

ACCESS AND SUCCESS PROGRAMS FOR THE HISTORICALLY
UNDERREPRESENTED IN HIGHER EDUCATION: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

ACCESS AND SUCCESS PROGRAMS FOR THE HISTORICALLY UNDERREPRESENTED IN HIGHER EDUCATION: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

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This practitioner-led dissertation used qualitative methods to explore the perspectives and lived experiences of historically underrepresented college students enrolled in higher education opportunity programs. This exploratory study engaged students of color, first-generation students, and students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. Data were collected from students attending three selective, predominantly White, residential liberal arts colleges in New York State through an emic-focused practitioner research approach that employed semi-structured interviews, focus groups, document and archival review, and observational fieldnotes. This dissertation is grounded in theories of belonging, cultural capital, and social reproduction, and it is situated within the current context of higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs at a polarizing sociopolitical moment in the United States. This study marks a departure from the corpus of research on college opportunity programs, which is primarily quantitative. This research connects students' sense of belonging to their overall experience at selective liberal arts colleges, and to their specific experiences of financial, academic, and social support, program structure, recruitment, and outreach. Findings can be used to inform university-based understandings of program impact by those designing, implementing, and evaluating targeted opportunity programs. Belonging emerged as an exponentializing impact factor shaping students' lived experiences and perspectives on the efficacy and quality of their programs.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | ii |
| ABSTRACT..... | iii |
| LIST OF TABLES..... | vi |
| LIST OF FIGURES..... | vii |
| | |
| CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Higher Education..... | 2 |
| Political Influence and Impact on Historically Underrepresented Students | 12 |
| Implications of Post-COVID-19 Enrollment Trends | 19 |
| Colleges and Universities as Sites of Social Reproduction | 22 |
| Empirical Norms and Contribution..... | 25 |
| Overview of the Dissertation | 34 |
| | |
| CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW..... | 36 |
| Introduction..... | 36 |
| Origins of College Access and Success Programs..... | 37 |
| Social and Cultural Capital are Central | 38 |
| Cataloging College Opportunity Programs..... | 40 |
| Survey of 20th Century Programs..... | 41 |
| Two Reputable Opportunity Programs | 41 |
| Public-Private Partnerships | 42 |
| Promise Programs | 43 |
| Prior Research Opposing Opportunity Programs | 44 |
| Belonging and Opportunity Programs | 47 |
| Recent Developments in Access..... | 51 |
| Opportunity Programs Benefit Students and Society | 55 |
| Beyond Fit..... | 60 |
| The Politics of Readiness..... | 64 |
| Student Success and Belonging | 70 |
| Workforce Implications | 77 |
| | |
| CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN..... | 80 |
| Conceptual Framework..... | 80 |
| Theoretical Context..... | 82 |
| Emergent Student-Centered Approach | 83 |
| Researcher Reflexivity..... | 86 |
| Methodology and Research Design..... | 90 |
| Rationale for Qualitative, Emic, Student-Focused Methods | 91 |
| Study Goals and Research Questions | 95 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Site Selection | 96 |
| Participant Selection | 99 |
| Data Collection | 102 |
| Semi-Structured Interviews | 102 |
| Focus Groups | 104 |
| Observational Fieldnotes | 106 |
| Memos and Dialogic Engagement..... | 107 |
| Data Analysis | 109 |
| Emergent and Inductive Themes | 110 |
| Value of the Qualitative Approach | 112 |
| Researcher Positionality..... | 113 |
| Validity | 116 |
| Study Limitations..... | 118 |
| | |
| CHAPTER 4 - ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS..... | 120 |
| | |
| Findings Grouped by Four Themes | 121 |
| Impact of Finances..... | 123 |
| Institution A Student Focus Group | 124 |
| Institution B Student Focus Group | 127 |
| Institution C Student Focus Group | 128 |
| Financial Support beyond Typical Aid | 129 |
| Limitations or Negative Experiences with Financial Support | 133 |
| Impact of Program Structure..... | 137 |
| Summer Bridge Transition..... | 138 |
| Designated Program Space | 144 |
| Impact of Development..... | 148 |
| Impact of Belonging | 153 |
| Conclusion | 160 |
| | |
| CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS | 163 |
| | |
| The Pros and Cons of Opportunity Programs | 164 |
| Distinct Selection of Students..... | 167 |
| An Exponentializing Sense of Belonging | 168 |
| Future Research | 172 |
| | |
| APPENDIX A - Participant Recruitment Email..... | 175 |
| APPENDIX B - Interview Protocol: Targeted Opportunity Program Leaders..... | 176 |
| APPENDIX C - Focus Group Protocol: Targeted Opportunity Program Students | 177 |
| APPENDIX D - Codes/Subcodes Definitions | 178 |
| APPENDIX E - Informed Consent Form | 181 |
| APPENDIX F - Student Pre-Focus Group Demographic Survey | 186 |
| | |
| REFERENCES | 188 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|---|-----|
| Table 1 - Institutional Index of Access and Success Programs | 98 |
| Table 2 - Participants in Focus Groups..... | 101 |
| Table 3 - Institutional Index of Student and Staff Demographics | 122 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 1 - Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging..... | 49 |
| Figure 2 - Key Concepts in the Emergent Student-Centered Approach..... | 85 |

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Exploring students' experiences of targeted college opportunity programs designed for underrepresented students in higher education through an empirical process of eliciting and examining current college students' perspectives can offer a fuller understanding of the bespoke ways opportunity program resources and ecosystems shape and influence the lived experiences, perspectives, and academic outcomes of undergraduate students from underrepresented backgrounds and underserved contexts. This exploratory practitioner research study examined students' experiences of college opportunity programs, perceptions of the value of their program experiences, and how their enrollment influenced their sense of belonging and success.

This dissertation study was designed to learn and understand, from students' emic (i.e., insider) conceptualizations and descriptions of their lived experiences, how college opportunity programs work in process and structure and how they impact student experiences, perceptions, choices, and outcomes. Going beyond more common quantitative measures of student retention and degree completion rates, this research sought to examine the inner experiences of undergraduate students within three postsecondary opportunity programs through the collection and analysis of contextualized data. The study contributes to existing scholarship on the design and implementation of targeted college opportunity programs and improvement or redesign of existing programs.

This research study was driven by my own professional experience as a leader in college admissions in the United States. In my prior role as Associate Dean of Admissions, Coordinator of Outreach for Opportunity and Inclusion in a higher education context. I was the lead admission officer for diversity recruitment initiatives at one of the institutions featured in this

research. In that role I advocated for all students to experience access and equity in their education, including being robustly and ongoingly welcomed into their institutions of higher education once they matriculate as students. This dissertation study utilized person-centered qualitative methods to share data collected from college students' insights attending three selective admission, residential liberal arts colleges in New York State. Each program is located within a predominantly White institution of higher education that has a mission and set of espoused values to prioritize increasing racial and ethnic diversity in their student communities.

One key approach to increasing college student diversity is to recruit historically underrepresented students into targeted opportunity programs. To understand the efficacy and value of opportunity program ecosystems, this practitioner-led study engaged current students within three sites to elicit their emic, or insider, experiential accounts and perspectives as current students. Focusing on similar postsecondary institutions in terms of size, location, admissions practices, and mission, this dissertation was designed, and data collection was conducted to illuminate influential factors in students' program experiences to offer a better understanding of how these programs are viewed and experienced by their key constituents. This in turn can contribute to establishing a framework for future research on and implementation of opportunity programs at other postsecondary institutions, both within PWIs and across the broader higher education landscape.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Higher Education

The institutions explored in this dissertation, like many contexts of higher education in the United States, state a commitment to and strategic focus on improving the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity in their student populations. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is a term for organizational frameworks that seek to promote the equitable treatment and full

participation of all people (APA, 2023). The promotion of equitable treatment is particularly important for individuals from groups that are historically underrepresented, minoritized, and discriminated against based upon their social identity. Identity is defined as an “individual’s sense of self defined by (a) a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person and (b) a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles” (APA, 2023). This conceptualization of identity includes groups or labels that the individuals cannot control, but are placed on them by structural categories, societal norms, biases, and prejudices (Schmeck et al., 2013; Yilmaz, n.d.).

Together, the three dimensions of diversity, equity, and inclusion are interconnected values that organizations seek to institutionalize through DEI frameworks, approaches, and initiatives (Hurtado, 2007; Tienda, 2013). Increased student diversity has proven beneficial to all, with Hurtado (2007) documenting how student engagement across diverse racial/ethnic demographic communities promoted student development in areas including complex thinking, ability to work with others from with different identities after college and increased general academic performance (e.g. content knowledge and vocabulary skills).

In terms of DEI, Tienda (2013) suggests that diversity does not equal inclusion in the title of their work. Instead, Tienda emphasizes that postsecondary institutions need to be more intentional in their commitment to implement equity strategies that support and engage the diverse views and experiences of their student communities. Tienda suggests that if programs are committed to diversifying their student communities, then these are imperatives rather than luxury items or optional program features. In this way, Tienda pushes beyond diverse representation to inclusive practices and equitable opportunities that intentionally push students

out of the documented tendency to self-sort themselves into the identity groups they see themselves as already belonging to (Strayhorn, 2010; Tienda, 2013; Tierney, 1999).

Within higher education, DEI is interwoven with institutional efforts to intentionally cultivate relationships for students within a campus community who are from non-dominant ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Importantly, institutions that focus on programming and policies to recruit and draw students from these backgrounds must establish an equitable, inclusive, and identity-affirming environment with equitable access to resources and opportunities, while embracing different identities, epistemologies, and viewpoints to foment the highest level of success in ways that embody the priorities, tenets, and approaches of diversity, equity, and inclusion, actionizing them as verbs (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 2007; Colgate University, 2019; Tienda, 2013).

The effort expressed by the current term diversity, equity, and inclusion has been called many things over the years including multicultural education, culturally responsive education, and anti-bias work; it includes a range of approaches to identifying and addressing institutional bias and discrimination. The goals of DEI are to integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion within an organization's ethos and policy ecosystem; to establish a diverse environment with the knowledge, skills, and culture to enact equity and inclusion and support authentic belonging for everyone. Belonging, the fourth letter in the acronym for many DEI programs (i.e., DEIB), happens when DEI concepts are considered and enacted effectively to such a degree that all individuals within an organization feel open to share their perspectives, fully engage, to work and to thrive and succeed without any interference from structural responses to their social identity or background.

In a U.S. context, DEI has most recently emerged on the national scene with new fervor in reaction to George Floyd's murder in 2020. While the Black Lives Matter movement and organizational DEI across sectors and within higher education have made progress, DEI has been pulled into an anti-DEI zeitgeist, tarnished by the politicized news cycle. For political reasons, many have weaponized and used DEI as a political football in ways that have started to regress equitable change, halting or in some cases even reversing progress made during the pandemic towards racial equity and the systematization of DEI in organizational design, strategy, and culture (Ravitch & Herzog, 2023).

The higher education-based DEI phenomenon and strategy at the heart of this dissertation is targeted recruitment and enrollment through U.S. college opportunity programs. During the college recruitment process, institutional representatives use specific language and communication techniques, highlight resources both inside and outside of the classroom, and employ strategies designed to build student excitement to apply and enroll as full-time students at these colleges. These recruitment initiatives are combined with those of student affairs, academic departments, and more comprehensive bridge program structures. The goal is to establish a foundation to ensure retention and successful degree attainment for students recruited from the most underrepresented identity groups (Perna, 2000; Ross et al., 2012; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Swail & Perna, 2002).

This practitioner exploratory research connects to previous scholarship that highlights the changing demographics of the college-going population and advocates for increased access to postsecondary education for historically underrepresented student communities (Perna, 2015; Perna & Kurban, 2013; Perna & Thomas, 2006, 2008). Access to postsecondary education efforts is designed to support programming established to increase the representation of students

from a range of demographics, geographic locations, and socioeconomic backgrounds to create a more diverse student population.

This research offers more contextualized, qualitative insights into how college students think and feel about the impacts of their higher education opportunity programs on their college-going experiences. The contextualization of their stories, as data, happened through the analysis, thematization, and curation of students' college-going experiences and their perspectives as they share them from within targeted opportunity programs at three predominantly White university settings in the United States. This research into college students' experiences of targeted opportunity programs art PWIs is an outgrowth of and connects back to Strayhorn's (2010) three-pronged conception of diversity and its impact on students' experiences.

First, *structural diversity* refers to the demographic makeup of the institution's student population. Next, *classroom diversity* speaks to the ways that demographic and cultural diversity are included and equitably represented in the curriculum, teaching practices, and scholarly materials used in the academic classroom setting. Finally, *interactional diversity* explains the engagement, contact, and interactions of students from different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender-identity, and other intersectional identities (Strayhorn, 2010).

There is a dearth of qualitative research that evinces and contextualizes the emic perspectives of students who enroll and participate in college opportunity programs. Emic, or insider, perspectives are “culturally and contextually embedded conceptualizations and descriptions of beliefs, behaviors and ways of being” (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 382) shared by study participants and analyzed with fidelity to their conceptualizations as they express them in their specific choices of words, concepts, and frames. This approach foregrounds student

perspectives on their own experiences as contextualized data within specific programs and campus ecosystems.

Emic approaches to qualitative research focus on the meaning and meaning making shared by participants as they conceptualize and articulate them during data collection, which allows for an inductive approach wherein participants share their personal, authentic, and organic perspectives on their lived experiences in ways that are contextualized within their individual understandings of the setting and themselves (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This study was designed to take an inductive, emic approach rather than a deductive, metric-focused approach. It was designed to encourage participants to learn language and describe how they experience, observe, and view program structure, process, and efficacy. This can illuminate their individualized understandings and conceptualizations of their internal experiences of the programs and how these are influenced by the specific contexts and mediating forces of their programs.

Researchers must consider how the success of targeted opportunity programs can be measured beyond traditional metrics focused on the institutional perspective, such as student rates of enrollment, retention, and degree attainment. While valuable, these metrics used by prior researchers to measure the effectiveness of targeted opportunity programs do not adequately account for contextual and personal factors that influence student engagement and growth, including features of the environment, program delivery, and campus climate. Most often, the metrics used are rates of college enrollment, first- to second-year retention, and degree completion percentage. These are the normative measures for determining the efficacy of targeted opportunity programs and intentional support resources for historically underrepresented demographic communities in higher education.

This dissertation builds on Strayhorn's 2010 categories of diversity, developed in a quantitative, survey-based context, to explore the opportunity program context and college ecosystem in ways that extend quantitative measures by contextualizing them using qualitative methods focused on the experiences of students enrolled in these programs as they describe them. Empirical assessments conducted by private research groups and governmental data reports emphasize how students from underrepresented populations compare, often unfavorably, to their White peers (e.g., students of color and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds). This directly relates to the demographics of the students' postsecondary institutions, which are PWIs.

The following discussion focuses on how opportunity programs relate with and inform Strayhorn's (2010) three-pronged definition of diversity. This connection is useful because the focus of this research are students' emic perspectives within these three programs that are based in PWIs, with explicit interest into how opportunity program enrollment impacts their overall experiences as undergraduate students.

First, the targeted opportunity programs connect to Strayhorn's (2010) definition of *structural diversity* due to the specialized recruitment and student selection processes that were established with a primary goal of a more racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity being represented within the student bodies of the three PWIs in this dissertation. Building on this representation goal, each opportunity program has embedded *classroom diversity* into academic curriculum criteria, social norms, and institutional policies that have grown into their broader institutional structures. This classroom diversity is exemplified across the three opportunity program structures. Each institution designed their transition programs to include introductions

to key campus offices such as academic resource centers to help establish where to go if there are academic struggles in their first year.

Finally, the three PWIs in this study illustrate their commitment to institutional impact, which connects to Strayhorn's (2010) definition of *interactional diversity*. This is evidenced through the consistent introduction of program students to key administrative leaders on campus. A primary example being the opportunity program students meeting the college president at Institution A during the summer transition program before the start of the academic year. This early introduction illustrates the important role of the program since it boosts students' feelings of belonging when they are recognized by name during the annual orientation picnic for new students to kick-off the academic year.

Opportunity program students must learn to navigate a whole new kind of environment and culture. At one of the research sites, students shared that they are introduced to first-year international students during orientation to engage with students from different cultures who are making a major transition from another country into a postsecondary institution in the United States. This intentional engagement between opportunity program and international students allows for a sense of shared experience. This is just one example of how opportunity programs are designed to assist their enrolled students in the process of developing a community beyond their own program cohort. This research focuses on how students describe their respective opportunity programs in terms of the conditions created for them to become more deeply involved in the wider campus community and to create their own individual sense of belonging.

In interviews, opportunity program students established personalized details of their experience within the program and how the program-specific experiences had an impact on their feelings of belonging within their university overall. One way to understand the concept of

belonging is that it is shaped by students' affective experiences of their interactions in social and academic ecosystem including seeing and accessing a wide range of academic, social, and professional development opportunities as part of their postsecondary education experiences. In this study, students shared details of their experiences in and outside of the classroom stating that an important characteristic is the contextual role of the opportunity programs' in having an impact on their overall college experience.

In a more targeted and focused analysis of belonging, this study builds upon the work of Hurtado and Carter (1997) whose research discussed how individuals identify themselves will be projected into a personal cohesion and deeper sense of belonging with other individuals who share a common personal identity as themselves. This self-defined understanding of personal cohesion and belonging can be empirically assessed through individuals' social and academic interactions that can enhance the participant perceptions of their connection into identity groups and campus environments.

Individuals' personal sense and rating of their cohesion into their college community builds on Strayhorn's (2010) multi-themed approach to diversity by accounting for intersectional identities, along with the impact of academic and social interactions on student belonging. Further, this approach to belonging builds on core DEI tenets. Students benefit from equity-minded institutional policies that push the campus community to be more open-minded and accepting of various individual and group identities.

These more inclusive policies and practices at events, student clubs and organizations, in leadership statements and modelling, allow individuals to engage more openly with a growing sense of psychological safety, which encourages stronger feelings of belonging. Prior research pushes for an increased responsibility of inclusive practices onto postsecondary institutional

leadership. These institutional efforts are more adept to prepare for students' backlash when there is a lack of intentional efforts, paired with broader social-political movements (Hailu & Sarubbi, 2019). While other research shows that these same institutional leaders, strategic plans, university missions, and clear equity-minded initiatives can harness the power of diversity represented within the campus community. This prior research has illustrated equity-minded initiatives by showing students ongoing changes, that are being implemented with hope, and include an outline for future opportunities to benefit all students regardless of their demographic or socio-economic background (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Ravitch & Herzog, 2023; Ravitch & Kannan, 2021; Tienda, 2013; J. Wilson et al., 2012).

New initiatives, programs, and policies from institutional leadership can present a strong indication of impacting current and future student experiences. These changes may expand beyond representative diversity in the makeup of the student body, but to do this, requires establishing equitable and inclusive policies within an environment where individuals within the community feel they belong and can openly express their self-identity/ies. Student sense of belonging is a persistent issue grounded in historical inequity in society and governmental legislation broadly, and in higher education institutional practices specifically (Jones & Nichols, 2020; Perna et al., 2014; Ward & Tierney, 2017). These broad structural barriers place limitations on the experiences of college students from historically underrepresented backgrounds—from expectations of being rejected to being under-supported at the undergraduate institutions they are admitted to, which leads to loss of student retention, lower degree completion rates, and increased levels of dissatisfaction with and struggle in their college or university campus cultural climate and experience, both academically and socially (Harper, 2013; Hurtado et al., 1998; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2020).

This dissertation study explores how students experience the ways that these targeted opportunity programs work to mitigate their concerns around belonging, provide access to postsecondary education, and promote representation of broader student diversity represented at the PWIs analyzed. This study connects to prior research on summer bridge programs, college access programs, and other intentional university initiatives that argues they make a difference in student academic performance, feelings of acceptance or belonging in their college community, and gains in the cultural capital that will serve them throughout and after college, (Grimmett et al., 1998; Means & Pyne, 2016; Perna et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2011).

Political Influence and Impact on Historically Underrepresented Students

Access and opportunity college programs for students from marginalized groups in higher education is directly linked to federal policy. President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" introduced the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the 1965 Higher Education Act. These national policies helped to establish early federal access and success programs (Green & Bedeau, 2020; McElroy & Armesto, 1998). A related context is how students from historically underrepresented and underserved communities have been harmed by government and higher education based institutional policies. Government harm is connected to fairness and consistency in education funding and the lack of understanding of the logistics and coordination needed to successfully complete college application and enrollment processes, especially for marginalized students, whose perspectives are foregrounded in this exploratory research (Perna & Kurban, 2013; Ward & Tierney, 2017).

Regarding accountability for institutional equity, some state governments have adopted performance-based funding (PBF) approaches that scale state budgets for higher education institutions based on metrics such as student retention and degree completion. The PBF approach

has created the unintended consequence of decreased funding to Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), hastening further inequity for historically under-resourced student demographics and postsecondary institutions (Umbricht et al., 2017; Ward & Tierney, 2017). For US colleges and universities, this includes stagnant hiring, recruitment, and transition processes.

Griffin (2020) provided findings that illustrated institutional equity through institutions of higher education that do not make decisions with equity as a foregrounded area of focus. The lack of institutional intentionality around putting equity at the forefront for efforts to develop comprehensive strategies that include interventions to inequitable practices and policies, has led to consistent disparities and inhospitable campus environments (Griffin, 2020; Hailu & Sarubbi, 2019). Such issues of inequity and unwelcoming environments impact not only student matriculation decisions, but also the decisions of students from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic identities at four-year institutions. Finally, the harms caused by governmental and institutional policies converge in a limited pipeline of potential faculty who identify as people of color, first-generation college goers, or multiple historically underrepresented identity groups, despite increased graduate-level graduates than prior generations (Griffin, 2020).

Higher education has also been demonstrated as an instrument of racialized social reproduction, Davis et al. (2020) assert that policy decisions that were intentionally racist, along with persistent prejudice, have led to established gaps in educational attainment for different populations of US citizens. A history of advocacy as pushback through activism that included sit-ins and other demonstrations during the 1960s and 1970s evidenced direct student connection to broader civil rights activism (Harper, 2013). This provided an emphasis of the outsized responsibility placed on historically under-represented students to access postsecondary education given broader social-political issues of equity in educational access. Moreover,

research from Strayhorn (2008) and Harper (2013) highlight how students of color, specifically Black men, tend to experience lower levels of belonging than their White peers do in higher education settings. This is precisely an equity and inclusion issue that requires addressing through data-driven governmental and institutional changes informed by research.

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI) has become a central mandate across sectors including higher education. To emphasize its importance, DEI is commonly included in institution-wide strategic plans. Examples include committees and task forces that address equity issues, action plans with stated goals to create a more diverse and inclusive community, and mission statements written to include institutional commitment to diversity and equity (Wilson et al., 2012). At colleges and universities, DEI outreach strategies are typically combined with the goal of engaging students from historically underrepresented demographic backgrounds.

The DEI-focused communication strategies in many higher education institutions enact intentional outreach to students from racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic demographics that are historically underrepresented within higher education institutions to support student body diversity. The goal is to use targeted communication that connects the campus environment with resources, programs, and key campus community details that build a narrative that enables students from historically underrepresented communities to see how they will positively fit into the campus infrastructure (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Tierney, 2004; Tran, 2021).

From my professional experience working in undergraduate student recruitment, the ideals of fit and proper resources to students and identity are useful to support students' ability to connect their own identity and interests to the ethos of an institution. That connection and feeling that a student will find a good fit at a college or university increases the likelihood a student will decide to attend which in turn increases the diversity of historically underrepresented students

represented within the total student population. Equity goes a step further to address institutional frameworks and policies that limit equal access to opportunities and resources that allow students to thrive (McGonagle et al., 2014; Perna & Swail, 2001; Watt et al., 2013).

DEI, as the current incarnation of an equity approach in higher education, seeks to foment and support anti-racism efforts, in many cases seeking input from a range of stakeholders to gain ongoing understanding of campus climate from the vantage points of diverse demographic groups and reject scarcity and deficit mindsets that place blame on individuals from these historically underrepresented communities for their lower levels of success or achievement as compared to their more privileged peers (Anderson, 2020; Griffin, 2020; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Administrators from these institutions who are committed to serving underrepresented students in equitable ways utilize campus climate surveys and other student-response mechanisms to encourage deeper kinds of understanding that can inform decision-making.

By refusing to place blame on students from underrepresented communities, campus administrators resist deficit orientations and scarcity logics that stem from as they evince a false narrative of lack of capacity to do well; rather, they acknowledge that the campus and/or their targeted opportunity program may not adequately provide resources and opportunities that fully meet the range of needs of students from marginalized populations (Ravitch & Kannan, 2021). In this way, DEI places the ownership of response on the institution, which requires adequate understanding of contextual insights through the lens of students' lived experiences and perspectives.

Finally, inclusion is the active implementation of the values, mission, and institutional statements around diversity and equity. Speaking to inclusion, Harper and Hurtado (2007) state that “intentionality in constructing culturally affirming environments and experiences that

facilitate the cultivation of racially diverse friendship groups must substitute passivity and negligence” (p. 20). This speaks to the necessity for postsecondary institutions to do the most to sponsor culturally relevant events that match the student body, train faculty on non-racist practices in the classroom, and establish consistent actions that help students feel welcome.

Additionally, as previously stated, institutions must push students outside of the more-comfortable decision to engage with peers within the same racial identity groups and have cross-cultural relationships, to elicit the deeper benefits of diversity within the campus environment, which includes academic performance boosts, social engagement benefits, future career benefits when working with diverse peers, and cultural capital gains in understanding other social-political identity groups better (Gurin, 2004; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 2009). This initial step of encouraging cross-cultural student engagement must be combined with visible and broad steps from senior leadership. Those wide-reaching institutional steps include efforts such as strategic plans, new institutional policies, and academic curricular adjustments can help move institutions towards true institutional equity (Kezar & Eckel, 2008).

At this moment in the United States, DEI is an acronym used to describe organizational equity efforts that focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, three tenets or values-based concepts that in their ideal application, drive an integrated system of inclusive equity (Ravitch & Herzog, 2023). DEI is ideally implemented as the integration of these tenets as a form of structural change through intentional efforts to create a culturally responsive and equitably nurturing environment in which all students feel a sense of belonging, feel seen, and thrive. Institutions of higher education have historically not implemented DEI in ways that support real structural change. Broader national dynamics that have arisen around race and issues of inequity have spilled over into students’ experiences to campus- and program-based equity and inclusion

challenges as seen through phenomena like Black@ accounts that made visible horrendous racialized harm done to students from elementary through graduate school.

As an example of this racialized phenomenon, campus protests call out institutional decisions such as unwillingness to discipline faculty or staff for clear acts of prejudice towards students of color and LGBTQ-identifying students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). More broadly, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement grew out of a grassroots movement in response to the systematic brutalization and murder of Black men and women by law enforcement officers in the United States beginning in 2013 with the social media hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. The harsh responses of local government and law enforcement to community organization or protest led BLM to expand into a national and even global movement and societal phenomenon.

Continued media coverage, growing community support, and activism across college campuses illustrate the power of student activism to push university leaders to assess their racial history and its legacy as they respond to historically underrepresented students' needs when there is constant media attention (Hailu & Sarubbi, 2019). This is an important representation of how collective student voices that push against inequality on college campuses (and beyond) can uplift important issues that overlap with the values of historically underrepresented communities. Targeted opportunity programs can evince that collective voice. Additionally, these programs are interwoven with historically underrepresented identities and historical narratives that can build energy to push institutions to be more equity-minded. Finally, institutions taking these equity-minded approaches can provide students with community, support, and resources that will allow them to thrive both in and outside of the classroom.

DEI strategies for communication and outreach come in a wide range of formats. One example at the K-12 level is the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program,

designed to promote college readiness through consistent support in rigorous coursework (Bernhardt, 2013). A second is TRIO, which is implemented in high school and postsecondary institutions. TRIO is an acronym first used for three federally funded outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). The first three programs were Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services; today, TRIO has expanded to eight programs assisting students designated as low-income, first-generation college students; those having documented disabilities; and others with limitations to their access to educational resources.

Another innovative approach to targeted opportunity creation, known as Talent Hubs, were created in communities to allow resources to spread across the industries of business, education, and other non-profits. Talent Hubs are a phenomenon of creating a collaborative effort to enable a larger population of students and community members to take advantage of local intellectual resources (Davis et al., 2020). In each case, the goal is to provide outlets for learning and engagement through postsecondary academic institutions.

TRIO and Talent Hubs are examples of institutional connectors between K-12 and higher education that enable students who might not otherwise see postsecondary education as an option, to view it as a more viable reality. These programs teach students how to apply to college, prepare them for the types of academic rigor and co-curricular engagement needed to stand out in the application process, and help them feel more confident as they transition into the unfamiliar college campus environment. Further, because TRIO exists at the postsecondary level, it supports students in their transition onto college campuses and throughout their academic journeys to degree completion.

Implications of Post-COVID-19 Enrollment Trends

A more recent and major impact on overall enrollment and opportunity programs in the United States was the global COVID-19 pandemic. In response to COVID, TRIO implemented resources to modernize an original access and success program from the Civil Rights Era to respond to student needs. TRIO's methods allowed students to access its tools online throughout the pandemic (Arendale, 2020). While coursework at most colleges and universities has returned to in-person classroom instruction, a marker of the post COVID-19 pandemic dynamic is that undergraduate enrollment continued to decline (Williams June, 2022). Since March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown was put into place, the number of undergraduate students performing their studies on college campuses decreased by over 1 million students at United States colleges and universities (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022; Williams June, 2022).

This significant decrease of one million U.S. undergraduates was more significant than projected. The pandemic decrease in enrollment – what some refer to as an enrollment cliff – is part of a long-term enrollment decline caused by several factors, including decreased birth rates in the United States (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022; Williams June, 2022). Additionally, as a college admissions professional for ten years, I have had exposure to growing skepticism in the value of a postsecondary degree in the current global and national marketplace. While the pandemic explains some decline in postsecondary education enrollment, this is not the only reason students are choosing postsecondary options other than college. Projections of declining birth rates will lead to decreased numbers of high school graduates and, moreover, that national economic inflation which led to rising operating budgets and increased

tuition has caused a decline in public confidence since parents think college tuition is too expensive for what students get from the experience (Fischer, 2022).

This phenomenon of waning confidence in higher education is seen in examples of individuals without a college degree attaining well-paying jobs of at least \$45,000 annually by midcareer (Fischer, 2022). Moreover, continued access gaps for students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds persist, and the 2023 U.S. Supreme Court (SCOTUS) decision that overturned precedent on Affirmative Action has further constrained access initiatives embedded in admissions practices that focus on applicants' race, ethnicity, and gender identity (Harper, 2023; Jones & Nichols, 2020).

In May 2024, spring enrollments for total undergraduate enrollment grew 2.5% following a decline in enrollments of 8.5% in 2021 and 2022 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024). Even with recent growth, the rising cost of college is still a major concern to most families in the United States. The Federal Pell Grant once covered 80% of the cost to attend a four-year public institution, but today it meets less than one-third of the cost for students (Fischer, 2019). Concerns about the return on investment, broader population trends, and the pandemic continue to impact postsecondary education enrollment in dramatic ways.

Over the decade from 2010 to 2020, when overall undergraduate enrollment fell, the decrease in students from under-represented racial and ethnic groups was sharp. The greatest change was in the decline of Black students (Adedoyin, 2022). Black undergraduate student enrollment decreased 17%, a figure which is nearly double the 9% enrollment drop for all undergraduates from 2010 to 2020 (Adedoyin, 2022). This sharp decline in Black student enrollment occurred during a period when colleges and universities searched for strategies to discover new pockets of students to recruit.

This phenomenon connects to the historic inability of higher education institutions to support the enrollment and degree completion of specific marginalized populations, including Black students (Fischer, 2022; Jones & Nichols, 2020). Harper (2013) reviewed decades of research on Black students' experiences attending predominantly White institutions, noting how that history of Black students' having racialized experiences establishes an extended timeline of modern challenges in higher education. His research offers data-based insight into how Black students can remain productive while working through racist campus environments. Harper (2013) pushes for future research on the racial climate for historically underrepresented students, especially Black-identifying students, attending PWIs to analyze diverse students' success beyond a racialized deficit mindset, which tends to pervade opportunity programs nationally. Harper (2013) implored institutions to explore prejudiced and racist spaces and/or practices to improve students' belonging. Current issues with being singled out and feeling isolation create a negative social experience for minoritized students on PWI campuses.

The racialized deficit mindset that Harper illuminated helps to explain multiple challenges including issues of over-focus on Black student isolation, lack of belonging in the racial dynamics of their campus environments, the dearth of faculty and staff mentorship to navigate racial challenges leading to over reliance on peer support networks, and a hyperfocus on students who do not reach degree completion. Harper argues that more attention must be paid to the one-third of Black men who persist through their educations to receive a bachelor's degree to understand and learn from how they navigate PWIs. This in turn can inform how postsecondary institutions design, develop, and improve upon their practices by providing insight into what these students say they need to overcome the historically rooted, structural barriers that land into their lived experiences of higher education.

Harper's (2013) findings are similar to the challenges presented for the broader demographic identity groups represented in the targeted opportunity programs at the three PWIs in this study. Harper's research elucidates that Black male students experience head-on challenges around a lack of proper social support, lacking feelings of belonging, and structural barriers present in institutional policies and traditional practices. These challenges for Black student in Harper's (2013) work are comparable to the experiences of targeted opportunity program students whose perspectives are the focus of this practitioner-led dissertation. Targeted opportunity programs like those in this dissertation have been utilized as a bridge to increased belonging, and students' emic perspectives highlight the unique efforts taken from start to finish. Finally, this study offers insight into students' perspectives on the ways the opportunity programs help to mitigate the negative PWI characteristics, experiences, and outcomes that Harper (2013) highlighted.

Colleges and Universities as Sites of Social Reproduction

One of these historic and present structural barriers within postsecondary institutions is social reproduction. Social reproduction is a term used to describe a phenomenon of the pervasive yet unspoken role of schools and other public institutions in the perpetuation of dominant cultures and social class stratification, which is enacted at both institutional and systemic levels, (Levinson et al., 1996; Serna & Woulfe, 2017). The concept of schools as sites of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 2008) has been applied to K-12 settings, viewing their structures and practices as sites that perpetuate social class and opportunity structures, (Levinson et al., 1996; Ravitch & Kannan, 2021) The current research extends this structural critique to colleges and universities arguing that that they too "perpetuate the social structures of the dominant class through the situational nature of education" (Serna & Woulfe, 2017, p. 4) and the

context of students socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, gender identity, or other self-identifying or demographic categories, are not always intentionally considered in how they impact student experiences within postsecondary education environments.

The consideration of education as a site of social reproduction impacts the bigger conversation of the approach of postsecondary institutions to overcoming these challenges in their admissions and student support practices. In addition to enrolling students from a diverse set of backgrounds, postsecondary institutions ongoingly consider their ability to retain these students and successfully graduate them. Meeting institutional goals for retention and degree completion are overarching concerns with increasing dropout rates (Fischer, 2022). This reality is exacerbated since students from underrepresented groups are more likely to leave college due to an unwelcoming campus environment or financial limitations (Fischer, 2019; Strayhorn, 2013). Nevertheless, students admitted into postsecondary institutions with more selective admissions practices (those admitting less than 25% of applicants) show a first-to-second-year retention of 93%. This is above the retention rate at open admission colleges (59%), and the overall retention rate for all postsecondary institutions (82%) (NCES, 2022).

Relatedly, the overall 6-year graduation rate, which is a federal mandate to report under the 1990 Student Right to Know Act, was 60% in 2019 (NCES, 2019). There are differences across racial and ethnic groups. Black students show a 6-year graduation rate of 40%, Hispanic students 54%, and Indigenous students 39%. These graduation rates are below White undergraduate students at 64% and 74% for Asian-identifying students. It is important to understand the impact of policies such as the 1990 Student Right to Know Act have on efforts to improve racial equity in the rate of undergraduate student enrollment, retention, and degree attainment. The Students Right to Know Act introduced the requirement that postsecondary

institutions that award college degrees report the percent of students who complete their degree within 150 percent of the normal time of degree completion (e.g., 6-year degree completion rate for a 4-year degree program).

Despite falling college enrollment statistics, and very controversially, many U.S. higher education institutions have increased their focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs and goals (Harper, 2024). One indicator of the increased institutional focus is the continued trend of hiring senior leaders often known as Chief Diversity Officers. The Chief Diversity Officer's primary focus is to lead and manage the institution's DEI strategies (Wilson, 2013). While higher education institutions overall have followed this hiring trend for senior officials, institutions have individually and uniquely defined the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion to best fit their specific institutional mission, values, and the goals outlined in institutional strategic planning (Kezar et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2012; Wilson, 2013).

Most postsecondary institutions in the United States are expected to embed programming to build a more diverse and inclusive community, and institutional leaders create plans to provide equity-focused resources that support the success of this more diverse community (Hurtado, 2007; Wilson et al., 2012). Institutional leaders and administrators are still required to foreground and track the enrollment, persistence, and graduation of diverse student populations by the U.S. Department of Education. Postsecondary institutions are thus still required, for the most part, to welcome and support diverse community members, from varying races, cultures, and ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, geographic locations, and other social identities (Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1998; Wilson et al., 2012). These demands pervade the higher education landscape, yet few campuses are equipped or able to enact these in ways that support, drive value, and offer meaningful engagement, belonging, and success outcomes to all students.

Empirical Norms and Contribution

This dissertation research examines and shares students' perceptions of the value of their targeted programs as individuals. Students defined value through different personally relevant concepts, including if and how expectations described to them in the recruitment process are met, the extent to which students believe they have access to necessary support resources (both in and outside of the classroom), and the extent to which they indeed feel the sense of community promoted through their targeted programs' mission and onboarding practices. This study focuses on students enrolled in four-year, residential, selective admissions, liberal arts PWIs. Students select this type of institution because of specific academic programs, co-curricular involvements, and a strong residential community. Most students live in university-owned housing, which has a significant impact on student enrollment decisions (Tran, 2021) because it makes campus resources more easily accessible for both academic support and co-curricular involvement.

The liberal arts institution, for the purposes of this study, is categorized by a curriculum built around student access to a broad range of course options to be intellectually well-rounded with a focus on developing soft skills such as communication and writing proficiency, critical and analytical thinking, and leadership acumen (Nimesheim, 2022). The three liberal arts institutions included in this study stand out for their level of selectivity, admitting less than one-third of all applicants. Each has a higher-than-average graduation rate at more than 85% and a postsecondary classification known for strong overall student retention rates (NCES, 2022).

This dissertation study highlights the experiences and emic, or insider, thoughts and insights of undergraduate students who are enrolled in targeted opportunity programs that focus on access and success at three PWIs. The goal of this study was to hear contextually nuanced stories that can tell the stories of these programs from the inside in ways that go beyond rates of

retention and degree attainment by engaging with current students to learn about their experiences as members of the targeted opportunity programs. This group of three colleges are all located in the state of New York. Institution A, Institution B, and Institution C are further connected by their relatively small student populations, with less than 4,000 total students. The three institutions are co-members of a five-college consortium agreement established to conduct collaborative recruitment events such as counselor tours, webinars, and regional travel to highlight a shared approach to the academic and geographic campus experience.

Throughout the recruitment and admissions process, prospective students may be offered a list of benefits to attend traditional liberal arts colleges. Many students receive significant financial aid (up to 100% of their demonstrated need), in addition to amenities such as book-loan programs, funding for laptops, specialty housing, or communal study space (Belasco, 2022). For students with minoritized identities, who identify as people of color, first-generation college students, or come from under-resourced financial backgrounds, these clear, accessible additional benefits can make certain colleges and universities feel like a better fit. Fit has been highlighted as inter-community relationships, academic programs students are looking for, the type of curriculum and academic rigor for students' intellectual talent, and other resources that support underrepresented students transition into a college or university (Baum et al., 2010; Bowman & Denson, 2014; Ma et al., 2019; Muskens et al., 2019; Tran, 2021).

Specifically, these benefits can make living within a predominantly White campus surrounded by predominantly White peers who come from more financially resourced backgrounds even more attractive. The benefits to allow historically marginalized student populations to more comfortably transition into PWIs have been developed over several generations. For almost three decades the *Journal for Black in Higher Education* (JBHE) tracked

first-year Black students' enrollment at high-ranking liberal arts colleges. In 2021, these data showed substantial gains for liberal arts colleges across the United States, highlighting Amherst College whose Black students enrollment increased 19.5% (Carrasco, 2022; JBHE, 2022). Carrasco (2022) highlights virtual or in-person events, need-blind admissions practices (family financial status is unavailable during review), and test-optional policies as examples that have helped liberal arts colleges with Black applicants.

Additionally, the benefits of attending small, residential liberal arts colleges include small class sizes, immersive learning experiences beyond the classroom (e.g., internships and research), easier access to mentorship from faculty and staff, and smaller student populations that create opportunities to connect with peers from similar backgrounds (Belasco, 2022; Tran, 2021). These campus environmental conditions help students to build a sense of belonging, making a liberal arts college more attractive for and attentive to students from historically underrepresented communities.

This research study explores students' experiences at three selective admission, liberal arts colleges that emphasize DEI and belonging in their recruitment process. Harper and Hurtado (2007) and Harper (2013) highlight the need for qualitative research at predominantly White institutions that focuses on DEI and belonging-related issues as students perceive them. This research expands on prior research in the area of belonging. While such research has been approached both qualitatively and quantitatively, it has not adequately explored the degree to which targeted opportunity programs provide the level of resources and support students seek utilizing an emic, or insider-focused approach to examine students' lived experience-based insights, thoughts, and ideas (Lopez, 2016; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2011).

Prior research has explored students' experiences in targeted bridge, access, success, and opportunity programs, highlighting factors that impact student sense of belonging, satisfaction, and ability to get the most out of their college experience. This research examines some of the factors that lead to success along the typical metrics of enrollment, retention, and graduation rates (Douglas & Attewell, 2014; Lopez, 2016; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2011). However, there is a dearth of analysis in this earlier research in terms of students' personal experiences and firsthand perspectives on how these programs impact their own experiences of belonging, engagement, support, and satisfaction.

Postsecondary institutions must ensure that factors such as campus climate and the nature of relational ecosystem are part of the conversation on equity, inclusion, and belonging practices to avoid repeating past mistakes or creating student negative outcomes and unrest due to poor leadership decisions that do not meet student needs (Anderson, 2020; Hailu & Sarubbi, 2019; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). However, earlier research may underreport what targeted opportunity programs provide to the underrepresented student communities they are designed to serve and support. One example is Strayhorn's (2010) research, which highlighted how a specific summer bridge program did not make any difference in student sense of belonging or social skills in terms of being more comfortable making new friends, or becoming involved with student clubs and organizations on their college campuses.

Strayhorn's (2010) example of early dissatisfaction is important to understanding students' processes and outcomes in these programs. There is a potential link between this and undermatching, a term that describes when students enroll in postsecondary institutions that are less selective than their academic capabilities (Muskens et al., 2019). Undermatching can lead to

students not being adequately challenged and thus dissatisfied with their college experience, which can lead to long-term impacts on career and economic social mobility.

Low-income students are more likely to undermatch because they lack understanding of the college application process and feel out of place within the social environments of a more selective college or university (Muskens et al., 2019). Early education opportunity programs and transition-focused higher education opportunity programs can help historically underrepresented students avoid this situation. Opportunity programs can educate students on college choice, the application process, and how to transition into new, unfamiliar cultural environments with more confidence.

Further, opportunity programs provide underrepresented students with a similar demographic cohort, ongoing support resources, and financial supports beyond aid for tuition and fees (e.g., book purchases or funding for travel) to enable students to have a fully immersed college experience with long-term career benefits that come from being satisfied with academic rigor that fits their academic skills (Muskens et al., 2019). This dissertation, led by a practitioner in the field through an emic approach, examines student perspectives on the mediating contexts that shape experience and satisfaction. This can help such programs to better understand how opportunity programs can fill important gaps and work against what Strayhorn (2010) and Muskens et al. (2019) described as high-level challenges for students who enroll in these targeted opportunity programs.

This dissertation emphasizes the perspectives of college students enrolled in targeted opportunity programs within selective, residential liberal arts, predominantly White institutions. Prior research utilized broad student affairs surveys, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey,

to provide comprehensive analysis (Dong, 2019; Douglas & Attewell, 2014; Strayhorn, 2010). These surveys do not create the conditions in which researchers directly speak with students. Moreover, the surveys do not focus on those students enrolled as part of unique targeted recruitment and support programs.

The NSSE is an annual survey of first- and senior-year students which estimates the ways that undergraduates spend their time as well as how they benefit from attending college (Ewell & McCormick, 2020). The survey results are organized into four thematic areas that are used to describe how students spend their time in college. The four themes are Academic Challenge, Learning with Peers, Experiences with Faculty, and Campus Environment, which are further delineated into ten Engagement Indicators (Higher-Order Learning, Reflective & Integrative Learning, Learning Strategies, Quantitative Reasoning, Collaborative Learning, Discussions with Diverse Others, Student-Faculty Interaction, Effective Teaching Practices, Quality of Interactions, and Supportive Environment). The four themes and ten indicators are utilized by college administrators to understand trends of current student experiences to implement key changes in policies and best practices that create the conditions to offer what students share as positive elements of support in and outside of the classroom and campus. Additionally, prospective students and their families can utilize the developed themes and indicators as a tool for their own personal research when exploring their college options. These details can help students, and their families determine if an institution is a good fit for their child as they make their way through the college-selection process.

Importantly, the theme of Learning with Peers is the only portion of the NSSE that has a DEI focus. The other three thematic areas and the ten Engagement Indicators do not highlight equity, inclusion, or belonging. Despite the lack of intentional DEI focus, NSSE results from

students from underrepresented racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and gender identity groups have been used in studies to provide overarching insights into the impact of targeted opportunity programs and overlapping experiences such as summer bridge programs.

The CIRP is only administered to first-year students, and unlike the NSSE, the survey is conducted at the start of a student's transition into college (HERI, 2024). CIRP is designed to provide a snapshot for college administrators of incoming students prior to entering college. Like the NSSE survey, the CIRP focuses on students' experiences. Combined with additional follow-up surveys it can be used as a longitudinal resource to show the impact of a college experience.

Additionally, while the CIRP does ask how students identify themselves demographically, it does not allow students to give their personal perspectives beyond standardized themes built into the survey. As such, both NSSE and CIRP pull students enrolled in opportunity programs out of these larger groups; this constitutes a research limitation related to the impact of context on their experiences as part of their opportunity programs.

This dissertation takes a different methodological approach, stemming from concern that prior research does not meaningfully engage students since it is not conducted by practitioners in an analogous setting, but rather by career researchers far away from these kinds of contexts. Shifting the methodological approach to this phenomenon required employing an emic approach to data collection and thematic analysis within an emic-centered practitioner research methodology and research design (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). It is important to note that this is not the first research on opportunity programs utilizing direct student engagement to focus on student perception as a central point of research methodology. Lopez (2016) analyzed undergraduate student perceptions of a bridge program at the community college where the students enrolled. While Lopez (2016) utilized a similar qualitative methodology for data

collection and analysis, this prior research analyzes a different Carnegie classification of postsecondary institution, namely Community Colleges.

The current study adds to the research on another type of postsecondary institution by exploring three selective, admissions liberal arts colleges, which award four-year bachelor's degrees, compared to Community Colleges, which are focused on two-year degrees and professional or technical education programs. Additionally, while Lopez (2016) analyzed the effects of Summer Bridge Programs, which each of the three PWIs in this study also employ, the current dissertation expands this research by looking at the full impact of opportunity programs through enrolled students' perspectives into their efficacy and value, and expands beyond a single transition portion of the college enrollment experience of undergraduate students.

Lopez's (2016) methods and findings can be compared to this dissertation as an opportunity to build conversation of best practices, common trends, and key differences to consider when analyzing opportunity programs based on institution type and characteristics. This dissertation expands upon Lopez's work by utilizing an emic-focused, semi-structured interview approach to interviews and student focus groups as compared to Lopez's structured interviews. This design allowed for emic concepts, language, and terminology to emerge inductively in conversations with students as part of a shared inquiry in interviews and focus groups. Importantly, students' emic perspectives afford the opportunity for more finely differentiated concepts and critiques to emerge during data collection and analysis than prior research approaches have allowed (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Due to the New York State Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) standards, including family income caps and requirements that students be the first in their family to attend college, many current access and success programs are comprised of students from populations

that are underrepresented in the overall college-going population (NCES, 2022). The purpose of this research is to understand from current students' perspectives whether and how targeted access and opportunity programs at their selective admission, residential liberal arts PWIs meet the goals outlined and promised by the institution. This research was designed to address the following research questions:

How do undergraduate students with diverse backgrounds, needs, and aspirations in targeted opportunity programs at selective PWIs...

1. Experience program support for making connections in the program and across campus?
2. Experience and understand the structure, value, and impacts of their program?

As a practitioner working in the targeted opportunity program field for over a decade, it is evident to me that college admissions counselors should be more knowledgeable about their own institutional opportunity programs in terms of how their programs compare to peer institutions and how students who fit HEOP demographic criteria transition and thrive within their program and broader campus community. Especially at predominantly White institutions like the three sites included in this research study, admissions professionals must be able to educate on the financial, academic, and social support systems available to prospective students and families who identify with historically underrepresented demographic groups.

Across higher education more broadly, there are many perspectives on access and the promotion of different forms of success including improved academic preparation for transition into postsecondary education, raising outcomes for degree completion, and narrowing equity and access gaps in key academic disciplines such as STEM fields (Johnson et al., 2020; Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018). However, researchers must continue to explore whether targeted programs provide the level of preparation and conditions of support that students need to prepare them for

successful performance in the rigorous environment of postsecondary education such as the selective liberal arts colleges that are the sites of this research.

Opportunity programs are embedded in the history of education access for underrepresented communities (Duranczyk et al., 2004; Harper, 2023; Hurtado et al., 1998; Kezar & Eckel, 2008; Perna & Kurban, 2013). Summer bridge programs, racial diversity, equity policies, and the roles of institutions in establishing DEI and belonging have been heavily studied (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Lopez, 2016; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2011). Importantly, this dissertation responds to calls from prior scholars for more qualitative assessment (Harper, 2013; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Centering and exploring students' lived experiences of targeted opportunity programs at PWIs using emic terms and organizing concepts can open doors of understanding for targeted opportunity programs to better serve and meet the needs of their students.

Overview of the Dissertation

In Chapter Two, the literature review for this practitioner-led dissertation is outlined. The literature follows a timeline of the establishment of college opportunity programs, beginning with the civil rights era and specific government legislation. The literature review then connects to more recent prior research and the connection to the current study which introduces a new way to understand these opportunity programs.

In Chapter Three the research methods are described in detail. This begins with the conceptual framework that was developed to guide data collection and analysis, particularly the use of emic perspectives from students' shared insights throughout data collection. Additionally, the methods chapter describes the fit of qualitative approach to add to the existing research on

opportunity programs, with particular attention to the decision to utilize interviews and focus groups as the primary forms of data collection.

The analysis and findings in Chapter Four are focused on four impact areas. The impacts are financial, the opportunity program structure, students' personal development, and the sense of belonging. The final impact area, belonging, is further highlighted for the exponential value that was unearthed through data collection and themes from the students' emic insights. The final Chapter Five on Analysis and Recommendations describes the targeted selection process of students into opportunity programs and provides additional insight into the exponentializing impact of students' emic perspectives on their sense of belonging.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This review of literature examines targeted access and success programs and builds from the establishment of federal policy that led to the creation of early opportunity programs in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. These governmental policies led to varied kinds of programs that work with students from marginalized demographic identities and socioeconomic backgrounds. This practitioner-led dissertation expands on prior research that has examined success using the metrics of enrollment, retention, and graduation rates (Douglas & Attewell, 2014; Lopez, 2016; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2011) but has not addressed student perceptions of belonging and satisfaction.

This literature review chapter curates and reviews research that illuminates the need for qualitative, student-focused assessment of targeted opportunity programs in higher education. First, it describes the legacy of access programs and different versions and iterations of these opportunity programs based on changes precipitated by legislation and political strategy. It then highlights the importance of cultural capital, which Bourdieu (2008) describes as self-development through cultivating social insights and knowledge in ways passed down through familial lineage and suggests that institutions push cultural capital through what they make accessible to people and by what is highlighted as culturally relevant. This section addresses how access to postsecondary education through opportunity programs allows for minoritized students to gain access to often unavailable forms of social capital earlier in their journey towards postsecondary education. This type of capital is not as easy to see as economic or financial capital that may include physical or monetized gains. The review then examines students fit

within the college environment and how this impacts their sense of academic rigor and preparedness in college. It ends with a discussion of research on student success in targeted opportunity programs, which most often is classified by degree completion, and a note on workforce implications.

Origins of College Access and Success Programs

Early legislation on college access and success programs reflected the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the 1965 Higher Education Act (amended in 1968, 1972, and 1986), established three initial federal TRIO programs -- Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services – in a coordinated effort to support minoritized student populations at U.S. colleges by achieving these goals (Green & Bedeau, 2020; McElroy & Armesto, 1998):

- (1) Boost students' core academic capabilities, including selection of a rigorous course curriculum,
- (2) Work to ameliorate social and community disadvantage, including financial challenges,
- (3) Provide transition support to increase the likelihood of disadvantaged youth degree completion.

TRIO, and similar programs, provided additional human capital for under-resourced and underserved communities (Bernhardt, 2013; McElroy & Armesto, 1998). McElroy and Armesto's (1998) historical analysis reminds us that these initiatives are not enough on their own to resolve equity gaps in educational opportunity. The underlying issues, such as lack of financial resources and poorly funded academic options (e.g., public schools) intersect with generational, social, and familial dynamics in ways that limit access to opportunities, creating gaps in individuals' and groups' *social capital*. Ricardo Stanton-Salazar (2004) defines social capital as “those ‘connections’ to individuals and to networks that can provide access to resources and

forms of support that facilitate the accomplishment of goals” (p. 18). For many minority students enrolled in opportunity programs, these connections can be nonexistent or inaccessible.

Social and Cultural Capital are Central

Social capital is central. Stanton-Salazar’s (2004) concept of social capital relates to a foundational definition from Bourdieu’s (1986/1983) theory of social capital, which was built around the size and depth of a network allowing individuals in a community of institutionalized relationships to profit from the collective strengths -- economic, cultural, symbolic -- of the group. Bourdieu argues that social capital is passed down and multiplied within a community network that shares identity and norms. These norms are “endlessly reproduced in and through the exchange (e.g., of gifts, words, women) which it encourages, and which presupposes and produces mutual knowledge and recognition” (1986/1983, p. 287). Importantly, capital is often viewed as static, but it is dynamic and contextually mediated, which matters to how programs are designed, implemented, and assessed.

These definitions of social capital help to explain why some populations have access to a greater swath of resources and opportunities than others. That difference in access to resources provides evinces the importance of early development of targeted access and success programs. These initial programs can be utilized to focus on early intervention and engagement, yet their limitations highlight the necessity for resources beyond programs such as AVID and TRIO. This is obviated by the expansion of TRIO from three to eight options since its inception in the 1960s. Further, prior research recommends improving teachers’ professional development, establishing similar readiness programs that connect high school students to high-quality career-specific skills development, and more intentional collaboration between K-12 and postsecondary institutions of education (McElroy & Armesto, 1998).

Cultural capital is defined as a social construct that establishes a level of power or higher social status based on inherited knowledge through familial and/or community relationships (Barker, 2004, p. 37). Cultural capital, along with the term social capital discussed above, was created by French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu to articulate a theory that can help us better understand a valuable tool that can be molded into economic and material gains such as degrees, better job opportunities, and general knowledge of best practices that are unknown by others to create a level of advantage (Barker, 2004; Bourdieu, 2008; Means & Pyne, 2016).

Bourdieu's (2008) concept of cultural capital is linked to individual self-development, knowledge that is injected into material works of art with deeper meaning such as art, books or other media, and accepted institutional or societal norms that become ingrained as highly important. Luedke's (2020) study focused on students of color attending PWIs and how they built an internal community based on a shared identity. Luedke's (2020) findings illustrated how cultural capital can be established and shared beyond the family or local dynamic within higher education institutions. The following sections describe access and opportunity programs, connecting the concepts highlighted by Bourdieu (2008) and Luedke (2020). Finally, the following sections illustrate how the above prior research on social capital relates to this dissertation specifically focused on students whose identities might overlap with those in Luedke's prior research, but specifically within opportunity programs in higher education.

Sociologist Annette Lareau builds on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital with a study of Black and White families of differing socioeconomic status which produced a new theory, concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2002). Concerted cultivation is defined as a parenting style whereby middle-class families, regardless of race, encourage their children to participate in a

mix of co-curricular and intellectual activities such as sports, learning a second language, creative arts, or participating in social engagement beyond familial groups (Lareau, 2002).

Through the comparison of middle-class family dynamics and working or low-income family environments, Laureau illustrates unique trends, with middle-class parents tending to be more involved in providing additional encouragement for their children's social and academic involvement. Accepting concerted cultivation, students enrolled in targeted opportunity programs would be more likely to be from working or low-income families without early childhood engagement or strategic parenting to build their cultural capital before college. These programs offer additional work and targeted types of support to help students catch up to their non-opportunity program peers at PWIs, where many students come from middle-class or wealthy family backgrounds. These opportunity programs provide a fast track to additional cultural capital development, while also being a safe space for students identity and express their culture (Hurtado, 2007; Luedke, 2020; Strayhorn, 2008).

Cataloging College Opportunity Programs

Scholars have examined the question of how opportunity programs best serve students in their transition into postsecondary education. This includes cataloging programs that developed by the end of the 20th century and describing the unique efforts that have gained a good reputation, including private-public partnerships (e.g., Living-learning Communities and Talent Hubs). Studies more recently have focused on 'promise' or free-tuition programs sponsored by the federal or state government. Critics point out that it can be quite difficult to separate the effect of a targeted program from other causal factors for success, such as self-selection of participants (Douglas & Attewell, 2014).

It is notable that targeted programs have thrived across primary and secondary education, along with success in the postsecondary sector on some larger campuses, but researchers have found them to be less prevalent at smaller private institutions (Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018; Lopez, 2016; McElroy & Armesto, 1998; Pell Institute, 2009).

Survey of 20th Century Programs

Through a national survey, Swail and Perna (2002) highlight the range of opportunity, access, and success programs. Some programs are supported through government funding and others are associated with local community organizations, businesses, and postsecondary institutions. Over 1,000 programs were established to focus their outreach efforts towards the most underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, low-income communities, and first-generation college students, using a range of formats. The list included programs based in K-12 schools, on college campuses, and community centers, featuring programs with different focal points designed to provide students with access to postsecondary education opportunities (Swail & Perna, 2002). The descriptive assessment notes two key concerns. First is the lack of standardization of programs including when students enter. Second, due to limited funding, programs were unable to hire third parties to properly collect data and evaluate their effectiveness.

Two Reputable Opportunity Programs

The first of two reputable programs to be examined is the Noble Network of Charter Schools in Chicago, IL, a major city with a notorious concentration of poverty and violence along its South side, a predominantly Black neighborhood. Early intervention proved to be valuable with the AVID program as a template (Bernhardt, 2013; McElroy & Armesto, 1998;

Perna & Swail, 2001). Yet this approach remains hampered by challenges with funding, curricular adjustments, and shifting attitudes towards student achievement.

In Chicago, the Noble Network engages students and parents for feedback at one of its campuses, The Noble Academy. Parents showed high aspirations for college, and their students reported gaining confidence in their college-going ability. Both parents and students reported that admission to this access and success program added valuable social and educational capital. However, students were held back by limited curricular options or advice that did not match the academic rigor or expectations of desirable postsecondary institutions (Dyce et al., 2012).

A second program is the Meyerhoff Scholars Program (MSP) at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). MSP has maintained an outstanding reputation since its inception. In studies of MSP, students reported their inclusion in MSP as very important to their college experience (cite study). The financial support, summer bridge program, and strength in the ‘identity’ of belonging to the Meyerhoff family ultimately developed the program in a brand which stands out for helping students develop a strong network (Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011). Successful programs, like MSP, depended on a relationship-based partnership model across different groups (Tierney & Jun, 2001). The creation and development of deep connections required buy-in across demographic identities, including race and socioeconomic status (Phillips, 2005). This could include partnership between public and privately owned organizations.

Public-Private Partnerships

The deep collaboration and support of public and private institutional across demographic and socioeconomic groups is documented in prior research (Phillips, 2005; Tierney & Jun, 2001; Ward & Tierney, 2017). This cross-cultural and inter-institutional collaboration is done through the state government of New York, where the current study sites are located. At public two-year

and four-year colleges and universities, students will primarily find options for the Education Opportunity Program (EOP). On campuses of private higher education institutions, the corresponding Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) is available. Both EOP and HEOP have specific qualifications about the length of time for state residency for a student to be considered for the financial, academic, and additional benefits provided by these programs (NYSSCA, 2019).

These New York programs were designed for students who were transitioning into higher education from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Program eligibility requirements direct colleges to enroll students recognized as economically disadvantaged, based on their family's total annual income and household size (Glazer, 1982; NYSSCA, 2019). In addition to helping students with the college application process, these programs provide ongoing support and resources to mitigate structural education, economic, and social issues that students from underserved populations carry into the higher education landscape. Institutions remain free to construct privately funded programs that best fit the identity and mission of their campus. We see another version of this at the federal government level as well with Higher Education Opportunity Programs (HEOP) that are government funded but have different models.

Promise Programs

Through the federal government, another approach is free-tuition options. These “promise programs” received a boost in their continued creation from work done within the Barack Obama presidential administration. Under the Obama Administration a proposed \$60 billion “America College Promise” would match grants for students during their first two years of enrollment in U.S. community colleges (Perna & Smith, 2020). While the America College

Promise was not enacted, this legislation helped encourage promise programs led by state and local governments in California, Tennessee, Oregon, and New York.

Postsecondary institution-specific programs were created as well, including University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's program for Illinois state residents from low-income families. Other targeted institutional options for high school graduates include promise programs to attend specific community colleges. Santa Cruz County College Commitment in California, Great River Promise to Arkansas Northeastern Colleges, and the Louisville Rotary Promise Scholarship in Kentucky, all represent two-year institution promise program establishments.

Research into promise programs has sought an improved understanding of the design, implementation, and type of impact promise programs can have for students from disadvantaged communities that are most often the scholarship recipients (Perna & Leigh, 2018). Due to their impact, there is an emphasis on increased understanding of promise programs through more empirical assessment that could help improve program designs and future resources (Perna & Smith, 2020). This means more research is necessary and this dissertation explores opportunity programs, which are like promise programs described in prior research.

Prior Research Opposing College Opportunity Programs

The existence and style of targeted access and success, bridge, or opportunity programs vary. Location is a key example of that difference with some programs situated on college campuses, within residential or community locations, and others with local hubs that are connected to a national organization (McElroy & Armesto, 1998; Perna & Swail, 2001; Swail & Perna, 2002). Even with empirical support and historical trends to illustrate the positive impact of targeted access and success programs, some research still questions their importance.

For example, Domina (2009) presents an opposing viewpoint with a longitudinal study that analyzed the efficacy of targeted college outreach to historically underrepresented student populations, in comparison to a control group of students receiving general outreach that is not focused on students' underrepresented identity which was designated as low income. Their results suggest that "targeted out-reach programs do little to change the educational trajectories of participating students" (p. 142). Domina's results illustrate that targeted outreach students increased college enrollment rates of 6% and that students engaged in these programs were more often enrolled in more advanced level courses (e.g., Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate).

However, Domina's (2009) statistical analysis shows that these differences are not statistically significant on measures of college enrollment and eventual degree completion when compared to students who received general college outreach. Domina's (2009) findings encourage the use of broader outreach to all students, highlighting key resources on college application preparation, the value of more advanced course enrollments and of teacher motivation to encourage students toward postsecondary education. This means that the targeted model, while beneficial, does not illustrate a significant enough quantitative difference to be the primary approach.

A more focused examination of what these targeted programs do and if it is enough to equalize student opportunity is in part a question of selection bias, with more ambitious students being self-selected into or being chosen for targeted access and opportunity programs. A selection bias would be a valid factor in illustrating decreased impact that can be directly credited to access and success programs. Another consideration is how success is measured, wherein current scholarship offers largely traditional measures including college enrollment

rates, retention after the first year, and degree attainment, as indicators of success (ACT, 2010; Davis et al., 2020; Domina, 2009; Duranczyk et al., 2004; Ross et al., 2012; Warren et al., 2021).

A qualitative, student-focused style of data collection and analysis is utilized in Creighton's (2007) research. While Creighton's work has a wider focus and is not specific to targeted opportunity programs, the research provided an emphasis on students from diverse backgrounds and key resources that supported their success, such as mentorship and counseling programs. Creighton's research centered on why undergraduate students decided to leave their postsecondary institution and discontinue enrollment. The research encouraged higher education administrators to invest more time and effort towards analysis of the various academic and non-academic indicators that could play a role in students' decisions to drop out. Other research has alluded to the impact of access and success programs going beyond academic or intellectual factors (Dyce et al., 2012; Perna & Thomas, 2008; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011).

For example, at University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) in the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, the focus was on undergraduate knowledge and skills as a specific programmatic goal. Part of the program's mission is an overall boost in the number of future Ph.D. graduates in STEM fields for Black students. Further, in the study I reviewed, Stolle-McAllister et al. (2011) analyzed the Meyerhoff Scholars program using an open-ended case methodology that did not have a specific template of questions that would allow students to speak freely about how the students personally viewed their fit, or sense of belonging, in the program and within the broader campus. Students from the Meyerhoff Scholars Program reported a high level of positive regard for themselves and their peers because of the program's reputation and the familial environment, with lots of direct support through their program being one of the reasons they chose to attend UMBC.

Thus, before considering why students might leave, an investigation of themes that draw students into postsecondary institutions is useful. This is of particular importance for student populations welcomed through these targeted programs. The Meyerhoff Scholars Program structure illustrates this with a community focused on building connections, providing support, helping students develop confidence, and encouraging students to enroll. The students' personal accounts utilized an emic approach, with focus on theories and insights illustrated through these students' personal accounts of their perspectives on their persistence, feelings of confidence, sense of belonging within their college community, and personal and academic growth in college (Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011).

This dissertation study leveraged more intentional, student-focused research engagement to generate insight that can seed new understandings culled from students' perspectives on their own schooling experiences. The students' emic understanding of success has not been captured in prior research in this area of the field.

Belonging and Opportunity Programs

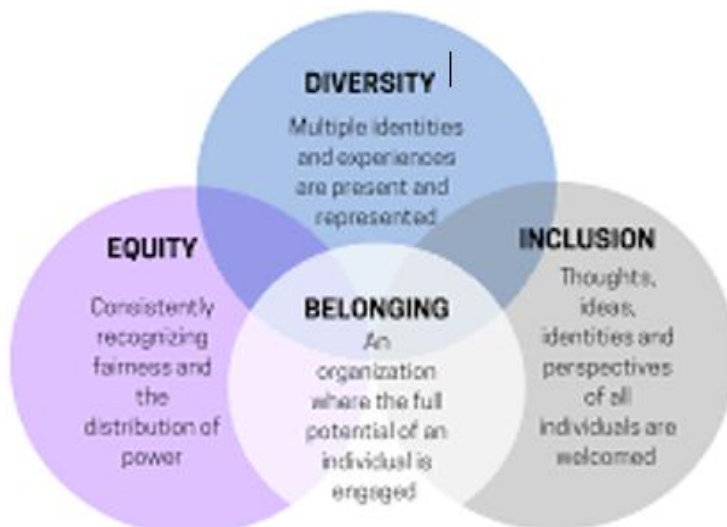
Belonging matters. The concept of belonging has been researched across contexts in and beyond education, including in higher education. Belonging is defined as “students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 4). This framing of belonging focuses on students' experiential insights into their campus' racial climate. This relates to the current dissertation focused on students' experiences and perspectives within targeted opportunity programs.

Belonging has gained increasing attention in research on students' perspectives of the impact of targeted opportunity program on their overall college experience because it is a byproduct of DEI—DEIB. Belonging lives at the intersection of diversity, equity and inclusion. It centers people in an organization and empowers all to fully engage and thrive. It matters to the success of an organization for every single person to know they are valued. Belonging is connected to the wellbeing and productivity of all (Kaplan Kondonjakis, 2021). Belonging is about creating a climate that welcomes the voices of all its members and people are encouraged to listen to one another's lived experiences so that they can learn to understand and respect their differences and similarities (Ravitch & Herzog, 2023).

The image below gives a visual representation of where belonging fits into the DEIB model. For targeted opportunity programs, student belonging is considered throughout the full experience, from strategic recruitment, unique admissions selections, ongoing and tailored support systems implemented into the program structure, and resources developed to prepare students for life after college (Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, 2009; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2019). These programs become a safety net for students, while also encouraging them to take advantage of key resources beyond the program itself, such as internships and academic study abroad programs.

Figure 1

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging



Students' sense of belonging in their college program and broader campus community emerged as a prominent finding across all students and all three programs. These opportunity programs have provided historically underrepresented student populations an access point into postsecondary education. The programs provide an onramp with summer bridge programs that have been shown to positively impact students' academic performance (Strayhorn, 2011). Additionally, these types of transition programs before the academic year allow students to develop a sense of community with one another, while also being introduced to their new environment, and learning more about the campus culture from program leaders (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Lopez, 2016; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011). This attention to detail around student adjustments to college environments, particularly students of color at PWIs, can help mitigate the initial culture shock and allow students to see the targeted opportunity program as a living-learning community that provides academic and co-curricular engagement with key

administrators to help them navigate issues throughout their college experience, (Johnson et al., 2020; Kezar et al., 2020; Luedke, 2020).

Through these intentional efforts, students can see the targeted opportunity programs as ideal as a special community within students' overall college campus. Students have the opportunity program's resources and insider community to help their transition into postsecondary education. However, students enrolled in opportunity programs must find their full connection and acceptance into the general campus community to thrive with a full comprehensive college experience and not just their filtered engagement within the opportunity program structure (Bowman & Denson, 2014). Garnering insight into the importance of belonging to students requires examining their experiences through the framework of Strayhorn's (2019) conceptualization of belonging, which he describes 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). This framing of belonging focuses on students' insights into their campus' racial climate and relates to the current dissertation which is also focused on students' perspectives on their sense of belonging and how it is impacted by their experiences of enrollment within targeted opportunity programs.

This practitioner-led study examines students' emic descriptions of their experiences engaging in campus activities, academic support resources, and how their targeted programs connect them to key areas of need, rather than numerical metrics of retention, degree completion, or academic performance that can be tied to the institution, but do not provide context of current undergraduates' points of view. In doing this, this study introduces an approach wherein current opportunity program students' own thoughts and words are foregrounded and examined to better

understand the varied inputs and impacts of these types of programs. Additionally, this dissertation expands on prior research by examining liberal arts PWIs with opportunity programs not yet studied in this way (Lopez, 2016; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2010).

Recent Developments in Access

At the undergraduate level, access is defined as “the elimination of discrimination and other barriers that contribute to inequitable opportunities to join and be a part of a work group, organization, or community,” (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023). Undergraduate student access requires intentional efforts by social, education, and/or governmental institutions to overcome structural barriers to students from historically minoritized demographic groups to attain enrollment at postsecondary institutions.

Intentional efforts include examples such as government scholarship or grant programs, targeted opportunity programs, pre-college readiness and college application preparation efforts, and legislation that is equity-minded to lessen the opportunity gap (Hurley & Hallmark, 2020; Perna et al., 2008, 2020; Perna & Swail, 2001; Ward & Tierney, 2017). Access is a longstanding historical and ongoing issue in US higher education where students’ racial/ethnic and socioeconomic identity impacts enrollment trends (Adedoyin, 2022; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Green & Bedeau, 2020; Ross et al., 2012).

As it pertains to programs supporting increased access and retention of nontraditional students and students from demographic groups that are historically underrepresented in higher education, Duranczyk et al. (2004) assembled a monograph with a collection of research-based chapters that combine to establish comprehensive thinking, best practices, and guidance towards connecting access to retention in higher education. The sections in this collection are related to prior affirmative action legal precedent from the SCOTUS, illustrating trends and data analysis

that provide perspectives on different multicultural and international strategies that act as an influence on historically minoritized prospective students. This type of collective research and strategic thinking would have been a valuable guide for institutional strategic change. However, the 2023 SCOTUS decisions have impacted this type of guidance and put some access efforts at risk or potentially null and void.

Changes in judicial precedence over time have changed the level of responsibility placed on higher education institutions around college admissions practices. The Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) previously set a federal precedent with their ruling in the 1978 Regents of the University of California vs Bakke case whereby “race could be considered by a university as a ‘plus’ or ‘one element of a range of factors’ even if it ‘tipped the scale’ among qualified applicants--as long as it did not insulate the individual from comparison with all the other candidates for the available seats” (Feder, 2009, p. 4). Today greater responsibility is placed on higher education institutions – through mandates – to establish more creative pathways to introduce new and effective access initiatives for minoritized college students. This increased responsibility for higher education comes from recent SCOTUS decisions which overturned previous decades of precedence by making affirmative action void in the criteria for college application evaluation (Harper, 2023).

Until 2023, Affirmative Action allowed college admission professionals in the United States to utilize a contextual approach, including racial and gender equity, as part of the application review in the college admission evaluation process. Today, the legal binding and professional foundations of affirmative action have been overturned. A 2023 SCOTUS case, Students for Fair Admissions versus Harvard University and the University of North Carolina, made race-conscious admissions unconstitutional.

The opportunity gap refers to the difference in resources, experiences, financial means, and other benefits for students, based on their socioeconomic background, which make up aggregate advantages and disadvantages (Carnevale et al., 2019; McElroy & Armesto, 1998). The opportunity gap has been called a number of things including the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lim et al., 2019). This gap provides students who already hold socio-economic and other capital advantages with an even greater access to opportunities than historically under-resourced and inherently disadvantaged peers. Prior to recent judicial action, Affirmative action offered a tool to build diverse classes through the acknowledgement of different access to postsecondary education and employment opportunities.

Federal programs such as TRIO had proven effective at increasing enrollment and graduation rates for the historically under-resourced or underrepresented student communities they were designed to admit (Pell Institute, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2024). More recent federal programs have brought together multi-industry approaches, including business, federal government agencies, and higher education to promote improved college access and degree completion for students who are categorized as first-generation, underrepresented minorities, or low-income (Green & Bedeau, 2020).

These multi-pronged efforts stemmed from Green and Bedeau's (2020) five-decade review of the United States' struggle to provide postsecondary degrees to students from historically under-resourced and minoritized demographic backgrounds starting in the 1970's. These degree completion issues have created an issue of diversity on college campuses and in the workforce. This prior research connects to this dissertation which is exploring how opportunity programs can help mitigate this challenge of access to postsecondary education and future career

opportunities based on students' perspectives into how the programs impact their higher education experiences.

In postsecondary education environments, TRIO and similar opportunity programs provide the means for public institutions to help incoming students from populations with decreased opportunity with an improved transition into their community and a process to see students through with successful degree attainment. Prior to the 2023 SCOTUS case, arguments that other categories or identities could be used as substitutions for race (e.g., socioeconomic status) cannot be used as successful proxies for racial/ethnic identities (Jones & Nichols, 2020). With the changing legal standing from the SCOTUS 2023 decision, there are existing opinions around decreased enrollment for students of color, impacts on faculty and administrative representation, and the impact on student life around race-focused programs or initiatives beyond enrollment (Harper, 2023).

While it is easy to applaud program benefits for diverse students, there is now considerable concern with persistent declines in undergraduate enrollment overall, and for the populations that the opportunity programs that are the focus of this research. Undergraduate students' overall enrollment declined nearly 5% under the projected numbers after the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports indicated a decline of over 1 million students below the enrollment count from the Spring of 2021 at U.S. colleges and universities (National Student Clearinghouse, 2022; Williams June, 2022).

Some hope remains given data that post-baccalaureate enrollment, across all academic levels, has increased over the past two years (National Student Clearinghouse, 2024). Students continue to study and earn more advanced, graduate-level degrees, a trend that provides important context for both personal and broad social benefits. Individuals who complete

postsecondary education are shown to benefit themselves and their local communities (Baum et al., 2010). Education provides personal financial and lifestyle benefits, allows individuals to add to the social capital of their networks, and boost the web of people throughout their interconnected community (Baum et al., 2010; Portes, 1998).

Data show that individuals who complete a postsecondary degree boost the economy. For example, individuals with a postsecondary degree pay more in taxes. This increases funding at the state and federal level for service programs that can help to improve the community (Baum et al., 2010). Those same degree recipients need less in public benefits, allowing budgets to go further to members of the community who need these resources. Healthcare costs, overall, also decrease with more education.

Research shows the implications of a college education and college degree attainment. For example, individuals with a postsecondary degree are more likely to exercise and smoke less among other life and risk-based decisions that create a healthier life for the individual and reduce the overall societal expense on medical services. Additionally, college degree holders volunteer more often and vote at higher rates, illustrating a commitment to impact their community (Baum et al., 2010). These are examples of how college-educated individuals benefit their local and broader society. The stakes are high for each generation and across the generations.

Opportunity Programs Benefit Students and Society

Targeted access and success programs that focus on mitigating enrollment differences are vital to ensuring the success of individuals, communities, and the nation overall. In fact, to maintain and support the primary goals of access and success programs, ensuring students recognize their reach beyond themselves, or even their own family, could build a greater awareness of the value of these targeted programs. While research highlights that there is not a

single answer for all groups, policy makers should consider the appropriate context to develop and implement multiple methodologies, models, and theories, to serve these diverse students and their needs (Perna & Thomas, 2006).

In their report “*Education Pays 2019: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society*,” Ma et al. (2019) highlight differences in employment patterns, income, and other indicators that provide some historical evidence into the way postsecondary education benefits extend beyond the individual. The research highlights a correlation between improved healthcare, socioeconomic status, and long-term employment benefits, for individuals who earn a postsecondary degree. Each of these factors help to create the foundation to understand the value of higher education beyond the academic components. Unfortunately, differences across demographic groups remain a consistent issue. Another article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* headlined “The Black Enrollment Cliff,” details the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on certain already under-resourced groups (Adedoyin, 2022).

Complex personal and societal factors play a role in the college enrollment decision process as well. The recognition and acceptance of this complex maze is how one set of research analyzed existing empirical assessments of the process (Perna, 2000). The admission decision is often made around investments from the individual student and their family. Even with social capital and academic ability to enhance enrollment modeling, financial aid alone is insufficient to increase college access (Perna, 2000). This illuminates the reality that even students with strong academic profiles (e.g., grades, curriculum rigor, and standardized test scores) may need more than significant merit scholarships to guide their college enrollment decisions. Students’ racial, ethnic, and cultural identities play a role in the process as well, with Black student being less likely to want to accept student loans, White and Hispanic students having comparable college

enrollment outcomes when academic record and social/cultural capital issues are controlled for (e.g., students with college-level academic preparation will attend regardless if economic and knowledge of college are similar), and all of these ethnic/racial groups academic ability (e.g., college readiness in the classroom) is the most prominent factor in students' decision to enroll in a college right after high school completion (Perna, 2000).

To better understand the nuanced and often complex process students must manage when making their college decisions, policy makers should consider context. This is done through legislation that illustrates an acceptance that there is no single answer for all students. The authors of these policies must be prepared to collaborate with all parties because policies interact in complex ways. Understanding these differences has encouraged the necessity to use multiple methods, models, and/or theories (Perna & Thomas, 2006). Once policymakers open their minds around equity, communities, social and cultural capital, and the different circumstances for students from historically under-resourced backgrounds, Perna and Kurban's (2013) conceptual model can be properly introduced.

Perna and Kurban's (2013) college enrollment and choice model is a context-based, multi-layered decision-making tool. Their work emphasized the need for changes in policy (government and school-based) in recognition of the demographic shifts of the student population, called for increased data collection on enrollment and college choice, and encouraged more efforts towards access initiatives (i.e., financial, academic preparation, support from family and friends). Early research promoted the value of these ideas. HEOP students showed higher retention rates and illustrated their potential at postsecondary success being based more on a lack of access to opportunities than student skills or intellectual ability (Glazer, 1982).

Opposing research to the above ideas around students' agency to make their own choice has suggested that students who identify with and are members of these types of access and success programs, are required to make specific personal adjustments. Tinto's (1993) assimilation-style mindset encouraged students from historically minoritized backgrounds to seek ways to become more like their majority-identity peers in the college community. Tinto suggests that this shift allows students to be more successful since without this adjustment, Tinto pointed to increased dropout rates, or attrition, for students from more diverse demographic backgrounds. Further, Engle and Tinto (2008) suggest that students who are the first in their family to enroll in college (first-generation students), those from low-income backgrounds, and students who showed a combination of these identities, are at greater risk of failure in college, which is defined as a higher drop-out rate and lower retention.

While this broader analysis does provide useful trends and insights about diverse student populations, this type of quantitative approach does not include direct engagement or personal perspective. Interviews with these students could add to an improved understanding of the support institutions provide. Additionally, qualitative methods examine context through exploring students' explanations of the program, their sense of belonging, and their ability to access resources. These types of assessments are integral to better understand how well targeted opportunity programs provide resources, even if their reputation is centered around their student support efforts (Kezar et al., 2020; McGonagle et al., 2014; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2011).

Resources such as Summer Bridge or transition programs provide a boost in students' academic confidence but were not statistically significant in impacting students' sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2011). The survey methodology of Strayhorn's study gave students

limited options for their responses. However, the pre-test/post-test model did allow for the illustration of change over time. Further, Strayhorn (2011) encourages scholars to continue efforts to better understand how targeted programs work and to intentionally explore under-resourced, marginalized communities (Strayhorn, 2011).

Building on Tinto's research into student attrition, Warren et al. (2021) push for more focused analysis and provide a way to refute the assimilation mindset of Tinto. Their work addresses the importance of college attainment programs and careful consideration of their development, implementation, and evaluation. Further, they highlight how these programs ease the transition into higher education for students from underrepresented populations (Warren et al., 2021). By concluding that institutions should provide more adequate and intentional resources to support underrepresented student populations, researchers have placed more accountability on the institutions versus pushing students to make major shifts in their identity or practices to fit into existing institutional structures, (Tinto, 1993; Warren et al., 2021).

In the context of underrepresented populations in higher education, it is important to remember that diversity is not inclusion, (Tienda, 2013). This is a prominent factor to consider for the formerly enslaved Black population in the United States at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), since as Tienda (2013) noted: "[Rising] inequality and population diversification suggest that the nation has drifted away from commitments to equal opportunity espoused in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement" (p. 4). This reinforces the importance of diversity and inclusion, particularly when a social movement or prominent advocacy groups are actively pushing for change.

Inclusion demonstrates and leverages the value of diversity within a campus environment to increase the potential for everyone's learning. Strayhorn (2008) found that students that are

introduced to and engage with an ethnically and racially diverse student body in college have an increased likelihood to feel a personal sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2008) combined that finding with empirical support around legal arguments relating to boosts in retention. Strayhorn (2019) builds on this when focusing on underrepresented students' sense of belonging leading to greater degree completion rates. As previously noted, postsecondary degree earners help themselves with great economic capital, but also benefit the health and economic wellness of their surrounding communities (Baum et al., 2010; Ma et al., 2019). This speaks to how opportunity programs that improve retention, academic performance, and degree completion, can help their graduates in boosting their home community as well.

Beyond Fit

Fit is defined as multi-dimensional assessment of a student's identity, interests, and characteristics of their ideal college with the eight domains, themes, or qualities that are measured at the school they attend (academic, social, cultural, physical, athletic, religious, socioeconomic, and political) (Bowman & Denson, 2014). It is important to consider student retention, student satisfaction, degree completion, and ways institutions can establish strategies to attract strong fit students or inform "lack of fit" or "misfit" students with transparent information and recruitment materials during the admissions recruitment process (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Tinto, 1993).

Related to this dissertation on students' experiences in targeted opportunity programs, Bowman and Denson's (2014) Student-Institution Fit Instrument (SIFI) could be utilized on incoming and current program students to more intentionally highlight what are common characteristics that make the institution a strong fit for students being strategically recruited into these opportunity programs, while recognizing some of the limitations Bowman and Denson

(2014) make clear about students' sorting themselves into friend groups, despite not being a strong fit for the institution overall due to potential for social isolation which leads to higher dropout rates and strong friendships alone does not completely overcome poor fit metrics.

Carnevale et al. (2019) provide a broader analysis of student-to-institutional fit, academic performance, and students' access to support resources. The report developed in their research was both described as "a good-news and a bad-news story," (Carnevale et al., 2019, p. 2). More specifically, the research presents positive views that early academic performance alone is not predictive of overall fit towards retention and future degree completion. Beyond performance students' individual striving, the quality of their academic experience, and institutional policies, all play a role in how students perceive themselves as being a good fit to their postsecondary institution.

Conversely, the bad news focused on institutional structures whereby existing systems inequitably distribute opportunity based on income, socioeconomic class status, race, and ethnicity. Students' individual work ethic and talent do not overcome historical biases built into the campus policies and infrastructure. These findings further disadvantage historically under-resourced and marginalized students who would enroll in the types of opportunity programs that were the focus of this dissertation.

Since life chances vary based on students' demographic profiles and social experiences, gender, race, ethnicity, and other dynamics (e.g., familial, school) impact students' immediate enrollment in postsecondary institutions and their degree attainment outcomes (Ross et al., 2012). Accepting this, the importance of continued investigation of these differences is apparent. That importance is clearer due to demographic shifts whereby more students from these

historically underrepresented communities make up the college-going population (Green & Bedeau, 2020; Indicator 24: Degrees Awarded, 2019; Perna & Kurban, 2013).

An improved understanding of how student communities of color provide a collective boost in cultural capital for one another, also called communal uplift, can help build the pathway for more shared social capital and allow those students who do find success to set a tremendous example. Luedke's (2020) work illuminates this, highlighting that when students of color were able to uplift one another using a community-focused approach of donating personal time and energy to one another. Researchers must consider whether enough is known about how targeted programs create the environment for students to reach those goals. Students want to set an example, support their peer group, and expand the cultural capital of their networks. Opportunity program students can exhibit this community capital uplift by sharing knowledge of the higher education system, putting the community gains over individual success, and being role models to younger individuals with shared identities including being willing to share their mistakes so they are not repeated by others in their social community (Luedke, 2020).

Relatedly, based on their research into developmental or remedial higher education programs, Bettinger et al. (2013) advocate for more comprehensive research which can help to create the conditions for leaders to meet students' needs more directly. To do this, asking students directly what those needs are is of vital importance to understand assessment from the end user experience as they describe it firsthand. This dissertation research takes this necessary next step by positioning students' perspectives at the center of data collection and analysis.

Perna (2015) implores the federal government to put the focus on those students from communities with the most financial need. The push is centered on aiding skillful navigation of daunting admission and financial aid application processes while adapting services to best meet

the contextual needs and identities of the targeted student populations. Both studies encourage more proper evaluation and analysis to help detail true best practices and shortfalls of these programs, including the suggestion of leveraging higher education TRIO programs with increased funding and expansion in the number of programs to be able to serve more students. (Bettinger et al., 2013; Perna, 2015).

To effectively integrate diversity initiatives within a university and to properly assess them requires an interconnected network of activity, whereby successful leaders sit at the center versus creating a top-down hierarchy (Kezar et al., 2008). Through this approach, communities can support students and share information. Kezar's research does not, however, specifically assess how this type of successful web could overlap to strengthen a targeted access, opportunity, or success program at a postsecondary institution. This dissertation study introduces current opportunity program students' insights that connect to the theories from Kezar et al. (2008) and how these findings connect to opportunity programs students supporting one another with shared information.

This type of communal student support for one another has been illustrated as a way to build social capital and comfort within a higher education institution to support student sense of belonging (Luedke, 2020). Beyond this, despite Bowman and Denison's (2014) student-institution fit instrument (SIFI) is not a direct connector to students' fit within their entire campus community, their research does illustrate that minoritized demographic groups (e.g., by race, first-generation status, or socioeconomic background) can focus their attention to relationships and programming with like-minded or similarly identifying student groups which can lead to a sense of "fit" without a full sense of belonging within the wider institution.

Finally, to meld fit with belonging, Thiem and Dasgupta (2022) recommend that institutions invest in summer bridge programs with intentional academic transition support, develop orientation messaging that promotes inter-cultural engagement and a journey for all students regardless of identity, invest in the use of their alumni network for student connections to the community and post-baccalaureate professional development, and develop living-learning communities that help students sense of belonging while introducing more immersive engagement experiences (e.g., research, study abroad, and use of on-campus academic support services).

The Politics of Readiness

Readiness is defined as a student's ability to meet the criteria for admission into a four-year postsecondary institution (Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018). Additional research and government assessment have provided insight into students' readiness for their transition from high school into postsecondary education. Standardized testing, such as the SAT and ACT, are additional common assessment tools to measure students' academic skills or preparedness for higher education (ACT, 2010; Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018). While access is important to open the door for students, as explained in the previous section, the notion of readiness is a tool to help students successfully transition into the college academic environment, with or without special preparation such as remedial education or summer bridge programs which can boost academic performance (Bettinger et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2011).

The national prominence of this issue was demonstrated by an inquiry from the United States Congress. In 2015, the U.S. House of Representatives' Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training Committee on Education and the Workforce explored college enrollment and degree completion for low-income and first-generation college students (Perna,

2015). Perna, serving as President of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), provided expert testimony on issues of access and success for underrepresented student populations, making clear the impact for these students and the nation. Her statement highlighted that postsecondary education is imperative as more and more jobs have taken on ‘upskilling.’ The term is defined as a requirement for education beyond high school for applicants to meet the baseline criteria for a job opening. Upskilling, paired with a global and technology-focused economy, presents a major obstacle for the United States. Perna (2015) was definitive that the United States is behind the educational needs of the population to be competitive in a global economy where more employers require candidates to have postsecondary education to be qualified for a job.

Programs such as TRIO, EOP, and HEOP are included as positive examples in Perna’s expert statement to the a subcommittee for the United States House of Representatives on a proposed model for college access and success programs for historically underrepresented students in 2015, (Perna, 2015). The programs are highlighted for providing valuable support to students from under-resourced backgrounds, while Perna also notes their inability to completely overcome structural issues that have entrenched severe gaps in degree completion between racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic demographic groups (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Perna, 2015; Ross et al., 2012). A core issue is the need for even more intentional government efforts. Students in targeted opportunity programs receive less than adequate personalized advising to work through the challenging maze of the college search, the application process, the completion of financial aid forms, and then selecting the ideal fit of colleges available to them (Perna, 2015).

However, a key issue is limited resources from pre-college preparation, by institutions during the undergraduate experience, and after graduation (Griffin, 2020; Means & Pyne, 2016;

Tierney, 2004). This includes lack of funding to help improve student performance and overall readiness, along with the limited funding channeled towards analysis of existing programs that would fulfill the responsibilities of student improvement in readiness and performance. An example is Perna and Smith's (2020) research on promise or free tuition program where they determined the dearth of research into these types of opportunity programs has limited the data available for higher education and government leaders to make informed, effective decisions that would provide focused efforts for resource allocation to the most under-resourced student populations. Scholarship suggests that accepting different decision-making and outcomes across demographic groups will be unavoidable, even as both the public and private sector work on encouraging more effort towards access and preparation, while taking intentional steps to address demographic differences across the lines of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Ma et al., 2019; Perna & Kurban, 2013).

To improve understanding of student readiness for college, higher education leaders need to speak directly to them, and to do so regularly. The researchers who explored UMBC's Meyerhoff Scholars Program took a grounded-theory approach to provide a deep explanation of what the identity of this longstanding access and success program truly means. Their open-ended case study with face-to-face interviews highlights how these targeted initiatives help students adjust to a campus through a summer bridge program. The six-week Summer Bridge introduces students to MSP values and expectations, while also building scholars' academic preparation and social dynamics of the University of Maryland – Baltimore County. Second, MSP helps students find their sense of belonging by networking with alumni and introduction to academic research sites from the beginning. Finally, the most important factor in MSP scholars' belonging is a community that becomes like a second family. The scholars described viewing one another with

the type of a love and hate relationship, but with an underlying compassion that you'd have towards a sibling, (Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011).

Pairing this approach with long-term, comprehensive statistical data can help unearth specific challenges and educate us on what fit looks like for students across different groups. Trends from the ACT show gaps in postsecondary goals based on students' curriculum, race, and financial background (ACT, 2010). At its core, however, this report suggests that, regardless of race/ethnicity or annual family income range, students who are ready for college are more likely to achieve postsecondary success (ACT, 2010).

Bringing social psychology to bear on Tinto's argument around assimilation into higher education spaces, Bowman and Denson (2014) explored the relationship between student success and college fit, creating their "Student Institution Fit Instrument" (SIFI) to analyze this dynamic. However, SIFI does not consider or focus on student specific identities (such as first-generation, students of color, etc.) to provide the most adept, best fit conversation. Yet investigations into different identity groups can be very important. Identity groups (race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class) have been factors that show differences in students' decision-making on enrollment, the impact of financial aid, and satisfaction with their college experience (Costa & Steffgen, 2020; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Means & Pyne, 2016; Park, 2009; Perna, 2015). These comparisons can be done by ensuring students can self-identify in studies or when using broad survey data, that these categories are included in the data collection and analysis.

First-generation college students, for example, have been found to be less likely to persist in postsecondary education, even when controlling for academic and social characteristics (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Students who have kids of their own, also known as 'student parents' are part of a larger new population of 'nontraditional college students' becoming more

common across the higher education space. Student-parents are an under-resourced population because postsecondary institutions do not have the range of resources to make the campus community more welcoming to them, such as childcare services (Peterson, 2016). Moreover, student-parents are encouraged to seek early support to help balance time and stay focused.

These examples illuminate some of the unique obstacles presented to different identities or categorized populations. This can be valuable context to understand different student experiences based on how students identify themselves, or for postsecondary institutions to establish different tailored resources that would be made available based on the student identities that are present in their campus community (Kezar et al., 2020). More importantly, research taking multiple approaches that are descriptive and explanatory builds on earlier noted concepts (Perna & Thomas, 2008). For example, pre-college programs, such as summer bridge or transition offerings help boost readiness and allow students to perform better in the college classroom (Strayhorn, 2011). Overall, students' academic preparation for college, indicated by their high school course rigor and performance, is still most connected to how students will perform in the college classroom. Strayhorn (2011) reminds us that a summer bridge program will boost first semester college GPA for comparable students, illustrating how well targeted initiatives can make a difference in student success and outcomes.

Beyond implementation of these targeted programs and resources, it is important to build understanding for how these tools and ecosystems work. The most common data analysis examines broad-level academic-focused, traditional measurements which include enrollment, retention, and degree completion. These points of analysis, while valuable, do not engage the population of current students. However, existing ongoing evaluations do examine outside of the classroom assessments. Two examples are the National Survey of Student Engagement and the

Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey. Both surveys engage undergraduate first-year students, and the NSSE also is administered to senior-standing undergraduates.

The NSSE surveys college students on their participation in education-focused activities, academic requirements and rigor, their perception of the campus environment, students' personal and academic development, and personal demographic information. In the CIRP, incoming first-year students are surveyed before college attendance. CIRP surveys students' high school behaviors, perceptions of their academic preparedness for college, admissions decisions, their expectations for college, engagement with their community (peers and faculty), personal values and goals, their personal demographic information, and concerns about college finances. Across surveys, demographic information allows for aggregate data and trends based on student identity groups. Yet, NSSE and CIRP do not engage on whether students were admitted as part of a targeted access or success program. While CIRP does ask about student participation in a summer bridge, this is not only offered for students enrolling as part of the programs that are the focal point of this research.

The current dissertation study takes a more nuanced and personal approach, compared to the potential trends-based analysis that these surveys provide. A more relational methodology provides additional value in understanding how students explain their growth, sense of belonging, level of support, and other relevant contextual experiences. Current student analysis and direct engagement through interviews is not being utilized to assess the implicit markers of value and success of these targeted access and success programs. This research can deepen and extend what we know beyond the NSSE and CIRP surveys, providing first-hand insights into how students see and understand these aspects of their college-going experiences.

Student Success and Belonging

Student success is defined by students' feelings of belonging, engagement in their college community through student programs such as clubs or organizations, and their discussion of the ease of access to campus resources. This is done by sharing the perspectives of a targeted group of students recruited through and enrolled into targeted opportunity programs designed to help the most underrepresented student populations transition into three higher education institutions.

Student preparation, sense of belonging, and determination have all been found to impact student success and outcomes (Lopez, 2016; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2014; Tierney & Jun, 2001). Most often, success is classified by student degree completion. These data are shown with graduation rates, in both 4-year and 6-year spans, for post-secondary, undergraduate degrees. However, success can also be measured in other ways that extend the inquiry beyond these metrics, which is the focus of the current dissertation.

Targeted opportunity programs are designed to help foster physical locations for direct support areas for students' academic and non-academic needs. Through what Johnson et al. (2020) described as placed-based education, learning communities are established. Learning communities are built around a connection of the classroom curriculum to a college or university's general geographic region, sometimes taking advantage of outdoor engagement. For targeted opportunity programs, this becomes more localized, with an emphasis on the program's physical location within the college's campus. In either case, a regional or more localized learning community puts specific emphasis on key cultural and geographic characteristics to add to students' experiences to create a sense of connection and deeper learning (Johnson et al., 2020). These learning communities allow students to gain a social community connections with one another, create a stronger sense of belonging, and improved outcomes for the most

academically at-risk students – those who experience difficulties with persistence, credit completion, and academic success.

While Johnson et al. (2020) is not focused on targeted opportunity programs and the demographic communities of students enrolled in colleges through these programs, similar research reported on the ways that living-learning communities have directly impacted students' overall character (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). Inkelas and Weisman (2003) determined students' academic transition, enjoyment of academic challenges, and an ability to see things with a new perspective, all because of being part of these unique, place-based environments or living learning communities.

The importance of belonging in the college experience is illuminated by Bowman et al. (2019) whose research developed a theoretical model illustrating how students' transition into college, first to second year retention, and their potential reasons for dropout or attrition, are all impacted by external factors, both on and off campus. Accepting the impact of external and off campus impact creates a dynamic whereby feelings of belonging can shift, with some resulting from events beyond just what happens within the campus environment – including examples such as time spent on social media and students' continued relationships with their parents or family members.

The outcomes from Bowman et al. (2019) emphasize reasons why higher education professionals should work to better understand the impact and value of belonging, including a clear insistence that higher education professional need to more consistently measure students' personal insights of their feelings of belonging within their college environment. The work recommended that institutions maintain non-academic, co-curricular programs (e.g., exercise classes) to boost students' engagement with their peers, cut time spent on social media, and

improve students' feelings of belonging, which were shown to improve satisfaction and retention. This dissertation's emphasis on students' emic perspectives and reporting how the three PWIs put an emphasis on students first-year transition into college with 5–6-week summer programming and on-going program-specific programming, along with finding ways to encourage broader co-curricular engagement is a representative of what Bowman et al. (2019) recommends that postsecondary education institutions be doing for all students to create an improved campus climate.

In fact, the idea of choice is key in the academic space and in co-curricular life. This enters the conversation on campus climate, which provides more direct insight into students' personal assessment of their sense of belonging within their college environment. Students who are more involved with their peers, with campus programming, and are aware of campus support resources, feel a strong sense of belonging (Bowman et al., 2019; Bowman & Denson, 2014). In their initial transition, students need more intentional support, which can help them feel more welcomed to a new environment, and especially for historically marginalized students, to perform better academically as they adjust (Bowman et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2011, 2019). This internal assessment is on-going while students also evaluate if their campus' policies and practices help them feel safe. Underlying this question of personal belonging and safety is whether students believe they can academically and socially thrive as their authentic selves within the existing campus infrastructure that is visible to them.

Two studies analyze this phenomenon more closely. Hurtado et al. (1998) provide a four-dimensional model of campus climate, and suggested ideas to improve education policy around diversity, equity, and inclusion. Hurtado (2007) built on this, noting that "Campus practices that facilitate student interaction with diversity promote a broad-based set of complex-

thinking and socio-cognitive, and democratic skills" (p. 192). These two studies connect the institutional mission to broader civic goals. This means that a college or university can influence positive student experiences and increase their feelings of belonging through changes in institutional policies. Institutional events that are DEI-focused, culturally relevant, and address intersectionality in their demographic approach illustrate a more inclusive campus climate (Strayhorn, 2019). Institutions providing this more inclusive campus community hold great potential for positive impact on the types of targeted programs and the enrolled program students' perspectives that were shared in this practitioner-led dissertation.

Finally, speaking to top administrators at PWIs, Hurtado and Harper (2007) elucidated the differences in how White and Black students see the campus environment and racial climate, is almost opposite in nature. Hurtado and Harper (2007) explicitly recognized that "Black students report lower levels of satisfaction with racial climates and perceive differential treatment on the basis of race more frequently" (p. 12) than their racial and ethnic minority peers. However, White students are the most satisfied racial/ethnic student group and thus incorrectly assume their BIPOC peers are satisfied with the campus' social environment as well. Harper and Hurtado (2007) acknowledged this misperception by White students is evident despite lower co-curricular engagement by BIPOC students.

Yet, due to limited meaningful cross-cultural interactions by students from different racial/ethnic groups, "student leaders who were presumed to have understood the general pulse of the campus were generally unaware" of the differences in students' perception of the campus racial climate (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p. 18). Unfortunately, past research on college campuses illustrates that students do not branch out beyond their self-identified or cultural communities to expand beyond their comfort zones often enough (Gurin, 2004; Harper & Hurtado, 2007;

Strayhorn, 2010). National survey analysis, observations of trends over time, and legal testimonies in major court cases around these issues have illustrated students' tendency to stay within groups and dynamics they are more familiar or comfortable with (Gurin, 2004).

Knowing this, Harper and Hurtado (2007) implored institutions to activate DEI commitments and not just espouse DEI plans or commitments without connecting them to programming or clear institutional policy changes. Examples of these intentional steps by postsecondary leadership include more clearly and consistently talking about the sensitive topic of race(ism), work against unofficial segregation within the campus residential and co-curricular communities, research historical institutional legacies of racism and work to change external reputations or perceptions, develop institutional programming and policies that require cross-racial interaction to seek to build relationships between students from different backgrounds, and illustrate transformation change with collaborative efforts including establishing a culturally diverse and equity-minded curriculum that pushes beyond passive conversations around race. These intentional steps must be consistent, encourage faculty and staff from minoritized racial/ethnic groups to feel comfortable to share their perspective without any concern of punishment, and illustrate clear leadership collaboration in the efforts to be most effective (S. R. Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Kezar et al., 2008; S. Ravitch & Herzog, 2023).

Speaking to students' experiences of higher education institutions overall, Stewart (2013) analyzed students from historically underrepresented ethnic and racial groups' CIRP survey results using a quantitative evaluation. Students' answers on the survey illustrated that students who are grouped as racially minoritized or underrepresented in higher education, still have differing experiences across postsecondary institutions. Some students in these racial or ethnic minority populations shared satisfaction with their college experience despite not experiencing a

level of social engagement that illustrated they are fully involved in their postsecondary education institution's co-curricular life through campus student organizations or events and programming. Stewart (2013) focused on student satisfaction with their institution (on a 1-5 Likert scale) and three specific types of campus involvement – leadership training, internship participation, and volunteer work, which were highlighted because of their positive impact on learning outcomes. These details were also combined with additional context of the students' pre-college characteristics of being a first-generation college student and family income (based on students' estimation of their parent's(s') income).

Analyzing the sample students' CIRP responses, this study concluded that students who self-identified with historically minoritized ethnic/racial demographic groups did not participate in leadership training, while nearly 50% of the sample completed an internship, and a majority (nearly 82%) participated in volunteer work. The trends of participation varied across racial and ethnic groups, with Black students being more likely to complete leadership training compared to Asian students, Black and Latino students showed more similar engagement levels, and multi-racial or biracial identifying students were dissimilar from all other groups. Further, student pre-college characteristics did not show a significant quantitative impact on students' involvement or ratings of satisfaction across any racial/ethnic demographic group. A key focus of the research was the approach to compare only students who identified themselves with a demographic racial or ethnic group that is historically underrepresented in higher education. Stewart (2013) approached the research with an intentional purpose that their concern that, "studying racially minoritized students only in comparison to their White peers, results in seeing them as deficient and at-risk" (p. 186).

Based on this purpose and their findings, Stewart (2013) encourages student affairs professionals to approach programming, and activities outreach differently to bring different groups together more often. This feeds into the networking model introduced in earlier research (Stanton-Salazar, 2004). The framework of social capital combined with institutional support allows for students' social network to increase and can be boosted by the universities intentional engagement to provide resources. Within this model, consideration for the unique and different needs across groups (e.g., student-parents) must be considered to most effectively engage across group dynamics and with adequate services (St. Amour, 2020).

Recent research introduces another potential for cross-community engagement through Talent Hubs, described as cross-sector partnerships working to heal communities through systemic reform around education, employment, and health disparities by Race/Ethnicity/SES (Davis et al., 2020). Talent hubs invite new networks within a campus community that draw different groups to come together, develop partnerships, and create an interconnected networking dynamic (Davis et al., 2020). These different modalities are intentional efforts for cross-cultural engagement for individuals from different racial/ethnic backgrounds with the key goal being to create multiple pathways to increased education beyond a high school diploma, and to establish a community of skilled and knowledgeable workers who are retainable because of the support network surrounding them due to Talent Hubs' intentional emphasis on equity-minded best practices (Davis et al., 2020).

Prior research has made it clear cross-cultural, multi-racial, and diverse curricula in postsecondary education benefits all students with greater capacity to work in diverse environments after college and boosting intellectual development due to being introduced to new, sometimes unknown values or insights through individuals from different backgrounds

(Gurin, 2004; S. R. Harper, 2008; S. R. Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 2007; S. Ravitch & Herzog, 2023; Stanton-Salazar, 2009). Yet, there is limited insight into how students invest in these types of cross-cultural, potentially cross-generational engagements. The literature does not illuminate where students see themselves fitting into some of these new ideas and processes. Certainly, the demographics of college-aged students illustrate that this population continues to become a more diverse group, with increasing percentages originating from historically underrepresented communities (Carnevale et al., 2019; National Student Clearinghouse, 2022; Perna, 2015; Perna et al., 2008).

Prior research illustrates that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and other historically minoritized populations are boosted in postsecondary education environments by programs that help them find their fit and encourage their sense of belonging (Baum et al., 2010; Ma et al., 2019; Perna & Kurban, 2013; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2008). To understand the quality of initiatives like targeted access and success programs research must engage the student communities to understand their experiences and what they take away from the resources introduced and offered within the ecosystem.

Workforce Implications

Especially with ideas such as upskilling and the need for an adequately trained workforce, it is important to understand that the United States is a nation dependent on the ability of postsecondary institutions to pivot and respond to a more diverse group of students (Perna, 2015). The focus of postsecondary education institutions is their ability to enroll students and successfully provide them with an effective educational experience. The American economy benefits from effective education with the production of qualified workers to employ. Valuable economic gains and students' educational needs being adequately met, all come together in

shared social capital (Bourdieu, 2008) that can benefit all parties. It is therefore desirable to develop foundations that help explain what promotes success through these programs among the most underrepresented student populations (Green & Bedeau, 2020).

To do this well, higher education research must refine its definition of success and further conceptualize targeted programs in ways that maximize student success. Perna and Thomas (2008) provide ten indicators as a definition for student success, which fall under themes of readiness, enrollment, achievement, and attainment after college. The ten indicators are: (1) educational aspiration, (2) academic preparation, (3) college access, (4) college choices, (5) academic performance, (6) transfer, (7) persistence to completion, (8) post-BA enrollment, (9) income, and (10) education attainment (Perna et al., 2008). For adequate implementation, research and practices must move beyond broad themes of evaluation to more effectively understand students' success.

Harper and Hurtado (2007) tell student affairs leaders in higher education to work to make sure that students minoritized by racial/ethnic groups do not feel like “guests in someone else’s house” (p. 20) by taking intentional steps to build out campus events and activities with cultural diversity and facilitation of cross-cultural engagement and diverse friendships for students from different ethnic/racial identity groups. Ravitch and Herzog (2023) voice a similar call to action that institutions must build relational trust, which is “built through day-to-day social exchanges and evinces a shared sense of imperative to take on the challenging work of complex adaptive change,” (p. 76). Both Harper and Hurtado (2007) and Ravitch and Herzog (2023) place responsibility on the institutions to make clear changes that illustrate to students that their belonging is important. Prior research puts the emphasis on postsecondary institutions to illustrate the importance of students' belonging through building programs that help students

feel safe, to feel that they welcome, and are consistent. These types of efforts are to ensure students do not feel these broad efforts are only in response to student dissatisfaction or a negative social or racial incident (Edwards, 2011; Hailu & Sarubbi, 2019; Kezar, 2008; Kezar & Eckel, 2008).

Speaking of implementation of research and practices for student success, Kolluri and Tierney (2020) remind scholars of the need for deeper study of DEI programs to build on that clear understanding of success. One example is broader data around degrees conferred (Indicator 24: Degrees Awarded, 2019). This dissertation examines the issue from multiple perspectives to create the conditions for students to describe their own experiences and perspectives on the value of programs like these, and the opportunities made available to them as part of these interconnected communities.

Where Perna et. al (2008) outline ten indicators to explore, Koullori and Tierney (2020) encourage deeper study of specific DEI programs. This practitioner-led dissertation takes the baton with a more focused, qualitative analysis of targeted opportunity programs with emphasis on how students described their experiences and the efficacy of this model of DEI program in higher education. By introducing students' personal insights and building out common trends or themes from this emic methodology, this study introduces new context around targeted opportunity programs. Prior research has shown how these programs increase sense of belonging, academic performance, and co-curricular involvement (Green & Bedeau, 2020; Pell Institute, 2009; Perna, 2015; Strayhorn, 2019). This dissertation explores student insights to understand how they experience their programs in terms of impact in these areas, along with how students themselves conceptualize and describe these interactions and themes.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter describes the methodological processes foundational to this practitioner-led, exploratory dissertation as well as its research design, data analysis, and treatment of validity issues. First, the study's conceptual framework is distilled. Next, the study's research design, its specific goals, and how these goals relate to the study's driving research questions are described.

From there, the practices and methods used for data collection outline how and why this research enables a deeper explanation of students' lived experiences of opportunity programs and their impact on their college-going experiences and outcomes.

Finally, the chapter closes with explanations of researcher positionality in practitioner research, measures taken to ensure study validity and data reliability, and study limitations. Taken together, these methods can help future researchers understand how to implement a balanced, equitable, and contextualized approach to research on access and success programs as a phenomenon in college campus contexts.

Conceptual Framework

Since the 1960s and 1970s, the federal government has set a tone with a combination of economic and educational policies that impact access to postsecondary education for historically marginalized demographic communities. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the 1965 Higher Education Act both were at the forefront of this transition in response to social advocacy of the broader civil rights movement in the United States. Following the lead of national legislation, state governments created education access programs, including the state of New York. There, the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) and Education Opportunity Program (EOP) initiatives allowed both public (HEOP) and private (EOP) postsecondary

institutions to utilize state funding to support access programs for students qualified as underrepresented or under-resourced, and thus to support their access to resources that boost advancement into postsecondary educational institutions (Nyquist, 1974; NYSSCA, 2019).

This practitioner-led dissertation research examines a particular type of access initiative that has grown out of the above historical efforts, analyzing targeted opportunity programs in the state of New York. As the lead admission officer for diversity recruitment initiatives at one of the institutions featured in this research, I was closely connected to this topic and students who would be admitted into a targeted opportunity program. My personal identity as a first-generation college graduate and former Pell Grant recipient, and my professional responsibility to increase the diversity of the institution's student population in terms of race, ethnicity, geographic location, and socioeconomic status, all created connection to this research topic.

The establishment of EOP and HEOP in the state of New York were the initial thread that allowed the institution in which I worked to grow into a fully institutionally funded opportunity program that had no requirements on student state of residence. Moreover, interest in this phenomenon transcends my own practice and work environment, and this study seeks to generate broader understanding of how student experiences can be elevated and leveraged to shape what opportunity programs and those working within them do, as well as the impact these program approaches have on students throughout their college experiences. To examine these phenomena in context and to drive a study that could evince deep understanding of the experiences of enrolled students with diverse expectations, identities, and aspirations in targeted opportunity programs at predominantly White liberal arts campuses, research questions were developed and posed to drive an emic, student-focused qualitative examination.

Theoretical Context

This dissertation research focused on undergraduate students' emic, or insider, articulation of their perspectives into life as enrolled students in their respective targeted opportunity programs. Previous practitioner-based research (Shulman, 1986) and additional scholarly research have determined that targeted opportunity programs are utilized by postsecondary education institutions to add racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity to campus student populations (Green & Bedeau, 2020).

This dissertation addressed three interrelated goals. First, it employed Strayhorn's (2010) three-pronged definition of diversity to explain how three PWIs developed an institutional focus on targeted recruitment and enrollment of students from historically underrepresented communities. Second, it illustrated how targeted opportunity programs provide the individuals within this community with an internal boost of cultural capital for future development (Bourdieu, 1986/1983; Means & Pyne, 2016). Third, it identified and analyzed student meaning-making, perspectives, and insights through an emic, student-focused approach that engaged their stories and narrations of their experiences in their respective PWIs to understand the contours, priorities, and efficacy of targeted opportunity programs.

Prior research illustrates an additional theoretical approach that illustrated the benefits of education on individuals' social, cultural, and economic capital as well. Bourdieu's (1986/1983) theory of social capital includes knowledge of educational institutions and institutional processes passed across generations in ways that inform and improve students' social and economic outcomes. Recognizing this, opportunity gaps for communities with different financial means or generational knowledge are expected. In fact, Serna and Woulfe (2017) use social reproduction theory to explain the opportunity gaps for historically underrepresented communities whose

members are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or students of color, who had been excluded from higher education opportunities and had been limited in social capital to improve their economic opportunities.

DEI-specific strategies implemented at all levels of education and policy create the possibility for historically marginalized students to overcome structural barriers. Implementation includes improved K-12 support structures and counsel, federal and state legislation, and institutional leadership with intentional equity-minded practices. Marginalized students can benefit from being educated earlier in their lives on their prospects and how to navigate an unknown system, and from creating a legislative environment that provides funding and/or information that is more supportive as well (Kezar & Eckel, 2008; Perna, 2006; Perna et al., 2008; Ward & Tierney, 2017).

Emergent Student-Centered Approach

The conceptual framework for this research emerged from identifying the gaps and limitations of existing scholarship on students' perspectives on their experiences and how they describe the value of opportunity programs. This work is a clarion call for research that examines students' emic perspectives through student-centered qualitative research methods. The initial review of existing research in this area found the typical way to gain insight on students enrolled in opportunity programs was through broader survey data (e.g., NSSE and CIRP) where researchers extracted relevant parts of the students' responses for further analysis (Douglas & Attewell, 2014; Strayhorn, 2010). Another approach from prior studies of opportunity programs employs customized surveys created as part of the research design (Johnson et al., 2020; Phillips, 2005; Strayhorn, 2011).

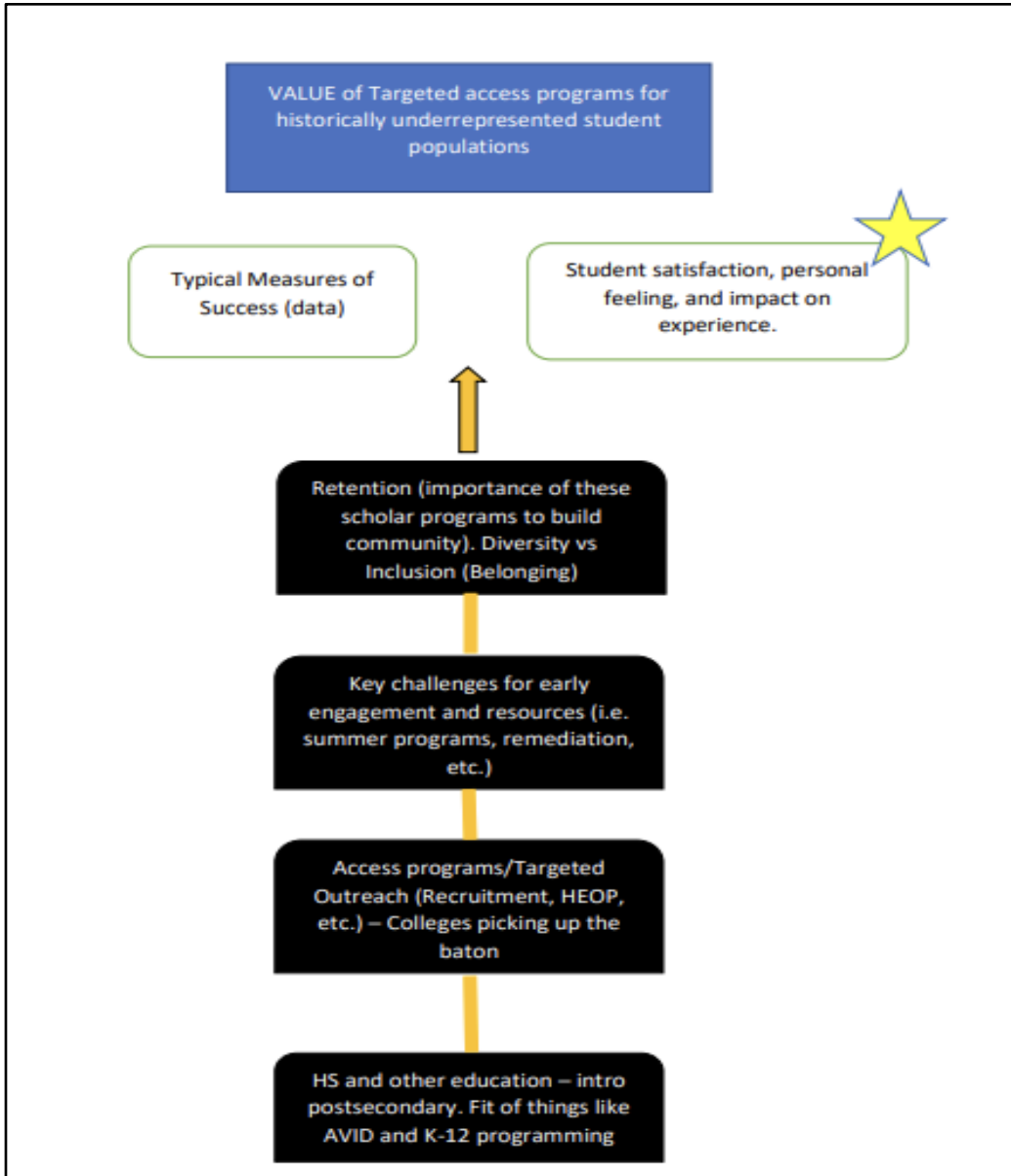
Semi-structured interviews of program leaders were used to elicit emic language and concepts, which allowed participants to introduce concepts that are culturally and/or contextually relevant to the research topic. In the analysis of student perspectives, focus groups were utilized across each site. These personal interactions were used to determine what common themes and differences would be highlighted across each site. This study introduced the analysis of a different classification of postsecondary institutions from previous research. Lopez (2016) collected student data through semi-structured interviews within the community college setting.

This dissertation focuses on current students and understanding their lived experiences within similar institutions with different approaches to their targeted opportunity programs. Prior research was examined to understand historical legacy and the role of legislation, the development of different types of access programs or initiatives on college campuses, and how targeted opportunity programs fit into research.

First, the practitioner insight to explore students' emic perspectives began in the proposal stages while analyzing prior research on opportunity programs. Figure 2 illustrates the concepts that encouraged more intentionality in the study of opportunity programs. From there, the study engaged students enrolled at a specific type of higher education institution – selective admissions, residential liberal arts colleges.

Figure 2

Key Concepts in the Emergent Student-Centered Approach



Researcher Reflexivity

This study focused on the perspectives of staff leaders and student scholars from three opportunity programs, all of which enrolled students from historically marginalized identity groups. I established this understanding through discourse around student fit, retention, and persistence to graduation from a historical, qualitative perspective (Bowman et al., 2019; Bowman & Denson, 2014; Luedke, 2020). The study's approach transitions from prior research methods analyzing opportunity programs in higher education. By using an emic, student-focused approach for data collection, this dissertation puts a prime emphasis on reflexivity, by accepting Ravitch and Carl's (2021) assertion that "people are experts of their own experiences" (p. 121). This study design prioritized student expertise of their own lived experience, creating the conditions for them to openly share their personal insights on the experience and impacts of their enrollment in targeted opportunity programs.

Researcher reflexivity is a researcher's ability to reflect on the impact of a research study's design, to consider how researcher biases may impact the research, and ongoing reflection into whether the research and its processes are appropriate to meet the goals of the study (APA, 2023; Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 121). Researcher reflexivity is vital to ensuring valid and rigorous research, while also establishing researcher-generated data through researcher memos, journals, and dialogic engagement (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 121).

This research explores students' perspectives of their respective opportunity programs using the concepts of tailoring success outlined in Kezar et al. (2020). Tailoring is a conceptual model whereby opportunity program leaders can utilize consistent trends of different students' unique needs to establish broader program resources that can serve multifaceted and unique needs of different students with intentional overall program modifications (Kezar et al., 2020, p.

11). In their establishment of tailoring in higher education, Kezar et al. (2020) highlighted bringing the concept of tailoring from other industries such as healthcare, social work, and K-12 education, yet remained clear about the comprehensive combination of multi-structured supports that tailoring is built around having “virtually no empirically based higher education models” (p. 3). The current study invites students’ diverse, personal perspectives from across three different PWIs opportunity programs to illustrate how a postsecondary institution could employ a similar model within a targeted opportunity program structure.

Importantly, diversity does not equal inclusion (Tienda, 2013). In this study this means that despite increased institutional commitments to add diverse ethnic/racial groups and socioeconomic diversity through targeted opportunity programs at the three PWIs in this study, this alone does not corroborate or lead to students enrolled in the programs feeling an increased sense of belonging. This practitioner-led dissertation featured personal insights from program leaders and student scholars to more critically understand how the students describe the benefits of being enrolled through these opportunity programs, how the programs impact students’ co-curricular and academic experiences, and the ways that students’ sense of belonging has an exponential impact on students’ overall experience. As previously mentioned, I identify with students enrolled in targeted opportunity programs. Yet, I did not enroll in this type of program as an undergraduate student. I recognize that my positionality as a college administrator could impact students’ comfort within the data collection and chose focus groups to encourage a level of comfort and willingness to share experiences openly and authentically. As noted in the Limitation section, there is also the generative potential of groupthink in this approach, which means that students relate with, refute, and build on each other’s insights to produce the most layered data set possible (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Recognizing that there is limited research in this area where scholars have engaged with students through direct interaction, I felt compelled to explore this topic in a more student-centered and contextualized way to understand the nature of students' lived experiences of what their opportunity programs provide and how this impacts their overall college experience, (Lopez, 2016; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2011). The success of tailoring is the ability to meet students' diverse needs within the structure of an institutional program, while reducing the individual human effort of program leadership (Kezar et al., 2020). This research speaks to the cognitive benefit for students to have opportunity programs that combine all support resources within a single umbrella (Kezar et al., 2020; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011).

This study fills a gap in this area of scholarship through analysis of a different Carnegie classification of postsecondary institution from previous studies that include student perspectives (Kezar et al., 2020; Lopez, 2016; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011). This dissertation research expands the limited historical research using an emic approach of students' perspectives as the primary qualitative factor in assessing opportunity programs (Lopez, 2016; Strayhorn, 2011). Students' emic perspectives proved invaluable, since it allowed for learning from the individuals who are or have lived the experience of being enrolled in these opportunity programs and understanding how the programs work best for them. This additional student insight provides additional understanding into the authenticity of the idea that students "may simply be unaware of the myriad support services available to them in college" (Kezar et al., 2020, p. 14). The direct engagement methodology of this dissertation enabled students to address the theme of success in tailoring the program to ensure the resources provided met the various types of academic and social integration highlighted in the Meyerhoff Scholarship Program featured in Stolle-McAllister et al. (2011).

To further expand on the findings of prior research, this dissertation sought to uncover deeper insights gained from students' emic perspectives and personal assessment of their own understanding of sense of belonging, one of the supported outcomes from prior research into opportunity programs and student access (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2011). Strayhorn (2011) illustrated small increases in students' sense of belonging through survey methodology, while Johnson et al. (2020) provided stronger self-reported insights from students in research of unique living-learning communities. Students explained their willingness to be more involved in the campus community, recounted self-reported boosts in their academic performance, and highlighted a lack of concern with accessing campus support resources with structured programs that provide easy links to services and resources, direct mentorship, and more organized logistical processes (Johnson et al., 2020; Kezar et al., 2020).

Kezar et al. (2020, p. 11) stated that tailoring is a conceptual model whereby opportunity program leaders can utilize consistent trends of different students' unique needs to establish broader program resources that can serve multifaceted and unique needs of different students with intentional overall program modifications. This idea relates to findings in Johnson et al. (2020) on living-learning communities. In both cases, students shared that these student-centered interventions provided boosts in how they experienced their undergraduate college environment. While surveys can provide a quantitative measure of changes (Johnson et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2011), these do not give the type of context-specific adjustments that tailoring calls for (Kezar et al., 2020). These adjustments can shed light on the unique differences between low-income students' smaller effect size for sense of belonging compared to first-generation and underrepresented student groups in Johnson et al. (2020).

Methodology and Research Design

This research analyzes the success and value of targeted access and success programs for historically underrepresented students at private, residential liberal arts colleges. The study built on prior theories and analysis in the research of Stolle-McAllister et al. (2011) and Lopez (2016) through engaging with students in focus groups, adding valuable perspectives and greater depth to scholarship on the impact of targeted access, success, and opportunity programs. Collecting qualitative data from students on student expectations and details on their actual lived experiences can help establish a more comprehensive dataset when paired with qualitative data on student outcomes, retention, enrollment to help mold targeted programs to be more responsive to meet students' personal needs and expectations. Quantitative data, while valuable for many kinds of programmatic improvement goals, on its own cannot help higher education leaders understand underlying challenges students may be facing that are ecosystemic and contextual. Additionally, insights from professionals who work most closely with students in targeted programs can enable higher education leadership to be more adaptive and possibly stay ahead of programmatic issues before they turn into crises (Kezar, 2008, 2011; Kezar et al., 2008).

Stated another way, postsecondary institutions must go beyond a mission statement to taking steps such as appointing a chief diversity officer or other representations of their espoused commitment to DEI issues (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Wilson et al., 2012). Higher education leaders must implement consistent and intentional efforts to bring students together across racial and cultural identities with co-curricular programming, while embedding DEI concepts into the academic curriculum (Green & Bedeau, 2020; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Kezar & Eckel, 2008; Ravitch & Kannan, 2021). These more aggressive and culturally focused efforts are equity-minded practices that can boost access to the kinds of social capital and resources that can allow

students in targeted programs to find their place on campus, which in turn supports success beyond graduation through professional or post-baccalaureate educational opportunities (Carnevale et al., 2019; Gurin, 2004; Johnson et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2013).

Rationale for Qualitative, Emic, Student-focused Methods

Research, government policy, government funding, and practical implementations at the institutional level demonstrated efforts to improve access to tools that have helped boost social capital and the share of resources in higher education devoted to historically underserved students. This is clear following federal legislation from the 1960s, including the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Higher Education Act of 1965, which both established foundational elements to the creation of federally funded programs such as TRIO with an effort “to identify, recruit and aid students from historically under resourced backgrounds into and through higher education institutions with a completed degree” (Green & Bedeau, 2020). At the state level, Higher Education Opportunity Programs (HEOP) have become a standard. New York has been implementing these state-funded programs with an emphasis on the support of economically disadvantaged students since the 1970’s (Glazer, 1982). Two key studies jumped out as more national examples to understand more in-depth analysis of these programs thus far.

Prior research analyzing opportunity programs has been primarily quantitative. The data points used most often as examples of the success of targeted opportunity programs are students’ first-year retention and degree completion rates (Johnson et al., 2020; Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018; Strayhorn, 2010). Beyond these measures, additional quantitative research focuses on historically underrepresented students’ higher rates of leaving college without earning their degree (Tinto, 1993). These examples do not examine the context of why students struggle or how the students’ perceptions are understood in those struggles.

This dissertation builds on quantitative research analyzing the cultural affirmation and support systems that allowed students from historically underrepresented demographic groups to thrive as indicated by the students' enrollment in and continued retention through postsecondary education (Tierney, 1999; Tierney & Jun, 2001). Finally, prior research advocated for better resource allocation to serve under-resourced students and the postsecondary institutions where they are more likely to enroll (Perna, 2015). In testimony before Congress, Perna showed how this would be beneficial to the nation's future by increasing the nation's college enrollment, providing improved understanding by postsecondary institutions' to meet contextual needs of students in their location or regions, and increasing degree completion rates (Perna, 2015).

Strayhorn (2011) and Stolle-McAllister et al. (2011) explored a single targeted program in each study, and both utilized qualitative methods with surveys and observations of targeted programs supporting diverse students. These researchers sought to understand how the targeted programs helped students academically and socially, with engagement in activities and feelings of belonging.

Stolle-McAllister et al. (2011) analyzed the Meyerhoff Scholars Program (MSP), the preeminent college access program within the University of Maryland Baltimore County. The study shared ways students in MSP described the financial support, summer bridge program, and formation of the Meyerhoff identity. Students in MSP developed confidence, elevated their social reputation at the institution, found familial connections, and built networks through their engagement in the program. Stolle-McAllister et al. (2011) utilized a mixed collection of students in focus groups (200 contacts in 30 groups) that included incoming first-year students engaged in MSP's summer bridge program, currently enrolled upper class standing students, and

recent graduates. The focus group methodology used open-ended questions coded based on students' answers to generate categories for additional analysis.

Strayhorn's (2011) research focused on the improved college preparation of students who participated in Summer Bridge Programs. This research implemented the multilayered approach of Perna and Thomas (2008), which proposed a new conceptual model looking at ten measures of student success and categorized them into four academic disciplines – economics, sociology, psychology, and education -- with a goal to review existing literature for an improved experience for students who qualified as economically disadvantaged, ethnic minority undergraduate students at predominantly White institutions of higher education.

In Strayhorn's work, data were collected through a pre and post survey sent to fifty-five students enrolled in the summer bridge program of a predominantly White research university in the Southeastern United States. All students were invited to participate via email. Strayhorn's research specifically highlighted the lack of research in higher education focused on this intersectionality of students' personal identities. Strayhorn found that summer bridge programs alone do not have a statistically significant impact on students' sense of belonging or social integration, but do provide a statistically significant impact on academic performance.

This dissertation introduces a different perspective, sharing students' personal insights into their insider (i.e., emic) details of how they describe the value and success of targeted programs while attending a particular type of college campus (residential, selective admission, liberal arts) using qualitative research methods. Qualitative research allows for deep engagement with the setting and people within the environment. I utilized Creswell and Poth's (2016) definition for qualitative research by collecting data centered around current undergraduate students' perspectives and lived experiences as members of targeted opportunity programs.

The overarching goal of this dissertation study was to add to research around targeted opportunity programs by sharing students' emic perspectives. This was done using interviews focused on student engagement, feelings of belonging, and success academically and socially, through campus activities. Student participants whose personal insights were shared in this dissertation research are enrolled at three campuses that fit the mold of selective admission, four-year private institutions with a predominantly White undergraduate student community also identified by their liberal arts curriculum. All three institutions are in the state of New York.

Institution A has combined a government-funded Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) with an institution-established program. With this approach, Institution A combined state funding, institutional funding, and institutional mission to create an opportunity program that introduces an annual cohort of 20 to 30 first-year students, half of which will be HEOP. Institution B has a signature institution-created program for an access and success program with an emphasis on both academic and social preparation. Institution C only utilizes the state-funded model of a Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP). This leaves Institution C as the only program with exclusive enrollment of New York State residents. The institutions are of similar profile in size, academic environment, and residential community, and all require a multi-week summer bridge program.

This dissertation study focused on students' assessment of their targeted opportunity program's value (i.e., meeting their needs, access to resources) and on key personal issues such as the sense of belonging. In this dissertation, the emphasis was on gaining student perspectives in focus groups, and observations of the programs' campuses. The sites are postsecondary education institutions in different locations within the state of New York. Each campus hosts its own opportunity program with different formats. Additionally, taking an emic, student-centered

approach, whereby study participants' personal insights would introduce contextually fitting theories and ideas, I added a missing piece in the existing scholarship on opportunity programs. This emic, student-focused approach further allowed the uncovering of common perspectives, insights, and context into the efficacy and value of these similar programs across the three postsecondary institutions.

Study Goals and Research Questions

The driving goal of this practitioner dissertation was to add valuable context that is unaccounted for without details of student experiences, as part of measuring students' success in opportunity programs. This research sought to explore and understand the context behind the academic and co-curricular resources provided specifically for students who are part of access and success initiatives developed for first-generation, low-income, students of minority racial and ethnic groups, and/or students who identify with other historically marginalized populations.

To adequately understand the targeted opportunity programs at Institution A, Institution B, and Institution C, research began with the interview of a key administrative or faculty member in a leadership role for the program at each campus. The leaders provided details beyond the publicly available information found on the institutions' websites. These 45–60-minute interviews offered meaningful, subjective descriptions of the contexts of the three programs, including learning more about the types of specific resources made available to students from their nested perspectives.

Interviews with institutional leaders were followed by focus groups made-up of current undergraduate students who were admitted as part of the institution's targeted access program. This research process was designed to effectively share how the students view the level and kinds of support made available to them. Both leader interviews and student focus groups built a

more comprehensive description of the type of environments (i.e., physical space, resources, and other support services) offered in each program, the admissions and recruitment processes, and details about how students were selected into the opportunity programs.

Focus groups included undergraduate students who ranged from new first-year students to recent graduates from the current academic year. The focus groups were comprised of four to six students at each campus. These group interviews highlighted students' perspectives on their sense of belonging, available program and institutional support resources, and the campus community beyond the opportunity program. The students' opinions on their lived experiences and the ins and outs of their program and campus contexts were useful in relation to the insights gathered from the one-on-one interviews with the leaders of each program. The main goal was to understand how students in the targeted access programs see their own situation in relation to the views of the administrative or faculty leaders of these programs. These research questions inquire into how students with a range of expectations, identities, and aspirations in targeted opportunity programs at predominantly White liberal arts campuses experience these targeted college programs:

How do undergraduate students with diverse backgrounds, needs, and aspirations in targeted opportunity programs at selective PWIs...

1. Experience program support for making connections in the program and across campus?
2. Experience and understand the structure, value, and impacts of their program?

Site Selection

The three campuses were selected based on their similarity in Carnegie Classification, demographics of the student populations, and location. To illustrate intentionality in diversifying the student body, these three institutions host opportunity programs that target the recruitment

and enrollment of students who identify as first-generation, students of color, low income, or other historically marginalized communities in higher education. The similarities were important to add to the validity of the data shared by allowing for a focus on students' emic perspectives on the impact of each targeted opportunity program from groups of students who are facing similar circumstances (e.g., location, type of institution, and general student population demographics), and with access to similar resources across the institutions in this study.

Data collection related to students' insights into their experiences being enrolled into targeted access programs at three residential, selective admission, private four-year liberal arts institutions in New York State. The campuses in this study all report more than 60% of their student communities identifying with the racial category white, which makes these institutions predominantly white institutions (PWI) (Bourke, 2016). Table 1 below was created using publicly available information from each of the institutional websites and provides details on each research site and an overview of the structures of their targeted access programs.

Table 1*Institutional Index of Access and Success Programs*

| Institution | A | B | C |
|---------------------------------|--|--|---|
| # of students enrolled | 72 students (18-20 annually) | 120 – 160 (30-40 annually) | 72 students (18-20 annually) |
| Institutional Demographics | 2,050 students 23% domestic students of color 21% first-generation college students 10% international students | 3,206 students 25% domestic students of color 13% first-generation college students 9% international students | 2,145 students 12% domestic students of color 19% first-generation college students 9.6% international students |
| Program Demographic Requirement | US citizen or Permanent Resident HS graduate First-generation college student Demonstrated financial need (based on household size, family income, & federal aid process) | 30-40 scholars each year First-generation college student | NY-state resident & HS graduate First-generation college student Demonstrated financial need (based on household size, family income, & NY State Ed Dept. guidelines) |
| Staffing Structure | 4-person team: Director, Associate Director, Academic Coordinator, Administrative Coordinator | 4-person team: Faculty Director, Associate Director, Administrative Dean, Graduate Fellow | 3-person team: Director, Assistant Director, Administrative Assistant |

Each campus includes an undergraduate population that is majority white students, also known as a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Information on the staffing was included for each site to highlight details on the interviews with key leaders for the opportunity programs in this study. I gained additional insights into each program's selection process, average size, and makeup of the student populations through these one-on-one interviews with program leaders. Across the three institutions all program leaders described unique evaluation processes for the student application review and enrollment process into their opportunity program. These unique admission evaluation processes included criteria for the students who can be selected, with all three institutions requiring students who were considered for admission into the opportunity programs to be categorized as first-generation and from low socioeconomic status families.

The campuses follow a trend in higher education with an institutional mission statement and/or specific diversity statement expressing a commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (Wilson et al., 2012). These opportunity programs are illustrations of that commitment of structural diversity in considering the demographic makeup of the student body (Strayhorn, 2010). This research sought to establish a narrative conclusion that can provide insights about how diverse students in these environments, who face common circumstances, feel they are supported by the opportunity program and their respective structures, processes, and resources. Interviews, focus groups, and site observations were utilized to collect data of the above research setting and programs.

Participant Selection

The selection criteria for research participants for this dissertation were that the student sample be only students enrolled in each of the three institutions' targeted opportunity programs. This was done to gain students' emic perspectives into their understanding of the impact the

opportunity programs have had on their overall college experience. Student participants were selected by recruiting volunteers to engage in focus groups with me.

The sample of students were recruited using a common email requesting volunteers, which was first sent to program leaders to forward to the currently enrolled students. The dissertation utilized a similar participant selection criterion to Stolle-McAllister (2011) and Strayhorn's (2011) foundational research. Both utilized student research participants enrolled into postsecondary institutions' opportunity programs through a targeted recruitment and admissions evaluation process.

The student participant group was 16 undergraduate students from a range of social backgrounds across the three programs. The focus groups ranged from 4-6 students at each institution. All students were first-generation and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds based on the criteria for admission into the opportunity programs at the three PWIs. The table below gives details for Institution A, Institution B, and Institution C, providing information on the number of students, how they self-identified their racial/ethnic origin and sex. This information was collected using the Pre-Focus Group survey-style form shared before the focus group conversations began, which is found in Appendix F.

Table 2*Participants in Focus Groups*

| Institution | Leader Interview Detail | Focus Group Detail |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| A | Program Director | 6 students 3 seniors, 2 juniors, 1 freshman 4 she/her, 1 he/him 3 Black, 2 Hispanic, 1 Unknown |
| B | Associate Director | 4 students 3 seniors, 1 junior 1 she/her, 3 he/him 2 Black, 1 Hispanic, 1 Unknown |
| C | Program Director | 6 students 3 senior, 2 junior, 1 freshman 4 she/her, 2 he/him 3 Hispanic, 2 Black, 1 two or more races |

Data Collection

Data Collection was done using three primary methods. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or using the Zoom video platform. Second, semi-structured student focus groups of 4-6 students from each institution were conducted in-person or using the Zoom video platform. Finally, site observations with observational fieldnotes were conducted at two of the three PWIs, that is, those that I visited in-person to conduct interviews and focus group data collection. The sections below provide details about the three data collection methods.

Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews constitute an intentional, structured social interaction through focused dialogic engagement; they are viewed as a mainstay of qualitative data collection because they generate individualized and contextualized data (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Individual interviews provided details on each interviewee's lived experiences, insights into specific events and phenomena as they perceived them, and details on how their perspectives relate to other participants in their settings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The driving reasons for including interviews in this study were to develop student-centered, detailed, and contextualized descriptions of nuanced experiences, to learn how student participants interpret events, and to develop holistic descriptions of contextual factors and their connection to program experience and outcomes (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In-depth interviews provide the unique ability to understand the contextual realities that shape people's perspectives on issues of race and equity as they play out in social interaction and organizational life (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Warikoo, 2016). Qualitative interviews provide the opportunity to collect data not only about behavior but about the representations, cultural beliefs, classification systems, emotions, imagined and experienced realities that can help to explain the actions of individuals

in the social world (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). The semi-structured nature of the interview protocols and process, along with the goal of building insider understanding of each program's student selection structure and available resources, invited the opportunity for emic perspectives to emerge.

A primary faculty or staff leader of the opportunity program working within each of the three site institutions was selected to be interviewed first using a semi-structured interview process. All faculty and administrator interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom live video platform. All interviews were audio recorded for verbatim transcription. Recorded sessions were stored on a separate external hard drive for improved security to protect participant information and collected transcripts data. Data from the interviews were read inductively as they came in and then coded through a qualitative data analysis process that used an inductive thematic approach focused on emic concepts, framings, and language for student interviews.

Interviews with staff and faculty leadership were conducted for validity through intentional, perspectival triangulation of perspectives within each of the institutions' opportunity programs (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Leaders for each program shared their own experiences and observations in ways that helped to build a layered understanding of the structures, logistics, processes, and outcomes of the opportunity programs that student participants would not have firsthand knowledge about. Importantly, these interviews created the conditions for the triangulation of student perceptions of their program's structure, orientation, process, and outputs which were then analyzed in relation to the respective institutional leader at their program site.

Focus Groups

Engaging beyond the numbers matters because it humanizes them while boosting student voice. Thus, this study employed the relational and dynamic approach of data collection via student focus groups. As Creswell and Poth (2016, p. 164) note:

Focus groups are advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information, when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other, when time to collect information is limited, and when individuals interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information.

Unlike one-on-one interviews, focus groups enable groupthink but also provide for dialogic engagement, which is a tremendous asset. One thing that needed active attention in these groups was when outspoken participants took attention away from more introverted or shy members of the group (Creswell & Poth, 2016). These dynamics were at the forefront of my mind as I conducted these data collection events.

Importantly, the establishment of a comfortable environment and good group management by the interviewer can help balance these issues (Creswell & Poth, 2016). With the student participants in this study, I engaged my shared identity as a Black, first-generation, Pell Grant, college graduate as a connection point. Representation matters. Additionally, I worked to remain conscious that my professional role as a researcher and admissions professional could be a potential factor in how people understood and responded to questions.

In particular, I remained aware of attentive to the fact that this positionality could make students less likely to deeply engage due to issues with power dynamics that work against how open or authentic the group would be (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The focus group was implemented to build comfort by conducting them on the students' home campuses to allow for a level of freer engagement and open discussion. Additionally, focus group sessions provided the

opportunity to directly experience the community and campus environments that students and their institutional leadership described.

To recruit students for the research focus groups, I emailed current faculty and/or administrative leaders listed as the primary contact on each institution's web page for the opportunity program. The email asked for participation, along with sharing initial content promoting the goals of the research. Appendix A contains the initial email sent to recruit student participants. Focus groups were conducted with 5-6 students from each campus using a semi-structured focus group protocol. As shown in Table 2, at Institution A the focus group consisted of 6 students, at Institution B there were 4 students in the focus group, and there were 5 students in the focus group at Institution C. The students are enrolled in access, success, and/or opportunity programs at the three New York state liberal arts colleges described in Chapter 1.

All student focus groups were conducted either in person or using Zoom live video platform. These focus groups were audio recorded for verbatim transcription. Recorded sessions were stored on a separate external hard drive for improved security to protect participant information and collected transcripts data. Data from the focus groups were coded through a qualitative data analysis process that used a student-focused, emic, inductive thematic approach (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The semi-structured format of the three focus groups, along with the goal to gain students' personal insights into their lived experiences as current undergraduates enrolled in these opportunity programs, allowed for emic perspectives to be uncovered, analyzed, and shared.

The semi-structured focus group employed in this study explored how each student identifies as a member of the opportunity program and how such identification impacts their broader campus experiences and overall sense of belonging at the institution. Focus groups also

explored themes such as students' feelings about their experiences of the program and school, ways students are encouraged to interact with the broader campus community beyond the program (i.e., through clubs and organizations), and students' perceptions of the level and kinds of support the program provides as they work to reach their academic and personal goals.

Observational Fieldnotes

The third data collection method utilized in this study was observational fieldnotes. Observation is a key tool for data collection in qualitative research that allows for maximal contextualization. Observation is described as the “noting of a phenomenon in the field setting through the five senses of the observer,” while taking active notes to have adequate records of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 165). In this study, the focus of observations was to understand the contexts in terms of their physical space and emotional environment. Similar challenges exist in observations as in interviewing, such as reactivity to power dynamics between researchers and participants. Other challenges of observation as a form of data collection include the responsibility to take quality fieldnotes in which all quotes are accurate and the responsibility to manage these incoming data while on-site and fully immersed in the research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). To help manage these challenges, I chose an approach that involved direct engagement and participant observation during data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The study's observational field notes were collected during site visits set up to conduct interviews and focus groups with the study's participants. I collected observational field notes of the campus communities, paying specific attention to the opportunity program physical spaces and resources that were consistently available to enrolled program students. This included observing opportunity program leadership and students enrolled in the opportunity programs.

During on-campus observations, I looked for the types of lounge and academic spaces made available to program students, while also considering where the programs' physical locations were on campus.

The focus on physical space related to other campus resources such as residence halls, other academic support spaces, or a centralized communal space, such as a campus' quad, was valuable to understanding how students might relate their program site's distance to other important campus resources and/or places of high engagement with peers. Additionally, for scheduling interviews, I considered the office location of each of the program leaders for reasons of confidentiality.

At the two sites I visited in person (Institution A and Institution B), I was strategic about how much time was spent on campus and where that time was spent. This was an intentional step to keep the dissertation focused on the physical space and details most related to the opportunity program. The observation field notes, memos from the site visits, and participants' insights combined to provide valuable context to better understand students' emic insights and connect them to support systems highlighted during interviews and focus group conversations. Due to time conflicts, I was unable to visit Institution C and collect in-person field notes.

Memos and Dialogic Engagement

Research memos are a “structured way to capture and process your ongoing ideas and discoveries, challenges associated with fieldwork and design, and analytic sense-making,” helping a researcher plan for and engage with intention and consistency during data collection (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, pp. 66–67). Dialogic engagement is “the collaborative dialogue-based processes that qualitative researchers engage in throughout a research study” (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 15). Memos are used as an intentional step for a researcher to track their ongoing

thoughts and document the research to help develop the research theory as it evolves through the discovery of data patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

To effectively and accurately illustrate the ongoing learning and understanding throughout the data gathering and analysis, I used notes and a process of consistent coding of these notes, along with recordings of participants' interviews and focus groups, to establish a concrete and responsive approach memo process since memos are so integral to meaning-making in qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Relatedly, as a form of inquiry on the data and process, the perspective of thought partners helped to challenge the research and me as the researcher from multiple perspectives. Together, memos and dialogic engagement established a record of the progress of new ideas, developing theories, and multiple ways to view the broader themes and developing concepts throughout the analytic process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

In this practitioner-led dissertation, research memos were used throughout design, data collection, and data analysis for sensemaking and tracking learning and developments throughout each stage of the research process. First, actual notes were taken throughout the literature review and data collection processes. Key memos included definitions of key terms (e.g., belonging) and research articles to pursue with greater depth from related studies. Additionally, during interviews and focus groups, which were recorded, notes included insights on body language, energy (or vibes) within the conversation, and additional subjective or non-verbal insights that could be valuable in future assessment or adding deeper context during future analysis.

Conversely, a limitation of this practitioner-led study would be the lack of formal, structured dialogic engagement. Ongoing conversations included check-ins with program faculty, an editor who was assigned early-on in the writing and analysis process, and unstructured yet constant check-ins with classmates and other scholars described in the Validity

section. Yet, there was not a structured process or a thought partner group throughout the study. Ongoing checks via researcher memos mentioned above, recorded transcripts, and more informal support conversations provided the additional perspectives.

Data Analysis

Data review and data analysis began with chronological, date-specific review due to the scheduled site visits, which included notetaking, recording, and field observations. I used a methods-based and thematic approach. I read through transcripts and site visit notes following each visit to check the validity of the observational fieldnotes to the data from interviews and focus group transcripts. After data collection from all three research sites, I reviewed program leader interview transcripts, student focus group transcripts, observational fieldnotes, and reviewed relevant archival data and documents to inductively develop data-based themes.

The emic approach this dissertation took meant that I did not conduct traditional deductive data readings. Instead, the readings were focused on excavating key concepts and ideas that research participants brought forward as common themes across the three institutions. Emic thematic analysis was conducted. This is a recognized technique used in narrative-based qualitative research, and is defined by a researcher identifying the themes uncovered through details shared by research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Thematic analysis was approached through an inductive approach. Inductive analysis means that theories and core themes emerge based on context related to engagement with the research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). An inductive process was implemented starting with evaluating interview and focus group transcripts, reading both with an intentional focus on the primary research questions. The goal was to code participants shared insights that included key terms of value and efficacy of the targeted opportunity programs. I started with the broad

ideas highlighted by the core constructs in the research questions, developed these into more focused themes, using this continuous process to establish the research themes explained in Chapter 5.

Emergent and Inductive Themes

Across the process of data analysis, three phases of coding were employed including open coding, “axial” connection of categories, and “selective” building of the story. This coding approach operationalized the emic approach through detailed procedures for analysis. These included reading interview transcripts and focus group transcripts multiple times, taking notes and writing memos based on these readings, and comparing these notes and memos with observational fieldnotes taken during data collection. Additionally, as described below in the validity section, I discussed my memos and notes, developed codes, and processes with peers as another check on my sense-making and the progression of my understanding.

For perspectival triangulation, after program leaders and students were engaged in data collection through interviews and focus groups, I then assessed their transcripts using In-Vivo Coding, which prioritizes the use of participant language and concepts as codes. This approach connected emic perspectives focused on participants’ emerging themes and included grounded theory ideology. In-Vivo Coding added value to this process given that I am a new researcher working with younger participants (Saldaña, 2013). During the initial phase of open coding line-by-line coding was used to analyze fragments of data. Open coding, continued data collection, and developing the research theory started concurrent with the broader research questions. The research questions are focused on the students’ experiences, perspectives, and understandings of the ecosystems and impacts of their opportunity programs on their college experiences. The current research centered on the participants to understand their sense of core issues of structure,

supports, impact, value, success and other emergent terms and concepts generated by the students themselves.

Interview and focus group transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose software to organize and manage the descriptive and coding process. This process began with the broad terms featured in the research questions – Targeted Opportunity Programs, Diversity, Development, Resources, Value, and Impact -- to create the first broad codes. From there, while reviewing participant statements in interviews and focus groups, additional codes and subcodes emerged. The four impact areas are Finances, Program Structure, Development, and Belonging, themes established from the emic perspectives of the participants.

To work towards the above four impact areas, memo notes were reviewed concurrently with key quotes in the interview and focus group transcripts. Details from this data review were then compared to existing terms to establish additional sub-themes to the broader concepts, such as different types of development (academic, leadership, personal, and post-college). The themes of Success, COVID, Location, Networking, Specialized Recruitment, and Tailoring were also established as common trends across the participants' insights into their experiences with the targeted opportunity programs.

Finally, to more clearly define overarching themes that began with terms in the initial research questions, sub-categories were developed. These subcategories were established from consistent perspectives that were defined in participants' quotes, notes and memo ideas, and themes that answered underlying questions around value and efficacy of opportunity programs. Students' unique and emic perspectives led to unique codes such as finances beyond traditional aid, different forms of networking, how students described their development, what the sense of

belonging meant to different students, and the various specialized recruitment initiatives utilized to support program students through the application process.

The exponentializing impact of belonging was evident in how participants consistently connected sense of belonging with other themes such as success, development, and networking. Sense of belonging was a key notion that students pointed to for their decision to enroll at their institution and part of the key support mechanism the targeted opportunity program can provide to help their retention, satisfaction, and feelings of confidence of their success during college and potential for life after college professionally.

Value of the Qualitative Approach

This research seeks to expand beyond the data, metrics, and quantitative information that are centralized in prior research on targeted opportunity programs (Perna & Leigh, 2018; Phillips, 2005; Strayhorn, 2011). Previous studies have employed similar qualitative orientations to study these types of programs (Dyce et al., 2012; Hurley & Hallmark, 2020; Phillips, 2005; Stewart, 2013; Tierney & Jun, 2001). Some studies utilized interviews (Tierney & Jun, 2001), while others used surveys (Dyce et al., 2012; Hurley & Hallmark, 2020; Phillips, 2005; Stewart, 2013). Creswell and Poth (2016) emphasize that qualitative analysis is valuable in the investigation of a complex issue to ensure a nuanced and detailed understanding of where individuals are empowered and when a new problem in the literature is addressed with a literary, flexible style of reporting. This dissertation employs this understanding of qualitative research with a unique lens on targeted opportunity programs: empowering student participants to share insights into their lived experiences to establish new themes that connect to their perspectives.

Prior research highlights the phenomenon of students from minoritized and marginalized backgrounds missing cultural capital need to be successful in the higher education scene. The

focus on cultural capital is important when considering the unique experiences of students in targeted opportunity programs who identify as being from a historically underrepresented racial or ethnic group. Further, previous scholarship overlaps with this emic approach to understanding students' satisfaction and sense of if and how their needs being met by their postsecondary institutions (Hurley & Hallmark, 2020; Phillips, 2005; Stewart, 2013; Tierney & Jun, 2001).

This study employed an inductive, interview-based data collection approach based on Stolle-McAllister et al. (2011) in their research of the Meyerhoff Scholars Program. This methodology used semi-structured interviews to allow for open-ended discussion to invite students' emic perspectives that seeded the emergent themes as interview and focus group transcripts were read, coded, and re-read. By consistently coding, reading, and using overlapping memos from site visits, I developed more intentional themes. This dissertation expanded upon the core themes highlighted in this prior research wherein Meyerhoff students noted the program's impact in terms of financial support, the Summer Bridge Program, Meyerhoff identity, and a sense of belonging. This study adds a new type of institution, while featuring students' voices and perspectives in a way that is lacking in current research on opportunity programs designed for underrepresented students in higher education. The subsequent Findings chapter analyzes data collected from interviews, focus groups, and site observations.

Researcher Positionality

As a practitioner-researcher, I must examine the ways that my practitioner identity has shaped my ideas, biases, assumptions, and wisdom of practice throughout this research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shulman, 1986). I am a leader in the field of college admissions and a former admission administrator for Institution B at the start of this research study. In that role, I

collaborated with the faculty and administrative directors for Institution B's opportunity program in the selection of students to be enrolled each year.

Based on previous experience with student selection and new institutional programs that have broadened access-based enrollment options at Institution B, questions exist around the program's current format. Institution B has introduced multiple opportunity programs with different criteria. There is a long-term program in focus in this dissertation, wherein students selected within the traditional admission review process complete a multiple week summer bridge program and become members of a collective four-year cohort. Additionally, Institution B introduced an opt-in program for all first-generation students admitted into the university. The first-generation student program does not have a specialized admissions selection process, and there is no summer bridge, but only a week-long pre-orientation for these students who often have similar backgrounds to those admitted into the long-term opportunity program.

Institution B became a QuestBridge Scholars partner in 2021. QuestBridge is a national access program that is well-known for its college match option. Students selected as QuestBridge scholars go through an application with the non-profit and are then afforded the opportunity to rank up to 12 postsecondary institutions based on the student's preference. College partners receive the names of all QuestBridge Scholars and rank them in order of preference, with no cap on the number of students the institutions can rank. Students who match with a college in their list of 12 then receive a full scholarship to cover all tuition and fees. Moreover, college partners pay an annual member fee and a per-student enrollment fee for match scholars and for students they enroll who are QuestBridge students who did not match in the initial review process. For Institution B, having these three options with students from similar backgrounds as first-generation college students, who are typically from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, has

divided and may have diluted the different resources and support systems available to students who fall under the umbrella of an opportunity program. Despite this challenge, by focusing on the long-term program that has a similar approach to Institution A and Institution C, the data collection and analysis in the qualitative review of Institution B's program can be utilized towards evaluating its value and success.

This dissertation study leverages students' lived experiences and perspectives into the ways post-secondary institutions can best address their needs with adequate resources, human and social capital, and using targeted programs to develop a sense of belonging. Prior research has not utilized direct engagement with the students, however, to understand their perception of the value such programs brings to them and how they would express the program's success.

On a more personal level, this is a topic of interest from my own professional experience and concern. Additionally, I self-identify to similar demographic profiles to those of my student participants. I am a self-identified person of color and a first-generation college graduate. Additionally, I was categorized as a low-income undergraduate student, and as such, I qualified for a federal Pell Grant.

In terms of my own college experience, I attended a residential liberal arts college with a predominantly white student population, like the students and research sites at the heart of this study. I did not, however, benefit from a targeted access and success program like those featured in this study. In fact, I was unaware of targeted programs providing such support, at either the K-12 or postsecondary level, to help educate students on the often challenging and confusing college application and financial aid processes.

In my own case, my lack of specific kinds of knowledge can be attributed to limitations of social capital within my own network, and these gaps in understanding are why this topic is

important to me. Additionally, this personal connection and my professional role and remit introduce the potential for implicit bias in data analysis. Students enrolled in opportunity programs share common experiences that relate to how I saw myself as a first-year, first-time undergraduate student. While I was not a member of an opportunity program, being a first-generation college student who received a federal Pell Grant due to my limited financial resources, I am drawn to support these students from similar circumstances.

Additionally, because I have seen some of the more positive dynamics (e.g., improved retention, degree completion, financial support for books and travel), I may over-index on the impact that programs like those in my research have for these students. These issues are important to the future of higher education, especially those institutions that have emphasized access and equity-minded practices (Kezar & Eckel, 2008; Ravitch & Herzog, 2023). Moreover, as someone aspiring to future higher education senior leadership, I hope to play a role in these future conversations as my career progresses.

Validity

To ensure the trustworthiness of the work in the current study, a group of accepted practices recommended for validity were utilized. Validity, also known as trustworthiness, is a methodological set of processes utilized within research design, data collection, and data analysis to support the rigor and quality of the research being conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). One type of validity, descriptive, is attached to “the factual accuracy of the data” and is related to data collection (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Descriptive validity was affirmed through transcription and recording of interviews or focus groups, observational fieldnotes, and other methods to confirm more precise data. Transcription, note-taking, and recordings were utilized in the current study to assure the descriptive validity of the data collection.

Triangulation is another approach to validity used in this research. Triangulation means using different methods and data sources to invite different perspectives towards achieving data complexity and accuracy (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Data collected in focus groups, interviews, and site visits and observations were utilized to compare key data that stood out as common or recognized as unique features for the targeted opportunity programs of each case. Through methodological triangulation, this study evinced common themes from participants' responses, similar traits across the campus sites with common approaches or environmental factors, but also highlighted key differences that stood out across each institutional case.

To help with this area of data validation, early in the summarizing process of data that emerged from each data collection method, I used member checks with program leaders to confirm how I described each case. Member checks involve a "person-centered approach to challenging interpretations" (p. 176) by engaging participants in the research study to confirm the data, notes, and specific details from the transcripts of interviews and focus groups (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Finally, dialogic engagement also included peer checking to support the validity of the current study. Ravitch and Carl (2021) describe this as a crucial aspect of validity necessity to "challenge your own assumptions, biases, and interpretations throughout a research study" (p. 181). In this dissertation, peer discussions were held with Assistant Professor Steve Desir at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education at each stage to consider research design, research questions, data collection, data analysis, and writing approaches to challenge my own perspectives. This included discussions about the data collection process, memos based on these data-based discussions, review of suggestions to build the study's theoretical framework, and both peer and research advisor feedback on missing elements or

updates needed to improve the study. Additionally, these peer conversations encouraged me to consider how this dissertation study added to the current corpus of research on college opportunity programs and provided ideas for future studies that could build from this student-focused emic design, implementation, and analytic approach.

Study Limitations

There are several limitations that should be noted. First, students in the current research group and their in-person experience were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some students were unable to engage in the full breadth of a summer bridge program or other in-person program experiences. COVID-19 also impacted these students' experiences in secondary education, including their selection in the college admission process given decreased in-person recruitment, and a decrease in their comfort level to go away to college. Students' experiences once in college were affected by new college environments including quarantine, masking, and/or decreased in-person activities. The realities of COVID-19 also impacted day-to-day life in ways that caused many students generally and targeted opportunity program students specifically to feel isolation.

Second, as the primary researcher and a former administrator at Institution B, my administrative standing may have impacted students' willingness to be candid or critical in interviews or may have decreased interest in participating in the study overall. There is also a level of implicit bias on my part from prior insights into the program's value to the community at Institution B, which generated strong feelings of investment in and responsibility to students' success. To be clear, there is no conflict of interest. I was an admissions administrator and had no responsibility to students beyond admission recruitment and enrollment. I did not take part in the summer bridge or any other programming for student transition and support once they were

enrolled at Institution B. It was explicitly outlined to admission administration at Institution B that upon enrollment admissions was required to relinquish responsibility for student engagement and on-boarding authority to student affairs professionals. Still, the positionality shapes my ideas and biases, which I tracked throughout using memos and dialogic engagement with critical friends.

Third, my position at Institution B, one of the three research sites, focused on DEI issues. My professional connection may introduce an implicit bias towards this topic and the value of these programs, regardless of institution. This could mean, for example, that I had a naïve trust in students' willingness to be open and candid. My bias towards seeing these programs in a positive light due to my professional engagement with one of the programs, as well as my personal identity, may also have clouded some of the critiques students shared.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Chapter 4 illuminates a set of findings that respond to the guiding research questions. The chapter is based on emic analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observational fieldnotes from students at the three research sites along with researcher memos and a practitioner research journal. This exploratory study was designed to extend research on targeted opportunity programs through offering a contextualized, student-centered understanding of ways that higher education opportunity programs influence students' lived experiences. Prior research analyzing student experience has not used the residential, liberal arts Carnegie classification of postsecondary education institutions nor used primarily qualitative methods (Lopez, 2016). This has implications for the application of these findings.

Prior research on targeted opportunity programs uses quantitative indicators of enrollment, retention, and graduation rates as the primary data points to explain the success of targeted opportunity programs (Douglas & Attewell, 2014; Lopez, 2016; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2011). This study explored students' internal experiences and perspectives on these experiences as undergraduates enrolled in targeted opportunity programs. Through interviews with program leaders and students, as well as student focus groups across the three PWIs, this dissertation explored students' perceptions of the value and efficacy of their respective opportunity programs. Notably, students' sense of belonging was uncovered as an *exponentializing impact factor* that shapes student experiences.

This chapter describes how, from the perspectives of enrolled students, opportunity programs provide value through how they encourage students with well-rounded, comprehensive experiences employing equity-minded supports which include reminders of their academic

capability, helping them learn to identify and overcome issues of imposter syndrome and the need to build onsite networks of support. The students participating in this research discussed their experiences of the program structures and processes for accessing financial and other resources, including being connected to an intentional community of program peers, alumni, and key people across the university network.

Study participants shared candid examples and stories from their lived experiences within their respective opportunity programs. Participants reflected on their individual experiences, backgrounds, perspectives, and program positionalities as they believe these influenced their perspectives and shaped their experiences. Students made meaningful connections between their experiences and the ways their opportunity programs shaped the unique features of their individual experiences.

Findings Grouped by Four Themes

Findings relating to the impact of opportunity programs at this type of postsecondary institution were grouped into four themes: (a) financial impact (Kezar et al., 2020; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011); (b) program structure impact (Kezar et al., 2020; Perna et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2011); (c) development impact (Douglas & Attewell, 2014; Perna & Thomas, 2008; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2010); and (d) belonging impact (Johnson et al., 2020; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2011). The following sections illuminate these four themes as core experiential impacts. Notably, belonging emerged as an *exponentializing factor* in students' experiences and their sense of the relationship of those experiences to their social interactions and academic outcomes. Table 2 is a useful point of reference on the three institutions where student participants were enrolled.

Table 3*Institutional Index of Student and Staff Demographics*

| Institution | A | B | C |
|--|---|--|---|
| # of Students Enrolled in Opportunity Programs | 72 students (18-20 annually) | 120 – 160 students (30-40 annually) | 72 students (18-20 annually) |
| Institutional Demographics | 2,050 students 23% domestic students of color 21% first-generation college students 10% international students | 3,206 students 25% domestic students of color 13% first-generation college students 9% international students | 2,145 students 12% domestic students of color 19% first-generation college students 9.6% international students |
| Program Demographic Requirements | US citizen or Permanent Resident High School graduate First-generation college student Demonstrated financial need (based on household size, family income, & federal aid process) | 30-40 scholars each year First-generation college student | NY-state resident & High School graduate First-generation college student Demonstrated financial need (based on household size, family income, & NY State Education Dept. guidelines) |
| Staffing Structure | 4-person team: Director, Associate Director, Academic Coordinator, Administrative Coordinator | 4-person team: Faculty Director, Associate Director, Administrative Dean, Graduate Fellow | 3-person team: Director, Assistant Director, Administrative Assistant |

Impact of Finances

A consistent question in semi-structured interviews was some form of “why did you choose to enroll at [insert institution name]?” The answer to this question and follow-up details and stories shared by students centered financing, including financial support beyond traditional aid for tuition and fees, as a key impact factor in their experience and outcomes. Because program selection criteria include low-income thresholds, program structures are built to add to the financial support of opportunity program students in personalized, co-curricular, and even emergency-focused situations.

The most common reason for enrolling at a particular institution among study participants was the amount of financial aid offered. At each institution, this funding is primarily realized from institutional aid in the form of grants or scholarships that do not need to be repaid. First, students’ socioeconomic status is central in the selection process. At each institution, either due to state funding requirements with HEOP or EOP, or in the case of Institution B’s internally funded model, a recognition of challenges students transitioning into postsecondary education from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face (Carnevale et al., 2019), programs provide students from low-income backgrounds with financial aid and other financial supports to help them thrive in their undergraduate experience. Institution A and Institution B build financial aid packages that meet 100% of the demonstrated financial need for all admitted students. This allows their opportunity program students to have a free or close to free undergraduate education.

However, before aid is awarded, students must be admitted and enrolled into the opportunity program. The Associate Director from Institution B described the selection process as emphasizing students whom they view as "diamonds in the rough," meaning those who show

potential and can shine when that potential is supported and properly fostered. Describing the students enrolled within Institution B's internally funded program, the Associate Director stated:

[Targeted opportunity program students] have done the best they can, given the resources they had in high school. Generally, they are from underserved backgrounds, they're first-generation, first in the family go to college. And so, we see that spark, we call it the [Institution B program] spark. We see it and get them to see that there are opportunities that they can be here at a liberal arts institution. They can thrive and succeed. (Institution B Program Lead Interview, 2023)

This quote from a program leader speaks to the phenomenon of students being evaluated on their background and selected into Institution B's opportunity program. The Associate Director recognized that the students come to college with limited social and economic capital, yet still show strong potential and college readiness. The Associate Director shared how that potential or "spark" is a key indicator for student selection into the opportunity program at Institution B. Further, they alluded to students' ability to find success by accessing the academic structure of their liberal arts curriculum.

When talking to students from each university, the impact of financial support in their decision of where to enroll became evident as well. All student participants shared that they recognize the importance of financial aid in the process. Additionally, all three PWIs have selection criteria that include students and their families' financial circumstances to be enrolled into an opportunity program. Below are specific insights from students at each institution.

Institution A Student Focus Group

Four of the six students from Institution A mentioned the strong financial aid package as a primary part of the decision-making process that led them to enroll at Institution A. This assessment differed within and across identity groups. The three Black male students (1 senior, 1 junior, and 1 first-year student) all shared different reasons. The senior mentioned having a great

experience while exploring the campus during a campus visit as the reason they chose Institution A. The first-year students also mentioned that they loved their campus visits, and also shared a general passion for Institution A and its special resources, such as unique services including therapy dogs that it offers. Conversely, the junior Black male shared that financial aid was the top focus for his decision:

[The] main reason I came to [Institution A] was [it being] one of the two schools that offered me a full ride... [and that was] really important in figuring out what the next steps in my future [were] going to look like. I think when it came down to it...I didn't want to go into debt at all. (Institution A Focus Group, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

This quote from a Black male from Institution A speaks to financial aid as the key reason this student chose to enroll at Institution A. This sentiment was shared by others. Speaking to financial aid, a junior classmate who identifies as a mixed-race female corroborated the importance of financial support and prioritized the importance of the identity of the opportunity program at Institution A:

It was mostly financial aid. Like, my family's low income, so I didn't want to put that burden on them, so I feel like they had to have some help for me to pay for college, so they weren't standing in the way of me getting a good quality education. So, when I'm applying to colleges, it was just mostly financial aid packages and seeing how much they offered me, and [Institution A] was by far the best. (Institution A Focus Group, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

This mixed-race, female junior student from Institution A reaffirmed the value of financial aid. Further, she delved into her personal desire to not burden her family while getting what she views as a strong academic experience. Like her junior Black male classmate, this mixed-race female student prioritized not having to be concerned with the financial impact postsecondary education can bring about for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. She further highlighted not wanting to burden her family with having to find ways to fund their education. This student clearly stated that her primary focus in choosing a college was based on

the amount of financial aid made available to them. This student's prioritization of financial aid in their college selection is an illustration of Perna's (2006) theory of under-matching, which shows students from low-income backgrounds often choose institutions with lower tuition. Yet, in this case, it is a student being able to enroll at Institution A, a high-tuition university that can afford them a debt-free educational opportunity.

The two other students in the focus group from Institution A were both seniors, identifying as Hispanic females. Both seniors were clear that the financial support was the main reason they chose Institution A. The first student to speak in the group was one of the Hispanic female seniors who described Institution A as "the most affordable option living in the state in New York." The other senior Hispanic female shared that she "knew [her] parents wouldn't be able to help [her] financially, so wherever [she'd] go, [she] needed a good financial aid package."

Four of the six students from Institution A shared that getting their tuition and fees paid by the university, what they referred to as a "full ride," was a primary factor in their decision to enroll at Institution A. Further, these four students shared that they see how this choice opened their eyes to future opportunities beyond college. One of the benefits they shared was not having to worry about debt from student loans upon graduation from college. This illustrates a specific type of cultural capital that Bourdieu (1986/1983) called self-improvement. Bourdieu described self-improvement as a self-embodied form of capital attained through commitment of time and energy that leads to gain that is greater than sacrifices. For students enrolled in targeted opportunity programs, self-improvement evinces a more positive sense of future opportunity and economic gain from not being hampered with debt immediately after college.

Institution B Focus Group

Institution B's student focus group had four participants. The focus group included three seniors (2 Black males, 1 Hispanic female) and a junior (Male, race/ethnicity unknown). For this group, financial aid was not a significant reason for their decision to enroll at Institution B. Instead, though the students' reasons varied, community was a common undertone in their choice. Two male students, a Black male senior from Texas and the Unknown racial/ethnic junior from Arizona were encouraged by prior students who had attended Institution B and enrolled as members of the opportunity program. The junior male from Arizona shared a specific connection to an older peer:

So actually, another Institution B program student came back to my high school and was the one that influenced me to apply to Colgate because I went to a magnet high school, so it was really little, and they would invite students all the time, and instead of admissions people from the colleges. So, she was my point person the entire time and she was like, "You better apply, 'cause if I can get in, you can get in." And they look for people from the same high schools, at least in her opinion. So I did it and it ended up just being one of the best or just the best option. (Institution B Focus Group, personal communication, May 7, 2023)

The other Black male in the study, a senior from New Jersey, shared that he arrived at Institution B because of the lack of support from his high school counselor, who discouraged him from applying to his dream school, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), despite being ranked in the top ten by GPA in his graduating class. Institution B was the only college he applied to "because if I wasn't getting into my dream college of MIT, why apply at anywhere else?" His classmate, a Hispanic female from Chicago, was encouraged by university-funded fly-in programs to visit college campuses. She shared:

I applied to every single fly-in and I got into four of them and I was so excited because I just didn't know that these were things that were available for people...I realized that there are places that actually want you there and need people like you to be there. And I

didn't even know where to start. (Institution B Focus Group, personal communication, May 7, 2023)

The four members of the focus group from Institution B ranged considerably in the reasons why they chose their institution. These data illustrate the type of unique decision-making processes for students of historically underrepresented ethnic and racial backgrounds. That decision-making by race and ethnicity was highlighted by Perna (2000) using national education survey data. It further explicates the range of social and cultural capital in this population, that is, of students' understanding of their college academic readiness, how the college recruitment process works, and having requisite support systems that connect underrepresented students to tools that help them navigate the complex system of applying to college (Perna, 2000; Perna et al., 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2009).

Institution C Focus Group

The student focus group from Institution C had five student participants. The group included a current senior (Hispanic female), three juniors (all female: 1 Black, 1 White, and 1 Hispanic), and a sophomore (Hispanic male). The entire group from Institution C shared that they prioritized the grant they were awarded as a key reason for their enrollment. The sophomore Hispanic male called the grant offered to HEOP students a “golden ticket” because he “wouldn’t have been able to afford it otherwise,” or to see much of the world beyond his home city (Institution C Focus Group, personal communication, July 15, 2023). His White, female junior classmate provided a unique perspective within the group:

I'm a local and I had a job, a job I was very dedicated to and I didn't want to leave that job. I liked the opportunity to stay in the area and I probably wouldn't have attended college without HEOP anyways. (Institution C Focus Group, personal communication, July 15, 2023)

Overall, there was a shared emphasis on funding for tuition and fees. Despite this acceptance of college funding, there was still a strong emphasis on the fact that financial aid is not everything. Program leaders and students all highlighted the intentional focus on building a program and community of support. That support ensures programs students are financially uplifted by their opportunity programs both during and after college.

Financial Support beyond Typical Aid

Students shared that they knew they were making a key life decision when they sought postsecondary education, driven by financial aid as a top factor. Prior data illustrate that financial aid is of major importance in students' decisions on college enrollment, and that there are differences by racial identity, age, and other personal factors (RNL, 2018).

Stolle-McAllister et al. (2011) provided insight into how financial aid enables students to focus on their goals and college experience more freely. While students in this dissertation prioritized the impact of financial aid awarded primarily for tuition and fees, all students interviewed highlighted the importance of financial support beyond these typical financial aid awards—meaning for related expenses such as glasses, laptops, study abroad, co-curricular trips (i.e. sports and internships), school supplies, emergency travel for family emergencies, and program events.

A senior Hispanic female from institution A prioritized this concept of freedom outlined in McAllister et al. (2011) when discussing support for school supplies, study abroad, and other interests they have:

[In] my experience, it's been easy. For school supplies at least, it's like I could just walk in and just ask faculty, "Hey, can I just grab a notebook from the back and bill a hundred percent?" They're like, "Here you go." With other things like study abroad, I asked them if they could help me finance my plane tickets to go to Australia, which is super expensive. And people [were] like, "Yeah, sure." And I didn't need to worry I guess in

that moment like, "Oh, what am I going to do? Can I even go to this program?" AOP wants to make sure that we can do things like a I guess a normal or not AOP related college student could do. So that includes study abroad. If I wanted to learn guitar, AOP showed me how to get guitar funding, stuff like that. So, I'd say it was pretty easy. I just walk into the office with the faculty and just ask... It's pretty nice. (Institution A Focus Group, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

The words of this senior Hispanic female illustrate that the financial and resource support extends beyond typical institutional financial aid. The student shared that she can easily gain access to resources to be used in the classroom as well as funding to take part in broader campus initiatives for a more comprehensive undergraduate experience, and that these opportunity programs are designed to allow students to feel at ease with potential financial barriers that extend beyond enrollment. The academic and co-curricular support described above is an example of Kezar et al.'s (2020) concept of tailoring, with individualized support being designed into the opportunity program structure.

Another example came from a junior from Institution C, who shared that "[HEOP students] get a stipend every semester in order to buy supplies and books for our classes and other essentials that we need for the beginning of the semester." A classmate, a sophomore male, shared that his opportunity program will "also sometimes cover emergency expenses and we also get a bit of space to store our items in for the next semesters so that we don't have to take them back with us home." An example of this same type of broad support given to the opportunity program students at Institution A was described by a senior Hispanic female who shared:

I've had friends who needed glasses and AOP will buy the glasses, even help them repair their laptop or it's no matter how big or small AOP will try their best to assist us financially with whatever we need. (Institution A Focus Group, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

This comment from this Hispanic, female senior from Institution A illustrated the importance of material support for a student who found herself without the means to cover basic

needs for vision or access to the technology needed to keep pace academically. She illustrated that the program went outside of the traditional bounds of student support programs (i.e. accessibility or learning plans), but kept student improvement and ability to do their best at the heart of support.

Relatedly, a classmate from Institution A, a senior who identifies as a Hispanic female, explicated clearly the extensive financial support opportunity programs can provide:

With other things like study abroad, I asked them if they could help me finance my plane tickets to go to Australia, which is super expensive. And people [were] like, "Yeah, sure." And I didn't need to worry I guess in that moment like, "Oh, what am I going to do? Can I even go to this program?" AOP wants to make sure that we can do things [that] a normal or not AOP related college student could do. (Institution A Focus Group, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

This quote from another Hispanic, female-identifying senior from Institution A speaks to how the opportunity programs fund students' capacity to have a well-rounded college experience with experiential learning offered through an experience such as an international semester abroad. Administrators shared this focus with the students and were diligent about this. The Associate Director from Institution A also committed to their process being established with the idea that, "everything from school supplies, the goal is of course to remove as many financial obstacles as we can. And so students get financial support, they get a lot of things waived in terms of fees." (Institution A Associate Director, personal communication, April 27, 2023) The Associate Director leaned into the importance of institutional leadership being intentional in weaving diverse initiatives into student programming and being equity-minded to ensure that the needs of a diverse student community are satisfied through comprehensive efforts (Kezar et al., 2008; Ravitch & Herzog, 2023; Ravitch & Kannan, 2021).

These examples from the two Hispanic female senior students and the program Associate Director from Institution A illustrate how the institutions in this dissertation provide students in the opportunity programs with continuous financial benefits beyond the scholarships and grants that pay their tuition and fees. The students take advantage of free books and school supplies, but also larger costs in the form of experiences like studying abroad.

The Meyerhoff Scholars, too, were emphatic in sharing the importance of having nearly free tuition, stating that it was the key factor in their decision to enroll at University of Maryland Baltimore County (Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011). Further, like the students in this study, the MSP group recognized the value in having financial support for research, internships, professional development, and other non-scholarship or financial aid specific opportunities (Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011). This type of non-traditional financial support helps students in these opportunity programs have a college experience that is more like their peers who are not enrolled in an opportunity program or those who do not face the same financial challenges to jump into co-curricular life as a college student.

Understanding the high cost of travel, beyond funding for academic study abroad, the programs must consider how many of their students moving so far away from family and not being able to be a support person might be a reason they will not enroll. Knowing this family connection is important, the programs have included emergency funds to get students back to their families and be present in times of need or personal hardship. This type of context-based, flexible, and equity-minded resource allocation for students in these opportunity programs is an illustration of humanizing educational change that is responsive to the real needs of the people attending these programs and postsecondary institutions (Ravitch & Kannan, 2021).

These examples of financial and resource support beyond traditional financial aid (e.g., study abroad and funding for guitar lessons) connect directly to the conceptual framework of this dissertation. The students provided insights into a way that these opportunity programs have allowed them to connect to the broader campus community with funding for co-curricular opportunities (e.g., playing guitar) or a more robust cultural experience (e.g., study abroad). Further, it is important to note the way it was described—with a carefree ease—that shaped the opportunity programs as being a bridge to broader access once students have enrolled. Findings from this study contribute to the confirmation of the importance of the financial impact of opportunity programs. Comprehensive financial support is highlighted as an important factor in retention, degree completion, and general satisfaction for students enrolled in higher education opportunity programs (Grimmett et al., 1998; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011).

Limitations or Negative Experiences with Financial Support

Student participants shared how their respective opportunity program has emphasized helping them find their footing as members of the university community. This begins with 5-6 weeks of summer bridge programs with older peer leaders helping new students' transition. The support continues with program-wide social events, direct advising support (academic and social), and a physical space where students can work, lounge, and build community with one another. This is important because of the sometimes-negative perceptions of students and the programs due to the extra financial resources the programs' students receive. Students from Institution B shared being seen as "poor and stupid."

Relatedly, the group from Institution A talked about their non-opportunity program peers being upset with them for receiving more financial aid and other monetary resources. A junior Hispanic female from Institution A elaborated:

I think a lot of people don't understand that most of us are low income, so when they find out we pay significantly less than them, they're just like, "And I have to pay 30K or I have to pay 60K?" But it's like we don't have the resources to even sometimes pay what we have to pay and it's [already] significantly less than [non-opportunity program students]. (Institution A Focus Group, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

This statement speaks to biases or strict criticism of students enrolled in these opportunity programs. Classmates who are not in the programs have preconceived notions of opportunity program students receiving too much support. While their work focuses specifically on Black students at PWIs, Harper's (2013) research indicates how students of color have to teach their peers and the broader campus community a level of cultural competency to understand their unique circumstances, coming from low-income and under-resourced backgrounds.

Harper's (2013) study of Black males attending PWIs indicated the negative impacts of racially based stress and/or bias from campus climates where students are made to feel they do not belong, or in the case of the targeted opportunity program students in this study, that they are being overly supported by the programs designed to help uplift them from a lack of support up to the point of college enrollment. A senior Hispanic female continued with more specifics of non-opportunity program peers' opinions of those in Institution A's opportunity program:

I'm with friends that are not [Institution A program students], [what] they see... there's this jealousy, I guess. Or I'm hearing things like, "[Why do you] have computers? [Why do] you guys get snacks?" [Peers say]... "well you guys don't really need this or they're spoiling you." (Institution A Focus Group, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

This senior Hispanic female at Institution A provided commentary that further illustrated Harper's (2013) concepts of racial bias and stress. These types of ongoing issues emotionally impact students of color at PWIs and can lead to bigger decisions such as the choice to discontinue their college studies. Racial bias and stress has been shown to lead to decreased retention and lower degree completion rates in studies that have focused on the impact of the

racial climate on students' college experiences (Harper, 2013; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Jones & Nichols, 2020).

In other instances, students shared that they may have underutilized the additional financial resources and other support services. At Institution A, students noted that the university administration, beyond the program leadership, did not share enough, because there were “so many resources and the university doesn't tell [them].” At Institution C, this was illustrated by resources being readily accessible, yet a recent graduate reflected on how they just had not utilized all of them. This student, a senior Hispanic female, continued by sharing the belief that “it really depends on the student” to make the most of the resources being offered.

Overall, students shared the importance of knowing who to ask for support and having good connections and tools to request ongoing support. However, opportunity program students and program leaders recognized that sometimes these resources are underutilized despite being readily available. First, the HEOP Program Director from Institution C clarified their role and empowers the students in their program by stating, “They have said to me that I change lives, and no, I do not. People change their own lives. I help open a door.” The Director shared how HEOP introduces students to important offices, including Student Financial Services:

[If a student] is having a little issue with money, let me [introduce them] to the student financial services [staff], and you know I'll introduce [them] to the person I know. She'll help [them] out. [This also] puts them in a position [of a kind of] leadership...
(Institution C, HEOP Director, personal communication, August 4, 2023)

The Director's quote speaks to the valuable interpersonal relationships HEOP can utilize to connect students to people and/or offices to meet their unique needs. A Hispanic female senior student from Institution C supported the HEOP Director's insights, sharing how the program prepares HEOP students for life after college:

I do believe that before you leave the program, they try to give you as much as they can. [The HEOP Director], he got money to help me go to job interviews. I'm telling you, they were helping me fly to Boston, paying for travel in different ways. So there's a lot of post- or pre-help that they give so that when you're post out, it doesn't really feel as bad or hard. You already know what you're doing or they at least gave you a timeline that you guys work together and figuring out what to do. It's just a different type of support than what we're probably used to when we're students.” (Institution C Focus Group, personal communication, July 15, 2023)

The quotes from Institution C’s program Director and the Hispanic female senior student illuminate the phenomenon of tailoring, which is the way opportunity program structures are adjusted to identify and meet students’ various needs. Specifically, for these opportunity programs, the infrastructures have been designed with the specific resources, tools, knowledge, and social capital needed to allow program students to excel in their undergraduate and post-baccalaureate lives (Kezar et al., 2020).

Together, these quotes and ideas from students provide a window into some of the biases that opportunity program students face on campus from their peers and the wider community because of additional financial needs and support. These issues call for institutional adjustments to better meet the needs of students from underrepresented backgrounds in terms of financial resources and establishing program structures that are welcoming and that encourage retention towards successful degree completion (Harper, 2013; Pather & Dorasamy, 2018).

Perna (2000, 2006) argued that low-income students choose to attend a given college based on its affordability. However, the students in this study focused on what they described as the urgent nature of financial support that extends and supports students beyond the cost of attendance, citing a range of “invisible expenses” and “hidden costs” that were formative to their experiences and opportunities. The students’ stories of their financial experiences in these situations illustrate the need for programs to be more intentional and holistic in identifying the

layers of their experiences. Students' ability to consistently recognize unique support and authentic insight into their own financial circumstances also suggests that the programs' mission and structure are valuable to help historically underrepresented students feel comfortable making the choice to travel further from home to attend the institutions in this study. Opportunity programs introduce students to present and future-building opportunities through program structures designed to help students learn what it takes to be successful in these unique and demanding sociocultural environments (Luedke, 2020).

Impact of Program Structure

Opportunity program structures include the financial system created to support the program, admissions processes to select students, and the transition process designed to prepare incoming students who have decided to enroll. The three programs utilize comparable approaches to student selection and transition into institutions. However, and importantly, these three PWIs have different underlying financial structures. Institution A is a fully university-funded program, Institution B uses a mix of state-funded HEOP and institutional funding, and Institution C has a completely state-funded HEOP model.

Being admitted into a postsecondary opportunity program can encourage enrollment, even for students who otherwise might not have viewed themselves as "college material" academically or as unprepared for the financial commitment (Perna et al., 2020). Perna et al. (2020) examined promise programs established at community colleges to understand the equity and value of different opportunity program formats. A typical transition support for opportunity programs are multi-week summer bridge programs. Prior research on summer bridge or transition programs illustrates their positive impact on improving students' academic preparation

for postsecondary education (Douglas & Attewell, 2014; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2011).

Summer Bridge Transition

Students reported that transition support is typically a required five-to-six-week summer program that begins before the start of the student's first academic year. New first-year students spend this time being introduced to the physical space of campus and their first-year peers in their opportunity program. The students also take academic coursework to prepare them for the academic rigor they will experience during the academic year. Program leaders for Institution B and Institution C shared that the academic courses their students complete during the summer are counted as formal credits towards student graduation. The program leader at Institution B further emphasized that their summer program is not designed to be a bridge experience, due to their program's view that a bridge is often used as "a remedial term" (Institution B, Associate Director, personal communication, May 6, 2023). Instead, at Institution B the incoming opportunity program cohort is challenged to complete a full 15-week semester curriculum course truncated into the five-week intensive summer session.

By collecting students' perspectives across the three PWIs with comparable opportunity program formats, this research establishes common trends for students in similar circumstances by location, institution type, and enrollment experience. Further, accepting that summer bridge programs can improve students' academic performance, understanding how students in these programs discussed the overall impact of these multi-week summer bridge programs is important, even beyond the academic benefits. The time spent with peers of similar racial and ethnic identities, from similar socioeconomic backgrounds with diverse personal experiences illustrates the implementation of Strayhorn's (2019) definition of belonging, whereby students

are viewed as qualified because they have been prepared for the campus climate with an introduction to the academic dynamics and campus physical environment for multiple weeks prior to their peers' arrival for the Fall semester.

All students in the focus group at Institution A shared that they had a positive experience and therefore a positive perspective on the value and quality of their summer program. The two Black male students (1 senior, 1 junior) did not speak directly to the summer transition itself. However, both Black male students spoke to the experiences in terms of the values that drive Institution A, which helped them to develop a strong community early on, enabling them to access resources (e.g., school supplies, emotional support, and informal/no-appointment advising) with minimal difficulty. Conversely, the other three students in the focus group spoke more directly about how Institution A's summer program had a positive impact on their entrée into higher education.

First, a senior Hispanic female noted coming to Institution A during COVID-19, yet still shared that the program "did everything possible to make sure that we had a core group of knowing each other firsthand and then branching out." This student highlighted the program's generative focus on community and building social capital, emphasizing the value of this during a pandemic which disallowed typical social engagement (Luedke, 2020; Stanton-Salazar, 2009). This kind of responsive, student-centered approach is illustrative of the type of flexible, real-time leadership necessary to meet the needs of the diverse student communities found in these opportunity programs (Ravitch & Kannan, 2021).

Another student, a Black, female first-year student in the same group, shared that "doing [Institution A program] summer was very pivotal for me" because, for example, it took them nearly two hours to learn how to appropriately communicate over email with their professors.

This is the type of core skill a bridge program should be attuned to, even though it is not traditional academic coursework. This Black, first-year female student shared how she experiences what is known as the education debt, also called the opportunity gap, given that this type of social capital was a missing link in her college readiness in terms of her academic ability in the classroom—and this speaks to a national trend (Carnevale et al., 2019; Green & Bedeau, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Each student highlighted how the multi-week summer programs, with the lead time, separation from the broader orientation, and programming to ensure more intentional transition support, built their confidence in their program, the institutional resources and people, and just developing a general understanding of how things work on their campus. This, they all shared, was pivotal.

The other Hispanic female senior student from Institution A confirmed this by sharing that the “[Institution A] summer program...is very helpful for students,” highlighting the positive energy of the faculty engagement being most prominent for them because the faculty, “care about us and want to see us succeed in our college journey.” Her classmate, a multi-racial Hispanic female who is a junior, highlighted another area, noting the career center and professional development being included in the summer transition as an indicator of Institution A's desire to support students' professional future from the beginning. These two Hispanic female students' quotes indicate the importance of faculty relationships, which have been shown to be prominent at a liberal arts college like Institution A (Tran, 2021). Additionally, the emphasis on career development and job skills preparation are contemporary adjustments across higher education, including in liberal arts environments, which the multi-racial Hispanic female junior leaned into more. These features of summer programs have been supported as a valuable

factor for well-rounded skill development for future success in the post-baccalaureate career environment (Humphreys & Davenport, 2005).

Strayhorn's (2019) definition for the sense of belonging is evident at Institution B. All students in the focus group shared mixed emotions about the summer bridge program, with both positive and negative markers, such as the ability to build rapport with people from similar backgrounds (positive) and being pushed to be too vulnerable about their lives and identity too soon (negative). Yet, the group was still able to point to the boost in support and comfort with one another after the experience. Two of the male students, a Black Senior and a junior of unknown race/ethnicity, shared how the summer program requirement was hard for their parents to accept because of the potential limitations. The Black male senior said his parents worried the summer program would “stop [them] from making friends everywhere,” meaning the rest of the student community not enrolled in Institution B’s program.

Their female classmate, a Hispanic-identifying senior, shared her concerns with the summer program more vehemently:

I almost didn't come because [of the Institution B program], because it required five weeks out of the summer and I was like, "Oh, I need money." So that was the one thing that made question coming here, was because of [the Institution B program]. 'Cause I knew I needed to have a job and keep making money over the summer, but the admission required you to be here during [the summer]. So I was hesitant...
(Institution B Focus Group, personal communication, May 7, 2023)

Despite similar concerns about the stress of a multiple week summer program, the other Black male senior from Institution B had a more positive takeaway of “meeting everybody and knowing we all are coming here from the same place more or less,” alluding to opportunity program students having similar demographic or economic backgrounds. This Black male senior

shared that “the two classes [were] great because that taste of academics for that one summer really did solidify how I was going to go forward and how to really do things.”

The students from Institution B were in unison around what one Black male senior described as forced “trauma bonding” during the summer program. Trauma bonding is defined as a process where individuals form close relationships or connections from shared negative experiences that have caused them fear or other disruptive feelings and that have long-lasting impacts in their attitudes and behaviors (APA, 2023). The group said they were pushed very early on in the multi-week experience to share personal details through Intergroup Dialogue, which is an educational model that uses, “face-to-face facilitated conversation between members of two or more social identity groups that strives to create new levels of understanding, relating, and action” (Zúñiga, 2003, p. 9). This type of negative experience is in direct opposition to the sense of belonging summer bridge and opportunity programs are said to encourage (Lopez, 2016; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2019).

Institution C builds the summer through wraparound support for their incoming students. The Director highlighted their one-on-one meeting with each student, team leadership group meetings to share observations, and new peer mentorship to better understand their cohort. Institution C prioritizes being aware of students’ unique needs and identifying both spoken and unspoken challenges so that the program can respond quickly to help students in their transition into Institution C. One example was about providing learning accommodations:

I work fairly closely with student accessibility services. We have a number of students who have some accommodations. We also every year...we identify more than one student who has come to us who either had testing so long ago that it’s no longer valid, or never had testing and should have. So, I actually have money built into the grant budget to pay for an assessment. (Institution C, HEOP Director, personal communication, August 4, 2023)

This quote from a program administrator highlights the individualized approach found at Institution C and is example of a common way they seek to support their opportunity program students' needs. Students from Institution C are in a program that has developed the type of interwoven, personalized resource model that Kezar (2020) described as tailoring. Additionally, the students can take advantage of personalized institutional, transformative support systems that have been developed at higher levels of leadership and trickle down into the fabric of the students' lived experiences in Institution C's program (Edwards, 2011; Kezar & Eckel, 2008).

The students from Institution C confirmed this personalized approach and that Institution C focuses on this from the beginning during their summer program. The group spoke in enthusiastic unison about the introduction to key faculty and administrators, along with being able to learn more about the campus' overall resources, saying it helped them feel more comfortable in their preparation for the impending academic year. One example is from a rising sophomore who identifies as a Hispanic female:

I guess one thing that they tend to do is do one-on-one meetings for all the HEOP students in the beginning of the semester. So, it's just more like, what are your plans for this semester? What are your plans? What are you trying to do and why? And how can I help you in that process? And what do you need from me? (Institution C Focus Group, personal communication, July 15, 2023)

This student confirmed the HEOP Director's details of the program structure being personalized and providing students with continued one-on-one support for their unique needs. Again, the students shared that Institution C's program provides them with tailored, personalized support that is built into the program's infrastructure (Kezar et al., 2020).

Additionally, the students' strong sense of the program being able to fit their needs and a summer transition that starts strong directly counteracts any concerns with Pather and Dorasmy's (2018) theory of mismatching, where minoritized first-year students enroll at postsecondary

institutions that do not meet their expectations, level of academic talent, or offer the resources necessary for students to be successful in and continue their studies to completion.

Designated Program Space

In addition to the students' insights on their summer programs, students were vocal about the value of the programs' physical space as a central hub for support, safety, and comfort. In on-campus observations at both Institution A and Institution B, it was notable that the opportunity programs have a building designated for their program specifically, and that is centrally located on the campus to allow students to easily access other resources. A male student from Institution B outlined how their institutionally-funded program provides unique support due to having a valued physical location on campus:

[Without the opportunity program,] I feel like that wouldn't have been nurtured as well, considering that we wouldn't have as good an idea of how to navigate [Institution B] without [the program], its resources, its access to people and the other, and the infinite amount of activities that you can do. (Institution B Focus Group, personal communication, May 7, 2023)

This quote from a male, junior student (race/ethnicity unknown) illuminated Institution B's program, which while not centered on individualized meetings as at Institution C, provides students with an understanding of the campus and its resources. This has allowed opportunity programs students to feel more comfortable and understand there are co-curricular experiences available to them as well. These additional options include things within the programs, such as lead roles as peer mentors during the summer bridge programs. The students also mentioned leadership development, career development through internships, and being encouraged to participate in cultural clubs and organizations that are part of general campus student life.

At Institution A, students expressed a similar tone about the physical space and how students are given a unique level of support; they find comfort in having the current assigned

location for them and their peers who are members of the AOP/HEOP program. A Black female first-year student described the value of their building and space sharing:

It's a safe space that you can come to. Especially at a PWI, it's kind of hard to navigate what is a safe space. So, I definitely feel like having the AOP office is a great opportunity. I feel like there's a lot of community involvement. (Institution A Focus Group, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

This first-year student at Institution A clearly defined the value of the opportunity program at the institution having a physical location for their students. Institution A's office is a physical representation of safety, a place for programming, and a place to get redirected to other resources as needed.

Across the three programs, students highlighted the importance of having their own assigned and dedicated space for the opportunity program office, which often include study and lounge areas. This allows students to share a physical location that feels like a safe environment, a place for studying and learning, and a space to get the type of individualized attention and support highlighted at Institution A. The students have a shared experience of finding comfort and specific directions on what to do next or where to go next in their times of need. These spaces were described as being social environments where students hang out, lounge, or engage in intentional activities that bring multiple cohorts and classes together.

Students at each institution shared that they appreciate being surrounded with a community of other first-year and older students from similar demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. This was a key point made by program leaders and students on each campus. Both groups of participants highlighted how the students in these targeted opportunity programs have been selected to join institutions with a majority-White student body, most of whom come from financial backgrounds of far greater privilege than their own.

The students shared how important it is that they were alerted to these differences throughout the recruitment, enrollment, and transition processes. A senior Hispanic female from Institution C highlighted cultural events on their campus:

I think one of the things that helped to stand out for me was the celebration of diversity event where they let us come and spend the night and the students are very honest about their experience as BIPOC students or people who have different social economic status compared to some of the other students here. And so, they were brutal about the experience of a culture shock and whatnot, but they also reinforced the idea of how strong our community is regardless of the culture shock. (Institution C Focus Group, personal communication, July 15, 2023)

Another Hispanic female, a senior student but from Institution A, spoke of a collaborative form of community engagement:

And also I think I like that we can be as involved as we launch in the program because there are different things like the student board and also we have something called the [Institution A mentor program]. So you can be a mentor to freshman students. Even the [Institution A] summer program, you can apply to that and be a teacher assistant for the summer. There's a lot of opportunities where you can be involved in the program as much as you want to be, which I think enhances the overall experience of the different parts of AOP. (Institution A Focus Group, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

These Hispanic female seniors, one from Institution A and one from Institution C, shared that their universities have been creative at meeting students where they are, adjusting admissions criteria, and building a bespoke program on each campus.

Notably, the first quote is a student from Institution C describing the institutionally funded overnight experience for prospective students. This immersive on-campus program allows potential opportunity program students to spend multiple days and nights on campus, sleep in the university residence halls, and have a current opportunity program student host them so they can personally experience the campus environment. The second quote builds on this by sharing how the 5-6 week required summer experience provides an opportunity for older cohorts to support their younger peers in the program. This student was clear that they can build

connections to their opportunity program peers, take on more leadership, and be more immersed in the program dynamics with designed mentorship opportunities.

Despite highly selective admissions criteria, these three institutions have adjusted to diversify the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic representation in their student communities. In fact, students' perspectives overall were that the institutions have done this while also building supportive and focused approaches through these opportunity programs. Each site employs the multi-level approach critical to student support from the start (Kezar et al., 2020; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011). Each of the three institutions has designed their program with key transition support, while also encouraging students to take on leadership within the opportunity program, be immensely involved in the broader campus community, and take advantage of the varying resources their campuses offer for immersive academic experiences (e.g., study abroad).

The three institutions have a stated focus on building community and helping students prepare for the academic rigor they will face during the academic year ahead. This approach illustrates the efficacy of opportunity programs directly supporting the intended success of enrolled students towards future graduation and students' post-baccalaureate goals. The programs focus on students' personal development, community engagement and cohort building, social-emotional support, and overall comprehensive ongoing initiatives towards student success. These individual areas for personal development correlate to the type of engagement afforded to the Meyerhoff Scholars in Stolle-McAllister et al. (2011). That growth aligns to the flexible, tailored, and broadly accessible resources that are key to the results in Kezar et al. (2020) discussed in the next section.

Impact of Development

Specific to the conceptual model of this dissertation, these findings about program structure illustrate how students described the importance of being introduced to key campus resources to increase their awareness and ease of access to support beyond the opportunity program itself that provide opportunities for personal development. Development in the context of this research is defined as a form of cultural capital that focuses on self-improvement through the expenditure of personal time and effort (Bourdieu, 1986/1983).

Students across the three programs shared that a key aspect of their personal growth and development was encouraged through introductions to important offices, people, and opportunities early in their transition into college. This notion overlaps with the concept of solid program structures, but also allows opportunity program students to build on their experiences throughout their postsecondary education experience, both in and outside of the classroom. Douglas and Attewell (2014) illustrated this connection in their research on community colleges and less selective four-year postsecondary institutions. Students saw increased degree completion percentages after participation in summer bridge programs. Additionally, their work showcased the importance of postsecondary institutions further developing their existing programs and resources to support students' growth (Douglas & Attewell, 2014).

A special example from the HEOP Director at Institution C highlighted the influence of the college president hosting an annual dinner. In fact, Institution C exhibited an extensive influence through their HEOP. The program's impact reaches the top levels of institutional leadership in the sense that senior leaders are introduced to students, host annual programming, and can act as major, visible support to the program students. Moreover, there is an emphasis on students' sense of belonging through intentional attempts to ensure that they feel seen,

remembered, and recognized across the full community beyond HEOP, for example with the president remembering and engaging the HEOP students at the Fall event for the full community.

Each summer, in fact, HEOP students are invited as a way for the president to get to know them.

The president has made a point to greet HEOP students during the regular fall orientation:

[During the big picnic for all first-year students,] as soon as new HEOP students walk in, [the president will] say "Great to see you again! How [are] you doing?" And their classmates are like, "What? Why do you know the president?" (Institution C HEOP Director, personal communication, August 4, 2023)

This quote from the Program Director at Institution C showed how the opportunity program connects students to campus leadership and in turn helps their self-confidence in their fit with the institution. Related to this development and Institution C's individualized approach mentioned earlier, a Hispanic male in their second year shared how networking is also included to help the HEOP students' development:

I think networking is also a really big part of the program and the various things that they offer us because during the summer we're here for a month or around there earlier than a lot of other incoming students. And because of that we get to have a lot of one-on-ones with professors and other faculty and [it] really just helps us branch out... Networking has a lot of unspoken value, but again, the connections between staff and other faculty is something that's provided really well for essentially everyone [in the organization]. (Institution C Focus Group, personal communication, July 15, 2023)

Similarly, at Institution A, all students in the focus group mentioned how the program connects them to other institutional offices, even if their opportunity program does not have the specific resources within their budget or physical space. This includes practical advice to help students with life after college when approaching their finances. The Associate Director at Institution A described this as follows:

There is a financial management class that we have our seniors take before they graduate, just because we do want for them to really start thinking about money and how they're going to save versus pay off loans and all of those other things. So we definitely do try to squeeze in a lot of fun because they're going to be stressed out in other ways, but there is

a level of practicality in terms of some of the programming that we do, because we do want [them] to have these critical skills. (Institution A Associate Director, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

These examples from program leaders at Institution A and Institution C illuminated ways the programs push students outside of the bounds of the opportunity programs. The students not only know they have a central hub, but the program leadership encourages the students to go beyond that physical space and safe community to develop their skills and knowledge further.

Students can broaden their social capital through cultivating their skills, including acceptance of their own economic knowledge and understanding that will provide a runway for that social understanding to become financial gain in their post-baccalaureate life. Not only this, but the networking and connection to key people like the president, or offices like career services, can help students to foster connections for prospects in additional education, future job searches, or others beyond program alumni, giving these students a chance to have long-standing relationships after their undergraduate experience.

At Institution B, all students in the opportunity program feel they are being pushed outside of their comfort zone, as well. Another key growth point that comes through is the students' social-emotional learning. Speaking about success related to the opportunity program, one student, a Black male from Texas, mentioned personal growth in how he views success:

I calculate success in terms of growth. And I kind of feel like I've grown so much in so many different ways. I feel like I've grown socially a lot. I've grown personally, I've grown academically, I've grown in ways of my thinking...

[I was] getting myself ready to take on this environment, taking on new people, taking on the professors and just the class load. I think it's done nothing but good because I feel like I've learned so much regardless of the academics, just being here and being in the presence of just everybody... and I kind of feel like I am 70% ready to go out into the real world and just really shake [things] up. (Institution B Focus Group, personal communication, May 7, 2023)

This quote from a Black male student at Institution B illuminated how he feels the program has led him to personal growth, and confirmed that he now feels prepared to succeed in life after college as well. This student's language is strong and confident. He speaks with a sense of belief in himself, and in the skills the opportunity program at Institution B has helped him develop, with focus and clarity. That confidence has allowed this student to feel ready to approach their post-college experience and career with the ability to make a dramatic impact in the “real world” and engage with a more diverse population of coworkers in his job environment because of what he has been introduced to in diverse communities, learning environments, and perspectives during his undergraduate experience at Institution A.

Another Black male student, originally from New Jersey, shared how he had come to see problem solving as a form of cultural competency. The student discussed his growth in having the ability to talk themselves out of high-level disagreements, something they might not have deemed as possible prior to enrollment at Institution B:

I would just define success in seeing the evolution of how you face problems, in the broadest way of saying it... Some of the ways I would've reacted right after high school is completely different than I've reacted now... There's so many problems that I've seen here that I've been able to help people work through just by talking. Back home, that just would not have worked. Even going back now talking to some of my friends, some of those problems would not work. But just being able to understand that speaking is a solution, I was never really taught that was a real thing until I got here. Actually, my brother actually told me that "talking is that shit White people do." (Institution B Focus Group, personal communication, May 7, 2023)

In this statement, the student alludes to an identity prior to college: between themselves and in their home community, problem-solving or disagreement could only be resolved with more aggressive engagement. Yet, through their academic and co-curricular experience at Institution B, this student has come to understand how to compromise and have honest discussions with people who have different opinions or who directly disagree with him.

Further, this student highlighted how different racial groups may be taught how to manage disagreement differently, and observed that this skill does not have to be assigned to culture and identity, but is just individuals' ability to come together and have dialogue without an aggressive conflict. He recognized his ability to see the world and engage with people from different backgrounds better, now that the opportunity program and Institution B have demonstrated ways to approach disagreement with a calmer perspective.

The other students from Institution B had emic perspectives of becoming more comfortable having vulnerable conversations (junior male, race/ethnicity unknown) and building friendships with people from other cultural groups (senior Hispanic female). Conversely, the student focus group from Institution C all leaned towards acquiring more practical skills like financial management, valuing that they now feel they can be more successful in their careers because they engaged in internships and networking, and that their program gave them a necessary and ongoing boost towards traditional academic success in the form of good grades. Overall, the students shared that they use the resources and people available to them to tailor situations to their own ideas and goals, but also to see their peers as examples of how to go about resolving situations when they may be personally uncertain. This illuminates the internal social capital development model and personally tailored support approaches utilized in this study's targeted opportunity programs (Kezar et al., 2020; Means & Pyne, 2016).

Finally, Luedke's (2020) prior scholarship highlighted the ability of first-generation students of color to assist younger peers who share similar demographic identities to see postsecondary education as a viable option. This shared belief creates the dynamic for community-based uplift throughout these social identity groups, and is aligned with the opportunity program students in this practitioner-led dissertation. The opportunity program

students take advantage of the programs to develop social capital, and at the same time they also create the dynamics for future success for themselves, their peers who enroll in these programs in the future, and the communities they will become part of after their undergraduate experience, all due to how they uplifted one another (Luedke, 2020; Means & Pyne, 2016).

Moreover, the students can compare their learned experiences before college, what the opportunity program introduces them to as part of their unique community, and the broader tools and perspectives of each of the institutions in this dissertation, to build a broader understanding of how they can successfully build their skills to meet their own benchmarks and approach their post-baccalaureate life with confidence that they can succeed, and real energy.

Impact of Belonging

The personal insight of students about the sense of belonging they experience due to their opportunity program is a key finding of this study. The data illustrated that students are encouraged and reassured that they earned their opportunity to attend the institution and should not see themselves as less than their peers who are not enrolled in the opportunity programs. In fact, the students share a clear understanding about the challenges of being at PWIs, and the ways that belonging is not evident at times beyond the opportunity program spaces, events, and support systems. The programs have confronted key structural issues such as imposter syndrome, the physical differences of many of these students from their majority White peers, and the history within the campuses themselves of minoritized students being underrepresented or not included at all. That history links to a central bias across all three institutions (Johnson et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2020; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2008, 2019).

First, students acknowledged the support from their peers and how this allows them to open up and share authentically about more vulnerable experiences and topics that they might

not share with non-opportunity program peers so readily. A Hispanic female who had recently graduated described this as follows:

In this [focus group] for example, a lot of people brought up very sensitive topics to themselves, financial instability, mental health issues or just lack of support at home or not even having a home. This is something I would never talk about with other peers just normally, but as soon as I find out they live in a certain area, then the conversation starts rolling to that comfortable area where you can talk about things like this. But most of the times all I'm talking about is stuff that's happening on campus, very small [Institution C] bubble type of conversations and those are cool and all, but it's not really touching onto me as a person. It's very surface level. (Institution C Focus Group, personal communication, July 15, 2023)

This statement speaks to the student's perspective that their opportunity program created the dynamic for her and her peers to feel comfortable sharing more personal and vulnerable details about themselves with one another. Specifically, all students in the focus group discussed this kind of experience and shared that they felt they could be authentic in their discussions due to the fact that they had built rapport and connection to one another through the shared experience of being enrolled in the opportunity program on their campus.

Speaking of their respective ability to be authentic, vulnerable, and to share personal insights, a student from Institution A confirmed this in their opportunity program as well, even with the challenges of COVID in 2020. This Hispanic female, who is a senior, shared her perspective on the invaluable impact of Institution A's opportunity program:

I guess there's no real way to quantify it. I think it's just being here in the [Institution A] program has taught me a lot because I was accepted during the time of COVID. So we didn't have the traditional summer, but [Institution A] did everything possible to make sure that we had a core group of knowing each other firsthand and then branching out. So it kind of helped us out socially when everyone was in lockdown. So I really appreciated that first bit of the family, I guess that [Institution A program] likes to talk about, that we're all in this together and that there's everyone in the year above and a year below to support you and you support them. So there's no real, I guess, way to say how much I value that. (Institution A Focus Group, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

Her reflections illuminated ways that these three opportunity programs help their students feel more comfortable by increasing their sense of belonging with one another, so much so that they felt comfortable being vulnerable and sharing their struggles about academics with each other throughout the year, as well.

A similar confirmation of peer support was shared at Institution B as students provided details on what they referred to as the ongoing negative impact of being enrolled at a PWI. The students leaned into their personalized racial and ethnic identities, sharing how they can feel like an outlier at a PWI where the bulk of their non-opportunity program peers are not people of color. A Hispanic senior female from Illinois provided great depth on this challenge:

And then the first week of actual classes, not [the summer transition program], was way [easier] because I feel, if I had not had [the opportunity program], I would've seen all of those White people walking together... That would've destroyed me, to know that I didn't have friends and [the White students] were all just walking together. I felt like that would've fully killed me. But knowing that, "Oh, I have people that live upstairs, I know people here," was good for me. But if I had come in without [Institution B's opportunity program] and without any of that program, I would've been like, "Ooh, I got to go home right now." And so I think that was what [was] good for me. (Institution B Focus Group, personal communication, May 7, 2023)

These students' comments point to a range of meaningful insights on the importance of the cohort and opportunity program community. Their words confirm the importance of the pre-orientation summer transition to build comfort. That comfort and the feeling of belonging to one another, with older peers, program leadership, and offices students were introduced to before the start of the formal academic year, together made a significant difference. The last student quoted at Institution B, notably, stated that the collection of White students would have been enough to push them to leave the school altogether with the summer bridge.

Yet, like their peers at the other two research sites, students experienced a sense of belonging through the opportunity programs, and were able to reach out to the rest of the campus

because a sense of safety, identity with the institution, and knowing they deserved these opportunities had been developed. These students shared how they could open up to one another, be protected and feel safe through the collectivity of being together, and knowing they have a place to run to if they reached a peak point of anxiety. That deep sense of belonging stopped their inclinations to run away or shrink, but still allowed these students to work through the earliest stages of discomfort and greatest points of concern as they made their transition into being an undergraduate at these PWIs.

Despite their growing sense of belonging and support in each other, these students share frustration at the stigma associated with being a part of an opportunity program. In fact, some have been misconstrued as being a tier below their peers *because* of their connection to the opportunity program. The Senior Associate Director from Institution A referred to their opportunity program students as “diamonds in the rough.” At Institution B, the administrator said their students were a group who “wouldn’t meet the criteria for general admission.” Institution C’s program Director shared that they enrolled students who would be academically “ineligible” to be admitted through the university’s general admissions process. Program leaders shared and highlighted stereotypes about students who are first-generation, low-income, or students of color as well (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In each case, it appears that the institutions overall, including faculty, do not fully understand the rationale or goals of the opportunity program and the broader intellectual potential of these students.

These faculty misunderstandings are illustrated in struggles with specific majors (i.e., STEM) or having to press more faculty to participate in teaching courses in the summer program (Johnson et al., 2020; McGonagle et al., 2014; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011). Program leaders must do extra work to educate their campuses on the importance of additional diversity across

the student body as well as the importance that program students feel welcomed enough that they can demonstrate the capacity to thrive both inside and outside of the classroom as members of their postsecondary institution's community (Strayhorn, 2019). The Associate Director at Institution A shared an overview of these experiences:

Being one of few in the classroom, that alone is something that all of our students have struggled with at some point. That feeling of imposter syndrome and just not feeling like they belong... We do have a lot of students who originally start in STEM that are interested in STEM, but usually by year three, we do see a dip in the number of students that actually stay in STEM... And so we've had conversations with the chemistry department, even the computer science department, where they're just seeing really low numbers. And so yeah, I would say that's another area in which more can be done. (Institution A Associate Director, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

This quote from a program leader illuminated that bias, imposter syndrome, and a sense of unbelonging in the wider community persist. The students at Institution C also shared experiences of not always feeling they that belong in the wider campus community. For example, a junior student who identifies as Hispanic and female described the wider university's lack of understanding about their opportunity program:

...so, there's a lot of professors and a lot of faculty who actually like to engage with us and actually like to participate in the program, which I really enjoy. But I guess what's [wrong is] the lack of, I guess, education around HEOP and why it's important to us and why we're in it. A lot of students on a campus think, oh, it's a free ride to scholarship. Oh, you guys have it easy, you have a good grant. But it's way more than that and we probably have been through way more than what they have been through to get to that college. (Institution C Focus Group, personal communication, July 15, 2023)

This quote highlighted broader concerns around cultural competency or acceptance of the opportunity program students' unique challenges, those that push against their sense of belonging, outside of their cohort and older peers.

Finally, students from Institution B shared insights about pre-college obstacles, including opinions from family and school officials telling them they could not succeed or maintain at a

PWI given the academic rigor of the university. A senior female who identifies as Hispanic shared that her family warned her when she was admitted to Institution B:

Yeah, my parents didn't want me to come to [Institution B] at all. They were like, "Don't go, you're going to drop out. It's a hard school." I remember a counselor in high school telling me that when I told him I got into [Institution B] he was like, "That's a hard school." And he fully was telling me I was going to drop out. (Institution B Focus Group, personal communication, May 7, 2023)

Her reflections speak to the concerns that many families of students in opportunity programs share, not only about their children going away to college but about their fit and their academic ability to succeed. This familial concern can stem from not knowing what college entails and thus not being able to offer support in ways that would benefit their children. One reflection from the family of a Black male classmate in their senior year speaks to this phenomenon. He shared:

After I read the fine print saying, "If you don't go to [the summer transition program], you can't go to [Institution B]," it actually kind of almost deterred my mom from giving me her permission to go. I won't say not letting me go because she says that, "This is, one, in the middle of nowhere and just full of White people. And if they're forcing [you] into this program, it's going to keep you away from everyone." (Institution B Focus Group, personal communication, May 7, 2023)

This quote details his family's concern that the program could be a roadblock to the student being welcomed into (or even introduced to) the wider campus community. Their concerns were that program membership might be restrictive in the sense that it could hold participants back from broader campus engagement. In both examples, students shared how their families gave them reasons to reconsider their decision or to not feel confident in their college choice and/or the opportunity program at Institution B itself.

These student and program leader anecdotes are illustrative of the continued challenge for students after they have been admitted. There are questions around their ability to fit in,

including specific academic disciplines where the institutions, even with their focused DEI efforts, still are not as supportive of students enrolled in the opportunity programs to achieve sustained academic success.

Further, students are aware of the PWI environment where they are one of the only students with similar demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. These circumstances create the potential for reasons to not enroll, reasons for students to not be engaged in their communities, and represent the cons in the bigger conversation about the pros and cons around belonging and fit. Yet, the opportunity programs have nevertheless allowed these students to stand strong and not completely walk away from the PWIs featured in this dissertation. A key part of this is the encouragement for students to participate in college life with one another and the wider campus communities overall.

The sense of belonging is exponentializing due to the gravity of what these students are facing at PWIs where bias and questions about their ability remain. Program leaders and the students highlighted the criticism of their additional support or their worthiness to be admitted into these selective admissions institutions. However, students can build confidence in themselves and their academic capacity, as well as develop their social capital through these opportunity programs. The students recognize how their program leaders and peers push the agenda with advocacy and evidence of continued success as top performers, even compared to their majority identity (affluent, White) peers.

Belonging is what attracts these students, allows them to sustain through structural challenges, and creates the legacy of alumni and campus infrastructure to continue to push against traditional racism and prejudices, all of which is required of senior leaders for future success in higher education (Kezar et al., 2008; Kezar & Eckel, 2008; Ravitch & Herzog, 2023).

Conclusion

Students interviewed for this dissertation shared that they experienced an emphasis on their involvement as students. They shared that their program leaders encourage students to find their specific interests and become members of a variety of communities beyond their engagement in the opportunity programs. These efforts have helped to establish core skills and investments in opportunity program students' human and social capital that can be used throughout and beyond their college experience.

Further, these students benefitted from broader institutional efforts to overcome longstanding structural barriers of fit (e.g., lack of cultural competency, biased faculty) that can undermine the confidence of students enrolled in these types of opportunity programs (Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022). This intervention was clear at Institution B where opportunity program students have been consistently awarded the highest university honor for leadership and engagement as they approach commencement. The Associate Director at Institution B confirmed opportunity program students' success and examined the students' standing within the overall campus community:

Our retention rate is probably as strong as the rest of [Institution B's] campus. And given the fact that they're coming in with a lot more baggage, if you will, with a lot less privilege and they're still competing at [the] same level.

And for the last five, six years, I would say, what, 3 or 4 of [the students] I can name, they also became the [name of award] winner, which is the highest honor that is bestowed on a student. (Institution B Associate Director, personal communication, May 6, 2023)

These statements from the associate director speak to how the program has worked to assuage familial concerns about holding students back from the broader community, which highlights a reason for Institution B's success in maintaining students' enrollment, despite much more challenged personal backgrounds than non-opportunity program students at this PWI, and

provides the connection and sense of belonging for these students to be top achievers within the campus community.

Similarly, at Institution A, when the university celebrated its first Rhodes Scholar in two decades, the student honored was an alumnus of their opportunity program. These are examples of the type of successes attained when students are encouraged to not retreat, to not stay within the program environment, and not to keep to themselves. Instead, these students are told to take hold of the experience in front of them, knowing that they have a community of support backing them up each step of the way. The Associate Director at Institution A provided an overview of this engagement:

Well, our students are definitely highly involved in the community building piece. Definitely, a lot of them are active participants and everything from volunteer opportunities on campus, they absolutely support with the admissions process. We ask them to host prospective students and to join panels and to participate in events that faculty are putting together. And so, in that way, the students are definitely engaging with the community on campus. I do think that they bring a different perspective from the general student body. (Institution A Associate Director, personal communication, April 27, 2023)

This type of encouragement and support contributes to the success of students enrolled in targeted, access-oriented initiatives for historically underrepresented students (Kezar et al., 2020; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2019). This deeper level of social-emotional engagement helps to develop students' sense of belonging. They trust in their advisors and the programs in moments of need, and have a community they can see as a safe space, even if the wider campus may not always be inviting. This can help students overcome issues of educational disadvantage that themselves can be comprehensive, multi-pronged, and all encompassing.

In higher education, especially at selective liberal arts institutions like those featured in this research, the gap in access to social, human, and financial capital is evident (Green &

Bedeau, 2020; Harper, 2013; Strayhorn, 2008). To overcome the years of lack of support, limited resources, and simple lack of encouragement, opportunity programs must respond with the same depth of support for students with a multi-pronged approach to be effective. The most important aspect is the social-emotional dynamic (i.e., a sense of belonging) (Johnson et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2019). This sense of belonging is what can help students feel more psychologically, academically, and emotionally capable of reaching their own potential.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This practitioner-led dissertation shared current undergraduate students' experiences of and perspectives on their targeted opportunity programs. This research engaged students enrolled in opportunity programs at higher education institutions within the Carnegie classification of residential, liberal arts colleges. Each of the three institutions is in the state of New York, has a selective admissions process, and has utilized targeted opportunity programs to increase diversity through the admission of students who might normally be overlooked in the rigorous admissions review process. While prior research defined diversity and highlighted the broad impact diversity has on students' campus experiences, this prior scholarship does not feature students' perspectives through interviews or other personal contacts to understand their experiences (Strayhorn, 2011). The current dissertation takes that step with an emic approach of presenting students' insights around the DEIB-focused initiative of targeted opportunity programs.

In this research on targeted opportunity programs, four themes were emphasized in the research findings: financial support, both in terms of traditional financial aid and coverage of miscellaneous expenses; program structure; development and personal growth of the students; and finally, the exponentializing impact of students' sense of belonging on the quality and success of their experiences as undergraduates]. While there were some clear differences in the recruitment and admissions selection for the targeted programs at each institution, at all three, the general focus remained on access for students who might otherwise be overlooked or not admitted due to the institutions' selective general admissions criteria.

Using the research questions, the study sought to understand more closely how students in these opportunity programs experience college, and specifically how they view their

experiences in these programs, using an emic approach focused on students' insights to generate themes. Additionally, key leaders' perspectives helped to contextualize students' experiences in and perspectives across a range of aspects and features of these programs. This research addresses two main research questions:

How do undergraduate students with diverse backgrounds, needs, and aspirations in targeted opportunity programs at selective PWIs...

1. Experience program support for making connections in the program and across campus?
2. Experience and understand the structure, value, and impacts of their program?

Guided by these research questions, interviews with program leaders built contextualized understanding of logistics and program offerings and were then paired with focus groups conducted with current undergraduate students in the opportunity programs to elicit emic perspectives on the students' lived experiences.

In this concluding chapter, findings are engaged in three ways. First, the distinct selection process through admission evaluation to engage targeted student populations is considered. Second, financial support that goes beyond traditional financial aid is highlighted. Finally, the need for a conscious way to measure, theorize, and conceptualize belonging as an exponentializing factor uncovered through the emic approach of participants' insights in data collection is illuminated.

The Pros and Cons of Opportunity Programs

Beyond students' feelings that they can excel and have a solid foundation in their community of peers and leaders within the opportunity programs, the students also shared insights from their experiences of some program flaws and limitations. Students all shared feelings of imposter syndrome, prejudice, and bias leveled against themselves, and against their

peers who were also enrolled in opportunity programs. Students highlighted that non-opportunity program peers often have negative perceptions of them as "poor and stupid," in the words of one participant. Administrative leaders highlighted the need to continue to educate faculty and community members on the intellectual ability of students in the programs. These and other anecdotes the students offered highlight the lack of broader campus understanding of these programs, beyond simply adding diverse representation to the student population. A potential ceiling is placed above students due to the limited confidence they may have given their experience of being seen through a deficit lens in other parts of their college community.

In each case the students discussed feeling "othered" because of their enrollment in the opportunity program. Despite this, students shared being educated to see themselves as unique and to accept their own humanity. The students all discussed being taught to overcome their ongoing experiences of imposter syndrome. They were encouraged to see it as a strength to ask for help and to thrive by improving both their strengths and areas of needed improvement with new tasks. This active sense of connection to their feelings of development and growth address concerns that programs with more comprehensive support systems "would just kill a student's self-confidence" before even beginning their college experience (Kezar et al., 2020, p. 13).

With this in mind, it is surprising how often students expressed a strong sense of self-confidence, specifically related to their own personal growth. This was illustrated by the ways that students' stories and shared insights cohered across institutions. Students at each of the programs shared the value of featured program elements that support incoming students with extensive information about their campus environment. Students highlighted the significant ongoing value of having a supportive cohort of peers to welcome them and be a representation of how to navigate these PWIs. Finally, students mentioned ways that their respective opportunity

programs are structured to develop broad support networks that extend into senior leadership, including the college or university president.

Even with these broad networks and intricate support systems, there is still external bias that shapes student concerns and experiences of fit and, as a Black male student from Institution B noted, of feeling the effects of persistent “imposter syndrome.” These types of self-doubts stand in direct contrast to the discussion of how students experience the Meyerhoff Scholars program in Stolle-McAllister et al. (2011), which fosters a sense of pride and prestige in opportunity program membership at the University of Maryland, a flagship public institution with a campus in Baltimore County (UMBC).

Across institutions, students recounted being doubted in their academic abilities, dealing with criticism for the additional support they received, and even at times the need for program leaders to advocate for the merits of the students enrolled into the programs with others on campus. As in the case of the Meyerhoff Scholars at UMBC, institutions would better serve their students if they enacted more humanizing and broad-based institutional policy implementation that foregrounds the individualized and shared needs of students to promote an increased sense of belonging (Ravitch & Kannan, 2021; Strayhorn, 2019). For the opportunity program students, equity-minded institutional structural advances would make the most difference. These institutional adjustments would not only improve underrepresented students’ willingness to enroll at PWIs, as did the students in this study, but also create more diverse student bodies that improve the intellectual and co-curricular benefits for all students (Gurin, 2004).

Institution B seems to come closest to the excellence of the Meyerhoff Scholars in achieving students’ sense of belonging and possibility, with program students consistently receiving the highest annual student award on campus. Even with this success internally, the

program's Senior Associate Director and students pointed to recent, vivid examples of prejudice and disregard for the students in this program. Nonetheless, the students benefited from the type of tailoring noted as being a key factor in students' success in Kezar et al. (2020). This intentional approach begins in the student selection process with specialized admissions standards.

Distinct Selection of Students

Campus leaders at all three institutions highlighted their distinct selection processes for enrolling students into their opportunity programs. These selection processes pull students out of their campus's general admissions selection pool, rather than recruiting candidates separately. Each school is selective, based on their admission rate within the Carnegie Classification, and the students selected and enrolled in these opportunity programs would not have been admitted otherwise. Another key requirement across all three institutions is student financial thresholds, which are determined by a high financial need through the standard financial aid forms, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and CSS Profile. Students selected for opportunity programs must be able to prove high financial need. Each institution provides significant financial aid support, and this has directly impacted selected students' decision to enroll.

Program students in this study confirmed the importance of high levels of financial support in their enrollment decision. It was the primary factor in students' decision to enroll for only two of the fifteen students who participated in the focus groups. One of these students shared that they were unaware of the opportunity program overall. This further points to the commonality of the students at each institution. Students do not apply directly to these programs but are pulled out of the general admission application pool based on demographics, and more specifically, financial and academic metrics. From this pool of potential opportunity program

students, each institution uses a committee review process. The committees include members of the opportunity programs' leadership and the Office of Admission to select the final cohorts of new incoming students.

Institution A, which has a mixed university-established and state-funded HEOP program, did not share its typical enrollment from selected students, but the university's page for the program shows less than 20 enrolled students. This is a similar number to the 18 selected by Institution C, which only has a state-funded Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP). Institution B differed significantly, with 30 to 40 scholars enrolled each year. Also, that university has a self-established opportunity program not included in the NY State HEOP network. This difference may be attributed to Institution B having an overall enrollment of approximately 1,000 more students than either Institution A or Institution C.

An Exponentializing Sense of Belonging

Students' perception of their sense of belonging as a function of their opportunity program experience illustrated a catalytic impact. The importance of students feeling an exponentializing sense of belonging is both evident and consistent with findings in research on the Meyerhoff Scholars program, in which students talk about referring to their community as a family (Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011). For these students, the sense of belonging and confidence boost provided by the familial environment of the opportunity programs has helped them build confidence in community support beyond their years as an undergraduate student. Further emphasizing the familial dynamic, the study acknowledges the imperfections in family relationships, but noted that students "still feel a strong bond of affection and obligation to everyone" (Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011, p. 11). Across the three research sites in this study, in

fact, students also recounted experiences with being seen as different, other than, and less than their non-program peers.

The takeaways from the interviews and focus groups illustrate how these programs help to launch students forward. Opportunity programs present student populations who might otherwise feel uncomfortable, unwelcomed, or not poised to succeed. The emphasis on belonging, providing a range and variety of resources—both set and emergent based on individual need--and offering a safe community and physical space to gather extends from each programs' mission. The impacts of the hybridization of these supports were made evident in how the students described their experiences as scholars on their campuses. However, unlike the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at University of Maryland, Baltimore County in Stolle-McAllister et al. (2011), these programs have not embedded a deep awareness and confidence across their campus communities.

Still, students shared some ways that they see and know they have support when needed from one another and the program leaders, who are their earliest contacts when they first step foot on campus. This support and intentionality encourages students to be more involved in the campus community. Opportunity program students are introduced to the general campus environment early and encouraged to engage with their academic interests, and the students' have little or no concern with accessing campus support resources due to the easy links to additional program funding, other university offices, direct mentorship, and more organized logistical processes (e.g. co-curricular activities, student clubs and organizations, sports, etc.), (Johnson et al., 2020; Kezar et al., 2020).

Understanding the importance of student access to resources and the prominence of program leadership in their support, this research must center students' emic conceptualizations

of their sense of belonging and what it means to them in context. However, traditional metrics around enrollment and retention do not elevate this metric. Opportunity programs must add annual assessments of how their enrolled students view and feel about their sense of belonging, both in the program and on the campus, with a focus on their classrooms and social spaces such as dorms, as well as on social events.

To adequately highlight the opportunity programs' impact, key questions need to be asked. For example, students from Institution C had nothing to say about what they would like to see in their campus' opportunity program going forward. To better understand if this is authentic, the following questions should be asked:

- Is there a lack of concern or complaint shown by students at Institution C when asked about how the opportunity program meets their needs?
- Have the programs adjusted to the students' different needs and tailored their response to these unique needs (Kezar et al., 2020)?

The introduction of a belonging score for individual students or the program overall would create a metric that program leaders can respond to by implementing more events, additional advising, and mentorship, or by engaging their students for ideas about what they need. The ability to be flexible, intentional, and quick with these adjustments would be another way these programs can exemplify their value. Further, increased scores after these adjustments would be another indicator of the success of targeted opportunity programs. Program leaders could utilize entering students' experience from the start of the summer transition programs and throughout their first year to see how their sense of belonging in the program and the wider campus community changes. For continuing students, combining these students' perspectives on belonging with quantitative metrics of retention could highlight the key programs, support

services, and opportunities that help students continue their academic experience. Moreover, this makes students' needs a factor in decision-making, rather than just quantitative examples of what is successful, since students' underlying experiences can hide their true feelings about satisfaction or the opposite (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Muskens et al., 2019; Park, 2009).

Regardless, engaging with students in focus groups in this study generated layered data that informs a new understanding of students' experiences in opportunity programs with a focus on insider themes, or emic student perspectives. Enrolled students' perspective provides another lens to understand the success of these targeted programs. With a deep history that dates to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, targeted opportunity programs for underrepresented students are a throughline in the fraught and inequitable history of access and inclusion, creating the opportunity for more in-depth contextual understanding into the future development of the best versions of opportunity programs.

It is imperative to understand how well these programs function beyond the metrics and the numbers. This requires the prioritized inclusion of student insights to gain a comprehensive sense of the value and efficacy of the opportunity programs. The focus on their humanity, unique needs, and the deep affirmation of these students as scholars, even when they may be seen as less than others, is vital to establishing maximally effective access and opportunity initiatives.

Researchers need to deepen and expand their framing of opportunity programs in academic scholarship by incorporating and centralizing student perspectives and experiences and linking these to their outcomes.

The current study took up this inquiry using a qualitative focus group approach to build upon prior research that is largely quantitative. Where Strayhorn (2011) analyzed a single university system and Stolle-McAllister et al. (2011) examined a longstanding opportunity

program on one campus, this study compares three similar programs across different higher education institutions. Further, the explores how tailoring and responsive design can be understood and leveraged in a different institutional type than the research of Kezar et al. (2020) which explores this type of student support within a transition program for K-12 students.

This study opens the door to a contextualized and student-centered assessment of support structures, practices, policies, and approaches of opportunity programs at residential liberal arts colleges. It is worth emphasizing that the reputation of selective liberal arts institutions rests precisely on preparing students for a productive life as a member of a close community, both during and after college. Further, this study illuminates how students specifically talk about what they value about these programs, and the types of social-emotional, educational, and post-college success strategies they received. This invites future research including larger-scale studies examining these broad issues to more deeply understand what targeted opportunity programs can offer when they understand how these program supports shape students' worlds.

Future Research

The current study focused on small, selective admission, rural campuses in the state of New York. A new study with larger postsecondary institutions, colleges, and universities in different geographic locations, universities with less selective admissions processes, and a mix of the types of colleges and universities based on their Carnegie Classifications, can introduce additional factors to understand next practices for targeted opportunity programs.

Additionally, unique questions could arise in the analysis of postsecondary institutions that are home to multiple targeted opportunity programs. These are colleges or universities that have implemented more than one access or opportunity program. For example, Institution B has the long-term program that is featured in this study, but has also developed a program targeted to

first-generation college students who are not enrolled in the traditional opportunity program. A key question to analyze would be how students, campus resources, and other focal points to engage students in these types of programs are impacted when the institution has committed to multiple programs? Are there any changes in the belonging score, sense of value, and indicators of success within these programs? Is there any difference in the foundation of the programs, which students are admitted, and the types of university resources students are able to access?

Another question to ask to move opportunity programs forward is how are these programs designed on campuses that are Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) versus others? Do campuses with a student body that is not majority White have established targeted opportunity programs? If so, are there key differences from those postsecondary institutions that are identified as PWIs? These types of questions and analysis would further establish understanding into the value and success of these programs across different college types, student communities, and the typical resources afforded to the students in these programs.

Finally, a mixed method study combining quantitative and qualitative metrics would offer the most comprehensive picture into the value and success of targeted opportunity programs. Prior research has not examined students' experiences and perspectives beyond university metrics such as enrollment and retention rates. This study sought to fill in these contextual and perspectival gaps. Combining contextualized stories such as these with quantitative data to illustrate a full assessment of targeted opportunity programs can enlighten scholars and practitioners on how to best respond to the academically talented, yet consistently under resourced students who are uniquely recruited into higher education opportunity programs.

These types of students and their emic perspectives were the focus of this dissertation. That focus on opportunity program students' insight added to the depth of extensive research on

these types of programs, which had thus far not sufficiently focused on the student experience. This study opens the door to greater possibilities for understanding and addressing how targeted opportunity programs, and the practitioners working within them and scholars conducting research about them, can actionize the exponential impact of belonging. This is especially important when historically underrepresented students are embedded in PWI campuses in which they must build specific kinds of cultural and educational capital to thrive as scholars during college, and later as citizens making an important contribution to our communities.

APPENDIX A

Participant Recruitment Email

Note: I used a strategy of intentional selection to identify the initial group of potential participants for this dissertation study. I sent this recruitment email to encourage volunteers to participate. My requirement was that the participants be currently enrolled opportunity program students at one of the three PWIs selected for this study based on their shared Carnegie classification, geographic location, and similar student body size.--Jamiere Abney, August, 2024

Hello Scholars!

My name is Jamiere Abney. I am a doctoral candidate in Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education.

Today, I reach out to ask for your participation in a research study. I ask you to take part in expanding the knowledge of educators through sharing details of your experiences as scholars in the opportunity program you're enrolled in at your college.

The purpose of my dissertation research is to learn more about students' experiences and perspectives on the resources, programming, and support structure of opportunity programs like yours. There is limited research from the perspective of current undergraduate students in these programs, people like YOU. And your experience matters—for you and the students who follow you. Can you share more about your program's resources and how it supports you and your classmates?

If you agree to participate, I will ask you to volunteer your participation by engaging in all the following:

Complete a survey on your demographics and relevant information about your social identity and background.

Take part in a 60-minute focus group facilitated by me that will include college-aged peers.

Allow for observations of you, the physical space of your opportunity program, and the resources made available to you as part of opportunity program support.

Provide your consent to be audio-recorded and to allow observational notes to be taken for data collection purposes.

This information will be collected and analyzed as data for the dissertation research study. I will not retain any details that can be used to identify you, and all references to you or your verbatim words will be de-identified for confidentiality.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for your contribution.

Best,
Jamiere N. Abney
Doctoral Candidate, UPenn

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol: Targeted Opportunity Program Leaders

Note: For the purposes of confidentiality, I utilized interview participants' professional title and the institution they were associated with (e.g. Associate Director, Institution B) during the interview notes, transcripts, and writing of this dissertation. Interviews were only conducted with Opportunity Program leaders. I utilized a semi-structured interview process throughout, with follow-up based on program leaders' responses.--Jamiere Abney, August, 2024

How do undergraduate students with diverse backgrounds, needs, and aspirations in targeted opportunity programs at selective PWIs, experience program support for making connections in the program and across campus?

- Can you share the selection and transition process for students in your program?
- The current study uses the concept of “tailoring” to define value. This focuses on “tailoring support to the unique needs of each student” and having context-specific resources within an umbrella altogether as most valuable for students recruited into targeted opportunity programs.
- How do you define the value of this program?

How do undergraduate students with diverse backgrounds, needs, and aspirations in targeted opportunity programs at selective PWIs, Experience and understand the structure, value, and impacts of their program?

- What types of resources are provided to students?
- Are programs all located within a single office, building, or part of the program logistics?
- Who is the primary point of contact or main advisor to students? Do they have other advisors?
- How does the program connect students to the broader campus?
- Do students receive support for personal and professional life after college?
 - Follow-up questions:
 - What are some examples?
 - What are the major drivers for these resources/supports?
- What are some expectations students have coming into the program?
 - Follow-up questions:
 - How does the program respond to these?
 - How do you help students build their understanding for “what to ask?”
- What additional details or facts are important for anyone to know about [your program]?
- How does [your program] impact the rest of the campus community?
- What are the key challenges [your program] faces?
 - Follow-up questions:
 - How do you inform incoming students about these things?
 - How do you educate incoming students on what to expect?

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Protocol: Targeted Opportunity Program Students

Note: For the purposes of confidentiality, I referred to focus group participants by codes during the focus group memo notes, transcripts, and writing of this dissertation. Focus groups were only conducted with Opportunity Program students. I utilized a semi-structured focus group process throughout data collection. My follow-up or clarity-seeking questions were based on opportunity program students' responses.--Jamiere Abney, August, 2024

How do undergraduate students with diverse backgrounds, needs, and aspirations in targeted opportunity programs at selective PWIs, experience program support for making connections in the program and across campus?

- Why did you choose to attend [your institution]?
 - Follow-up question:
 - Was the specific program important to you in that decision?
- How would you define the value of this program?
 - Follow-up questions:
 - In what ways is the program most valuable to you?
 - How is the program lacking value?
- How would you define success?
 - Follow-up questions:
 - Has the program helped you to be successful in this way?
 - Probe for an example

Research Question 2: How do undergraduate students with diverse backgrounds, needs, and aspirations in targeted opportunity programs at selective PWIs, Experience and understand the structure, value, and impacts of their program?

- What types of resources are provided to you? To your peers? Do you observe anything about these resources and how they are allocated?
 - Follow-up question:
 - What is it like to access these resources?
- What is your relationship with [name of primary contact]?
- What are some positive or favorite parts of the program? Why?
- Is there anything you dislike about the program? Why?
- Is there anything you would like to add or change about the program? Why?
- Do you feel the program connects students with the broader campus?
- Does the program offer career and post-college support?
 - Follow-up questions:
 - What are some examples?
 - Do you feel prepared for what that entails? Probe specifics.
- What were some of your expectations for the program when you enrolled?
 - Follow-up questions:
 - Has the program met your expectations?
 - If yes, how? (If no, why not?)

APPENDIX D

Codes/Subcodes Definitions

Note: These research codes and sub-codes were inductively developed through emic-focused data analysis processes.--Jamiere Abney, August, 2024

| | Code / Sub-Code | Definition |
|---|---|--|
| 1 | Academic Support & Growth | How students described their development academically regarding classroom and other learning experiences |
| | <i>Faculty Relationships</i> | Description of the ways students were able to engage with or receive personal support from their college/university faculty |
| 2 | COVID | Details related to the COVID pandemic and how it created unique circumstances for the students within the opportunity program |
| 3 | Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion | Dynamics, themes and/or highlights around social dynamic and culture around ethnicity, races, SES, or other DEI considerations |
| | <i>Racial Identity & Culture</i> | Self-categorized race-specific cultural ideas shared by the student participants |
| 4 | Finances | All financial aid, socioeconomic status, and other money related topics |
| | <i>Donation</i> | Funding given to the opportunity programs and or resources supporting the program |
| | <i>Good Financial Aid Award</i> | Strong funding (e.g. grants and scholarships) that are solely focused on students' tuition and fees |
| 5 | First Generation | Students whose parents/guardians do not hold a 4-year degree |
| 6 | Leadership Development | Students' perspectives on their growth or development of leadership skills and opportunities |
| 7 | Location | Student insights into the value of the physical space allocated for the opportunity program on campus |
| 8 | Mental Health & Emotional Wellness | Emotional support, mental health details, and other emotionally related commentary |
| | <i>Negative Emotional Situation</i> | Specific mental health or emotional commentary that was described as negative by participants |

| | | |
|----|--|---|
| 9 | Miscellaneous | These were codes or ideas that did not have multiple insights to develop as their own broader category |
| | <i>Problem Solving</i> | |
| 10 | Networking | Connecting to key people, other university offices, and important resources |
| | <i>Alumni</i> | Specific network with opportunity program alumni |
| | <i>International Student Relationships</i> | Opportunity program students being connected to international students |
| | <i>President</i> | Specific networking with the college or university president |
| 11 | Personal Development | Person-specific and/or Personal areas of growth |
| | <i>Confidence Boost</i> | Ways the students share that the program boosts their self confidence |
| | <i>Find new personal interests</i> | Students finding a new program or co-curricular interest to develop |
| | <i>Take a chance</i> | Students making a risk or “just going for it” with an opportunity |
| 12 | Post-college Development | |
| 13 | Sense of belonging | Strayhorn (2019) multi-pronged definition of belonging |
| | <i>Institutional Support</i> | Belonging support that is institutional and not just tied to the opportunity program |
| | <i>Love for the Institution</i> | Students expressed deep satisfaction and/or love for their institution due to their level of personal belonging |
| 14 | Specialized Recruitment and/or Admissions | Students’ descriptions of the practices geared towards targeted recruitment and enrollment of students into these opportunity programs |
| | <i>CBO or Access Programs</i> | Students’ mentions of non-profit programs with a specific mission to support marginalized students support to navigate the college application and enrollment process |
| | <i>Engagement with current students</i> | Students’ details of being able to meet with or hear from current opportunity program students during their recruitment/admission process |
| | <i>Fly-in Programs</i> | Institutionally funded visit programs for low SES students who cannot afford |

| | | |
|----|---|---|
| | | the expense (typically multiple days and nights) |
| 15 | Success | Students' descriptions of outcomes, their ideas of success, and how these have been impacted by the opportunity program experience |
| 16 | Tailoring | Defined by Kezar et al. (2020) |
| 17 | Targeted Access Program | Federal, State, or Institutionally funded access program that students are admitted & enrolled into based on demographic criteria (e.g. race, ethnicity, and being low SES) |
| | <i>Educate campus on the program's identity</i> | Program leaders, students, and other institutional community members working to educate the campus on an opportunity program's true mission and/or purpose |
| | <i>Lack of connection across class year</i> | Enrolled opportunity program students not connecting or engaging across year of enrollment |
| | <i>Lack of support</i> | Definitive examples of the programs not helping students |
| | <i>Learning the Campus</i> | Program helping students learn the physical details and cultural identity of their campus and the community |
| | <i>Limits after graduation</i> | Students' insights into any potential limitations the program creates for their post-baccalaureate future |
| | <i>Other programs</i> | Mentions of other access programs that are not the featured program the student participants are enrolled into |
| | <i>Program-specific resources</i> | Additional resources made available to students due to being enrolled in the opportunity program |
| | <i>Relationship to program leadership</i> | Students' insights into the impact or key examples of support from the opportunity program leaders |
| 18 | Value | Students' and program leaders' descriptions of what the opportunity program adds to the students' experiences |

APPENDIX E

Informed Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Protocol Title: | The Value of Access and Success Programs Targeted for Historically Underrepresented Students in Higher Education |
| Principal Investigator: | Jamiere Abney (<i>Dissertation Chair: REDACTED</i>) REDACTED |
| Emergency Contact: | Insert Emergency Contact Insert Phone Number |

Research Study Summary for Potential Participants

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Your participation is voluntary, and you should only participate if you completely understand what the study requires and what the risks of participation are. You should ask the study team any questions you have related to participating before agreeing to join the study. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant at any time before, during or after participation, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (REDACTED) for assistance.

The research study is being conducted to understand the impact of access, success, and opportunity programs. The focus is on current students' details of their personal experience with satisfaction, support, sense of belonging, and other connections to the broader campus community through their program.

If you agree to join the study, you will be asked to engage in or complete the following research procedures:

- A 1:1 interview with the primary researcher, Jamiere Abney, a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education.
- Your participation will last for approximately 60 minutes. You may receive a follow-up email to share information or to make sure the information you shared is represented correctly.

- Your responses will be shared with current university leaders in college access and success programs at the sites for this research. Any trends found through the research may help to improve the resources and support for future students in these opportunity programs.
- The most common risks of participation are your personal information (name and college where you are enrolled) being accidentally made public.

Should you decide you no longer wish to participate in a 1:1 interview but would like to support this research, you can recommend other students to join in the research. You may also provide access to information (i.e., a webpage or print document) that can help the research team better understand how your opportunity and/or access and success program impacts current students.

If you are interested in participating, a member of the study team will review the full information with you. You are free to decline or stop participation at any time during or after the initial consenting process.

Why am I being asked to volunteer?

- *You are being invited to participate in a research study due to your response to the initial outreach email sharing that you are willing to volunteer.*
- *You meet the criteria for participation as a current undergraduate student who is a member of an access, success, and/or opportunity program.*
- *You will get a copy of the informed consent form.*
- *You will be asked to provide consent via signature, verbal agreement, check box, etc.; PLEASE NOTE that signed consent must be obtained for research that presents greater than minimal risk of harm to participants.*

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation is voluntary which means you can choose whether to continue your participation at any time.

If you do not understand what you are reading, do not sign it. Please ask the researcher to explain anything you do not understand, including any language contained in this form. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form. A copy of the form will be given to you so that you have convenient access to contact information and answers to questions about the study. You may ask to have this form read to you.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the current research is to analyze the success and value of opportunity programs (access, success, and inclusion-based initiatives) for historically underrepresented students at private, residential liberal arts colleges. This research is being conducted as part of a graduate student (the researcher) doctoral dissertation.

How long will I be in the study?

- *Participants (“you”) are expected to participate for 60 minutes as part of a 1:1 interview with the primary researcher.*
- *The study, in total, will be conducted over the course of 4-5 months (December 2022 – May 2023).*
- *This is a multi-site study with undergraduate students across 3 different residential liberal arts colleges in NY State.*

What am I being asked to do?

- *You are being asked to consent to being part of this multi-site (3 college locations) research study on access, success, or opportunity programs.*
- *You are being asked to answer questions and have conversation in a 1:1 60-minute interview with the primary researcher.*
- *You are being asked to consent for this interview to be recorded. The recorded transcript will be used for proper analysis in the research study.*
- *You are being asked to sign (or verbalize) your consent form to confirm your participation in the research study.*

What are possible risks or discomforts?

- *A potential risk of participation is that there is an accident where confidentiality (i.e., protection of your information) is broken. In this case your personal information could be accidentally revealed.*
- *This study will seek to understand your personal experience and feelings. Due to this personal nature, feelings of discomfort or past historical issues of trauma could come up as part of the interview. These questions are not directly included, but thoughts around these situations could come up based on the topics around issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and sense of belonging.*

What if new information becomes available about the study?

- *Any new information or updates will be communicated to participants.*

During this study, more information that could be important to you may be found. This includes information that, once learned, might cause you to change your mind about being in the study. We will notify you as soon as possible if such information becomes available.

How will I benefit from the study?

You are not expected to get any benefit from being in this research study. However, broader **benefits to society** include potential improvement to the opportunity program for **future undergraduate students**.

What other choices do I have if I do not participate?

- You can recommend other participants who fit the criteria.
- You may direct the researcher to other resources (i.e., online or print) to learn more about the opportunity program and its impact on current students.

Will I be paid for being in this study?

- There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Will I have to pay for anything?

- You will not have any personal expenses or be expected to pay for anything as a participant in this study.

When is the study over? Can I leave the study before it ends?

- *The study will end after all interviews are conducted, interview details are analyzed, and the dissertation paper has been completed.*
- *The Chair of the primary researcher could end the study due to issues related to the research or the graduate program the researcher is enrolled in.*
- *You (“You”) can elect to leave the study at any time. There are no consequences of a participant’s decision to withdraw from the research. However, your perspective and insights will not be used in the final research analysis. Should you wish to withdraw, contact the primary researcher (Jamiere Abney).*
- *Data from participants who withdraw from the study will not be used in the final analysis.*

This study is expected to end after all participants have completed all the visits, and all information has been collected. This study may also be stopped at any time because:

- The Primary Investigator feels it is necessary for the welfare, rights, or safety of participants. Such an action would not require your consent, but you will be informed if such a decision is made and the reason for this decision.
- The study Principal Investigator has decided to stop the study.

If you decide to participate, you are free to stop participating in the study at any time. You may do this by contacting the investigator noted on page one of this form. Withdrawal will not interfere with your [employment, future care, current or future services, etc.].

Could I be withdrawn from the study?

You could be removed from the study if you request to withdraw or if it is found that you are not actually a member of an access, success, or opportunity program at your college or university. You will be notified of your withdrawal via email.

How will my personal information be protected during the study?

We will do our best to make sure that the personal information obtained during this research study will be kept private. However, we cannot guarantee total privacy in focus groups. Your personal information may be given out if required by law. If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Pennsylvania will have access to your records.

Your data and information will be used on a personal device and/or separate external drive that is not accessible through a network drive system. Further, specific participant information will not be used (i.e., name) in the written materials shared in the dissertation writing or final shared data analysis.

Will information about this study be available to the public?

The final dissertation will be made public. As part of our graduate program, final approved dissertations are submitted to the ProQuest academic database to be published.

APPENDIX F

Student Pre-Focus Group Demographic Survey

Note: This appendix includes the survey protocol distributed to student participants prior to their focus group participation. The survey was created using “Tips for Effective Questionnaire Design” from Ravitch and Carl (2019, p. 154). I found this approach to be valuable and successful in-person. However, for my single online engagement focus group site, the form was not completed and required multiple attempts to get students’ information, particularly their self-identified race and ethnicity.--Jamiere Abney, August, 2024

Hello, please share this general information about yourself. This will be used to properly group data collected in this study to analyze trends across groups with similar backgrounds.

Your college or university Student ID#: _____

College you currently attend: _____

Start year and semester: _____

Graduation year: _____

Are you a first-generation college student? **Circle from one of the options below:**

Parents have no college degree.

Parents have some college education but did not complete it with a degree.

One parent has some college, but the other does not.

Another relative (e.g., aunt, uncle, grandparent, cousin) has earned a college degree.

What racial group/s do you identify with? **Circle ALL options below that fit your identity:**

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latino

Native Hawaiian or Asian Pacific Islander

Multiracial

Race/Ethnicity unknown.

White

Other, please explain:

Please circle (or write-in) **your Sex/Gender Identity** below:

Woman

Man

Non-binary

Other, self-define:

Prefer not to say

(Optional) Do you identify as:

Transgender

Cisgender

Other/self-define:

Prefer not to say

What language(s) do you speak at home? Enter here:

What is your current GPA: _____

What is your selected or intended major? Enter here:

Please share **your plans for post-graduation below** (1-2 sentences or bullet points):

Anything else that you would like to share? Enter here:

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