black Male Initiatives that focus primarily on remediation, risk reduction, or academic intervention. Instead, successful initiatives should be designed around strengths, assets, relationships, and cultural affirmation.

Programs should intentionally incorporate:

- Culturally grounded mentoring relationships
- Opportunities for identity exploration and affirmation
- Leadership development experiences
- Exposure to Black faculty, staff, alumni, and professionals
- Community-building practices that foster brotherhood and belonging

- Structured opportunities to develop Community Cultural Wealth

Importantly, the findings suggest that Black Male Initiatives should not function as peripheral programs operating on the margins of institutional life. Rather, they should be recognized as critical components of institutional equity strategies.

Implications for UC Davis and the Black-Serving Institution (BSI) Framework

The findings hold particular significance for UC Davis as it continues exploring what it means to function as a Black-Serving Institution (BSI). While historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were founded with explicit missions centered on educating and supporting Black students, the concept of a Black-Serving Institution challenges predominantly White institutions to examine the extent to which they create environments where Black students can not only enroll and graduate, but also experience belonging, affirmation, leadership development, and holistic success.

The experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. participants suggest that becoming a Black-serving institution requires more than increasing Black student enrollment or improving graduation rates. Rather, it requires intentional efforts to create institutional conditions in which Black students are recognized as valued members of the university community and where their cultural wealth, identities, experiences, and aspirations are affirmed and supported. The findings indicate that belonging may be one of the most important indicators of whether an institution is truly serving Black students.

Participants consistently described the transformative impact of culturally affirming spaces, meaningful mentorship relationships, representation among faculty and staff, and opportunities to engage in leadership and community-building. These experiences suggest that institutions aspiring to become Black-serving must move beyond access alone and focus on

creating environments where Black students can thrive academically, socially, culturally, and professionally.

As UC Davis continues advancing conversations regarding its Black-serving institutional aspirations, the findings suggest several important considerations:

- Expand opportunities for culturally responsive mentorship across academic, co-curricular, and professional development contexts.
- Increase the recruitment, retention, and visibility of Black faculty, staff, administrators, and student affairs professionals.
- Invest in culturally affirming programs and initiatives that foster belonging, identity affirmation, leadership development, and community engagement.
- Strengthen partnerships among CADSS, AAMP, AAE, colleges, academic departments, student organizations, and community stakeholders to create a coordinated ecosystem of support.
- Develop assessment measures that examine belonging, mattering, psychological safety, leadership development, community engagement, and cultural affirmation alongside traditional academic outcomes.
- Ensure that Black student success is embedded within institutional planning, accountability structures, and resource allocation processes rather than being relegated to isolated programs or units.

The findings further suggest that culturally affirming initiatives such as B.L.A.C.K. should be viewed not as supplemental support services but as examples of the institutional practices that characterize a Black-serving environment. Participants' experiences demonstrate that belonging, mentorship, cultural affirmation, and community are not ancillary to student success; they are

foundational conditions through which persistence, leadership development, and long-term achievement become possible.

Ultimately, the findings challenge UC Davis and other predominantly White institutions to reconsider what it means to serve Black students effectively. Becoming a Black-serving institution is not simply a matter of enrolling more Black students. It is a commitment to creating institutional environments where Black students are able to see themselves reflected, supported, valued, and empowered throughout their educational journeys. The experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that institutions move closer to that aspiration when they intentionally cultivate cultures of belonging, affirmation, accountability, and opportunity.

Implications for Student Affairs Practice

The findings also reinforce the critical role of Student Affairs professionals in creating environments where students experience belonging and mattering.

Participants consistently described transformative relationships occurring outside traditional classroom settings. Mentorship conversations, peer interactions, leadership opportunities, cultural programs, and community spaces frequently served as catalysts for growth and development.

These findings support long-standing Student Affairs principles emphasizing holistic student development. However, they also highlight the importance of culturally specific programming designed to address the unique experiences of Black students attending PWIs. Student Affairs professionals should therefore prioritize:

- Identity-based community building
- Leadership development grounded in cultural affirmation
- Mental health and wellness initiatives for Black students

- Opportunities for peer mentoring and community accountability
- Cross-campus collaboration around belonging and student success

Implications for Retention and Belonging Initiatives

Perhaps the most significant implication emerging from this study is that retention should not be understood solely as an academic outcome.

Participants did not persist because they simply learned to study more effectively or access campus resources. They persisted because they found relationships, communities, and environments that affirmed their humanity and reinforced their belief that they belonged.

This finding suggests that retention initiatives should move beyond compliance-based approaches focused exclusively on academic performance indicators. Institutions should consider belonging, connection, mentorship, and community as central retention strategies rather than supplemental interventions. The findings ultimately suggest that belonging is not merely correlated with persistence - it is foundational to it.

While these implications provide important insights for institutional practice, they also point toward specific actions that colleges and universities can take to better support Black male collegians. The following section presents recommendations informed by the findings and grounded in the experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees. These recommendations are intended to guide institutional leaders, faculty, advisors, student affairs professionals, and Black Male Initiative practitioners seeking to create more equitable, culturally affirming environments that foster belonging, persistence, leadership, and success.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study suggest that improving Black male persistence requires more than isolated interventions or short-term retention initiatives. Participants' experiences indicate

that meaningful success emerges when institutions intentionally create environments that foster belonging, mentorship, leadership development, cultural affirmation, and community. The following recommendations are offered for institutional leaders, academic advisors, faculty, student affairs professionals, and practitioners responsible for supporting Black male collegians.

Institutional Recommendations

Institutions should move beyond diversity metrics as primary indicators of success and adopt belonging-centered approaches to equity and student success. While increasing Black student enrollment remains important, enrollment alone does not guarantee inclusion, engagement, or persistence.

Institutions should:

- Develop campus-wide belonging assessment measures that specifically examine the experiences of Black students.
- Increase recruitment and retention of Black faculty, staff, and administrators.
- Embed culturally responsive student success initiatives within institutional strategic planning.
- Provide sustained funding for identity-based support programs rather than relying on temporary or grant-funded resources.
- Establish accountability structures that regularly evaluate campus climate and student belonging.

The findings suggest that belonging should be viewed as a strategic institutional priority rather than a peripheral student affairs concern.

Programmatic Recommendations

Black Male Initiatives should be designed as comprehensive developmental ecosystems rather than isolated mentoring or retention programs.

Programs should intentionally incorporate:

- Structured mentorship opportunities.
- Leadership development experiences.
- Academic and professional networking opportunities.
- Cultural identity exploration.
- Community-building activities.
- Opportunities for critical dialogue regarding race, masculinity, and higher education.

The experiences of former B.L.A.C.K. mentees suggest that the greatest impact occurs when these elements operate collectively rather than independently.

Academic Advising Recommendations

Academic advising should be reframed as a culturally responsive practice that addresses both academic and developmental dimensions of student success.

Institutions should:

- Provide advisor training grounded in Sense of Belonging theory and Community Cultural Wealth.
- Expand strengths-based advising approaches.
- Encourage advisors to incorporate discussions regarding identity, belonging, and leadership development.
- Create advising models that prioritize relationship-building alongside academic planning.

- Increase collaboration between advising units and culturally specific student support programs.

The findings indicate that advising relationships can function as powerful mechanisms for activating Community Cultural Wealth and fostering persistence.

Faculty and Staff Recommendations

Faculty and staff play critical roles in shaping students' experiences of belonging and institutional engagement.

Faculty and staff should:

- Create classroom environments that affirm diverse identities and lived experiences.
- Increase transparency regarding the hidden curriculum.
- Actively connect students with opportunities for research, internships, and professional development.
- Serve as mentors and sponsors for Black students whenever possible.
- Recognize the emotional labor often associated with navigating predominantly White institutions.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that individual relationships with faculty and staff often influenced their sense of possibility and belonging.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, this study was conducted at a single institution. Although UC Davis provides an important context for examining Black male student experiences at a large public research university, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of Black male collegians at other institutions,

including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), private universities, or community colleges.

Second, the study utilized a relatively small sample of ten former B.L.A.C.K. participants. While qualitative inquiry prioritizes depth over breadth, the experiences represented in this study do not encompass the full range of perspectives among Black male students at UC Davis or among all participants who engaged with the program.

Third, the study relied on retrospective alumni narratives. Participants reflected on experiences that occurred several years prior to the interviews. As a result, memories may have been influenced by time, subsequent life experiences, and evolving interpretations of past events.

Fourth, researcher positionality must be acknowledged. As the founder and primary architect of the B.L.A.C.K. program, I entered this study with a deep personal and professional investment in the initiative. While intentional efforts were made to ensure rigor, reflexivity, member checking, and transparency throughout the research process, my positionality inevitably shaped how the study was designed, interpreted, and understood.

Finally, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable. Rather, the purpose of this study was to generate rich descriptions and deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences. Readers should therefore consider the transferability of findings in relation to their own institutional contexts.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into the experiences of Black male collegians and the role culturally affirming initiatives can play in supporting persistence, belonging, and development.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several opportunities for future research.

First, comparative studies examining multiple Black Male Initiatives across institutional contexts would deepen understanding regarding which programmatic elements contribute most significantly to student success. Comparative research involving public universities, private institutions, minority-serving institutions, and HBCUs would be particularly valuable.

Second, longitudinal studies following Black male students from college entry through graduation would provide greater insight into how belonging, identity, mentorship, and leadership develop over time. Such studies could help illuminate developmental processes that retrospective interviews may not fully capture.

Third, future research should explore the experiences of Black queer collegians participating in Black Male Initiatives. While several participants in this study identified across diverse identities, additional research is needed to understand how sexuality and gender identity intersect with belonging, mentorship, and persistence.

Fourth, researchers should examine the experiences of neurodivergent Black students in higher education. The experiences shared by participants such as Julian suggest that important intersections between race, disability, and belonging warrant greater scholarly attention.

Fifth, additional research should investigate the role of academic advising in fostering belonging and persistence among Black students. Although advising emerged as an important theme in this study, advising-centered research remains relatively limited within the Black male student success literature.

Sixth, comparative studies examining Black male student experiences at HBCUs and PWIs could provide valuable insight into how institutional context shapes belonging, identity development, and persistence.

Finally, future research should explore post-graduate identity trajectories among former Black Male Initiative participants. Participants in this study frequently described B.L.A.C.K. as influencing their professional identities, leadership philosophies, and community commitments long after graduation. Additional research could help illuminate the long-term developmental impact of such programs.

Conclusion

The experiences shared by former B.L.A.C.K. mentees reveal a powerful truth: Black male persistence is about far more than remaining enrolled in college. It is about finding community in spaces where isolation often feels inevitable. It is about discovering mentors who recognize potential before students fully recognize it themselves. It is about developing the confidence to navigate institutions that were not always designed with Black men in mind while refusing to surrender one's identity in the process.

At its core, this study began with a simple question: What impact did participation in the B.L.A.C.K. program have on the lives of Black male collegians at UC Davis?

The answer that emerged from participants' narratives extends far beyond retention, graduation, or academic achievement.

Former mentees described B.L.A.C.K. as a place where they found belonging when they questioned whether they belonged. They described mentors who helped them navigate uncertainty, challenge self-doubt, and imagine futures they had not previously considered possible. They described relationships that evolved into brotherhood, accountability, and lifelong community. They described opportunities to engage critically with race, masculinity, leadership, and identity in ways that transformed how they understood themselves and their place in the world.

Most importantly, participants described transformation.

For some, that transformation involved learning that academic excellence and Black identity were not contradictory. For others, it involved discovering that vulnerability could coexist with strength, that leadership could be rooted in service, or that success could be measured by community impact rather than individual accomplishment. Still others described finding the courage to challenge institutional narratives and construct more authentic understandings of who they were and who they hoped to become.

The findings suggest that B.L.A.C.K. functioned as much more than a mentoring program. It served as a culturally affirming developmental ecology where belonging, mentorship, Community Cultural Wealth, leadership development, identity affirmation, and critical consciousness operated together to support Black male success. Through this ecology, participants developed the knowledge, relationships, confidence, and sense of purpose necessary not only to persist within the university but to flourish beyond it.

The significance of B.L.A.C.K. extends beyond UC Davis. At a time when institutions across the nation continue to grapple with persistent inequities in Black student outcomes, the experiences of former mentees offer an important reminder: Black men do not need to be fixed. They need environments that recognize their humanity, affirm their cultural wealth, cultivate their leadership, and support their aspirations.

The stories shared throughout this study challenge deficit-oriented narratives that have too often shaped discussions of Black male achievement in higher education. Instead, they reveal Black men as scholars, leaders, mentors, advocates, innovators, and community builders whose success is strengthened when institutions invest in culturally responsive forms of support.

Years after graduation, participants continued to describe B.L.A.C.K. not as a program they attended, but as a community that shaped who they became. That enduring influence may

be the clearest measure of the program's impact. The legacy of B.L.A.C.K. is found not only in degrees earned or careers pursued, but in the lives transformed, communities strengthened, and future generations of students who continue to benefit from the mentorship, leadership, and collective responsibility its participants now carry forward.

In the end, the story of B.L.A.C.K. is not simply a story about persistence. It is a story about possibility. It is a story about what becomes possible when Black men are provided spaces where they are seen, valued, challenged, supported, and empowered to thrive. And it is a story that offers important lessons for institutions seeking to create more equitable and humane pathways to success for Black students in higher education.

Appendix A

B.L.A.C.K. Recruitment Script

Subject: Share Your Experience – Participate in Research on Black Male Success at UC Davis

Dear [Former Mentee],

I hope you're doing well! I am in the final stages of completing my doctorate degree here at UC Davis, in the Graduate School of Education. I am conducting a research study to explore the experiences of former participants in the B.L.A.C.K. (Black Leadership Ambassadors for Culture & Knowledge) program at UC Davis. This study seeks to understand how the program supported Black male undergraduates in their academic journeys and overall success.

Since you were part of the B.L.A.C.K. program while you were an undergraduate student, I would love to invite you to participate in this research by sharing your experiences through a one-on-one interview. Your insights are valuable and can help shape future strategies our campus can use to better support Black male students at UC Davis.

What to Expect

What: A private, 45–60-minute interview (via Zoom) where you'll share your experiences in the B.L.A.C.K. program and how it impacted your academic journey.

Who: The interview will be conducted by me, and all responses will remain confidential.

Why: Your participation will contribute to research aimed at improving support systems for Black male students at UC Davis.

Interested? If you're willing to participate, please reply to this email or fill out this brief form. I will then reach out to schedule a time that works best for you.

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at [kaycarter@ucdavis.edu] or [510-590-6084]. Thank you for considering this opportunity. I truly appreciate your time and the experiences you will bring to this important research!

Looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Best,

Kayton Carter

CANDEL student (Cohort 14)

UC Davis Graduate School of Education

Appendix B

B.L.A.C.K. Interview Protocol

The following interview questions were used during data collection:

Subject: Share Your Experience – Participate in Research on Black Male Success at UC Davis

Pre-Interview Checklist:

- Ensure recording device is functioning (audio or video).
- Confirm participant has signed the consent form.
- Provide an overview of the interview purpose and reassure participants of confidentiality.
- Reiterate that participants can choose not to answer any question or stop the interview at any time.

Interview Structure:

Introduction (5-10 minutes)

- Welcome and thank the participants for their time.
- Briefly introduce me and the purpose of the research.
- Review the consent form, confidentiality agreement, and the structure of the interview.
- Ask the participant if they are comfortable with recording the session.
- Provide a brief overview of the B.L.A.C.K. program to set the context.

Example Script: "Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. Today, we'll be discussing your UC Davis experience, and your experiences as a mentee/participant in the B.L.A.C.K. program, with a specific focus on how the program impacted your shift at UC Davis. Your insights are invaluable, and everything shared will remain confidential. Feel free to skip any questions you're not comfortable with, and we can stop at any time if needed."

Opening/Background Questions (10 minutes)

1. Tell me your full name, the year you graduated from UC Davis, your major, and what you are doing now post-graduating?
2. Can you briefly describe your educational experiences prior to enrolling in UC Davis?
3. Describe your college preparation prior to enrolling in UC Davis?
4. What factors influenced your decision to go to college?
5. What factors supported your decision to attend UC Davis?
6. What were your career aspirations prior to coming to UC Davis?

Main Interview Questions (30 minutes)

Sense of Belonging (Strayhorn, 2012)

1. Can you describe a specific moment or experience during your time in the B.L.A.C.K. program that made you feel a strong sense of belonging at UC Davis?
 - a. Follow-up: What aspects of the program (mentorship, advising, counseling) contributed most to that feeling?
2. In what ways did your involvement in the B.L.A.C.K. program impact your relationships with faculty, staff, and peers on campus?
 - a. Follow-up: Did you feel that these relationships helped reinforce your sense of connection and inclusion at UC Davis? Why or why not?
3. How did your sense of belonging within the B.L.A.C.K. program influence your overall academic motivation and persistence at UC Davis?
 - a. Follow-up: Were there moments when your sense of belonging was challenged, and how did you overcome those challenges?

Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005)

1. The Community Cultural Wealth Model highlights various forms of capital (such as aspirational, social, and navigational capital). Can you share ways the B.L.A.C.K. program helped you leverage these forms of capital in your academic and personal life?
 - a. Follow-up: Which specific form of capital do you feel was most valuable in your success at UC Davis?
2. How did the mentorship and advising components of the B.L.A.C.K. program help you navigate institutional barriers or challenges you faced at UC Davis?
 - a. Follow-up: What skills or knowledge did you gain from the program that helped you advocate for yourself academically and socially?
3. In what ways did the B.L.A.C.K. program help you connect with and utilize cultural or community-based resources (on or off campus) to support your success?
 - a. Follow-up: Did you feel empowered to contribute back to your community because of these connections? If so, how?

Retention and Persistence:

1. What aspects of the B.L.A.C.K. program supported your efforts to succeed at UC Davis?
2. Were there other campus resources in addition to the B.L.A.C.K. program that you found crucial to your success?

Reflections & Recommendations:

1. Looking back, how do alums of B.L.A.C.K. reflect on their experiences at UC Davis.
2. Is there anything you would change about your experience in the B.L.A.C.K. program?
3. Do you have any recommendations for improving the B.L.A.C.K. program for future participants?

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