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The Role of Learning Communities in Supporting Enrollment Decisions and the Academic
Success of African American Community College Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Tanya Suzy Baronian

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Role of Learning Communities in Supporting Enrollment Decisions and the Academic Success of African American Community College Students

by

Tanya Suzy Baronian

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Mark P. Hansen, Co-Chair

Professor Tyrone C. Howard, Co-Chair

Though Assembly Bill 705 was passed in California to reduce gaps in retention and completion for community college students of color, these equity gaps persist. This study used quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine factors that influence enrollment choices and success in gatekeeper courses, like English, for African American community college students. Of particular focus were institutional supports and the role of learning communities. This study's findings mostly confirm existing research on learning communities and other institutional supports, like counseling, and the ways in which these supports help students enroll in and complete courses. Primary findings from this study emphasize the importance of creating Educational Plans with counselors and frequent contact with counselors. The quality of professors was also perceived to influence students' academic success, in addition

to precollege factors, such as pre-existing writing skills. This study was grounded in two theoretical frameworks: Regina Deil-Amen's (2011) Socio-Academic Integrative Moments and Laura Rendon's (1994) Theory of Validation. The important role that learning communities play in community building and increasing a sense of belonging among students of color are validated through the lenses of these theories.

The dissertation of Tanya Suzy Baronian is approved.

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2022

DEDICATION

This dissertation, three years of hard work and sacrifice, is for my children, Paul and Vivienne. I hope that this accomplishment always inspires you to keep working towards your own goals and dreams. If mama can do it, so can you! Being away from you those many weekends and weeknights was the hardest part of all this. May you always find the motivation to keep going even when the going gets tough. I love you.

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CHAPTER ONE

STUDY OVERVIEW

This study investigated the contributing factors of first-year African American community college students' completion of transfer-level English, and the ways their Learning Communities (LC) provide support with course enrollment and academic success. Even though the California Community College (CCC) system eliminated remedial courses and provided direct access to transfer-level math and English when it passed Assembly Bill 705 (AB 705) in 2017, African Americans are still experiencing barriers when it comes to enrolling in and completing transfer-level courses, English and math specifically. For example, in 2019 (AB 705's first year of implementation) there was a 23% completion gap between White and Black students in transfer-level English, only a 3% reduction from 2015 before the assembly bill's implementation (Mejia et al., 2020). The low rates of completion is not a demographic issue, but rather an institutional one. The positive correlation between completing transferable English in the first year of enrollment and completion rates presents a needed area of intervention.

While course completion is a nationwide problem, the CCC reports that for the last decade, African American completion rates for transfer-level English statewide are the lowest of any ethnic group in their first and second years, 27.4% and 45.6% respectively (CCC Chancellor's Office Data Mart, 2020). In comparison, they are 51.8% and 67.5% for White students, and 45.3% and 66.5% for Asian students (CCC Chancellor's Office Data Mart, 2020). According to EdSource (Gordon, 2019) and de Brey et al. (2019), 38% of African American postsecondary students make it to degree or transfer completion within six years of enrolling, whereas 64% of White students complete within six years and 74% of Asians (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Data show that completing transferable requirements in the first

year of college is associated with higher rates of degree, certificate or transfer completion and achievement (Leinbach & Jenkins, 2008; Campaign for College Opportunity and the California Acceleration Project, 2019). According to Driscoll's report for UC Davis' Policy Brief prepared under their Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) program (2007), the number of transfer courses students take their first semester predicts persistence for the spring semester and beyond. In short, community colleges need to get students enrolled in transferable English in their first year of college enrollment – and then support them.

Background to the Problem

Historically, African Americans have attained lower completion and retention rates than White and Asian students. African Americans have consistently remained at the bottom of the educational ladder in terms of their enrollment in college, their course completion rates and degree attainment (Harris & Wood, 2013). For example, in 2002, African American men made up 4.3% of all postsecondary students, the same percentage as 1976 (Harper, 2006), despite African Americans comprising 13.4% of the U.S.'s total population (U.S. Census, 2019; Mckinnon, 2003). One of the reasons for this large gap in degree completion between African Americans and White and Asian students is the long sequences of remedial courses that students previously enrolled in before reaching transfer-level courses. Before California state senate and assembly bills regarding the restriction of remedial course sequences were implemented, 60% of community college students were enrolling in at least one remedial course before enrolling in transferable courses (Woods et al., 2019). Nationally, 56% of African Americans enrolled in remedial courses according to a report prepared by Jimenez et al. (2016). The same report stated that only “22 percent of students who complete remedial education courses complete the associated gateway subject course: for example, a first-level English or math course” (p. 12).

In 2018, 37% of African American students aged 18-24 enrolled in college, in comparison to 59% of Asian and 42% of White students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). African Americans comprise about 13% of all degree granting college enrollment in the U.S. (NCES, 2020; Baum & Ma, 2016) compared to White students who comprise about 52% of total undergraduate enrollment (NCES, 2020). Roughly half of all African American students enroll in community colleges, the largest of any postsecondary sectors, including non-profits and four-year universities (Baum & Ma, 2016; Newman et al., 2015). Though community college offers many programs, careers and academic pathways (Belfield & Bailey, 2011), and offers services to support at-risk students (Calcagno et al., 2008), colleges struggle to close equity gaps and to increase completion rates for African American students. Not only are their completion rates low, but these rates have not increased enough to diminish the equity gap between them and White students. For example, according to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI) (2020) the percentage of African Americans between the ages of 25-29 with a bachelor's degree or higher was 29% in 2019, an 11% increase from 2000. In comparison, White students in the same age range and during the same time period increased from 34% to 45%; also an 11% increase (PNPI, 2020). In short, African American students continue to attain bachelor's degrees at slower rates than White students.

In California, 87% of African American students enrolled in developmental courses in comparison to 74% of White and 70% of Asian students (Public Policy Institute of California [PPIC], 2016). Long term outcomes for students who start in remedial courses are even more dismal, with only 16% of those students earning a certificate or associate degree within six years, and 24% of them transferring to four-year schools (PPIC, 2016). Again, these rates are disproportionately lower for lower-income, Latina/o/x, and

African Americans students. In an attempt to improve these low degree attainment gaps, California passed AB 705 in 2017 which directly places students in transfer-level math and English, and eliminates placement exams and the vast majority of remediation programs. Since fall 2019, students have had direct access to enroll in transfer-level courses. Though the elimination of remedial courses in California's community colleges have shown gains in all demographics, African Americans are still reported to enrolling in and completing gatekeeper courses at the lowest levels in the state (Mejia et al., 2019), and equity gaps continue to persist (Mejia et al., 2020). It is not known why African American students are not enrolling in these transferable courses even though they now have access to them, and why it is that they are not completing them at rates that would diminish the equity gap.

Gatekeeper Courses

For the last several decades, multiple institutional barriers prevented students from enrolling in the lowest transfer-level courses (i.e. English 101 or Math 1), often called “gatekeeper” courses. Some of these barriers included precollege indicators, such as GPA, entrance exam scores, and a lack of academic advising. College and Career Readiness Initiative (2012) reports a significant gap in performance and completion in gatekeeper English courses across the nation among all student demographics (Jonas et al., 2012). Completing transferable English and math within the first year of enrolling in college is a predictor of persistence to spring semester, and beyond. This is why AB 705 was passed. Nevertheless, it has become evident that access alone is insufficient to substantially increase enrollment and completion. Colleges need to communicate access of these transferable courses to students and must completely eliminate remedial courses so that students do not have any other choice but to start at transfer-level gatekeeper courses (Hern, 2019a). These issues highlight the need for other

institutional supports, like LCs, in becoming more efficiently and effectively employed by colleges to help increase gains.

Learning Communities as Institutional Supports

One of the strategies that colleges and universities employ to improve student outcomes and increase completion rates are LCs. LCs are institutional supports established to help specific student subgroups adjust to school life, in addition to improve their sense of belonging, increase student connectivity to campus life and therefore, academic performance (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Because LCs provide students with social activities in addition to academic support, students increase their campus involvement and overall academic achievement in their classes (Tinto & Russo, 1994; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999), including persistence (Weiss et al., 2015). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (2007) name LCs as one of its ten “high impact” educational practices that positively benefit students.

Though LCs date back to the 1920s, they have gained popularity in recent years and have become a popular go-to solution to help increase completion rates in community colleges (Weiss et al., 2015). Given their different populations, there are differences in LC models between four-year and two-year institutions. While four-year schools often tie their LCs with a residential component in addition to linked courses, community college LCs group students either by ethnic groups (i.e. Umoja, Ujima, Puente) and/or major/career choices (Otto et al., 2015). Though on-campus housing positively impacts school connectivity and therefore retention (Astin, 1984), community college students do not typically have this option.

LCs, whether at four-year or two-year institutions, share similar overlapping components. Weiss et al. (2015) argue that LCs usually consist of four typical elements: students co-enroll in two or more courses together, like a cohort style; instructors of these courses collaborate on those

classes together; instructors integrate instruction and activate collaborative learning; and student support services are prioritized for the cohort. It is unlikely that every LC in the nation includes one or more of these components. What is true about all LCs is their intention to increase achievement and to enhance the interaction of students in and out of the classroom (Beachboard et al., 2011).

Existing Gaps in the Research

Available research on LCs targets four-year universities, with a gap in the literature for LCs in community colleges (Barnes & Piland, 2010). An examination of LCs' effectiveness on non-residential campuses is even less common (Kern & Kingsbury, 2019). The gaps in the research are two pronged: 1) no prior research has examined the effectiveness of LCs with respect to specific student demographic subgroups, and 2) there is limited research that examines the effectiveness of LCs at two-year colleges. Research is still needed to uncover which elements of LCs are most impactful on specific groups' persistence and overall completion. Further, minority students' points of view regarding the impact that LCs have on their learning is absent in research (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). We also know little about students who transition in and out of LCs, and the unintended consequences of those transitions to evaluate their long-term effects (MacGregor et al., 2001).

The results of this study can help the CCC system understand why African Americans are not enrolling in English within their first year even when they have institutional supports in place, like LCs, after AB 705's implementation. The goal is to have the CCC implement the necessary changes to LCs to improve the overall retention, persistence, and graduation rates for African American students.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this research is to determine how to enroll and support African American students in community college transfer-level English classes. Specifically, it explores the ways that the Blackacademics Learning Community program (pseudonym) at Pleasant College (pseudonym) can contribute to African American students' decisions regarding enrollment and completion of transfer-level English within the first year of college enrollment.

Research Questions

1. What factors influence African American students' enrollment decisions and to what extent do LCs play a role in those decisions?
2. What are the factors that contribute to African American students' academic success and to what extent do LCs play a role in these students' academic success?
3. What do staff and students perceive as the benefits of being part of an LC?

Overview of the Research Design

This study is an explanatory sequential mixed methods study. It explored one LC in particular, Blackacademics at Pleasant College (PC), to identify institutional and program strengths and needed improvements to assist their 496 African American students (Pleasant College Dashboard, 2021). Currently, the LC has 50 members, or roughly 10% of the school's total African American student population. Combined data from students and the program staff (including counselors and program director) will inform the school as to how it can improve its LC support in increasing student enrollment in and completion of transfer-level English in their first year.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

While there have been gains in college enrollment for all populations the last 30 years, gaps in degree, transfer, and/or certificate attainment between African Americans and White and Asian students persist (Strayhorn, 2011; Libassi, 2018). In California, where the fifth largest African American population resides in the country (i.e. 2.2 million), only 36% of African American men aged 25-64 possess a college degree in comparison to 56% of White men in the same age range (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021). Like so, 41% of African American females in California aged 25-64 possess a college degree in comparison to 59% of White women who do so (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) (2018) reported that enrollment for students of color at community colleges has increased over the last 20 years, but only 36% transfer to four-year schools. Comparatively, 50.4% of White and 49.8% of Asian students transfer to four-year institutions (NSCRC, 2018).

Though community colleges have turned their attention to closing equity gaps, especially for students of color, only about 12% of all African American students graduate with a certificate or degree from two-year institutions (Villarreal & Garcia, 2016). Sixty five percent of African Americans are nontraditional students, meaning they attend part-time, are 24 years of age or older, are financially independent from their parents, and/or have responsibilities outside of school like jobs and family obligations (Goings, 2017; Gomez, 2015). Because nontraditional students attend part-time, they take longer to reach completion and are less likely to earn a degree than traditional students (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

This literature review first defines the terms “persistence” and “retention,” then goes on to explore persistence and retention indicators (both precollege and college), including institutional factors that impact persistence and retention. It goes on to explore the role of community colleges in postsecondary education and the role AB 705 has played in course selection and completion. As LCs are proven institutional supports, I then detail their history, purpose, and implementation, drawing largely from four-year institutions. The review then discusses how LCs can foster a sense of belonging, as this factor has been proven to increase retention. Finally, the review elucidates how effective LCs are in improving student engagement, leading to improved outcomes for specific student subgroups.

Persistence and Retention

Though the terms “persistence rate” and “retention rate” differ in meaning from state to state, and even differ in meaning between universities and community colleges, both terms drive at the same idea: the rate at which students remain active on campus. The NSCRC (2015) defines persistence as “continued enrollment (or degree completion) at **any** higher education institution — including one different from the institution of initial enrollment — in the fall semesters of a student’s first and second year” and retention as “continued enrollment (or degree completion) within the **same** higher education institution in the fall semesters of a student’s first and second year.” Most Southern California community colleges, including the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD), define persistence as the rate of consecutive enrollment during primary semesters (fall/spring) and retention as the rate at which a student remained in the class for the duration of its scheduled time (16 weeks, 8 weeks, 5 weeks, etc.). The research studies referenced in this literature review use the terms “persistence” and “retention” the way the NSCRC defines them. When not referring to the research articles, this literature review uses the

terms according to how the Southern California community colleges do so in order to remain consistent with the way the research site for this study defines them.

Predictors of Persistence

A number of factors contribute to persistence. These include: precollege indicators and life experience-related indicators (Therriault & Krivoshey, 2014); first year college GPA (Whalen et al., 2009); first semester college GPA (Gershenfeld et al., 2016); performance in first year math (Herzog, 2005) and English (Leinbach & Jenkins, 2008); and academic support, including faculty development, course design, and instructional technology (Marsh, 2014). Furthermore, high first semester GPAs are associated with enrollment in transfer-level courses (Callahan & Belcheir, 2017). How college students select courses and experience campus life impacts graduation and completion rates.

Precollege Factors

While the same federal laws apply to all public K-12 schools in terms of equitable academic opportunities for students, research indicates that the spirit of the law and what is actually being implemented are contrary to one another. Data show that high schools with high populations of Latina/o/x and African American students have lower student outcomes and wider achievement gaps than Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) (Brown, 2013). These schools receive lower funding (The Century Foundation, 2020), offer less numbers of challenging courses, like honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses (Quinton, 2014), may or may not have college counselors on site (Engberg & Gilbert, 2013), and often have novice and/or underperforming instructors teaching students in the classroom (Office for Civil Rights, 2014; Brown, 2013). In addition, the schools they attend oftentimes have structural and aesthetic deficiencies (Oakes & Lipton, 2004; ACLU of Southern California, 2019). Three key high

school factors that predict college persistence include lack of challenging courses, lack of technology, and low high school GPA.

Challenging Courses

Research indicates that students who are challenged in their high school coursework are better prepared for college. High school course rigor shows a strong relationship with college outcomes (Adelman, 2006; Therriault & Krivoshey, 2014; Jonas et al., 2012). Advanced levels of high school courses, such as English, math, and science, are associated with higher chances of success in gateway college courses (Woods et al., 2019; Jonas et al., 2012). In addition, AP courses and exam participation are indicators of positive predictors of college preparation and early success (Chajewski et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2010; Therriault & Krivoshey, 2014).

In a study report prepared by the College and Career Readiness Initiative (2012), students who take AP and advanced courses in high school increase their chances of first year college success. Students of color struggle when they arrive to college due to the lack of rigorous high school course offerings (Welton & Martinez, 2014), African American students in particular (Bryant, 2015). In the 2015-2016 school year, Black students made-up 15.4% of the total U.S. public school population, but only 9.4% of them took AP courses. They are underrepresented in AP courses in every state (Francis & Darity, 2021; The Education Trust, 2020). In a study conducted by Woods et al. (2019) regarding course enrollment for first time college students, students with higher levels of preparation from high school are more likely to succeed in transfer-level English; students who enter college with transfer credits are more likely to retain into their second year (Woods et al., 2019). In addition, students of color were less likely to enroll in transfer-level English in their first year of college (Woods et al., 2019). In this same study, Black students succeeded in gatekeeper English courses at a lower rate than White

students due to lack of preparedness in pre-college reading and writing (Woods et al., 2019). In fact, one third of underprepared freshmen are predicted to fail gatekeeper English with the passing of AB 705 (Woods et al., 2019). Given that less than 10% of African Americans are enrolled in AP courses across the nation, coupled with the strong correlation between advanced high school coursework and college success, it is clear that schools do not provide African Americans an equitable chance at succeeding in gatekeeper coursework.

Technology

Research also indicates that more students graduate from high school and consider college when they have technology integrated with their learning (Valentine & Bernhisel, 2008). Whalen et al. (2009) found that students with more technology use in high school were 17.7% more likely to retain into the second year of college than those students who reported using less technology. Schools made up of predominantly Latina/o/x and/or African American students often do not have the funds to offer technology integrated curriculum. A report prepared by Gallup commissioned by Google (2016) states that Black students are less likely to have computer science integrated in their academic coursework than are White students, at 47% and 58% respectively. Clearly, a lack of both rigorous course offerings and technology contribute to the low level of preparedness of these students in higher education, in addition to feelings of under preparedness. As a result, receiving higher education institutions often offer supports to encourage persistence, including counseling services (Tovar, 2015; Booth et al., 2013, Smith et al., 2012), summer bridge programs, early alerts, and LCs.

High School GPA

Research continually indicates that high school GPA is associated with college readiness and success (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Bridgeman et al., 2008; Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005;

Westrick et al., 2015). Furthermore, high school GPA is correlated to first and second year college GPA, and second and third year college retention (Westrick et al., 2015). According to the Nation's Report Card (Nord et al., 2011), White and Asian students earned higher GPAs (3.09 and 3.26 respectively) than Black and Latina/o/x students (2.69 and 2.84 respectively). Research indicates that high school GPA on its own can predict transfer-level English and math course success (Scott-Clayton, 2012). It is no coincidence that Black students' GPA is significantly lower than any other ethnic group in the country as is their success rate in transfer-level English in college.

College GPA and Retention

Just as high school GPA is correlated with retention in college, first and second semester college GPA is also correlated with retention in later semesters. A study conducted by Callahan and Belcheir (2017) regarding transfer-level English completion found that grades were the best indicator of retention from one semester to the next. The study, which comprised of 5,650 college students at the Boise State University, correlated the successful completion of transferable math and English in the first year of college with retention. In the study, they found that 83% of surveyed students who received an "A" in English were still enrolled in school one year later, whereas 31% of students who received non-passing marks were enrolled one year later. In their four-year study (Fall 2007-Fall 2010), they revealed that what predicted retention the most was receiving an "A" in English. Students who earned an "A" were 3.3 times more likely to be retained the next semester and those who earned a "B" were 2.5 times more likely (Callahan & Belcheir, 2017).

Other studies also confirm similar findings regarding grades and retention. For example, in 2014, the University of Arizona hired an educational technology company that uses predictive

analytics to help boost student graduation rates (Kovacs, 2016). One of the findings that stood out the most was that earning an “A” or “B” in transfer-level English was directly related to higher college graduation rates (Kovacs, 2016). This is consistent with other researchers who link GPA with retention, like Herzog (2005) and Whalen et al. (2009). A study that examined ten years of enrollment data at four public universities in Texas reported that Black students’ first semester GPA was on average 0.4 points lower than White students (Fletcher & Tienda, 2010). This ties with previous research evidence that posits first semester GPA as a completion predictor (Gershenfeld et al., 2016). Furthermore, research also finds that first to second year retention is the most important determining factor of graduation rates (Marsh, 2014). While inequity in K-12 institutions impacts community colleges, many have built institutional supports to level the playing field.

Institutional Factors that Predict Retention

There are multiple institutional factors that impact overall retention of students, outside of the characteristics of the admitted student (Woodard et al., 2001). These factors include, but are not limited to, participation in remedial courses, GPA, and credits earned in the first year of college (Therriault & Krivoshey, 2014). In addition, interactions between faculty and students, leadership, location, financial construct, size of the school, and other student support services, like LCs, affect retention (Calcagno et al., 2008; Marsh, 2014). These factors suggest reasons why students are not remaining enrolled past the first year.

When examining course selection choices and retention, particularly in the first year of college enrollment, researchers need to consider institutional factors. Marsh (2014) examined 489 four-year public institutions in an effort to find which institutional factors impact retention the most. He found that aside from full-time status and finances impacting retention, that

academic support, such as course design, faculty development, and technology, influenced retention and persistence the most. Another study found that four-year institutions have stronger socialization abilities and therefore positive impacts on persistence (Calcagno et al., 2008). Of course, these studies are not specific to two-year institutions. Nevertheless, two-year institutions are also concerned with second year persistence and retention, and can take advantage of their smaller physical campus size to create more intimate socialization opportunities for students (Calcagno et al., 2008). Institutional factors on student retention vary on each campus due to the type of student that the college serves.

Sense of Belonging and Students of Color

Many researchers argue that a sense of belonging is crucial for students of color in postsecondary education, directly correlating it with retention and student success (Harris & Wood, 2013; Rendon, 1994). A qualitative study at one college in the LACCD examined why African American and Latina/o/x males completed English classes (Villarreal & Garcia, 2015). Respondents said that they persisted in their classes as a result of support services from professors and tutoring, and reported that they dropped classes when overwhelmed by feelings of incapacity to perform well or to keep up with their classes, and a lack of resources (Villarreal & Garcia, 2015). Simply stated, if students of color do not feel a sense of connectedness or belonging within the institution, they are less likely to maximize their potential or persist through courses and/or degree completion (Karp et al., 2010).

The Role of Community Colleges in Higher Education

The role community colleges have played in postsecondary education has increased dramatically over the last six decades. In 1963, community colleges enrolled 15% of all students, approximately 740,000 students (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). In 1983, 4.9 million students

attended two-year college (Vaughan, 1985). By fall 2018, 11.8 million students were enrolled in community colleges across the nation, about a 1500% increase from the 1960s (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). Today, the primary challenge for community college is not to attract students, but how to best serve the existing students they already have (Calcagno et al., 2008). According to the College Board's Research Brief prepared by Baum and Ma (2016), NSCRC reported that 46% of all students who completed a degree in 2014 from a four-year institution had enrolled in a two-year institution at one point in the past 10 years. It is widely believed that community colleges have the potential to place the United States at the forefront of scholastic accomplishment in terms of degree completion (Ewell, 2010) by preparing graduates to eventually compete in a global economy (Wood, 2014).

Transfer-level English Completion After Passing AB 705

Legislators advocated for the passage of California's AB 705 as a potential solution to inequitable placement of Latina/o/x and African American community college students in prerequisite remedial courses. Nevertheless, academic under preparedness is still an issue for many students, particularly those in community colleges (Woods et al., 2019). Prior to 2012, more than 75% of students in the CCC were required to take remedial courses (Hern, 2019a). Specifically, in the 2007-2008 school year, 46% of African-American students had taken remedial courses (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). Even still, those who enrolled in remedial postsecondary courses but did not participate in LCs had lower completion rates than those in remedial courses who were members of LCs according to one qualitative study at a community college (Barbatis, 2010).

In an attempt to improve completion, in 2012 Senate Bill 1456 (SB 1456) was passed to ensure that higher education institutions provided students with a number of supports when

matriculating to college, including “orientation, assessment and placement, counseling, and other Educational Planning services, and academic interventions” (California Legislative Information, retrieved 2022). Though helpful, low-income students and students of color continued to complete remedial and later gateway courses at disproportionately lower rates when compared with White and Asian students (Jimenez et al., 2016).

Today, however, math and English placement exams are eliminated due to AB 705. The law requires colleges to allow students to directly enroll into transfer-level math and English. As of fall 2019, 96% of students have access to transfer-level English, whereas only 38% had access to it in fall 2015 (PPIC, 2020). The law explains that “A community college district or college shall maximize the probability that a student will enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and mathematics within a one-year time frame” (California Legislative Information, 2017). The Chancellor’s Office clarified that community colleges must position students to complete transfer-level courses within one year. In 2022, Assembly Bill 1705 (AB 1705), a new law that builds on AB 705, was proposed in an attempt to guarantee students the one year completion (California Legislative Information, retrieved May 2022). To date, the assembly bill has cleared the Assembly’s Higher Education Committee.

Nevertheless, African American students in the CCC system are not enrolling in transfer-level English in their first year of college at rates that would close completion gaps between them and White and Asian students (PPIC, 2020). Though there is a 20-25% increase in the completion of transfer-level courses for all racial/ethnic groups between 2017-2020, African Americans are still experiencing lower completion rates than all other ethnic groups (PPIC, 2020; Mejia et al., 2021). Simply providing access to the college is not sufficient (Calcagno et al., 2008). It is the school’s responsibility to provide students with resources and support, such as

counseling, tutoring centers, writing labs, and embedded tutors (Woods et al., 2019). LCs can increase a sense of belonging and self-efficacy to bolster their performance in their courses, specifically transfer-level English.

Learning Communities

Many interventions at post-secondary institutions already support students, from social and academic clubs to writing labs to tech help to LCs. These have all proven to be effective ways to acclimate students to the first year of college life both in and out of the classroom (Rocconi, 2011). Of the many institutional supports embraced over the past decade, LCs have gained the most popularity (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999).

History of Learning Communities

LCs date back to the 1920s and 1930s (Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Cox, 2004; MacGregor et al., 2001; Tinto, 2003) and are accredited to John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn who posited that learning in cohorts was most effective (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Price, 2005; Kern & Kingsbury, 2019; Cox, 2004). LCs, and the term “learning communities,” regained traction in the 1980s (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Cox, 2004; Zhao & Kuh, 2004; MacGregor et al., 2001; Tinto, 2003). Since then, LCs have increasingly been recognized as a source of student engagement in and out of the classroom, which leads to higher levels of students learning, development, and overall educational effectiveness (Zhao & Kuh, 2004; MacGregor et al., 2001). Lenning and Ebbers report that, typically, LCs are used to link people in three distinct ways: through curriculum, technology (i.e. the internet), and internationally (country to country). LCs are more frequently implemented today in community colleges to help improve overall outcomes due to the fact that they are associated with positive social, academic, and psychological outcomes (Weiss et al., 2015). In short, LCs contribute to retention (MacGregor & Smith, 2005). As of

2005, there exists over 500 LCs in colleges and universities in the United States (MacGregor & Smith, 2005; Lardner & Malnarich, 2008).

Organization and Goals

LCs are known to critically impact the first year of college, where attrition is most likely to happen (Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011; Whalen et al., 2009; Tinto, 2003). Among its many goals, LCs aim to create a social and intellectual community for students (MacGregor et al., 2001). Joining an LC is typically voluntary and institutions form their LCs in different ways. Though not true of all LCs, many require cohorts of students to co-enroll in at least two classes together (MacGregor & Smith, 2005). Regardless of shared features (or not), LCs provide students with a sense of connectivity and belonging, and seek to increase student outcomes and student engagement (Otto et al., 2015; Weiss et al., 2015; MacGregor et al., 2001; Kuh et al., 2008). In addition, LCs aim to “deepen learning, create a deeper sense of connection among ideas and curricular issues, and create a deeper sense of community” (MacGregor et al., 2001, p. 1).

Lenning and Ebbers (1999) believe that there are four ways of organizing LCs: curriculum, classroom, residential, and student-type (Kern & Kingsbury, 2019). It is important to note that Pike et al. (2011) found that the differences in the types of LCs only influence student experiences in subtle ways, indicating that one type is not better than another. What schools should focus on instead are the types of students on their campuses when creating a specific LC. For the purposes of this study, student-type LCs will be highlighted. Student-type LCs are often defined as LCs that serve a specific student subgroup, such as historically underserved, academically underprepared, honors, etc. (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). For example, Umoja, Ujima, and

Black Scholars Program are “student-type” LCs serving African American students on many Southern California community college campuses.

Sense of Belonging

Learning in a cohort style enhances feelings of relatedness, which leads to improved student motivation and educational outcomes (Beachboard et al., 2011). Autonomy, competence and feelings of relatedness (or sense of belonging) all impact motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Beachboard et al., 2011). Hurtado and Carter (1997) and Rendon (1994) argue that student departure, or lack thereof, is linked with a sense of belonging in combination with discussions regarding course content with other students outside of the class. Strayhorn (2008) posits that one of the reasons that Black males depart college is due to a lack of sense of belonging. When students feel a sense of belonging, their motivation to perform better increases.

Learning environments also promote feelings of relatedness to teachers and peers, and can help improve motivation, which in turn has positive effects on school outcomes (Chen & Jang, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Sense of belonging has been linked to self-efficacy, among other factors like retention and higher grades (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Inkelas et al., 2007). A study conducted by Beachboard et al. (2011) regarding the effectiveness of LCs on academic outcomes found that sense of belonging was the single most influential variable that contributed to student performance. Their research looked at 130 of the 529 four-year colleges and universities that participated in the 2005 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). They looked at 2,000 randomly selected student records and concluded that LCs increase a sense of relatedness, and therefore improve motivation which leads to better learning and academic outcomes.

A strong sense of belonging can enhance any experience that one is participating in. This effect is no different on a college campus. Strayhorn (2012) defines a sense of belonging, as it pertains to college, as:

...students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

Students involved with peers and campus life, such as seeking out tutoring, attending office hours, and joining clubs or LCs, are more likely to identify with the institution, and therefore are more likely to persist (Therriault & Krivoshey, 2014; Berger & Milem, 1999; Kuh et al., 2008; Titus, 2004). Berger and Milem (1999) found that first-year students who were more involved on campus were also more highly involved in academics and socializing, in addition to feeling more committed to the school. Hausmann et al. (2007) conducted a longitudinal experimental designed study at a four year university with African American and White students that focused on: 1) the role that sense of belonging plays in predicting persistence and “other variables that predict persistence” (p. 2) and 2) “the effects of an intervention designed to increase students' sense of belonging” (p. 2). In their study, they found that students' intentions to persist is positively associated with a sense of belonging and institutional commitment. In other words, students who reported a greater sense of belonging or institutional commitment reported stronger intentions to persist (Hausmann et al., 2007).

Involvement with peers and faculty are key to a sense of belonging (Rendon, 1994; Braxton et al., 2000), which particularly affects underrepresented students (Rendon, 1994; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008). Of the

many findings from Hausmann et al. (2007) perhaps the most significant was that African American students who had more peer support had an increased sense of belonging and institutional commitment. They suggest that “the early social experiences students have when they first enter college and the social support they receive during that time are likely to be better determinants of initial levels of sense of belonging than are demographic characteristics or academic experiences” (p. 27) and that these school interactions are “consistent with the idea that developing a sense of belonging is important to college persistence” (p. 3). This study elucidates that a students’ sense of belonging impacts the degree at which they adjust to their academic life (Hausmann et al., 2007). Since a core component of most LCs is to help students become involved with school while fostering a sense of belonging, then it can be argued that they may positively effect persistence intentions.

Other Benefits

Multiple research studies indicate that LCs have a variety of benefits including facilitating the transition from high school to college, positive academic outcomes like higher grades, satisfaction with college, and increased graduation rates (Pike et al., 2011). Studies conducted by Tinto (2003) and MacGregor et al. (2001) show that LCs have five promising results: 1) LCs help retention, especially for underrepresented students and those who are academically at-risk, 2) LCs contribute to deeper and better integrated student learning, including intellectual development, 3) LCs aid in faculty development because those who are involved in LCs are reported to have greater social and professional gains, 4) LCs help students and faculty develop a sense of community due to its integration of academics and socialization, and 5) LC participants develop cultural sensitivity and respect for other people.

Persistence and Retention

Institutional supports, like LCs, are established to help students persist from one semester to the next. Braxton et al. (2000) report that the more invested students are in their institution, the better their persistence rates. In a study conducted at a four-year university, Whalen et al. (2009) found that students who were part of an LC in their first year of college were more likely to retain to their second year than those who were not part of one. In another study that focused on the impact of LCs on persistence for first year at-risk undergraduates at one four-year university, Heaney and Fisher (2011) reported that students in an LC “were statistically more likely to remain at [the] university into their second year” (p. 11). It is the institution’s responsibility to invest time, energy, and financial resources to help support students who are at-risk by developing intervention programs (Levitz et al., 1999). Since it is known that taking transferable English in the first year of enrollment is directly correlated with persistence, or long-term retention, then membership in an LC is not only crucial in enrolling in transfer-level classes but also in completion rates.

Because LCs are proven to help improve student outcomes, including grades, there is a correlation between participation in them and second year retention. In a mixed methods national research project conducted at a Spokane Washington community college with a well-established LC, MacGregor et al. (2001) also found that retention and persistence were positively correlated with LCs. They reported that students in LCs “invested significantly more ‘time on task’” (p. 5), and that their academic engagement directly positively impacted their socialization outside of the classroom. They also measured the perceptions students held regarding their own involvement, peers, environment, classes, faculty and administrators, and found that students in LCs “perceived the environment more positively, themselves as more involved, and even

administrators as nicer” (p. 5). Perhaps the most significant finding is that students in LCs performed significantly better in remedial courses and had higher persistence rates than those who did not.

Student Engagement and Learning

In addition to earning higher grades (Callahan & Belcheir, 2017) and demonstrating greater persistence and retention rates (Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Beachboard et al., 2011), students who are part of an LC improve critical and higher order thinking (Inkelas et al., 2006; Pike et al., 2011; Beachboard et al., 2011), and communicate and learn better than nonparticipants (Tinto & Russo, 1994). In a study conducted by Tinto (2003) under the National Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment at three postsecondary institutions (two community colleges and one university) across the nation, he reported four significant insights regarding student engagement and persistence: 1) students in an LC spent more time together outside of class than non-LC students. Students reported the time spent as being “supportive,” without which they claimed they may have dropped out of college; 2) LC students became “more actively involved in classroom learning, even after class...[and] spent more time learning together both inside and outside the class” (p. 5); 3) LC participation enhanced student learning; 4) LC students persisted at a higher rate than non-LC students. For example, at one of the community colleges, the LC students persisted at a rate about 25% higher than non-LC participants. This study demonstrates the positive impact that LCs can make on completion rates, especially because LCs provide opportunities for social interaction outside of the classroom.

Pike et al. (2011) conducted research on first year and senior undergraduate students who were enrolled in four-year baccalaureate granting institutions and who participated in the NSSE in 2004. The institutions were considered diverse according to the 2000 Carnegie classification.

Pike et al. (2011) considered six engagement measures that are associated with LCs, including 1) academic effort, 2) integrative and higher-order thinking, 3) diversity experiences, 4) active and collaborative learning, 5) student-faculty interactions, and 6) supportive campus environment. The research study yielded many findings of which the following are most relevant to this literature review. The researchers found that "...learning community membership was positively related to academic effort, as were being female and being a member of a racial/ethnic minority group. Participating in a learning community was associated with a 3.20-point increase in academic effort" (Pike et al., 2011, p. 308). An interesting note is that this research indicated higher student engagement in senior students more so than freshman. This finding may indicate that participation in LCs from freshmen year has far-reaching positive impacts on student outcomes. Ultimately, Pike et al. (2011) found that participating in LCs was positively related to all six types of student engagement measures. Their findings are consistent with previous research, which also explored whether LC participation was positively related to engagement (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Since LCs are positively associated with student engagement, and student engagement is positively associated with student outcomes, LCs clearly impact student learning (Pike, et al., 2011), which this key study confirms.

Out-of-Class Interaction

Out-of-class interaction also contributes to academic achievement. Out-of-classroom experiences are just as important to LCs as those in the classroom to help bolster connectedness and engagement. Pike et al. (2011) reported that students who participated in LCs with courses that engaged in group discussions or that required out of class activities reported higher levels of engagement.

In studies conducted by Hurtado and Carter (1997) and Maestas et al. (2007), students reported that participating in discussions about school matters out of the classroom with other peers increase their feelings of belonging. These findings directly tie in with the first two insights regarding the impact of LCs listed in the aforementioned research study Tinto (2003) conducted under the National Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment. Since LCs allow for “unique closeness” for students due to both the frequency of and the opportunity for socializing outside of class than those who are not members of LCs, this directly correlates with the LCs potential to increase students’ sense of belonging which in turn impacts retention (Maestas et al., 2007).

In a study conducted by Rocconi (2011), students who participated in LCs had stronger social and academic gains in college than those who did not. This effect is due to the fact that LCs create a network around students in order to help them acclimate to college by providing them with social and academic support through peers, faculty, and shared experiences (Paige et al., 2019). Research indicates that students who participate in activities outside of the classroom increase their likelihood to connect with their peers, which in turn has been proven to increase retention and success (Astin, 1984; Rendon, 1994; Tinto & Russo, 1994). For the most part, community college students struggle with college involvement outside of the classroom as most colleges don’t offer housing and their students are usually nontraditional students, meaning they are typically employed, older and have other obligations outside of school that hinders their involvement at the college (Tinto & Russo, 1994). LCs can help to increase student involvement and therefore increase engagement both in and out of classes.

Improved Faculty Relationships

Students who are involved on campus, who create faculty relations, and who interact with peers persist at higher rates than those who do not (Roberts & Styron, 2010; Hurtado & Carter,

1997; Maestas et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008). For example, one research study found that participation in LCs improved student-faculty relationships (Pike et al., 2011). Positive student-faculty relations result in student success, especially for African American students on community college campuses. Strayhorn and Saddler (2008) found that African-American students' college satisfaction was directly related to student-faculty relations. This correlation between college satisfaction and faculty interaction can be strengthened through institutional supports (Rendon, 1994). As research indicates, improving this connection will result in an increase in the number of students feeling satisfied and, therefore, improve retention.

Recent research indicates that stigmas and stereotypes, particularly for African American males, impedes student-faculty relations, and impacts their ability to persist and achieve a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Newman et al., 2015). LCs specifically designed for African American students help to foster sense of belonging and cultivate feelings of relatedness which will enhance student-faculty relations and encourage student involvement out of the classroom.

Lifelong Learning

LCs have also been linked positively with fostering an inclination towards inquiry and lifelong learning. Another significant study that yielded positive results between academic LCs and learning outcomes was conducted by Kilgo et al. (2015). The researchers surveyed 10% of first year undergraduate students across 17 universities throughout the U.S. regarding ten high impact practices, including participation in LCs. They found that participation in LCs is positively correlated with the Need for Cognition and Positive Attitude toward Literacy (PATL), which is often described as an indicator of lifelong learning and inquiry (Kilgo et al., 2015).

Blackademics: A Learning Community for African American Students

The structure of LCs may differ from one campus to the next. The vast majority, however, offer students a few common supports, including linked classes that are often small in size, support with a group or peer, and the promotion of social activities and programs. Taking the same classes with familiar faces often makes learning accessible and comfortable to students, allowing for close interaction with peers (Whalen et al., 2009). In fact, for nontraditional students, like African Americans, who often struggle with validation in the classroom, participation in an LC can have positive outcomes for them (Rendon, 1994). Rendon (1994) argues that LCs are one of the ways in which colleges can foster a sense of community validation and excitement for learning for vulnerable populations.

However, the existence of an LC on a college campus does not automatically correlate with success for that particular group. In fact, many campuses across the nation have LCs but do not utilize them well, especially in helping students complete transferable math and English in their first year. Some well-known LCs for African American students in the CCC include Ujima, Umoja, and Black Scholars Program. Because most African Americans are part-time students, they likely have less time to be social and involved on campus. Involvement in an LC can make-up for their part-time status in regards to socializing, since students in LCs typically enroll in classes in a cohort style.

The Blackademics LC at PC is structured differently from the traditional LC. Whereas most other LCs link two courses together or require students to enroll in a core set of classes as a cohort, PC's LC does not require any course or cohort linking. In many ways, their LC is more equitable for their African American students: it takes into consideration the fact that the majority of their African American students attend part-time. This part-time status makes it

difficult for students to be locked into two courses that may not fit their schedules. Instead, Blackacademics incentivizes membership by offering linked counselors, priority registration and meal gift cards, in addition to free campus transportation and parking. PC's English department's self-study (2019) reported that Blackacademics members completed transfer-level English at a substantially higher rate, 25% higher, than African American students who were not members. While Blackacademics seems to be supporting their students academically, they do not have a large membership. Only about 10% of PC's African American students are members of Blackacademics.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws from Regina Deil-Amen's concept of Socio-Academic Integrative Moments (2011) and Laura Rendon's Theory of Validation (1994). These frameworks allow me to use my lens as a community college instructor in understanding my students' social and academic experiences on and off campus. The theories also help me gain insight into the reasons as to why students are willing to become involved on campus or not, the factors that impact validation and sense of belonging, and how social and academic involvement impacts their persistence.

Deil-Amen (2011) draws from Tinto's (1994), Astin's (1984), and Pascarella's (1991) theories of departure and involvement, and alters them to focus on race, class, and culture for students who attend two year schools (community colleges and private two-year colleges), something that has not been explored previous to Deil-Amen's research. Her qualitative research study, from which her Socio-Academic Integrative concept is born, offers insights on how students view their own social and academic integrative experiences on campus, including how these experiences impact their sense of belonging and persistence. Ultimately what she found is

that institutional agents, like faculty, peers, and staff, critically impacted the ways in which students felt they integrated into their classes.

Because I am looking at African American community college students and the factors influencing their enrollment decisions and academic success, I want to learn what it will take for students to feel invested in the college that will lead to their enrolling in and completing their courses, specifically transfer-level English. Deil-Amen's model reconfirms that an integrative approach of social and academic experiences is necessary for minoritized students to persist. Since LCs are known to encourage these combined experiences, Deil-Amen's concept helps to frame my understanding of how combining social and academic experiences to create a sense of belonging contributes to completion and persistence. Finally, not only does Deil-Amen report that African American students in particular "desire for a culture or personal connection with an individual or group on campus" like LCs (p. 61), she also supports the "construction" of LCs and other cohort models of student support on two year campuses for this reason. In this way, it becomes the institution's responsibility to monitor student progress and is more effective in student success. This is also a notion that Rendon endorses.

Rendon's (1994) Theory of Validation centers around the idea that minority students do not feel a sense of belonging in college due to invalidating academic experiences up to that point in their education. She addresses the fact that nontraditional students, who make-up a substantial portion of the student body, attend schools designed with "traditional," or white full-time students, in mind. As a result, they feel "alienated and intimidated" by college culture (Rendon, 1994, p. 34).

Rendon (1994) lists six elements that encompass the term "validation." The following is an abridged version of those six: 1) validation enables, confirms, and supports, 2) validation can

make students “feel capable of learning” because it provides them with feelings of self-worth (p. 44); it makes them feel like the college values and accepts their experiences, 3) “validation is a prerequisite to student development” (p. 44), 4) validation occurs both in and out of the classroom, 5) the more validated the student feels, the more enriched her/his academic experience becomes, and 6) the timeframe when a student feels validated is significant; it is most effective when a student feels validation in the first year of college and/or the first few weeks of class.

In her seminal research study, Rendon (1994) presents five key findings from five colleges across the U.S. that form the tenants of her validation theory. She reports: 1) nontraditional students, especially those in community college and at a majority African American four year college, expressed doubts about their ability to succeed in college versus traditional students who expressed little to no concerns about succeeding, 2) nontraditional students require the support of “significant others” to help them navigate through the academic institution versus traditional students who are more independent and can figure out the institution easily, 3) student success in their first year of college enrollment is directly linked to whether students get involved on campus on their own or whether the institution validates students’ sense of belonging, 4) in and out of class validation can help nontraditional students become learners, and 5) it is not easy for nontraditional students to get involved on campus; validation may be a “prerequisite for involvement to occur” (Rendon, 1994, p. 37).

Because I am studying the impacts that LCs have on student enrollment choices and course completion for nontraditional students and their out-of-class experiences, Rendon’s theory helps to elucidate the ways in which LCs can increase validation early on, and therefore, increase student involvement. In turn, this deeper understanding of the importance of early

validation for nontraditional students can help the Blackacademics LC improve its structures to encourage student enrollment and completion of transfer-level English.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

The purpose of this study is to understand the course enrollment choices, specifically enrollment in transfer-level English, of African American students in community colleges post AB 705 implementation. These choices are important because before AB 705, the state believed that students of color were under enrolled in gatekeeper courses due to lack of access. Now that AB 705 is implemented, meaning colleges are responsible for getting students to complete transfer-level English and math within one year of enrolling in transfer-level courses, it is clear that access is not the barrier that is preventing students from enrolling in and completing transfer-level courses, like math and English, at rates that would minimize the equity gap between them and White and Asian students. The results of this study can further inform colleges about how to support students and help them to close degree and/or transfer achievement gaps between African American students and White and Asian students in California. This study included quantitative and qualitative research components in order to investigate the following questions:

Research Questions

1. What factors influence African American students' enrollment decisions and to what extent do LCs play a role in those decisions?
2. What are the factors that contribute to African American students' academic success and to what extent do LCs play a role in these students' academic success?
3. What do staff and students perceive as the benefits of being part of an LC?

Methods

Site

To understand the factors influencing enrollment decisions and to explore the role of LCs, the following criteria were needed for my site: strong AB 705 implementation, a large enough African American population to study, and an LC specific to African American students. PC fits these criteria. Founded in 1927 in a large suburb of Los Angeles, PC serves about 14,000 students annually and has a diverse student body. PC is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) with roughly 30% Latina/o/x students and close to 4% African American/Black students. Colleges that offer less than 10% of remedial math and English are categorized as “strong” implementers of AB 705. According to PC’s course catalog, it is considered a “strong” implementer of the assembly bill. Finally, the school offers a competitive student to teacher ratio (26 to 1). These combined elements make it an appropriate site to study.

As of fall 2020, PC enrolled 496 African American students, or 3.7% of the total student population at the college (PC Dashboard, retrieved 2021). In 2020, the English division released a self-study where they reported that PC’s African American students’ completion rates in transfer-level English (which includes English 101 and an AB 705 adapted English course with a lab co-requisite called English 101+) are the lowest of all ethnic groups on campus at 41.5% in comparison to Latina/o/x students at 49.9% (note: the self-study did not report on White or Asian completion rates). At the time of this study, the CCC Chancellor’s Data Mart had not updated their post AB 705 data, therefore, its statewide impacts are not yet known. Thus, PC’s self-study provides valuable and “early” insights into the effects of the assembly bill.

At the time of this study, approximately 50 African American students were members of the Blackademics LC at PC. The aforementioned self-study reported that though those African

American students in the Blackacademics LC had completion rates close to 25 percentage points higher than those who were not members of the LC (72.7% vs 48.1%), only six students in their Blackacademics LC enrolled in transfer-level English out of 50 the year of the self-study (2019-2020).

Participants

This study engaged first year community college students who identified as African American on their college application. The survey was initially sent to 263 students who indicated that they were new enrollees to PC in the 2020 school year—specifically newly enrolled for credit either in summer and/or fall 2020. Due to low response rates from students who had not enrolled in transfer-level English, the need to survey a secondary sample of students was determined. The secondary sample who received the second survey instrument included students from two cohorts (new enrollees in summer/fall 2020 and new enrollees in summer/fall 2021) who identified as African American and who also did not enroll in transfer-level English. The secondary sample survey instrument was sent to 381 students.

Both survey instruments were emailed to the students by the Dean of Research, Planning and Grants and both surveys included a question that asked students to participate in interviews. Of those who indicated willingness to participate, five were interviewed—Bailey, Barbara, Cher, Jason, and Ruby (pseudonyms). Because AB 705's implementation began fall 2019, it was important to survey and interview first year students after that timeframe.

In addition, this study engaged staff members of the Blackacademics LC for one-on-one interviews, including the program director and linked counselors from who I learned about the strengths and weaknesses of the LC program, the ways in which the program supports their students in and out of the classroom, and the role the LC plays in course enrollment.

Three of the five counselors, Mandy, Fred, and Sasha (pseudonyms) and the LC director, Desiree (pseudonym), were interviewed though all five counselors were emailed and invited to participate. The three counselors who responded affirmatively to interview coincidentally happened to be the three that the director recommended. The director said Mandy, Fred, and Sasha worked more frequently with the Blackacademics students than the other two counselors. In an email, Desiree remarked that “with the three counselors, you will have all of the info you need. [The other two] work more with our [other LC members].”

Data Collection Methods

Survey

I administered two online surveys generated through Qualtrics. The first survey instrument was administered to a primary sample between the months of October 2021 and January 2022. The median response time for the survey instrument was a little more than four minutes (see *Appendix A* for survey instrument). Questions focused on the factors (both barriers and opportunities) students identified that contributed to enrolling in (or not enrolling in) transfer-level English in their first year of college enrollment. Additionally, I collected demographic data, including ethnicity, gender, age, school status (i.e., full or part-time), if they were members of the Blackacademics LC or not, whether or not they enrolled in transfer-level English and/or completed it or not, and academic goals (i.e., transfer, certificate, AA, or other). The second survey was administered between the months of December 2021 and February 2022. Its median response time was under two minutes and also asked about demographic information, like age, gender, and ethnicity, in addition to whether students had enrolled in transfer-level English and whether or not they had an Educational Plan. An open ended question about why students did not enroll in English was also included (see *Appendix B*).

Both surveys served as a tool to identify interview participants. After both data collection cycles, a total of 38 student responses were recorded. Following the survey, one-one interviews were conducted with those students who expressed interest in a follow-up.

One-on-One Interviews: Students

I conducted five total in-depth one-on-one student interviews between the months of December 2022 and January 2022. I interviewed three students who enrolled in and completed transfer-level English within their first year of college enrollment (though one completed transfer-level English 20 years prior and had re-enrolled to PC recently), one had enrolled in and completed remedial English within her first year, and one had enrolled in and completed both remedial and transfer-level English during her time at Pleasant (she first enrolled in 2017 before AB 705's implementation at the college). All but one of the students were members of an LC. Those who were LC members were also asked about the LCs contribution on their social and academic experiences (see student interview protocols in *Appendix C* and *Appendix D*). The interviews helped me to understand the ways in which experiences with student support services and English classes impact enrollment and completion.

One-on-One Interviews: LC Staff

In addition to the student interviews, four LC staff members—the current program director and three linked counselors—were interviewed in October 2021. The LC program director helped me to understand the structure of the program and what she identified as strengths and weaknesses of the program. She also shared the extent to which she believes the LC influences course enrollment for African American students. Additionally, she provided me with deeper insight regarding the wrap-around services of LC membership that students benefit

from, like linked counseling and social opportunities (see *Appendix F* for LC Director interview protocol).

The three counselors were interviewed separately as well. They helped me to understand their roles in student enrollment choices in further depth. They also elaborated on the counselor's role in communicating AB 705 and the importance of enrolling in transfer-level math and English in the first year, and also the impact that Educational Plans can have on students' enrollment choices. Counselors also provided student points of view regarding the impact the LC has on student experiences in and out of classrooms (see *Appendix E* for LC staff interview protocol). The LC staff interviews in combination with the student data allowed me to make collective sense of multiple points of view regarding enrollment choices and completion.

All the one-on-one interviews, including student and staff, lasted between 45 minutes to an hour and were administered and recorded via Zoom in my personal meeting room. I also recorded the interview using Otter.ai as back-up. I used Otter.ai to transcribe the interview which I carefully proofread to ensure accuracy.

Access

The director of the Blackacademics LC, the advisor of the Black Student Club (pseudonym) and the Dean of Research, Planning, and Grants expressed support in my data collection. They also provided me with access and recruiting insights.

The Dean of Research, Planning, and Grants identified the students that fit the criteria I was looking for. For the primary survey sample, he reported 263 new first-year for-credit African American enrollments in the summer and fall 2020 cohort. For the secondary survey sample, he determined 381 eligible students based on the aforementioned criteria (see *Participants*). The director of the LC and the Black Student Club advisor encouraged students to complete the

survey once it had been distributed by email though the LC director asked to see the survey in advance before endorsing it to students. Within the survey, I asked if the survey responder was willing to participate in follow-up interviews to elaborate on their responses. I contacted those who responded affirmatively to interview.

Data Analysis

Because I asked for demographic information in the survey to confirm LC membership I looked for correlations between membership and enrollment and/or completion rates. I used descriptive statistics to summarize the response distributions for items in the questionnaires, including frequency proportions and responses to each category. I used a chi-square test to examine association between variables, specifically between the frequency of counselor meetings and taking transfer-level English and the frequency of completing an Educational Plan and enrolling in transfer-level English which helped to answer my first two research questions.

The survey and interviews helped me develop emerging thematic categories, such as whether student support services is an influence in completion or whether the LC had any impact on enrollment choices. For the interviews, I read each of the transcripts and completed line by line coding and generated similar thematic categories to the survey, like whether they enrolled in an English course after seeing a counselor and the reasons for completing or not completing the course, which helped elucidate research questions one and two. I color-coded the categories and organized my data into those categories using MAXQDA, after which I isolated parts of the interview that supported the emerging categories. After re-reading the transcripts from each category, I looked for any sub-categories that emerged, like reasons why some student support services were used over others and the ways in which the institution contributed to a sense of belonging which contributed to research question three. I generated a thesis statement/claim

about the themes and patterns. I further connected the results of this qualitative analysis to the quantitative data from the survey to identify patterns or contradictions between the interview and survey data.

Research Design and Rationale

This mixed methods study deeply dove into what African American community college students at one Southern California community college identified as factors that influenced their enrollment in, and completion of, transfer-level English in their first year of college enrollment. It also explored the role that the school's LC played in course enrollment choices and completion, specifically in transfer-level English, according to both the students and the program staff. A mixed methods study was the only design that allowed me to collect data that helped to make correlations regarding enrollment, completion, and demographic information, in addition to data about perceptions and lived experiences regarding factors that influence enrollment and completion.

A mixed methods approach was appropriate because it contextualized both measurement instruments, the survey and the interviews, and increased understanding of the changes needed to improve equity for African American students (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Though preliminary quantitative research shows an increase in completion of transfer-level English, equity gaps still persist in retention and success (Mejia et al., 2019; Mejia et al., 2020; Mejia et al., 2021). A mixed methods approach naturally allowed for triangulation of strengths, limitations, and conclusions (Maxwell, 2013) and allowed the end product to be "richly descriptive" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

A quantitative study provided deeper insights into which factors played larger roles in course selection than others, and helped me see correlations between variables. A qualitative

study alone would have limited my understanding of any developing trends for course enrollment decisions schoolwide for this population because “quantitative evidence is often very important in demonstrating impact” (MacGregor et al., 2001). In addition, it was easier to recruit students from a survey and helped me gain access to a larger student populace.

On the other hand, an exclusively quantitative study would not have worked because interviews allow for reflection in a way that a survey cannot capture (MacGregor et al., 2001). Interviews proceeding the survey provide an arena where students elaborated on the variables from the survey that contributed to enrollment choices, as well as elaborated on lived experiences. A qualitative study uncovered how the institution, specifically LCs, can support enrollment in and completion of transferable English within students’ first year. The institution can use this information to help further modify and develop the supports they have implemented as a result of AB 705, which could ultimately increase enrollment and completion rates for this population.

Role Management

Though I am best known at PC as an active adjunct faculty member in the English division, many of the English division members know that I am in a doctoral program at UCLA. As I moved through the process of positioning myself to ask for approval of and gain access to the campus in order to collect data, my role shifted towards “researcher.”

Because I usually teach one or two English classes a semester, and because on average I only have two African American students enrolled in my classes per semester, the survey data was not conflicting, biased or skewed in any significant way.

Ensuring Credibility, Validity, Reliability

I took proper care to ensure credibility of the study. Since I am an English instructor at the college and my study focuses on English class success, I was careful not to bring in my own perceptions of how and why students do or don't complete transfer-level English based off of my own experiences.

First, I field tested the survey via Zoom with one former African American PC student. This student helped me to identify any bias or repetition. She helped me to ensure that the survey questions were not misinterpreted, and that the language was not discriminatory or stereotypical in any way. The field test process helped to strengthen reliability of the survey. I also showed the survey to the Blackademics LC director to further strengthen the validity of the survey. Since she knows the program in depth, she helped to identify potential assumptions or other facets of the program to incorporate into the survey. Next, the data was triangulated by simultaneously interviewing LC staff and surveying students, then following student surveys with student interviews. I also triangulated the interviews by analyzing the emerging themes from the interviews and surveys, and used direct quotes for supportive evidence. In addition, the aggregated responses from the survey were triangulated with the interview responses to determine if responses were consistent between the survey and the one-on-one interviews. This process increased confidence in my conclusions and interpretations.

Students may have found it difficult to trust me with honest responses. For example, maybe their enrollment was impacted by the fact that they don't have any African American instructors in the English division. As a White professor in the English department, they may not feel comfortable sharing that with me. A way I combatted this was by sincerely expressing that I was conducting the study in order to help the college's goal of improving their services and

supports not only for them, but for all demographics across the board. Letting them know that their honest, uninhibited feedback was crucial in helping the college take steps towards that goal may have relieved some of the anxiety that could be associated with our obvious color barrier. Assuring interview respondents that their identity was protected and their responses were aggregated hopefully encouraged students to be candid about their experiences. Another threat to validity was that I am a White woman interviewing Black students. To add another layer, I am a White English instructor at the same very institution that these Black students were enrolled in. It's possible that I could be their instructor in the future.

Ethical Issues

Students may have feared retaliation by English instructors or LC staff for participating in this study, so when reporting study findings, their names, including the school's name, the program names, and the names of any staff were replaced with pseudonyms. I communicated with the students and staff that the survey data and interviews will only be accessible to me and that none of their information will be revealed to anyone else ever. The survey data and the interview recordings and transcripts are stored and managed only by myself in a secure location that is only accessible by me.

Finally, an interview like this may have been potentially emotionally harming to students who may have to think and talk about negative memories. This may have led them to feel stressed or anxious. After the interview, I provided students with campus resources in case they wanted to talk to someone about their feelings and experiences regarding the LC, the school, or their English classes.

Conclusion

This study followed the passage of AB 705 that came into implementation fall 2019 in the CCC. It guarantees direct access to transfer-level math and English to all students in the CCC upon enrolling. This means that remedial courses are either no longer offered or compose less than 10% of course offerings per semester. Students no longer need to take entrance exams to be placed in transfer-level math and English courses, rather they have immediate access to these gatekeeper courses. However, even with the passing of AB 705, African American students are not enrolling in transfer-level English at the same rate as White or Asian students within their first year of college enrollment. The timing of this study is important because the law's purpose is to increase completion rates for students of color and to ultimately close degree, transfer and/or certificate completion gaps. Although all ethnic groups have improved in their completion rates since AB 705's implementation, there is still a sizable equity gap between African American and White students.

African American underrepresentation in gatekeeper courses in their first year directly results in their low persistence and completion rates as shown by the CCC Chancellor's Data Mart (2020). This study attempted to understand the factors influencing African American students enrollment in transfer-level English in their first year of college, and investigated what LCs can do to increase enrollment and completion rates in the first year.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This study used a mixed-methods approach to explore factors that may influence African American students' enrollment decisions and academic success, in addition to understanding the role of LCs in these students' college experiences. Data collection for the study included three components: one-on-one interviews with LC staff, an online survey instrument administered to current Pleasant students, and one-on-one interviews conducted with a subset of those students.

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors influence African American students' enrollment decisions and to what extent do LCs play a role in those decisions?
2. What are the factors that contribute to African American students' academic success and to what extent do LCs play a role in these students' academic success?
3. What do staff and students perceive as the benefits of being part of an LC?

The student questionnaire and interviews alongside the LC staff interviews were the primary basis for answering Research Question #1, student interviews largely answered Research Question #2, and student and LC staff interviews helped to answer Research Question #3.

Characteristics of the Study Participants

Characteristics of the Student Survey Sample

An online questionnaire was distributed via email to all African American students who first enrolled during summer or fall 2020 (n=263). Twenty three students (9%) responded to this initial invitation. Due to the small number of responses, I created a secondary sample of African American students who enrolled summer and fall 2020 or summer and fall 2021 and who had not

enrolled in transfer-level English. A total of 381 students met the secondary sample criteria (this includes some students who had met the initial criteria) and were emailed a shortened version of the online questionnaire. Of these, 15 students (4%) responded.

Demographic characteristics of the 38 student respondents (23 from the initial sample, 15 from the secondary sample) are summarized in Table 1. Twenty-five (66%) of the respondents identified solely as African American/Black; the remaining 13 (34%) identified as multi-racial with African American/Black as one of their identifications. Twenty-one respondents (55%) reported their age as being between 18 and 29 years, fourteen (37%) reported an age of 30 years or more, and three (8%) did not report their age. Eight (21%) identified as male, and 30 (79%) identified as female. Twenty-one respondents (55%) said they had developed an Educational Plan with their counselor, 12 (32%) reported that they did not, and five students (13%) either could not remember developing a plan or did not respond to this question. In terms of LC membership, nine (24%) were members of an LC, 25 (66%) were not members, and four (10%) declined to respond. Finally, 21 students (55%) reported that they had not enrolled in a transfer-level English class in their first year of entering college; 17 (45%) reported that they had.

Table 1*Demographic characteristics of student study participants*

	Survey Participants (n=38)		Interview Participants (n=5)	
	n	%	n	%
Gender				
Female	30	79	4	80
Male	8	21	1	20
Age				
18-19	7	18	1	20
20-29	14	37	2	40
30-39	6	16	0	0
40+	8	21	2	40
Declined/Missing	3	8	0	0
Ethnicity				
African American/Black Only	25	66	2	40
Multi-racial, including African American/Black	13	34	3	60
Enrolled in transfer-level English				
Yes	17	45	4	80
No	21	55	1	20
Created an Educational Plan				
Yes	21	55	4	80
No	12	32	1	20
Can't Remember / No Response	5	13	0	0
Learning Community Member				
Yes	9	24	4	80
No	25	66	1	20
Declined to Respond	4	10	0	0

Characteristics of the Student Interview Sample

On the survey, students were asked if they were interested in a one-on-one follow-up interview via Zoom. Of the 20 students who expressed interest (53% of all respondents), five were interviewed. Table 1 above summarizes some of the demographic characteristics of these students. Four of the interviewees indicated membership in an LC; three indicated membership in Blackademics, and one indicated membership in the Latina/o/x LC. One participant reported being unaware of (and not a member of) any LC.

The five student interviewees were: Bailey, Barbara, Cher, Jason, and Ruby. Table 2 shows some selected background information about these participants. Bailey, Cher, and Ruby were first year students in summer/fall 2020, while Jason enrolled as a first year student in fall 2021; Barbara had been at Pleasant since 2017, before AB 705 was implemented. Jason identified as male and the rest of the four identified as female. Cher and Jason indicated having enrolled in and completed transfer-level English within their first year of enrolling at PC. Ruby and Barbara completed remedial English courses in their first years rather than a transfer-level course, though Barbara went on to complete transfer-level English later. Cher, Jason, and Ruby reported their ages as being between 18 and 29. Bailey and Barbara reported their ages as being over 40 and indicated that they had returned to school after a hiatus of at least two decades. Bailey took transfer-level English the first time she was in college.

Table 2
Student interview participants

Interviewee (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Enrolled in Transfer-Level English	Education Plan	LC Member
Bailey	F	40+	AA Only	Yes	No	No
Barbara	F	40+	AA Only	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cher	F	18-19	AA/B Only	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jason	M	25-29	AA/B Only	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ruby	F	20-24	AA/B Only	No	Yes	Yes

Characteristics of the Learning Community Staff Interview Sample

At the time that this study took place, the Blackacademics Learning Community staff consisted of five counselors (three full-time and two part-time) and the director. I interviewed the three counselors who were willing to participate (Fred, Mandy, and Sasha) and the LC director, Desiree.

Research Question #1 Findings

The findings from this section answer Research Question #1: What factors influence African American students' enrollment decisions and to what extent do LCs play a role in those decisions? Students identified two institutional supports that primarily influenced their enrollment choices: LC counselors and Educational Plans. The interviews with the LC staff echoed similar responses with that of the students.

Counselors and Educational Plans: Survey Findings

Two of the institutional supports that students indicated as most significant in their enrollment choices include counseling and a resource created by counselors: Educational Plans. It is important to note that the college also has general counselors that are non-LC specific who also develop Educational Plans, but the students in this study spoke primarily about their LC counselors in relation to their enrollment, completion, and Educational Plans. Most of the surveyed and interviewed students reported that counselors played a significant role in their enrollment decisions.

Reasons for Enrolling

Though two survey instruments were emailed, only the first asked about the role counselors played in their enrollment choices. The first survey yielded 23 respondents. Fifteen of the 23 students (65%) were enrolled in transfer-level English. Twelve of the 15 students (80%) who enrolled in transfer-level English reported the reasons why they enrolled. Their responses are summarized in Table 3 below. Nine of the 12 (75%) reported that their Educational Plan was either a partial reason or the primary reason, eight (67%) said that counselors were a reason they enrolled, and ten (83%) said they enrolled in English because it's a prerequisite.

Table 3*Reasons for enrolling in transfer-level English during first year of college (n=12)*

	Not a Reason		Part of the Reason		The Primary Reason	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
It was a prerequisite I needed to complete.	1	8	1	8	9	75
It was included in my Educational Plan.	1	8	3	25	6	50
A Pleasant counselor told me.	2	17	2	17	6	50
The LC recommended enrollment.	10	83	0	0	0	0
My friends enrolled.	9	75	0	0	0	0
My high school teacher told me to.	9	75	0	0	0	0

The student responses reflect that in addition to counselors playing a significant role in enrollment, Educational Plans help students to enroll in gatekeeper courses early on. For instance, even though Ruby was placed into remedial English when she enrolled in the college, when meeting with her counselor to create an Educational Plan she said that the “plan that [she] create[d] involved taking 101.” In other words, regardless of placing into remedial English and enrolling in that course in fall 2020, her counselor included transfer-level English within Ruby’s first year on her Educational Plan.

Reasons for Not Enrolling

Of the 23 who took the first survey, eight (35%) had not enrolled in transfer-level English. Of those eight, seven (88%) responded to the portion of the survey that asks for the reasons as to why they didn’t enroll in English. Their responses are summarized in Table 4 below. Five (71%) of the students said that a primary or partial reason as to why they didn’t enroll was a conflict in schedule, four (57%) said a reason was that they wanted to take other classes instead, and three (43%) reported that responsibilities outside of school inhibited their ability to enroll. Other reasons students reported for not taking English included: they didn’t think it was important to enroll within the first year, they were nervous, did not feel prepared,

had taken AP English in high school, and/or had taken a different English course or a similar course in college (see *Appendix A* for full survey questions).

Table 4

Reasons for not enrolling in transfer-level English during first year of college (n=7)

	Not a Reason or No Response		Part of the Reason		The Primary Reason	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
I wanted to take other classes	3	43	1	14	3	43
I had scheduling conflicts	2	29	3	43	2	29
I had responsibilities outside of school to take care of	4	57	1	14	2	29
I passed AP English in high school	5	71	1	14	1	14
I took a different English course at [Pleasant]	5	71	1	14	1	14
I took a similar course at another college.	5	71	1	14	1	14
I did not think it was important to enroll during my first or second semester.	6	86	0	0	1	14
I was nervous about taking English classes.	6	86	1	14	0	0
I did not feel prepared for taking English classes.	6	86	1	14	0	0
I was not told (by a counselor) to take English classes in my first year	7	100	0	0	0	0
My counselor recommended against me taking English in my first year	7	100	0	0	0	0
I earned credit through dual enrollment in high school.	7	100	0	0	0	0

One of the reasons that stands out in particular is scheduling conflicts. This may indicate that English classes are not offered with sufficient time options throughout the day and week for students to avoid scheduling conflicts. Before the pandemic, the English division at PC offered, on average, 70-75 English 101 courses for each of the fall and spring semesters. During the pandemic, those numbers declined to 60-65 course offerings per semester. This does not include courses that may have been cancelled after the enrollment period commenced. A second reason

that stands out is that more than half the students who didn't enroll indicated that wanting to take other classes was a partial or primary reason for not enrolling in transfer-level English. It is possible that students are not properly informed about the importance of taking transfer-level English within their first year. Further investigation is needed to understand the students' decision-making.

The survey instrument for the secondary sample of students asked about reasons why students did not enroll in English with an open ended question (in contrast to the first version of the instrument which provided reasons to select from along with the option of responding to an open-ended question). Of the 15 responded to the second survey, 13 (87%) were not enrolled in transfer-level English. Nine of the 13 (69%) said that they didn't enroll because they had already taken the course at another community college or had completed a course that fulfilled that requirement. This implies that they have already earned credit for the course; Pleasant accepts transfer-level credits taken at other institutions. Each of the following were also mentioned once: the course was "not needed," the student hadn't "taken the assessment," and the course was "not in [their] education plan." The secondary sample's results are mixed. Because a large majority (69%) of those who did not take transfer-level English in their first year at Pleasant reported that they had taken the course previously, it is possible that they may have enrolled at Pleasant for a new start or may have been dual enrolled in high school or another college. The implications of defining students as "new" to an institution when they are not new to higher education needs further investigating.

Counseling and Enrollment

Given the important role that counselors may have in informing students decisions, I examined whether enrolling in transfer-level English was associated with the frequency of

meeting with a counselor. Twenty-two students (96%) provided information about their contacts with counselors (see *Table 5*). Of these, 13 (61%) indicated having seen a counselor three or more times in their first year of enrolling, four (17%) reported seeing a counselor only once, and five respondents (22%) reported never seeing a counselor in their first year. Of the 13 students who reported that they had seen a counselor three or more times, 10 (77%) said they enrolled in English. Of the nine students who reported seeing a counselor two times or less, three (33%) reported they enrolled in English. There was a significant association between the frequency of meeting with a counselor and enrollment in transfer-level English within the first year ($\phi=.436$, $\chi^2_{df=1}=4.180$, $p=.041$).

Table 5

Contact with counselor and enrollment in transfer-level English

Enrolled in transfer-level English	Saw a counselor				Total	
	0-2 times		3+ times			
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes	3	33.3	10	76.9	13	59.1
No	6	66.7	3	23.1	9	40.9
Total	9		13		22	

Note: $\phi=.436$, $\chi^2_{df=1}=4.180$, $p=.041$. Results are based on responses to the first survey only (n=22 respondents).

Educational Plan and Enrollment

Of the 38 student survey respondents, 21 (55%) reported having developed an Educational Plan with their counselor, 12 (32%) had not developed a plan, and five (13%) either couldn't remember whether they had developed a plan or did not respond (see *Table 1*). Of the 21 students who created an Educational Plan, 10 (48%) enrolled in transfer-level English. Among the 12 students who did not create an Educational Plan, eight (67%) also did not enroll in transfer-level English in their first year. In contrast, 11 (52%) of the 21 students who did create an Educational Plan opted not to take transfer-level English in their first year (see *Table 6*).

Although the rates of enrollment differ based on having created an Educational Plan, this association was not statistically significant ($\phi=.332$, $\chi^2_{df=1}=2.424$, $p=.119$).

Table 6

Creation of an Educational Plan and enrollment in transfer-level English

Enrolled in transfer-level English	Created an Educational Plan				Total	
	Yes		No			
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes	10	48	4	33	14	37
No	11	52	8	67	19	50
Total	21		12		33	

Note: $\phi=.332$, $\chi^2_{df=1}=2.424$, $p=.119$. Results are based on the responses from both student questionnaires (n=38 respondents).

Learning Community (LC) Membership and Enrollment

Because one of the goals of LC counselors is to create Educational Plans with students, I analyzed whether enrolling in transfer-level English was associated with membership in an LC. Of the 23 survey respondents from the first instrument, 22 (96%) responded to the question about LC membership. Of these 22, nine participants (41%) reported being involved in an LC. Of these nine, eight (89%) enrolled in transfer-level English and one (11%) enrolled in remedial English. Thirteen (59%) did not indicate being a member of an LC. Of those 13, seven (54%) had not enrolled in English and six (46%) had enrolled in English (see *Table 7*). The difference in enrollment rates based on LC membership was statistically significant ($\phi = 0.437$, $\chi^2_{df=1} = 4.197$, $p = .040$).

Table 7***Learning Community (LC) Membership and enrollment in transfer-level English***

Enrolled in transfer-level English	Learning Community Membership				Total	
	Yes		No			
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes	8	89	6	46	14	64
No	1	11	7	54	8	36
Total	9		13		22	

Note: $\phi=0.437$, $\chi^2_{df=1}=4.197$, $p=.040$. Results are based on the responses from the first questionnaire (n=22 respondents).

Learning Community (LC) Membership and Counseling

Given the significant association between the frequency of meeting a counselor and enrolling in transfer-level English (see *Table 5*), I examined the association between LC membership and the frequency at which LC members see counselors. Twenty one (91%) of the 23 students from the first survey responded to the survey question regarding the number of times they saw a counselor over the course of their first school year (i.e. summer, fall, winter, and spring semesters). Nine (43%) of the 21 indicated being a member of an LC. Seven (78%) of the nine reported seeing a counselor more than three times, while five (42%) of 12 students who were not LC members saw a counselor three or more times (see *Table 8*). Although these results are suggestive of an association between the LC membership and counseling, the relationship was not statistically significant ($\phi = 0.361$, $\chi^2_{df=1} = 2.738$, $p = .098$).

Table 8*Learning Community (LC) membership and contact with counselor*

Counselor Contact	LC Membership				Total	
	Yes		No			
	n	%	n	%	n	%
0-2 Times	2	22	7	58	9	43
3+ Times	7	78	5	42	12	57
Total	9		12		21	

Note: $\phi=0.361$, $\chi^2_{df=1}=2.738$, $p=.098$. Results are based on the responses from the first questionnaire (n=21 respondents).

Counselors and Educational Plans: Student Interview Findings

Of the five students who were interviewed, four—Jason, Cher, Barbara, and Ruby—had created Educational Plans with their counselors (see *Table 2*). All four commented on the importance of the Educational Plan in their enrollment choices. Jason detailed the impact of his LC counselor and the role his Educational Plan played in his enrollment choices in the following way:

[S]he was pretty important to helping me understand which courses to pick and which ones to be smart about picking over the course of the semesters. I'll say like, it was really more about balance than anything. Sometimes you get caught up in kind of seeing the, trying to see the light at the end of the tunnel before you actually go through it. So I'll say [my counselor's] definitely been really, really important into helping me understand ... what kind of courses throughout the semester, kind of keep me in line with the things that I want to accomplish, just as far as like, not just for my degree plan, but also the transfer credits as well, because I think one or the other is easy to forget when you focus on, when you focus on trying to structure your, your course load in a certain way. So I'll say my counselor has been very important in helping me really detail out a plan that really

tackles all of the things that I want to do and all the things that I need to get done in order to graduate on time.

When asked about the role of the LC counselor in course selection choices, Jason continued:

[M]y counselor...helped me outline all of the courses that I needed to transfer [and] helped me understand all the courses that I needed to translate to the different, to the different UC schools that I want to apply to, and even some ones outside of the UC system. And really helped me understand like, what kind of course load I was looking at, in order to accomplish the goals that I set out to achieve when graduating.

Cher described the counselor's impact in enrollment choices and planning similarly to Jason. She described the way she and her LC counselor decided on courses to include in her Educational Plan, which ultimately led to her enrollment choices. She said her LC counselors:

[E]xplained a lot through the IGETC and [what to] look for...And then they walk through it, like, 'Oh, you need a science section one, which one do you like, and this one provides this, there's some provides that' and they're like... 'Do you have any questions on what this class does over this one? So you can, you know, decide which one you want.' So, then asking those kind of questions, helps me know, what classes I'm taking. But you know, what to expect out of them as well.

Cher continued to describe the role counselors played in enrollment choices and Educational Plans:

[T]heir guidance kind of helps you think of, 'Oh, I didn't think of that kind of thing.' So we can, you know, really plan out your classes, and they help you plan out for future semesters. So I think that's really helpful.

When asked about the guidance from counselors regarding enrolling in English in her first year, Cher continued to explain that her counselors told her to “jump into the English 102 class...they told [her] why, they explained to [her] why and...how it works...credit wise.”

Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum (IGETC) is a mutually agreed upon general education pattern that is accepted by the California State University and University of California systems for transferring community college students. Educational Plans are informed by the IGETC but customized for individual students’ educational goals, major, and transfer institutions’ course requirements. Cher’s and Jason’s comments demonstrate the importance of reviewing an Educational Plan with a counselor in order to make the most effective enrollment choices for the goals they have set out for themselves. It is important to note that while non-LC counselors also create Educational Plans, they don’t require meetings with students or have required program check-ins with students like LC counselors do.

Ruby described planning her Educational Plan with her LC counselor during her 30-minute appointment. She said she and her counselor “go over what courses [she] need[s] to transfer and how to go about that. And putting it in a plan.” Ruby also commented on the guidance she received to enroll in English in her first year. She said her counselor “emphasized it...that was a big thing that she pushed on, was getting [her] prerequisites out the way so [she] could take the courses that [she] needed to take.” Ruby was also struggling with finances and expressed that she would not be able to continue to afford classes that semester and was in danger of compromising her GPA. When specifically asked about the role the LC played in enrollment choices her last semester, she responded:

I couldn't afford any of my classes, and I was failing, because I was so stressed. And [my counselor] gave...I didn't really know about the excused withdrawal deadline. But she,

she did express that to me. And I was able to drop them in time, they don't affect my GPA. So she helped a lot with that.

Although Ruby did not comment directly on her counselor's influence in enrollment her last semester, she did express that her counselor was the reason she was able to salvage her GPA. Had she not had the support of her counselor in understanding enrollment and financial aid, she would have been in danger of permanent damage to her academic standing.

The interviews supported the survey results in regards to the significance of counselors in the academic and emotional experiences of the students, with students remarking that counselors "absolutely" impacted their enrollment choices and that they "played a big role" in course selection.

Four of five students (all except for Bailey) remarked on counselors and Educational Plans as being impactful in enrollment choices. Ruby and Barbara were the only two students who mentioned that in addition to their counselors' influence in their enrollment choices, they enrolled in English in order to complete prerequisite requirements because both students started at remedial English. No other factors were discussed or mentioned as having influenced enrollment choices, though interviewees mentioned other supports as influential with respect to their overall school experience. For instance, Jason cited the bookstore and scholarship opportunities, while Barbara emphasized tutoring. The student interviews validate the importance of institutional supports, especially counselors and Educational Plans, in their enrollment choices.

Counselors and Encouraging Enrollment: LC Counselor Interview Findings

All three counselors reported that they emphasize the importance of enrolling in transfer-level English and math within the first year of students' college enrollment.

Fred said that whenever he counsels Blackacademics students, he “talk[s] to them about English,” helps them to “plan out the courses for students” and includes English in their Educational Plan for the first year. He also explained that he doesn’t just tell students what courses to take, but also wants them “to understand why they’re taking them and in what sequence and why English...[is] important to take during the first year.” When asked if LC counselors communicate the importance of AB 705 and its impact on enrollment, Sasha commented that she lets students know about the importance of “registering for...transfer-level classes and...talking about...feelings about that...incorporated into the whole planning.” She also stated that counselors “always encourage the English...for the first semester...and just getting that in the first semester. So [they] always recommend that English” because they “want them to complete the English and math...hopefully within the first year.” The third counselor, Mandy, also echoed that they “always...highly encourage English” in order to “get it done, get it out of the way ahead of time.”

In addition to the student experiences regarding the LC’s influence in enrollment, all three LC counselors who were interviewed also commented on the importance of Educational Plans in helping students enroll in transfer-level courses, including English.

When asked about the extent to which counselors are involved with creating Educational Plans, Fred said that the counselors aim to “have an Educational Plan on file for every single one of [their Blackacademics] students.” He went on to say:

[We] do create...the Educational Plan. I think the Educational Plan itself, you know...the classes...and their plan...it's co-created with the students. So I think a counselor plays, you know, a very important role in terms of being able to provide that Educational Plan

to the students so they can see it on their planner. But, you know, at least for me, we involve our students in planning those courses.

Mandy also remarked that the counselors “develop [Blackacademics students’] Educational Plans.”

Sasha said that the Educational Plan was the “focus” of the 30-minute appointment. During that time, her goal is:

[T]o really start the Student Educational Plan, if they don't have one already. I want to at least get one semester on there. Preferably two semesters so we can have that first year...solidified and...have an idea how that first year is going to go.

Sasha also described creating Educational Plans as a strategy for priority registration:

“sometimes [they] have to do a student Educational Plan for them to get like their priority registration or something like that.” While Sasha reported helping students create an Educational Plans in order to obtain priority registration, she also noted that all LC members create an Educational Plan, regardless of the LC counselor they see.

Like the student interviews, the LC counselor interviews validate the importance of institutional supports, especially the Educational Plans counselors develop, in students’ enrollment choices.

Research Question #2 Findings

The findings from this section answer Research Question #2: What are the factors that contribute to African American students’ academic success and to what extent do LCs play a role in these students’ academic success? Student interviewees described multiple factors that contribute to African American students’ academic success: professors and the resources they provide, pre-existing writing skills, how effectively their high schools prepared them, and the required LC mid-semester check-ins with counselors.

Professors and Resources They Provide

Students elaborated on the factors that helped them to succeed in their coursework. All five students who were interviewed described the instructors at the college as high-quality professors. Four of the students who had recently completed English commented specifically on the importance of the quality of their English instructor in the completion of their English course. English professors were described as “really helpful,” “fantastic,” “supportive,” “awesome” and “great.” Ruby recalled that her professor helped her to realize that she was a better writer than she thought.

Other qualities that students appreciated about their instructors included accessibility and timeliness in responding to emails, a positive attitude, and willingness to be supportive. Ruby continued to explain that “the fact that [the] professor was always available...to respond was a big help. Like, when [she] emailed him, he got back in, in a timely manner. That helped a lot.” Cher appreciated one professor’s “positive attitude throughout the whole semester” and noted that this professor’s “supportive energy or vibe helped [her] not stress too much” and made the class more “manageable.” The student responses suggest that instructors’ content mastery is not enough for students to achieve in the classroom; attitude and support are also important.

In addition to the quality of professors, Jason, Cher, and Ruby described the resources that professors provided in-class as an important feature in making the course more manageable. These students commented that the professor provided “great resources” that helped them “to translate from what’s in [their] head onto paper” and that “resources that [the English professor] gave out” made the class “manageable.” These resources included links to articles that helped students grasp content more clearly, as well as grammar and vocabulary handouts that helped with their writing skills. Students also remarked that the resources were key because they helped

validate navigating skills. For example, Cher explained, “I think having the teacher provide [the resources] helped me gather, ‘Oh this is the correct way.’” Jason also echoed that office hours helped to validate his navigating skills as well. Other noteworthy attributes students mentioned were the teachers’ willingness to share personal stories and helping students explore different points of view as important influences in the completion of their courses.

The responses of the students who were interviewed demonstrates that effective teaching and instructor support are crucial in the completion of courses.

Writing Skills

When asked about factors that helped in the completion of English, students remarked on their own skills as writers in addition to improving their writing skills over the course of the semester. Two students, Jason and Barbara, self-described as “strong” writers. Barbara described herself as someone who loves “writing...[and] telling stories,” and credited her success in English to her love of writing. Cher said she used resources provided by her professor to help her improve her writing skills. She described those resources as having “really helped, so that [she] can make [her] writing more complex.” Other factors that Jason and Cher said improved their writing and reading skills included their high school preparation (detailed in the next section), the resources that teachers provided (as mentioned above), office hours, and workshops. Cher said specifically of workshops that:

[T]he library was really helpful because I did a workshop...I learned how to navigate the library search. So I can look for articles faster and more efficiently, and look for articles that are specific to what I need to write about. So that library workshop...really helped...

The student responses show that not only do the writing skills that they come into college with help them in their course but that professors and institutional resources also helped in their continuous improvement of those skills which led to their success in their English classes.

High School Preparation

All five interviewees were asked about the ways in which their high schools prepared them for college. Three of the five (Jason, Cher, and Barbara) remarked that their high schools prepared them. Jason and Cher, who had attended high school recently, detailed the ways in which they were prepared. Jason remarked that he “had a couple of really good instructors during [his] AP courses” and Cher expressed that she took advantage of “upscale” courses at her school and that she was enrolled in her school’s Business Academy “that prepared [her] in a more...serious type of class environment [which] really helped [her]” when she got to college. Ruby recalled not taking advantage of the “wide variety of courses” that her high school offered and that “looking back now, [she] should have.” Bailey shared that her high school had not “prepared [her] at all for college,” though it is important to note that she also graduated from high school about 20 years ago.

The student responses show a connection between high school preparation and student performance and outcomes.

Learning Community: Counselors and Counselor Check-ins

According to the LC staff and student interviews, there are three requirements that must be fulfilled in order to enjoy the monetary incentives that the LC offers. The requirements include: attending the new student orientation (“new student” is in reference to “new” LC students, not the school’s general “new student” orientation), seeing an LC counselor at least once per semester, and submitting a mid-term progress check to counselors each semester. And

though the students who were interviewed did not report that any of the LCs were responsible for their decision to enroll in English, they expressed that the LC counselor relationship and LC required counselor check-ins played a role in their persistence in the class.

Barbara described the check-in as a time when counselors “encourage” them and make sure that they are “going in the...right direction.” Jason described the check-ins in the following way:

I'll say it definitely keeps me honest. Having kind of, having a way to...keep up with...my progress, like outside of just tracking my grades, and having someone to help explain...

When asked about how his membership impacted his course load management, Jason continued describing his experiences, reflecting about the check-ins:

[C]heckups over the course...of the semester definitely made it easier [to focus] some of my efforts...on the other courses that may not have been as strong or may not have been doing as well...So having those checkups...were definitely very helpful to understanding where I was over the course of the semester, and then how to best kind of refocus and reinvigorate some of that, that energy into those courses to kind of help me propel all those courses as a success as well.

When asked about how her LC membership impacts her academics, Ruby said:

I think it impacts it positively. Because with the, with the progress checks, it makes me want to do better. So I can tell [the counselor], that, you know...I'm doing better with classes...[it] gives me something to look forward to, to tell her...because I view her as somebody that I actually want to do better for.

Students also described their counselors as “encouraging” and making them feel “supported,” that they “care” and want “students to succeed.” Cher said that “all the counselors are very helpful and welcoming.” Jason detailed that the counselors are:

...fantastic. Definitely energetic. Definitely put in that effort for all of the students. They definitely...show through their actions and not just their words, but they're very, very involved with the community.

Additional Factors for Success

In addition to professors, resources, writing skills, high school preparation, and LC counselors, students commented on other institutional supports that helped them in their academic success. For example, both Barbara and Cher commented on the importance of the library as a supportive space; for Barbara the library was a space to access tutoring and Cher appreciated the research workshops the library offers.

Jason and Ruby expressed an appreciation for the school’s website, describing it as a place that resources are easily accessible. Jason commented that he was able to access “different scholarship opportunities, especially on the Pleasant College’s website,” and Ruby said that “everything you need to know, everything you need to find out is on the website.” Jason summarized Pleasant’s ability to share resources in the following way:

[Pleasant] has done a fantastic job of relaying resources, relaying information, has probably has one of the most interactive web pages that I've experienced, as far as like really tailoring all the links to detailing out information that is definitely important to you, especially for scholarships, especially for counselor resources. They definitely walk you through all of the things that you need in order to contact or access a counselor, or

any department that they have. So I don't have any negative critiques for [Pleasant], they're doing a fantastic job thus far.

The student responses demonstrate how important it is for them to have someone supporting them throughout the semester, and how important institutional support is as well. The responses also show that precollege factors, like rigorous coursework and writing skills, help students in their academic success in college. The student interviews also confirm that the access to counseling they receive through the LC help contribute toward their academic success.

Research Question #3 Findings

The findings detailed below answer Research Question #3: What do staff and students perceive as the benefits of being part of an LC? Findings come from two primary points of view: the LC staff, which includes the director and three counselors, and the four interviewed students who are LC members. The interview data reveal that LC counselors' following-thru with mid-semester check-ins was the most significant support that LCs offer academically. They also show that the community aspect of the LC made students feel connected to the institution because they belong to a community that cares for them on campus. All four of the student interviewees mentioned the positive impact of the LC on their college experiences and sense of community. LC staff reported that they build rapport with their students, which allows for honest conversations and guidance; this sentiment was echoed by the students. Findings validate what research suggests regarding the role that LCs play in developing students' sense of belonging (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999).

Access to Mid-Semester Check-ins

In addition to students articulating the importance of the check-ins (as detailed in Research Question #2's findings), LC staff also commented on how important the mid-semester

check-ins were to student progress and motivation. The counselors described them to be a crucial, “frequent,” and a “huge” part of the LC counseling process. Counselors check students’ “classes, their grades, and [follow] up,” according to the LC director.

Though students at Pleasant who are not LC members can make appointments with counselors at any given time, LC members are assigned to a counselor upon membership and are required to check-in with counselors mid-semester to earn monetary incentives. Students who are not LC members do not have access to the announcements, flyers, and direct contact to and from LC counselors via the LC’s Learning Management System; general students do not have a counseling Learning Management System course shell. Unlike LC members who are contacted by their counselors, general students typically initiate seeing a counselor, which they can do either by calling the division, walking in, or logging on to the online counseling advising system to ask for an appointment.

Counselors also credited the check-ins with helping to build rapport and relationships with students. When asked about the frequency at which students see him and the topics that they discuss, Fred remarked that talking about student feelings and barriers helped him “provide some appropriate interventions for them to...see it through...especially with [their] Black students...for all students for that matter, they really need that...support and that encouragement and that cheerleading.” Fred also shared that students express appreciation for the check-ins and they frequently ask that he check back with them later in the semester. One way he achieves this follow-thru is by using the “timing off emails” feature on Microsoft Outlook, a feature that allows timing the delivery of emails. Fred keeps his “students feeling connected” and helps them “to persist” by following up on their check-in request and demonstrating his commitment to them.

LC counselors don't wait for students to reach out to them, they take initiative with keeping in contact. Sasha said that counselors are "part of the journey" and that they are always "checking [student] progress." And Mandy described the LC counselors' follow-up as "very strong." She said that the counselors "always follow-up" with students, especially those who have not submitted their mid-semester progress checks. She detailed her follow-up with the students in the following way:

If students haven't completed their appointment, I'm checking in with them...we reach out to them, 'Hey, I haven't seen you in a while. How are you?' So even though they might not respond to your email...us initiating contact, and not waiting for the student to contact us...they remember that we tried to outreach to them.

When asked about the impact that LC membership had on his academics, Jason spoke of the importance of having someone who is encouraging. He said that having a counselor to turn to in the semester helped him decide how to:

[K]eep pushing, especially when you hit some of those lows in your course material where sometimes just feels like, you know, for weeks at a time, you're just taking test after test after test. So sometimes you just kind of need that boost, and having somebody in your corner to tell you like you're on the right track just keep going.

Barbara shared that she appreciated the LC because the counselors are

[C]aring, they're concerned. They're supportive, that they share their ability to show other options...[students] can see the invitation of support in other people's outlook and that will make me a better student and change and be stronger in what I'm doing at [Pleasant].

Both students and LC staff responses indicated that maintaining a relationship with each other during the course of the semester is key in keeping students enrolled and successful in their

courses. The required mid-semester check provides an extra opportunity for students to stay connected with counselors who in turn help keep students on track.

Sense of Belonging

Both the LC staff and the student interviewees strongly expressed that the LC successfully validates students' feelings and sense of belonging and characterized those feelings as playing an important role in students' overall experiences at the college.

Student Perspectives

Cher, Jason, Barbara, and Ruby were all members of an LC and they all had a lot to say about the reasons why they initially joined. Ruby, who had moved to Southern California from out of state to attend PC, said "joining [Blackademics] was kind of a natural thing...it made [her] really comfortable...[because she] wanted to find someone who looks like [her] to maybe be more comfortable." She went on to say that she was "just looking to connect with somebody from [her] community at [her] school." She acknowledged that she is not opposed to meeting non-Black students "but being comfortable was [her] first thing and then meeting people outside of that..." Jason, like Ruby, had also moved from out of state to attend college in Southern California. He also echoed Ruby's sentiments about "being in a completely new school, in a new environment, [he] thought it was gonna be a great way to socially just meet some other people."

When asked about why she joined Blackademics, Barbara provided a memorable metaphor:

Because I found myself singular. I felt myself, I felt abandoned. A loss, emptiness...I was...representing, like a forest. And I was walking through the forest with no direction and no encouragement of 'you're not the only one.' So this is why I came to

[Blackademics] because we can unite, as a unity of a community and help outsiders or others to be strong in their education with no fear.

Though research indicates that peer interactions for LC members is an important factor in retention and creating a sense of belonging, it is important to note that none of the students indicated that their peers had influenced their enrollment choices or completion. Cher mentioned feeling included due to the social events the LC organized, but even then she did not specifically point towards peers as being responsible for having cultivated those feelings of inclusion but instead spoke more generally about those feelings in relation to the Blackademics program and the school in general. For instance, Cher said she joined the Latina/o/x LC because she “wanted to feel supported...there's a lot of social events that helps [her] feel more included into the school. So that really helped [her] transition into from high school to college.”

When asked about their overall experiences as LC members, the students commented on the importance of community building, feeling supported and cared for, and how being a member helped provide a more balanced school life. For example, Jason shared:

I think it's been a great community to start building relationships and building like a foundation and to not just like a collegiate career, but also just like your social career, especially at [Pleasant]. [Pleasant] has definitely been very vocal and very prominent about how, how to reach out and how to provide resources. And I think [Blackademics] has done a great job to echo that statement.

Ruby commented that she loves that “student equity...gives [students] an opportunity to have a community within a community because a college is a community and...having a community within that community is very important to [her].” Cher described the benefits of being part of an LC in the following way:

I think that helps, you know, like, culture wise, for you to be comfortable in. But I like the, the resources they provide, even just like, when it comes to fun things, they, they host like social events and things like that. And I think that makes me more comfortable to ask them about the more serious type of stuff about school.

Cher's response demonstrates that the social aspect of the LC helps students advocate for themselves. The relationship that they build via the LC helps access resources that the college offers. Ruby reiterated a similar sentiment regarding the social aspect of the LC and the way it impacts her academic relationships. She said the LC's social aspect is

...important to me because I get a sense of the community...and you get to know professors...my African American experience professor actually was in the, in that event, and it gives you a chance to get to know your professors in a way that you wouldn't get to, if you were just attending classes. And also you, it was a relaxing moment for me, it was like, 'Okay, let me give you time to breathe.' It's not, it's not education related on anything. It's just a moment to just relax. And that's with all of [the social events], honestly.

Barbara expressed her deep appreciation for Blackacademics, crediting them with being the reason why she has remained a student at Pleasant: "Personally, if it wasn't for [Blackacademics], I think I would have left [Pleasant] long ago." She went on to say that [Blackacademics] is her "backbone. And it's helping [her] continue to stand. And, and not, it's not about fighting, it's about the reminiscing. Just the thought of someone cares. And the support, getting that support is very vital."

LC Staff Perspectives

Not only did the students praise Blackacademics for fostering a sense of community and support, but the LC counselors also shared that creating a safe space for students, a sense of belonging, and community are some benefits of LC membership.

One of the first aspects that the LC counselors discussed as vital in their relationship with their Blackacademics students was their ability to make connections with their students. When talking about making a connection with Black students, Fred explained:

...going into college, maybe feeling unseen, unheard, maybe don't feel connected. And so I try to leverage, you know, me, coming from a first generation college background, me coming from an urban, you know, growing up in an urban area, me being a student of color, I try to leverage that, to try to build some sort of connection with, you know, with our Black students, and just get to know them for who they are. Once I feel like, you know, that comfort level is there, I feel like students are a little bit more inclined to kind of bring up, you know, issues or challenges that they might be facing.

Sasha shared similar feelings with Fred in terms of sharing personal experiences with students to make connections:

[W]e provide a safe space for our students to talk about their experiences and things that happened in the classroom, things that, you know, the way they feel, you know, being at [Pleasant], a Predominantly White Institution. And I think that having counselors that look like them, and they have a shared experience, or background, is really important in that dialogue, and building rapport, and being able to use like an authentic voice, when they're communicating their experiences at [Pleasant].

Mandy also echoed her counselor colleagues' feelings towards building rapport, describing these connections as an important door that helps forge longer term relationships. She explained, "we started making a connection, and then from there, it would lead potentially to an appointment or...continuous communication." Later, she continued to share that "creating networking, and building relationships for [Black students] to feel connected to campus. Because, again, feeling connected to the campus into your environment is really important for them...for them to continue on with their education."

When the LC director was asked about her primary goals for the LC's students, she responded with three primary goals. The first goal is "to develop and maintain a sense of community for [their] students...to help them feel that they matter and belong at [Pleasant] overall." The second goal "is to make sure that [Blackacademics students] feel encouraged to explore other aspects of [Pleasant] and feel like they belong at [Pleasant] and not just that at the learning community." The third goal is "to build that confidence to increase leadership...Opportunities for [students] to move into more leadership roles on campus, on and off campus."

The LC staff interviews identify making students feel a sense of belonging on campus as their primary goal, the foundational goal that allows to build a relationship. All three counselors shared the same ideas about the importance of making an initial connection with the students in order to build rapport that leads to positive and frequent communication, which in turn leads to better student outcomes. This relationship allows for students to engage in important conversations about academic and other experiences with their counselors. As Fred acknowledges "...college research shows that...the more that a student feels that sense of belonging, the more likely they're to persist."

Conclusion

It is clear from the student and staff data that collective institutional support positively impact students' experiences in and out of the classroom. Students reported that institutional supports in the form of counselors and Educational Plans were of utmost importance in their enrollment decisions, including their enrollment in transfer-level English in the first year of college, which helps to understand Research Question #1. In regards to Research Question #2, students reported a number of factors as crucial in their completing their courses and overall success in their coursework: high quality professors and resources provided by professors, pre-existing writing skills, high school preparation, and counselor check-ins. Finally, students and staff reported that the benefits of LC membership include counselor check-ins and a sense of belonging within the college which helped to elucidate Research Question #3.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

There has always existed an equity gap for students of color, specifically African Americans, in higher education (Harris & Wood, 2013; Strayhorn, 2011; Libassi, 2018; The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). In California, only 26% of African Americans possess a bachelor's degree compared to 45% of White students (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021). While this gap has been acknowledged by institutions, the efforts to help diminish it thus far have been largely unsuccessful (PNPI, 2020; Villarreal & Garcia, 2016). Within the last ten years, several states have passed laws to help remove barriers, like remedial courses, in order to help community colleges increase persistence and graduation rates especially for students of color. For example, in 2012 California passed SB 1456 to help students matriculate to college. This meant colleges were required to improve institutional supports, such as counseling, orientation, Educational Plans, and other academic supports. Though there has been improvement in persistence since 2012 and post AB 705 (PPIC, 2020), the gap between African American students and their White and Asian counterparts persists. In an attempt to continue improving persistence and retention, colleges turned their attention to developing LCs (Zhao & Kuh, 2004; MacGregor et al., 2001). LCs play an important role in supporting students and developing a sense of belonging, particularly for those groups on campus who have been historically marginalized, which leads to improved student outcomes (Berger & Milem, 1999; Beachboard et al., 2011).

This study focused on African American community college students, and the factors that contribute to their enrollment decisions and academic success, including completion of transfer-level English, as well as the role an African American LC played in supporting students'

persistence. With this study, I seek to contribute to the body of literature that already exists about the ways in which the institution can increase their supports to encourage enrollment and completion of English for African American students within the first year of college enrollment.

AB 705 in California was passed in 2017 with the intention to increase the completion of transfer-level English and math within the first year of students enrolling in college. Since AB 705's implementation in 2019, placement exams—which were disproportionately impacting students of color, especially African Americans students—have been eliminated. In addition, remedial course offerings have been significantly reduced, and students have had direct access to enroll in transfer-level math and English. With these changes, completion rates have increased across the board by 20-25 percent (Mejia et al., 2020). Nevertheless, a sizable completion gap continues to exist between African American and White students (Mejia, Rodriguez, & Johnson, 2021). For instance, in 2015 (before AB 705's implementation) White students' completion for transfer-level English was 41% in comparison to Black students' completion rate of 15% (Mejia et al., 2020), a 26% difference. In 2019 (the first year AB 705 was implemented) White students' completion rate for transfer-level English was 71% in comparison to 48% of Black students (Mejia et al., 2020), a 23% difference. Although there is a slight reduction in the difference in completion rates between White and Black students, the equity gap is still sizeable. Though currently under investigation, the exact factors as to why the gap still exists as widely as it does post AB 705 are still unclear (Mejia et al., 2021). One possible reason for the continued gap is the pandemic which may have limited the assembly bill's benefits (Mejia et al., 2021) in addition to lack of access to counseling (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018).

This mixed methods study employed a survey instrument and interviews. The survey allowed me to look for patterns across a number of variables including the number of times

students saw counselors, whether the student had created Educational Plans, LC membership and whether the student had enrolled in transfer-level English. The survey also provided student perspectives regarding the reasons for enrolling or not enrolling in English within their first year. The student survey allowed me to examine student experiences in and out of the classroom and gain an understanding of enrollment choices. The LC staff interviews provided me with insight regarding their perspectives on supporting students, relationship building with students, and the program's intentions. The student interviews provided in-depth reasons for enrollment choices, for joining an LC, and the importance of feeling a sense of belonging in their academic journey.

The findings from this study suggest that creating an Educational Plan with counselors and seeing counselors more than twice within their first year of college enrollment may impact students' decision in enrolling in transfer-level English. Findings also suggest that high school preparation is important for students to complete English, and that professors play a key role as well. LC staff confirm that the relationship they build with students is significant in students' choices and completion; student interviews echoed the same sentiment.

Student and LC interviewees both emphasized that the LC cultivated feelings of belonging and care within students. They both reported that those feelings play an important, positive role in the overall college experience for students and also helped to build meaningful relationships between them and the institution. A sense of belonging impacts students' desire to build relationships and to build trust with the institution (Karp et al., 2010). In turn, that relationship and trust leads students to opportunities for conversations and access to resources, e.g. counselors and Educational Plans. Without that trust in the institution, students would not be willing to see counselors or other representatives of the institution, and would limit their access to important resources and relations (Karp et al., 2010).

The findings in this chapter confirm and extend the literature that already exists about African American students' decisions to enroll in and complete transfer-level English, and the role their LC membership plays in their college experience. In addition, it confirms the important part that feelings of belonging plays in students' persistence. In this last chapter, I review my findings in light of the literature review and theoretical frameworks. I then discuss some of the study's limitations and offer recommendations for practice and for future research.

Review of the Findings and Connections to Prior Research

Students reported a number of factors that influenced their academic success and their decision to enroll in and complete transfer-level English within their first year. Students mentioned that LC counselors and the sense of belonging that LCs cultivate, Educational Plans, high quality professors, and high school preparation and pre-existing writing skills all play an important role in the enrolling of and completion of courses. Students also spoke extensively about the importance of counselors and LCs in their overall college journey. Both the student and LC staff interviews affirmed similar sentiments regarding the importance of LCs and the benefits of membership, including the frequent interaction between student and counselor. Prior research confirms that counselors, rigorous high school curriculum, and feelings of belonging are important aspects in the academic journey of students (Adelman, 2006; Therriault & Krivoshey, 2014; Jonas et al., 2012; Harris & Wood, 2013; Rendon, 1994), as did the findings from this research study. Both students' and LC staff members' perspectives informed the findings of Research Question #1 and #3, while Research Question #2's findings primarily came from student interviews.

Research Question #1: What factors influence African American students' enrollment decisions and to what extent do LCs play a role in those decisions?

The survey and interview findings reinforce that counseling is an important institutional resource that students need in order to navigate course selection. Additionally, Educational Plans that counselors create provide students with a roadmap of how to get to where they are going (e.g., transfer, certificate, associate's degree, etc.). These findings are not surprising, especially when considering that SB 1456 was passed in 2012 for the specific reason of aiding students in the college matriculation process.

Counselors

The first research question explored the reasons why students enroll in transfer-level English. Findings demonstrated that counselors, and the relationship that students have with counselors, are an important part of why students enroll in certain courses over others during the semester. Over and over again, I heard students talk about how important their counselors were in helping them figure out or confirm what courses to enroll in. This finding confirms and extends what is already known about the factors that impact college students' enrollment choices. Previous research shows that course selection factors vary from campus to campus depending on the demographics of students (Calcagno et al., 2008). Prior research also demonstrates the importance of counselors in the matriculation process (Booth et al., 2013), but does not necessarily focus on relationship building between counselor and student. This finding validates how important counselors—and their rapport with students—are in course selection.

Educational Plans

Educational Plans that counselors create were also identified as influential in course enrollment decisions. Students reported that the process of developing a plan helped them to see

“where they are going” and to stay on “track” and the survey instruments confirmed that students were more likely to enroll in English if they created Educational Plans with a counselor. The findings from this study confirm existing research on the importance of Educational Plans. Similar to why AB 705 was passed to eliminate remedial coursework, SB 1456 was passed to ensure that higher education institutions provided students with supports when matriculating to college, including “Educational Planning services” (California Legislative Information, retrieved May 2022). In 2013, the Research and Planning Group for the California Community Colleges published a multi-year research study on the matriculation supports mentioned in SB 1456. In this study, “students prioritized and made inextricable links between having a specific educational goal and plan (directed) and staying motivated to achieve that goal (focused)” (Booth et al., 2013). Because the majority of community college students don’t see a counselor and don’t have an Educational Plan (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018), efforts like these bills and research studies (which help to increase state funding for resources) are attempts to increase access to these supports for students. The findings in Research Question #1 not only confirms the importance of Educational Plans in the course selection decisions of students, but specifically highlights them as an important institutional support and distinguishes them from the many others that students have access to (like orientation).

Encouraging Enrollment of Transfer-level Courses

The literature review presented in this research study does not report on the importance of counselors' encouragement of taking transfer-level courses. This may be so because research studies on the effectiveness of AB 705 are newer and all of the different institutional supports that have been amended and improved since SB 1456 and AB 705 (like counseling services, tutoring, and bridge programs) have not fully been examined since AB 705 was only just fully

implemented beginning the fall 2019 semester, and was interrupted by the pandemic. Having said that, the students and LC staff participating in this study indicated that encouragement from counselors is an important aspect of course selection choices. Though students said things like counselors don't "force [them] into anything," they also said that the guidance the counselors provide was significant in mapping out their goals. Access to counseling, an area that has also been researched, is an important factor to consider (Smith et al., 2012). The students who were interviewed in this study who were also members of an LC not only had access to counselors, but reported that they met with their counselors multiple times over the course of the year. This access provided them with many opportunities to hear suggestions from their counselors, and provided counselors an opportunity to encourage students to enroll in transfer-level courses as well as completing the courses they were enrolled in. The survey data indicated that students who were members of an LC saw counselors more than three times at a larger rate than students who were not members of an LC. Access to counseling, an area that has been researched, is an important opportunity that the majority of the students do not have due to school budget and student-to-counselor ratio, among other reasons (Smith et al., 2012). Similarly, LC counselors talked heavily about encouraging transfer-level courses and explained to students the importance of taking those classes sooner than later. Previous research shows that counseling is an important piece of retention (Tovar, 2015), but does not specifically address ways in which counselors should be articulating to students about course selection.

Research Question #2: What are the factors that contribute to African American students' academic success and to what extent do LCs play a role in these students' academic success?

While there are a host of potential reasons that can impact students' academic success, student interviews honed in on a few key factors. And though not all students were members of LCs, it is clear from the student responses that LC membership positively impacts their academic progress. Students reported the following as the most important factors that contributed toward their ability to complete courses successfully: high quality professors and the resources they provide, pre-existing writing skills and high school preparation, in addition to the LC counselor's required mid-semester check-ins.

Professors and the Resources they Provide

As instructors are the ones who have the most direct contact with students, it came as no surprise that students in this research study reported that the quality of instructors was an important factor in completing their English courses successfully. Though being a high quality instructor does not necessarily require the use of resources, research demonstrates a connection between being a high quality instructor and providing additional resources, like links, videos, articles and handouts, to help bolster learning (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010). The interview participants expressed an appreciation for the resources instructors provided, crediting them with being a major reason for successful completion.

High School Preparation and Writing Skills

Research shows that precollege factors, like high school preparation and challenging courses, are indicators of college preparation and success (Adelman, 2006; Therriault & Krivoshey, 2014; Jonas et al., 2012; Woods et al., 2019). Student findings for Research Question

#2 confirms existing research regarding the importance of high school preparation (including effective teachers), taking challenging courses, and self-identifying as strong writers as reasons for completion.

LC Counselors and Required LC Mid-semester Check-ins

Students reported that the support they received from their LC counselors and their follow-ups heavily contributed to their completion of courses. This is a significant finding especially since it is the school's responsibility to provide students with resources and support to help students achieve their academic goals (Woods et al., 2019). This finding extends research. The research studies on LCs cited in Chapter Two do not identify counseling as an important aspect of what LCs offer and how counseling contributes to retention. But Rendon's (1994) Theory of Validation, one of two frameworks grounding this research study, discusses the importance of counselors' validation of student experiences as a way to help improve retention. This finding is consistent with Rendon's theory and recommendations in her seminal work on validation.

Research Question #3: What do staff and students perceive as the benefits of being part of an LC?

The role of LCs stretches beyond encouraging the enrollment and completion of transfer-level English. LCs are known for increasing a sense of belonging in students, and research tells that a sense of belonging is impactful in students' decisions to remain enrolled in college (Tinto & Russo, 1994; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Weiss et al., 2015). My findings for Research Question #3 are in agreement with these prior studies, specifically the comments students made on the importance of building community and being part of a warm environment; like so, LC staff shared the importance of making students feel that they are cared for and how those feelings impact students while they are in college. While creating a sense of belonging may not directly

impact their academic career, it is important to the overall college experience for students, which in turn impacts their level of involvement on campus and their decision to remain enrolled in college.

LC Counselors Following-thru with Mid-semester Check-ins

In addition to the rapport that students and counselors build and how that relationship leads the way to more frequent interactions, following through and checking-in on students was also reported as an important aspect of how LCs support students academically. Once again, though counseling and the significant role that counselors play as institutional supports is something that has been researched (Tovar, 2015), the aspect of following through and checking-in, and how that impacts retention, is an area that lacks investigation. Not only is checking-in a strategic way to encourage academic progress, it also contributes to the sense of belonging and care that students expressed appreciation for (Rendon, 1994; Tovar, 2015).

Sense of Belonging

One of the most important qualities that LCs offer on college campuses is their ability to foster a sense of belonging and care in students, in addition to demonstrating institutional care—both of which are associated with student retention and persistence. According to staff and student interviews, the Blackacademics LC was no different. An overwhelming amount of research about LCs shows they create a sense of belonging (Harris & Wood, 2013; Rendon, 1994; Beachboard et al., 2011), and demonstrates how sense of belonging plays a crucial role in students' academic commitment (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Inkelas et al., 2007). Additionally, the two theoretical frameworks that this research study is grounded in, Deil-Amen's (2011) Socio-Academic Integration and Rendon's (1994) Theory of Validation, emphasize the importance of these feelings and their impact on student retention and persistence. The findings for Research

Question #3 regarding sense of belonging and community building in relation to students' overall college experiences, both academically and socially, heavily confirms previous research. There is one area that this finding challenges, however, from previous research.

Prior research on LCs and sense of belonging found that peers and relationships built with peers through LC membership were important (Chen & Jang, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Rendon, 1994; Braxton et al., 2000). Research studies report that peer relationships play a significant role in course completion, and may even influence retention (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas et al., 2007). When students were asked about the extent to which their peers and socializing with peers in and out of the classroom impacted their engagement, the interviewees reported that their peers weren't influential in their course selection, completion, or overall college experience. Additionally, they did not remark on their peers contributing toward their sense of belonging. The sense of belonging and community that students felt seemed to primarily stem from their relationships with their counselors. Perhaps because this study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, student interactions with classmates and peers differed than pre-pandemic times. The change from face-to-face social interaction to online interaction may have impacted the significant ways in which peers contributed to a sense of belonging and engagement as previous research shows. Nevertheless, however, this finding (or lack of) extends and to a degree challenges, the literature on this specific aspect of LCs and the importance of peer interactions.

Limitations

Although the study itself sheds light on important factors that impact student enrollment and completion, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations. The survey sample was smaller than planned and may not be representative of the larger population of African American

students at Pleasant (or the population of African American students attending California's community colleges). In addition, the ways that LCs functioned during the pandemic (including the ways that they support students' enrollment decisions and academic success) may be different due to the pandemic.

One of the biggest limitations to the study was the small number of students completing the survey. Because interviewees were recruited from the survey respondents, the limited response rate limited my ability to recruit enough students to participate in one-on-one interviews. Under 4% of Pleasant College's population identified as African American at the time of this study; the college reported that 496 students identified as African American in fall 2020. However, because I was recruiting for first year students in the 2020 school year (and not all of the African American population on campus), the first survey instrument was sent to 263 students. When the first survey yielded only 23 students, I changed the incentive structure and shortened the survey instrument. I also decided to include two cohorts instead of one (both 2020 and 2021) in order to expand the pool. The second survey sample yielded an additional 15 completed responses. The second survey instrument was sent specifically to students who did not enroll in transfer-level English in their first year since the first survey yielded more responses from students who had enrolled than those who hadn't. Thus, the 38 total student responses on the survey do not accurately reflect a randomized sample of the school's African American population. Nor did I gather in-depth responses from students who took the second survey since the survey was shortened significantly.

Because I was only able to interview five students, and of them four were LC members, it is unclear how representative the participants and their perspectives are. Two of the five students, Bailey and Barbara, had enrolled in college two decades prior so they were not technically "first

year” students when the study took place, although they were new to Pleasant. Only two of the five students, Cher and Jason, belonged to one of the three groups that I had initially hoped include in the interview sample: 1) students who enrolled in and completed transfer-level English within their first year who were not members of an LC, 2) students who enrolled in and completed transfer-level English within their first year who were members of an LC, and 3) students who never enrolled in transfer-level English regardless of LC membership. Cher and Jason belonged to the second group listed above; Cher was a member of the Latina/o/x LC and Jason was a member of Blackademics. Barbara was not a first year Pleasant College student and began at the college pre-AB 705 so she had completed a longer sequence of remedial English before completing transfer-level English. At the time of the study, she had already completed transfer-level English. Ruby was a first year student but she was placed in remedial English, and Bailey did not need to take English because she’d already completed it 20 years ago. However, due to the limited number of students who were willing to interview, I decided to interview all those who volunteered to participate, otherwise my findings would be further limited. This self-selection to participate in a one-on-one survey is also a possible limitation as students who are willing to participate may share similar experiences and characteristics with each other. Students who did not complete English were less willing to participate in a one-on-one interview than those who had enrolled in and completed the course successfully. Therefore, my findings do not truly reflect the ways in which the institution can improve itself to reach those students. Rather, the results positively affirm what is already being done on an institutional level.

Because this study examined why the equity gap is as wide as it is post AB 705 (which was passed in 2017 and implemented in 2019), another limitation is that there were only two possible cohorts to draw from at the time of the study. Therefore, reporting on enrollment trends

over time since was not possible. This was further compounded by the fact that AB 705's intended changes were disrupted by Covid-19. In addition, because students of color have experienced the most departure from the CCC during the pandemic (Kelliher, 2022), it was even more difficult to find students to participate in the study. The pandemic also impacted the variety and frequency of out-of-class social opportunities for students which is historically considered one of the prime experiences that LCs offer (Tinto & Russo, 1994; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999).

The fact that this study took place at a single site is also limiting in that the students at Pleasant College may not accurately reflect other African American student experiences in Southern California, or California at large. Furthermore, most of the African American population attends part-time, which may have restricted those who wanted to participate in a follow-up interview from doing so. This may have led to interviewing students who were similar in background and in demographic, limiting diverse responses and insights. Finally, because the survey and interview questions rely on memory recall, students may not have remembered reasons for enrollment or completion, and other details, accurately.

Recommendations

The findings from this study validate much of the existing research on reasons why students complete courses and the impact LCs have on students' sense of belonging and subsequent academic advancement. At the same time, the findings elaborate on the reasons for enrolling and challenge the importance of peer influences on students' retention. As with any research study, this one unveiled a number of noteworthy recommendations for administrators, leaders, and other program decision makers in community colleges.

Ensure Access to Transfer-Level Courses

Historically, class schedules and offerings were built around instructor availability and preference in combination with a consideration for past institutional enrollment data (i.e., how many courses filled, how many needed to be cancelled, and student enrollment). Guided Pathways, a national movement to redesign community colleges with a focus on removing structural barriers to course and degree completion, was implemented in California around 2015. It brought to the forefront the need for comprehensive enrollment management plans that ask colleges to design schedules around students' lives in order to maximize program and degree completion. As a result, colleges have increased the times during the day that gatekeeper courses are offered. However, the survey data revealed that some students did not enroll in transfer-level courses due to a conflict in schedule. In light of this, I recommend a thorough, college-wide examination of the schedule of course offerings. In addition, the number of students who experience these conflicts and the courses that come into conflict with transfer-level course offerings should be investigated. It would be disappointing, for example, if students were unable to take courses recommended on their Educational Plans due to schedule conflicts or lack of course offerings.

One way to examine the schedule is to consider when transfer-level courses (specifically math and English) are offered, in relation to when other “popular” courses (like electives) are offered each semester. This, combined with the *number* of these key courses being offered, can help colleges decide which classes to prioritize in the schedule. Examining potential scheduling conflicts with transfer-level courses can result in making strategic changes in the course offering schedule, opening up more possibilities for enrollment in important courses. This would be of particular help to part-time students, who have limited time on campus. Removing scheduling

conflicts could improve access to transfer-level courses and help students make effective choices in enrollment.

Forging Partnerships Between Community Colleges and Local High Schools

The four student interviewees who enrolled in transfer-level English within the first year and completed it successfully commented on the preparation they received in high school. One of those students (Cher) credited the partnership her school had with Pleasant in helping her enroll in transfer-level courses and her ability to navigate the schedule. Dual enrollment and bridge programs, like the one Cher described, have been in existence for a number of decades and are developed in a variety of ways. Though these programs differ in structure from college to college, they share the common goal of easing the transition into higher education.

Because high school rigor and preparation is an important precollege indicator of success (Adelman, 2006; Therriault & Krivoshey, 2014; Jonas et al., 2012), forging purposeful partnerships between community colleges and their local high schools to examine and communicate expectations about English writing and reading skills is one way for institutions to prepare students for college academics. For example, outreach divisions at colleges could host informative workshops for high school teachers at schools that have partnerships with local colleges. A workshop, for instance, that focuses on the skills and expectations of transfer-level English and math in college can help high schools backwards plan their curriculum. This research study revealed that students with strong pre-existing writing skills were positioned for academic success in college. Providing time and space, such as workshops, for high schools and colleges to partner together can potentially help high schools continue to develop students' writing and reading skills so that they align more closely with what their local community

colleges expect. This could result in more students completing transfer-level courses in their first year, which is the aim of AB 705 and AB 1705.

Creating a structured bridge program for students coming from high school has the potential to not only alleviate the stress that comes from transitioning to college, but also helps students make beneficial enrollment choices. Typically, bridge programs are focused on onboarding students during the summer between high school and college. I recommend that colleges extend their bridge program into the first semester as well. “Extending” the bridge can serve as a reminder to students to see a counselor, take advantage of on-campus resources (like the library or tutoring), and to become more active on campus (like joining an LC). As this research study demonstrated, meeting frequently with a counselor and involvement in LCs helps students enroll in and complete gatekeeper courses. Providing students with a longer-reaching bridge program can increase the chance of students’ interactions on campus, helping them to take advantage of resources. This can lead to increased enrollment, completion, persistence, and retention.

Explore Strategies to Increase Student Engagement with Counselors

Student responses to the questionnaire and their comments in the interviews revealed that counseling plays an important role in enrollment choices. The survey data showed that seeing a counselor three or more times is associated with an increased likelihood of enrolling in transfer-level English. Unfortunately, most students don’t ever see a counselor (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018; Smith et al., 2012), much less see them more than twice in a given year. Increasing the number of times a student sees a counselor would benefit both the institution and the retention of its students (Tovar, 2015). While this may sound like a tremendous undertaking given the disproportionate student-counselor ratio, examining

counseling services in LCs and other programs that offer specialized counseling can be an effective place to start. For instance, rather than requiring student to see counselors once a semester, LCs can incentivize and increase the minimum requirement to twice per semester.

Another way to increase engagement with counseling is to offer embedded counselors for gatekeeper courses. Given the large student-teacher ratio, assigning embedded counselors to transfer-level English and math can increase the chances of students engaging with counselors, which can also lead to successful completion of courses. Since most students do not ever see a counselor (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018; Smith et al., 2012), embedding a counselor within a class provides equitable access to an important institutional support that may otherwise remain elusive.

In addition to embedded counseling, developing wrap-around support with counseling in the form of early alert systems can provide instructors with an additional way to connect students to counseling. Early alert systems are ways for teachers to notify counselors about student performance in the early weeks of the semester. Once the instructor fills out an alert for a student, the system communicates the notification with counseling services who then initiate contact with the student. While early alert systems are not a new resource, most schools underutilize them. Training faculty on how to use early alerts is one way to connect counselors with students. Developing a plan for counselor-teacher follow-up after an early alert is another way to ensure students are benefiting from wrap-around services. Strategies such as these can help improve retention and persistence.

Explore Strategies to Increase Student Enrollment in Learning Communities

The findings from the study revealed that some students had never heard of Blackacademics or had heard of the LC but had not joined. The research study did not inquire

whether those students who had heard about the LC but who had not joined were aware of membership benefits or not. Findings also revealed that LC members interacted with counselors more frequently and were more likely to enroll in transfer-level English. Prior research also makes it clear that membership in LCs helps to increase academic achievement (Therriault & Krivoshey, 2014; Berger & Milem, 1999; Kuh et al., 2008; Titus, 2004). A national study conducted by Tinto (2003) found that students in one community college persisted, on average, 25% more if they were members of an LC in comparison to those students who were not. PC's 2019 self-study revealed that Blackademics members completed transfer-level English at higher rates, 25% to be exact, than those African American students who were not members. However, only about 50 (10%) of their African American students were members of Blackademics and only six (12%) of the members successfully completed transfer-level English at the time of the self-study. Community colleges, where half of all African American college students enroll (College Board, 2016; Newman et al., 2015), should find ways to increase membership in their LCs. LC staff should actively promote awareness of the LCs and advertise that the LC services are available to all students—part-time or full-time, traditional or non-traditional age, working or non-working, etc. One interview participant who had never heard of Blackademics remarked that she would hesitate to join due to her age. If the LC advertises itself to be beneficial to all students, and qualifies what “all” means, then students who may have pre-conceived notions of a typical member may be less reluctant to join. LCs may find it beneficial to host informational sessions throughout the year in order to maximize their exposure and to capture students year-round. Informational sessions can detail benefits of joining, including the monetary incentives, access to counseling, social opportunities, and also statistics surrounding completion and graduation rates. Finally, restructuring the organization itself can attract new student members.

For example, currently all Blackademics members are simply that—members. Providing leadership opportunities within the LC, such as becoming a student ambassador or participating in the college’s New Student Orientation, further incentivizes membership and ensures student-centeredness. According to the LC director, one of Blackademics’ goals is to encourage leadership opportunities for their students. Providing those leadership opportunities in the LC itself is an effective place to motivate students to eventually seek other leadership prospects.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study sought to investigate why students enroll in and complete English, it was also meant to examine reasons as to why students do not enroll within their first year, or enroll but do not complete. Unfortunately, I was unable to dive as deeply into the latter as was intended. Thus, additional research on students who did not enroll in and/or complete transfer-level English within the first year is needed to further understand enrollment choices. Further, the importance of seeing a counselor more than twice over the course of the first two semesters and its impact on student retention and persistence is also worth exploring.

Students Not Enrolling in English

A study that only focuses on interviewing students who did not enroll in—or who enrolled in but did not complete—transfer-level English is necessary. In many ways their reasons and experiences are most important because they are the students who will help close the equity gap. If they are not enrolling at all or dropping before completion, colleges must become aware of the reasons as to why this is happening in order to better support those students.

Student-Counselor Relationships

While research shows that peers play a substantial role in persistence and academic achievement for LC members (Chen & Jang, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000), the students in this

study did not identify peer relationships as significantly influencing their enrollment decisions and success. Rather, they identified the relationships they made with their counselors as more influential in relation to retention and persistence. Further research is needed on college counselors' impact on retention and the potential for how those relationships can improve retention.

Seeing a Counselor More Than Once

The survey results suggest that students who see counselors three or more times over the course of their first year may be more likely to enroll in and complete transfer-level English. However, more research is needed to confirm that result, as well as to explore ways of increasing access to counseling. Future research should examine: a) the nature of this relationship, b) how to get students to see counselors frequently within their first year of enrolling, and c) the impact of counseling on persistence and completion.

Learning Community Student-Peer Relationships

Because the pandemic may have interrupted the typical social interaction that occurred in and out of the classroom for students who are members of LCs, it is worth exploring how peer relationships for LC members have shifted post-pandemic and the extent to which peer relationships influence students' sense of belonging and enrollment choices. Previous research indicated that students who belonged to LCs reported that their peer relations positively influence their overall college experiences and academic successes (Chen & Jang, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this research study, however, students did not ascribe any of their successes or their positive college experiences to their LC peers (or other students for that matter), instead they focused on detailing their counselor relationships, the LC program and the institution itself in general. Investigating the social aspect of LCs and its impact on sense of belonging in light of

the pandemic is an area worth exploring. Future research should examine the changing influence of peers on students' sense of belonging and enrollment choices during and after the pandemic.

Abbreviated Educational Plan vs. Comprehensive Educational Plan

Student Education Plans are a statewide matriculation tool that is mandated by California Education Code and can be developed in two levels: an Abbreviated Educational Plan and a Comprehensive Educational Plan. An Abbreviated Educational Plan focuses on prescribing courses one semester to two semesters at a time and is most often utilized to guide incoming freshmen or students who are on academic probation. A Comprehensive Educational Plan maps out the courses required for a student to complete their stated educational goal (e.g., AA/AS, certificate, transfer). This research study did not investigate the specific type of Educational Plan that Pleasant's LC developed for its members, nor did it examine the impact of each plan regarding retention, persistence, enrollment and/or completion. Future research could examine how each type supports enrollment in transfer-level courses and the completion of those courses within the one year time frame that AB 705 mandates in relation to the students' stated educational goal.

Comparative Research

This study identified some key factors that may influence the enrollment decisions and academic success of African American community college students. Future research could examine the extent to which the same factors are viewed by other student groups (e.g. Latina/o/x or Asian students) as being important. Thus, conducting research that would be comparative and not limited to African American students will also be beneficial in understanding factors that influence enrollment decisions and success, and the benefits of LC membership. In addition, examining heterogeneity within the Black student population can help to further refine the

institution's services and resources, like LCs, to provide targeted supports for specific subgroups. For instance, the experiences and needs of an African American student may differ from a Black student who has immigrated newly to the U.S. Identifying different subgroups for Black students on campus can help the institution develop specific supports which would address their needs more equitably.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights regarding the factors that impact the course enrollment decisions and academic success of African American community college students. Though it is natural to first think of professors as the first members on the forefront of the academic journey of students, counselors also share that burden. In California, the majority of community college students miss out on the benefits of seeing a counselor (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018; Smith et al., 2012; Booth, Cooper, & Karandjeff, 2013). Given that counseling is associated with completion and that many students lack access to counseling, it becomes no surprise that so many students of color are not completing the academic journeys they endeavored. The students in this study demonstrate that regular communication between them and key institutional players (e.g. teachers and counselors) significantly impact their enrollment and persistence. It is the institution's responsibility not only to acclimate students to college life, but to clearly communicate the importance of gatekeeper courses and then to help students remain in those courses once they are enrolled.

This research study, alongside the frameworks that this research was grounded in, also illuminates the importance of sense of belonging for African American students and the impact of these feelings on their successes. Because African American students only make up about 6% of enrollment in the CCC system (CCCO retrieved 2022), they often attend schools that are

PWIs or HSIs. This frequently means that they have less opportunity to make connections with the institution or that the institution has a limited number of programs specific to them. This is why African American LCs are significant institutional supports; their ability to increase a sense of community and belonging for African American students becomes a powerful tool that helps to validate students' experiences and has the potential to positively impact their academic successes. Counselors and professors in combination with specific programs (like LCs) have great potential in helping African American students build community which becomes an invaluable support for this often marginalized student population. With the collective efforts of the institution, all groups on college campuses can be made to feel like they belong—because they do.

APPENDIX A

PRIMARY STUDENT SURVEY

Hello! Thank you for your interest in this survey.

I am a doctoral student at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) conducting a study regarding first-year African American/Black community college students and their enrollment patterns. I ask that you complete this 21-question survey, which should take **approximately 5-8 minutes**. The survey mainly asks questions about your enrollment in and completion of English courses in your first year of college.

If you'd like more information, click [here](#).

NOTE: The survey works best if taken from a desktop/laptop.

Do you wish to participate in the study?

- ☐ No (closes this form)
- ☐ Yes (proceed to the questionnaire)

1. How would you describe your ethnicity? (Please check all that apply)
 - a. Asian or Pacific Islander
 - b. Black or African American
 - c. Hispanic or Latino/Latina/Latina/o/x
 - d. Native American or Alaskan
 - e. White or Caucasian
 - f. Biracial or Multiracial
 - g. I prefer not to say
 - h. Other
2. What is your age range?
 - a. 18-19
 - b. 20-24
 - c. 25-29
 - d. 30-34
 - e. 35-39
 - f. 40+
 - g. I prefer not to say
 - h. Other:
3. What best describes the gender you identify with?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Non-binary / third gender
 - d. I prefer not to say
 - e. I prefer to self-describe:

4. Which option **best** describes your educational goal at [Pleasant]?
- Complete a certificate without transferring.
 - Complete a certificate then transfer.
 - Earn an Associate's degree without transferring.
 - Transfer with an Associate's degree.
 - Transfer without an Associate's degree.
 - Haven't decided yet.
 - Other
5. Which of the following was true of your enrollment status during the **Fall 2020** semester?
- I was a full-time student (e.g. enrolled in 12 units or more).
 - I was a part-time student (e.g. enrolled in 11 units or less).
 - I was not enrolled.
6. Which of the following was true of your enrollment status during the **Spring 2021** semester?
- I was a full-time student (e.g. enrolled in 12 units or more).
 - I was a part-time student (e.g. enrolled in 11 units or less).
 - I was not enrolled.
7. Describe your involvement in the following groups:

	I have <u>not</u> heard of this organization.	I have heard of this organization but do not know anyone who is involved.	I know someone who is involved with or who is a member of this organization.	I am involved with or am a member of this organization.
Black Scholars Learning Community (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐
La Comunidad Learning Community (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Guardian Scholars (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Black Student Union (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐

8. Have you enrolled in or are you currently enrolled in English 101/101+?
- Yes
 - No

9. In which semester(s) were you enrolled in English 101/101+?
(If you took it more than once, select all that apply.)

- a. Summer 2020
- b. Fall 2020
- c. Winter 2021
- d. Spring 2021
- e. Summer 2021
- f. Fall 2021

10. When you took English 101/101+, which of the following best describes the result?

	I earned a passing grade (A, B or C). (1)	I completed but did <u>not</u> earn a passing grade (D or F). (2)	I did not complete it because I dropped or withdrew from the course. (3)	I earned an incomplete. (4)
Summer 2020	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fall 2020	☐	☐	☐	☐
Winter 2021	☐	☐	☐	☐
Spring 2021	☐	☐	☐	☐
Summer 2021	☐	☐	☐	☐

11. Please indicate the number of times you saw a [Pleasant] academic counselor (including EOP&S, Student Equity, DSPS, etc.).

	Zero times	One time	Two times	Three or more times
Summer 2020	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fall 2020	☐	☐	☐	☐
Winter 2021	☐	☐	☐	☐
Spring 2021	☐	☐	☐	☐

12. Have you completed an educational plan with your counselor?
- Yes
 - No
 - I don't remember
13. During which semester did you **first** develop an education plan with your counselor?
- Summer 2020
 - Fall 2020
 - Winter 2020
 - Spring 2021
 - Summer 2021
 - Fall 2021
 - I don't remember
14. Was English 101 or English 101+ included in your educational plan?
- Yes, English 101 or English 101+ was included in the plan for my first year (2020-2021).
 - Yes, English 101 or English 101+ was included in the plan for my second year (2021-2022).
 - No, English 101 or English 101+ was not included in my education plan.
 - I don't remember whether the plan included English 101 or English 101+.
15. To what extent were each of the following relevant in your decision to take English 101/101+?

	Not a reason.	Part of the reason.	The primary reason.
My friends enrolled.	☐	☐	☐
My high school counselor told me to.	☐	☐	☐
A [Pleasant] counselor told me to.	☐	☐	☐
It was included in my educational plan.	☐	☐	☐
It was a prerequisite I needed to complete.	☐	☐	☐
The Black Scholars Learning Community recommended enrollment.	☐	☐	☐

16. Are there any other reasons **not listed** regarding why you decided to take English 101/101+?

17. Please indicate the extent to which each of the following were relevant to your decision to **withdraw from or drop** English 101/101+.

	Not a reason	Part of the reason	The primary reason
Work or family obligations	☐	☐	☐
Illness or health concerns (mine or someone else's)	☐	☐	☐
Financial reasons	☐	☐	☐
Difficulty of the class	☐	☐	☐
Didn't like the professor	☐	☐	☐
Didn't like the times the class met	☐	☐	☐
Didn't like the online format/prefer to wait to take it in person	☐	☐	☐
Lack of academic support	☐	☐	☐
Didn't find the class interesting or relevant	☐	☐	☐
Didn't need the class for my academic goals	☐	☐	☐

18. Are there any other reasons **not listed** regarding your decision to drop English 101/101+ in the 2020-2021?

19. Which of the following best describes why you have **not** enrolled in English 101/101+ at [Pleasant]?

	Not a reason	Part of the reason	The primary reason
I did not think it was important to enroll in English during my first or second semester.	☐	☐	☐
I was nervous about taking English classes.	☐	☐	☐
I did not feel prepared for English classes.	☐	☐	☐

I was not told (by a counselor) to take English in my first year.	☐	☐	☐
My counselor recommended against me taking English in my first year.	☐	☐	☐
I wanted to take other classes.	☐	☐	☐
I had scheduling conflicts.	☐	☐	☐
I had responsibilities outside of school to take care of.	☐	☐	☐
I passed AP English in high school	☐	☐	☐
I took a different English course at [Pleasant]	☐	☐	☐
I earned credit through dual enrollment in high school.	☐	☐	☐
I took a similar course at another college.	☐	☐	☐

20. Are there any other reasons **not listed** regarding your decision to **not** enroll in English 101/101+?

This is the end of the questionnaire. Thank you very much for your responses!

As a small token of gratitude, I would like to send you a \$10 Amazon gift card. Would you like to receive this gift card?

- ☐ Yes (you will be asked to provide contact information)
- ☐ No

I will be conducting a small number of individual and group interviews. These will last about an hour and will take place in the months of December or January via Zoom. All focus group and interview participants will receive a \$25 gift card.

Would you be interested in receiving information about participating in an individual or group interview?

- ☐ Yes (you will be asked to provide contact info)
- ☐ No

After the completion of this study, a drawing will be held for three \$25 Amazon gift cards. The chances of winning will depend on the number of individuals entered (expected to be no more than 270).

Do you wish to be entered in the drawing for one of three \$25 gift cards?

- ☐ Yes (you will be asked to provide contact info)
- ☐ No

Contact Info **Please provide your contact information.**

- ☐ First and Last Name _____
- ☐ Phone contact _____
- ☐ E-mail address _____

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Tanyab81@gmail.com.

You may click on the “Back” button to review the questions or click “Next” to submit your responses (this will end the survey)

APPENDIX B

SECONDARY STUDENT SURVEY

Blurb Hello! Thank you for your interest in this survey.

I am a doctoral student at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and a [Pleasant] instructor conducting a study on course enrollment patterns. I ask that you complete this **2-4 minute** survey. Participants will receive a \$10 gift card at the end of the survey.

If you'd like more information, click [here](#).

NOTE: The survey works best if taken from a desktop/laptop.

Do you wish to participate in the study?

- ☐ No (closes this form)
- ☐ Yes (proceed to the questionnaire)

1. Have you enrolled in or are you currently enrolled in English 101/101+ at [Pleasant]?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. In which semester(s) were you enrolled in English 101/101+ at [Pleasant]?
(If you took it more than once, select all that apply.)
 - a. Summer 2020
 - b. Fall 2020
 - c. Winter 2021
 - d. Spring 2021
 - e. Summer 2021
 - f. Fall 2021
 - g. Winter 2022
 - h. Spring 2022
3. Please use the space below to describe your reasons for not having enrolled in English 101/101+ in detail.
4. Have you completed an educational plan with your counselor?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I don't remember
5. How would you describe your ethnicity? (Please check all that apply)
 - a. Asian or Pacific Islander
 - b. Black or African American
 - c. Hispanic or Latino/Latina/Latina/o/x
 - d. Native American or Alaskan

- e. White or Caucasian
 - f. Biracial or Multiracial
 - g. I prefer not to say
 - h. Other
6. What is your age range?
- a. 18-19
 - b. 20-24
 - c. 25-29
 - d. 30-34
 - e. 35-39
 - f. 40+
 - g. I prefer not to say
 - h. Other:
7. What best describes the gender you identify with?
- a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Non-binary / third gender
 - d. I prefer not to say
 - e. I prefer to self-describe:

This is the end of the questionnaire. Thank you very much for your responses!

As a small token of gratitude, I would like to send you a \$10 Amazon gift card. Would you like to receive this gift card?

- ☐ Yes (you will be asked to provide contact information)
- ☐ No

I will be conducting a small number of one-on-one interviews. These will last about 45 minutes to an hour and will take place in the months of February and March via Zoom. All interview participants will receive a \$25 gift card.

Would you be interested in receiving information about participating in a one-on-one interview?

- ☐ Yes (you will be asked to provide contact info)
- ☐ No

Please provide your contact information.

☐ First and Last Name _____

☐ Phone contact _____

☐ E-mail address _____

☐ *If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Tanyab81@gmail.com.*

You may click on the “Back” button to review the questions or click “Next” to submit your responses (this will end the survey).

APPENDIX C

ONE ON ONE INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS—STUDENTS WHO COMPLETED (W/LC MEMBERSHIP)

Hi! Thank you so much for agreeing to this follow-up one on one interview, and taking the time to speak with me about your experiences as a student at GCC and in the Black Scholars Learning Community. I know you are busy so I appreciate you taking time out of your schedule for this interview. The interview should last about one hour. To express my gratitude, you will be gifted a \$25 gift card of your choosing between Amazon and Target at the end of the one on one interview for your participation.

Before we begin, I would like to communicate a few items:

- 1. The reason for this one on one interview is to learn about your experiences in the Black Scholars Learning Community. Your responses are important because GCC is committed to equity and helping students complete their goals. The information you provide can help the school improve and strengthen its supports for students. If at any time, you feel uncomfortable about a topic or question, or do not have experience in a particular area, let me know and I can move onto the next question. Do you have any questions regarding the reason for the interview?*
- 2. I will analyze and present the information I gather in this interview to my doctoral dissertation committee. The information you provide will be confidential. Findings of this interview may be published or included in my doctoral dissertation, but you will never be identified. Are you ok with this?*
- 3. This interview will be recorded so that I don't miss any of the information you provide. As I am expected to provide a write-up of this interview for my dissertation and committee, recording our conversation will allow me to include all the aspects of your responses accurately. Please feel free to stop the recording at any time in our interview. I expect our session to last about an hour.*
- 4. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?*

Warm-Up:

1. Tell me about your high school education. In what ways, if any, do you believe your school prepared you for college?
2. What is/are your **academic** goal(s) at GCC?

Key Questions:

1. Tell me, how long have you been a student at GCC?
 - a. I noticed on the survey that you were enrolled full time in fall 2020 but part time in spring 2021. Why did you go from full to part time?
 - b. What is your current enrollment status?
2. Tell me a little bit about **how** you got involved in the BSLC.
3. Now, tell me a little bit about **why** you decided to join the BSLC.
4. How did you hear about BSLC?

5. What does membership look like? In other words, what, if anything, is expected of you as a member of the BSLC?
6. Tell me about some of the non-academic socializing you do as a member of the BSLC, if there is any.
 - a. **How** important are these **social opportunities** for you?
 - b. **Why** are these **social opportunities** important for you?
7. How would you describe your overall experience as a member of the LC?
8. What do you appreciate most, if anything, about the LC?
9. To what extent did the incentives (gift cards, etc...) that the BSLC offers impact your decision to join the LC?
10. Now let's switch gears and talk a little bit about the LC in relation to your academics. How would you describe your membership's impact on your academics?
 - a. What role, if any, did the LC play in your **course selection choices** in your first year?
 - b. What role did your LC **counselors** play in your **enrollment choices**, if any?
 - c. What roles did your BSLC peers play in your enrollment choice, if any?
11. Let's now talk about your experiences in your classes in your first year. How did your classes go?
 - a. In what ways, if any, did the LC make your classes more manageable?
 - b. What other GCC supports, if any, did you use to help you with your classes?
12. On the survey you indicated that you have not yet enrolled in English 101/transfer-level English. Could you elaborate on why you have chosen not to enroll yet?
 - a. You also indicated that you plan on enrolling in your second year instead of your first. Could you tell me a little bit about why you decided to enroll in your second year instead of your first?
13. What factors do you believe helped you in completing transfer-level English with a passing grade?
14. Tell me about the ways in which your membership in BSLC, if any, influenced your decision **to enroll** in English 101/101+.
 - a. *(If BSLC did not impact their course selection)*: How did you decide what classes to take in your first year?
15. How much of a role did your BSLC counselor play in the courses you selected **overall**?
16. Could you tell me how many times you saw a Black Scholars counselor in your first year on campus?
 - a. On the survey you indicated that you completed an educational plan with your counselor. Was English 101 part of your first year's ed plan or your second?
 - b. Did you complete your ed plan with your BSLC counselor or a different counselor?
 - c. In what ways, if any, did your educational plan impact your enrollment choices your first year in college?
17. Now let's shift focus to the support services on campus, such as office hours, tutoring, academic labs, disabled student services, etc. What role, if any, have these services played in helping to complete your English 101?
18. In general, what other supports do you think GCC could be or should be providing students like yourself in order to encourage enrolling in transfer-level courses, like English and math, and completing those courses?

19. Do you have any recommendations in terms of improvement or changes that should be made in your viewpoint for the BSLC?
20. What do you think the students in the BSLC would recommend for the LC in terms of improvements or additional supports?

Thank you for all of your participation thus far. I would now like to talk to you a little bit about an assembly bill that was passed in 2017. In 2017, Assembly Bill 705 (or AB 705), was passed in the state of California. This assembly bill eliminated remedial courses in math and English for community college students. In other words, everyone who enters community college in California no longer needs to take an entrance exam to enroll in transfer-level math and English, you now have access to those classes from the first semester you enroll in college. The assembly bill was passed to ensure that every single student has an equitable chance at enrolling in these required courses, and to subsequently reach their desired academic goals in community college. I would now like to ask a few questions about the assembly bill.

21. Have you heard about this assembly bill or this new law (elimination of remedial courses)?
22. Where did you hear about it from?
23. What do you think about the goal of AB 705?
24. In what ways, if any, do you think GCC works towards the goals that AB 705 set out to achieve?
25. What, if anything, do you think the BSLC could be doing to help support AB 705?

Closing

1. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience at GCC?
2. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences as a Black Scholars learning community member?

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today and for answering all my questions. I have learned so much valuable information through your responses. I appreciate your time and willingness to participate in my interview.

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS—STUDENTS WHO COMPLETED (W/O LC MEMBERSHIP)

Introduction—Student Interview Questions

Hi! Thank you so much for agreeing to this follow-up interview, and taking the time to speak with me about your experiences as a student at GCC, and your course enrollment choices. I know you are busy so I appreciate you taking time out of your schedule for this interview. To express my gratitude, you will be gifted a \$25 gift card at the end of the interview for your participation.

Before we begin, I would like to communicate a few items:

- 1. The reason for this interview is to understand your decision-making process about transfer-level English courses within your first year of college. Your responses are important because GCC is committed to equity and helping students complete their goals. The information you provide can help the school improve and strengthen its supports for students. If at any time, you feel uncomfortable about a topic or question, or do not have experience in a particular area, let me know and I can move onto the next question. Do you have any questions regarding the reason for the interview?*
- 2. I will analyze and present the information I gather in this interview to my doctoral dissertation committee. The information you provide will be confidential and anonymous. Findings of this interview may be published or included in my doctoral dissertation, but you will never be identified. Are you ok with this?*
- 3. This interview will be recorded so that I don't miss any of the information you provide. As I am expected to provide a write-up of this interview for my dissertation and committee, recording our conversation will allow me to include all the aspects of your responses accurately. Please feel free to stop the recording at any time in our interview. I expect our session to last between 30-45 minutes.*
- 4. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?*

Warm-Up:

1. Tell me, how long have you been a student at GCC?
2. Tell me about your experience at GCC thus far.
 - a. What do they like?
 - b. What has been challenging?
3. What is/are your **academic** goal(s) at GCC?

Key Questions:

1. Tell me a little bit about how you decided to choose the courses that you enrolled in in your first year.
 - a. What advice, if any, did you get and from whom?
 - b. What role did your counselors play in your enrollment choices, if any?
 - c. What roles did your peers play in your enrollment choice, if any?
2. Let's talk about your general experiences in your classes in your first year. How did your classes go?
 - a. What, if anything, made your classes more manageable?
 - b. What, if anything, made your classes challenging?
 - c. What GCC supports, if any, did you use to help you with your classes?
3. On the survey, you indicated that you enrolled in transfer-level English and completed it in your first year at the college. Tell me more about the reasons you decided to enroll in English 101 within the first year.
 - a. In what ways, if any, do you believe your part-time status influenced the courses you chose to enroll in in your first year of college? (Same question to those who are full-time.)
4. Could you tell me more about any factors or reasons you think contributed to succeeding in your English course?
 - a. What other experiences, if any, played a role in the completion of your English course?
 - b. In what ways, if any, did your professor play a role in helping you complete your English course?
5. Are you involved with any student clubs or organizations? If so, which one(s)?
 - a. What were some of the reasons why you decided to join X club/organization?
6. On the survey, you indicated that you are not a member of the Black Scholars Learning Community. Tell me more about your reasons for not joining.
 - a. *If they expressed a desire to join in the future, I would follow-up with:* Could you elaborate on why you plan on joining in the future?
 - b. What do you currently know about the Black Scholars Learning Community?
7. Now let's shift focus to the support services on campus, such as office hours, tutoring, academic labs, disabled student services, etc. What role, if any, have these services played in your completion of English 101?
8. How did you decide what classes to take in your first year?
 - a. Not to sound repetitive, but would you now describe in more detail how much of a role your counselor played in the courses you selected?
 - i. Specifically, tell me more about how much influence your counselor played in you enrolling in English 101 (and completing it)?
 - ii. Could you elaborate on the role your counselor played in your willingness to use student support services?
 - iii. In what ways, if any, did your educational plan impact your enrollment choices your first year in college?
 - iv. If you did not complete a plan, what could your counselor have done in order to help you complete the course?
9. In general, what other supports do you think GCC could be or should be providing students like yourself in order to encourage enrolling in transfer-level courses, like English and math, and completing those courses?

Closing

1. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience at GCC and/or in your English class(es)?

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today and for answering all my questions. I have learned so much valuable information through your responses. I appreciate your time and willingness to participate in my interview.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS—LC LINKED COUNSELORS

Introduction—LC Linked Counselors Questions

Hi! Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview, and taking the time to speak with me about your role as counselor for the Black Scholars Learning Community at GCC, in addition to the role the LC plays in student enrollment choices. I know you are busy so I appreciate you taking time out of your schedule for this interview.

Before we begin, I would like to communicate a few items:

- 1. The reason for this interview is to understand the role that the Black Scholars LC plays in the enrollment of transfer-level English courses within students' first year of college enrollment. Your responses are important because GCC is committed to equity and helping students complete their goals. The information you provide can help the school improve and strengthen its supports for students. If at any time, you feel uncomfortable about a topic or question, or do not have experience in a particular area, let me know and I can move onto the next question. Do you have any questions regarding the reason for the interview?*
- 2. I will analyze and present the information I gather in this interview to my doctoral dissertation committee. The information you provide will be confidential and anonymous. Findings of this interview may be published or included in my doctoral dissertation, but you will never be identified. Are you ok with this?*
- 3. This interview will be recorded so that I don't miss any of the information you provide. As I am expected to provide a write-up of this interview for my dissertation and committee, recording our conversation will allow me to include all the aspects of your responses accurately. Please feel free to stop the recording at any time in our interview. I expect our session to last between 30-45 minutes.*
- 4. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?*

Warm-Up:

- 1. Tell me, how long have you been a counselor for the Black Scholars Learning Community (BSLC)?*
- 2. Have you seen an increase in the number of students who see you since you first started?*
- 3. What might the reasons for this increase?*
- 4. How are students recruited to the BSLC?*

Key Questions:

- 1. Tell me about the process in place that encourages students to come see you for the first time as a member of the LC (e.g. how students learn about making appointments to see you, etc...)*
 - a. When does the first meeting take place?*

- b. How often do you meet with the students?
 - c. Ideally, how often should you be meeting with students both in timing and frequency?
2. Could you describe the role of the linked counselor for a BLSC member?
3. In your experience, how important is the role of the linked counselor in enrollment choices for the members of the LC?
 - a. What are some of the other institutional supports you remind students of?
 - b. Of all the supports you mentioned that the LC offers, which do you find (in your experience) as the most influential or important on students' academic progress?
4. In your experience, how important is the role of the linked counselor in the overall academic journey of their BLSC students?
5. Could you talk a little bit about the courses that students are encouraged to enroll in as members of the LC in their first year of college enrollment?
 - a. To what extent are BSLC linked counselors involved with the formation of educational plans?
 - a. Why are they encouraged to take these courses in their first year instead of other courses?
 - b. Tell me about the communication of the importance of these courses to students. In other words, what do counselors tell students about why they should take certain courses over others in their first year of enrollment?
6. Could you talk about what some of the topics you engage in with the students when they come to see you?
 - a. You mentioned a few topics outside of academic ones, like social opportunities. How important do you think the social aspect of the LC is for the students in relation to their academic progress?
7. What do BSLC counselors communicate about AB 705 to students?
8. What do counselors communicate to students about the importance of enrolling in transfer-level math and English within the first year of college enrollment to its members?
9. How would you describe the goal(s) of BSLC for its students?
10. Could you elaborate on what you believe to be strengths of the BSLC?
11. Could you elaborate on what you believe to be areas of improvement for the BSLC?

Closing

1. What is *your* personal goal for the LC as you move forward in your role?
2. Is there anything else you would like to add about the role of Black Scholars Program in the academic and social experiences of its members?

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today and for answering all my questions. I have learned so much valuable information through your responses. I appreciate your time and willingness to participate in my interview.

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS—LC DIRECTOR

Introduction—LC Program Director Questions

Hi! Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview, and taking the time to speak with me about your role as the director of the Black Scholars Learning Community at GCC, in addition to the role the LC plays in student enrollment choices. I know you are busy so I appreciate you taking time out of your schedule for this interview.

Before we begin, I would like to communicate a few items:

- 1. The reason for this interview is to understand the role that Learning Communities may have in promoting student's academic success, including their completion of transfer-level English . Your responses are important because GCC is committed to equity and helping students complete their goals. The information you provide can help the school improve and strengthen its supports for students. If at any time, you feel uncomfortable about a topic or question, or do not have experience in a particular area, let me know and I can move onto the next question. Do you have any questions regarding the reason for the interview?*
- 2. I will analyze and present the information I gather in this interview to my doctoral dissertation committee. The information you provide will be confidential and anonymous. Findings of this interview may be published or included in my doctoral dissertation, but you will never be identified. Are you ok with this?*
- 3. This interview will be recorded so that I don't miss any of the information you provide. As I am expected to provide a write-up of this interview for my dissertation and committee, recording our conversation will allow me to include all the aspects of your responses accurately. Please feel free to stop the recording at any time in our interview. I expect our session to last between 30-45 minutes.*
- 4. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?*

Warm-Up:

1. Tell me, how long has the Black Scholars Learning Community (BSLC) existed at GCC?
2. And how long have you been the director for BSLC?
3. What is the current number of students in the LC?
4. Have you seen a change in BSLC student enrollment since your first year as director?
 - a. From your point of view, what might the reasons for changes in enrollment be?

Key Questions:

2. What would you say are some things BSLC is known for?
 - a. What are some of the programs strengths?
 - b. What would you say are some areas the program could growth?
3. Tell me about how BSLC is structured.

- a. You mentioned that one aspect of your structure is XYZ. What might some of the reasons be for the way this LC is structured.
 - b. How typical is the structure of your LC in comparison to other local community colleges?
 - c. Would you elaborate on how the college decided on this structure specifically for the African American students at GCC?
 - d. What were some key factors that led to these choices?
4. How does BSLC compare to other LCs on campus (e.g., La Comunidad, Guardian Scholars)? What's similar or different?
5. What are BSLC's primary goals?
 - a. What activities does the BSLC implement to accomplish those goals?
6. How do students get connected with BSLC?
 - a. What sorts of things are done to recruit?
 - b. Why do you think students join?
 - c. Could you elaborate on any perks or benefits of joining the LC if there are any? Academic, social or otherwise?
7. Tell me about the length of membership for the average student who joins.
 - a. If clarification is needed: in other words, when a student enrolls, do they typically remain enrolled until they transfer/graduate/stop attending?
 - b. What reasons do students report for not remaining enrolled if they exit the program before they transfer/graduate/meet their goal at the college?
 - c. Are there different levels of involvement/participation in this LC? If so, what are they?
8. In your experience, how much impact does the social aspect that the BSLC provides for students have on their willingness to remain active in the LC?
9. Now let's shift gears and talk a little bit about the academic aspects of BSLC. To what extent is BSLC involved in helping students plan what courses to take?
 - a. What sort of academic supports are available through BSLC?
 - b. Other activities? (e.g., social?)
 - c. Could you tell me a little bit about how the BSLC determines what to include in a student's education plan?
10. In your experience, how important is the role of the linked counselors in enrollment choices for the members of the LC?
 - a. What are some of the other institutional supports offered to the students through the LC, if there are any others?
 - b. Of all the supports you mentioned that the LC offers, which do you find (in your experience) as the most influential or important on students' academic progress?
11. Could you talk a little bit about the courses that students are encouraged to enroll in as members of the LC in their first year of college enrollment?
 - a. Why are they encouraged to take these courses in their first year instead of other courses?
 - b. Tell me about the communication of the importance of these courses to students. In other words, to your knowledge, what are students told about why they should take certain courses over others in their first year of enrollment?
12. Is AB 705 communicated to the BLSC students?
 - a. What does the BSLC communicate about AB 705 to students?

- b. What does the BSLC communicate about the importance of enrolling in transfer-level math and English within the first year of college enrollment to its members?
- c. Could you elaborate on changes, if there are any, to the BSLC since AB 705's implementation?
- d. In what ways, if any, do you think the BSLC supports the goals of AB 705?

Closing

- 1. What is *your* personal goal for the LC as you move forward in your role?
- 2. Is there anything else you would like to add about the role of Black Scholars Program in the academic and social experiences of its members?

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today and for answering all my questions. I have learned so much valuable information through your responses. I appreciate your time and willingness to participate in my interview.

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