VOICES FROM THE PIPELINE: AN INTERPRETIVE, CRITICAL RACE THEORY
STUDY OF THRIVING AMONG UNDERREPRESENTED COLLEGE STUDENT
ALUMNI OF A TARGETED PRE-COLLEGE PREPARATION PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

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Higher Education Administration

VOICES FROM THE PIPELINE: AN INTERPRETIVE, CRITICAL RACE THEORY STUDY OF THRIVING AMONG UNDERREPRESENTED COLLEGE STUDENT ALUMNI OF A TARGETED PRE-COLLEGE PREPARATION PROGRAM (178 pp.)

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The purpose of this qualitative, Critical Race Theory (CRT) study was to better understand the lived experiences of underrepresented minority college students. Specifically, this study sought to identify themes across the students’ experiences that contributed to their academic, interpersonal and intrapersonal success from a non-deficit, equity minded perspective. I employed a basic interpretive design with a CRT lens to amplify the voices of non-majority students by conducting semi structured interviews with 8 participants who had each attended the same pre-college program and enrolled at the same highly selective, research university. In so doing, I listened for counter narratives that challenged existing assumptions about the needs and experiences of underrepresented minority students.

Four themes emerged from across the student experiences including: (a) tone setting dynamics; (b) sense of belonging; (c) sense of self; and (d) defining success as growth. The experiences highlighted in these themes illustrate the ways that the participants in this study challenge the dominant discourse description of them as at risk or high risk.
The study findings call for a significant shift in thinking in order to better serve all students. First, they call out the ways that institutions perpetuate the *minoritization* of students of color. Second, the findings highlight the need to attend to the *accessibility* of our campus communities. Finally, they acknowledge that our current success conversation actually focuses on students *surviving* rather than *thriving*. Specific implications for educators, as well as suggestions for additional areas of inquiry are also addressed.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is broad acknowledgement from across the United States of a need to increase college enrollment and completion rates among racial and ethnic minority students. From President Obama to university presidents there is resounding awareness of and commitment to the need for increasing access to higher education and narrowing achievement gaps for students whose racial and ethnic minority status are underrepresented in our college and university populations. Yet the problems of access and success persist. At first glance the access problem for minority students seems to be improving. For example, Anthony Carneval and Jeff Strohl’s (2013) analysis of IPEDS enrollment data conducted for Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce found that the absolute numbers of African American and Hispanic students entering higher education have increased markedly over the past two decades. However, their report entitled Separate and Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege (Carneval and Strohl, 2013) goes on to examine these enrollment trends in depth. In so doing Carnevale and Strohl (2013) reveal a number of alarming findings that illuminate the racial divide in higher education.

Carnevale and Strohl’s (2013) in depth analysis first illustrates that, despite an increase in overall enrollment, there is a notable racial divide between the types of institutions that students are entering. Specifically, they state that
“between 1995 and 2009, more than eight in ten of net new white students have
gone to the 468 most selective colleges and more than seven in ten net new
African American and Hispanic students have gone to the 3250 open access, two
and four year colleges.” (p. 8). Carnevale and Strohl (2013) further explain that
institution type matters in enrollment because it makes a difference in degree
completion. “The completion rate for the 468 most selective four year colleges is
82 percent, compared with 49 percent for open access, two and four year
colleges.” (p. 11). These findings shine a bright light on the impact of
environment on student success and reinforce the need to further interrogate the
ways that race and white privilege impact students’ enrollment decisions, their
college experiences and ultimately their success.

The higher education community has broadly accepted the notion that the
answer to increasing minority student enrollment lies in the development of a
pipeline. However, as William Bowen and Derek Bok (1998), in their preface to
*The Shape of the River: Long Term Consequences of Considering Race in College
and University Admissions*, remind us the pipeline imagery that dominates
descriptions of increasing access to higher education fails to account for the actual
experiences of the students attempting to traverse this journey.

We often hear of the importance of keeping young people moving through
the pipeline from elementary school to high school to college, on through
graduate and professional schools, and into jobs, family responsibilities,
and civic life. But this image is misleading, with its connotation of a
smooth, well-defined, and well-understood passage. It is more helpful to
think of the nurturing of talent as a process akin to moving down a
winding river, with rock-strewn rapids and slow channels, muddy at times
and clear at others. (Bowen & Bok, 1998, pp. xlix)

While imagining a smooth pipeline that creates a direct and expedient route for
students is more pleasant than that of a winding river, we must concede, as Bowen and
Bok (1998) suggest, that the journey for our students is not always smooth or well
defined. We are then left to ponder the rock strewn rapids, slow channels, and muddy
places.

In *Can we talk about race?* Beverly Tatum (2007) asserts that:

The negative educational impact of attending high poverty schools is well
documented. Whether a student comes from a poor or middle income family,
academic achievement is likely to decline if the student attends a high poverty
school. (p. 15).

Tatum (2007) further adds that despite these documented differences in student
achievement, students in poor districts, typically non-white districts, have no other option
but to continue to receive little or no resources despite the obligation to provide a basic
level of education guaranteed to every student. Given the inequities at the secondary
level, how are low income students, who are often also first generation, and typically
African American or Hispanic, expected to make the leap to elite higher education
institutions? College readiness is an important dynamic but enrollment and graduation
differences exist even among students who seem to be the most academically prepared.
For example, only 57 percent of African American and Hispanic students who scored in the top quartile of the SAT and ACT completed either a certificate, Associates or Bachelor’s degree compared to 77 percent of white students (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

Many pipeline programs have therefore extended into the college experience. The expanded pipeline is designed to ease transitions and support students who are presumed to be the problem. Far too little research has been conducted on the lived experiences of college students in the pipeline and even less has attempted to call out the problem of institutional racism and white privilege. Exploring the student experiences and general quality of campus life for underrepresented minority and low SES students is relevant given research showing that despite the call for increased access to higher education and the myriad programs to support that goal, racial minority and low income students are still less likely to persist to graduation than their white and higher SES peers (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Ishitani, 2003; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001; Terenzini et.al, 1996; Titus, 2006).

**Purpose**

This qualitative, Critical Race Theory (CRT) study seeks to understand the lived experiences of underrepresented racial minority and low socio-economic status students who participated in one pre-college preparation program that intentionally serves this student population prior to their matriculation at a private, highly selective research university. Given the focus in admission to this pre-college program and to distinguish it from other pre-college programs, the program of interest in this study is referred to as Pre-College Diversity (PC-Div). Specifically, this study intends to identify themes across
these students’ experiences, both during PC-Div and in college, that have contributed to their (a) successful transition to and persistence in college, (b) academic integration, and (c) social integration at the study site.

Through in-depth interviews with a willing sample of eight student participants, I seek to amplify the voices of non-majority students, listening for counter narratives that challenge existing assumptions about the experiences and needs of underrepresented students. Specific research questions for this study included: 1. What are the experiences of underrepresented students, both in the PC-Div program and as matriculated students at this private, highly selective, research university? 2. How does race and/or racism shape the students’ understanding of their experiences? 3. How do the experiences of students in this study relate to the three dimensions of college thriving: academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal as defined by Laurie Schreiner and colleagues (Schreiner, et. al., 2009b)?

Semi structured interviews with open ended questions serve as the format for investigating the overall research questions. Student participants responded to questions such as: What experiences do you consider pivotal and/or influential in your time at PC-Div and now as a student? In what ways do you believe that your experience was/is similar or different from students that participated in the other pre-college programs? What role, if any, has race and racism played in your experiences? Applying Critical Race Theory (CRT) to the analysis and interpretation of students’ responses demanded a questioning of dominant assumptions, most notably those of white privilege and deficit thinking, and called for the emergence of counter narratives. The CRT lens also calls for
consideration of following overarching question: Despite an attempt to create opportunity for students from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups and socioeconomic conditions, does the Pre-College Diversity program at Research University, and others like it, actually contribute to overall educational inequity?

Understanding the Current Conversation

Attempting to understand the experiences of underrepresented racial minority students in American higher education can be a daunting task. The initial challenge lies in understanding the many ways that the students that I am most interested in learning from might be categorized. For the purpose of this study, underrepresented students include African American, Hispanic, Native American, and multi-ethnic students with specific focus on those of low socioeconomic status (SES). Students from these racial and SES groupings also make up the vast majority of first generation students, meaning that their parents or grandparents did not attend college. I adopted the above operational definition of underrepresented students for the purposes of this study because it is the definition used by the PC-Div program in determining their intended population and alumni of this program were the participants in my research.

The term underrepresented is widely used in educational literature and most commonly refers to the racial and ethnic categories of students identified in the operational definition above. These students are referred to as underrepresented because the percentage of students representing these populations on our campuses is lower than the percentages within the greater population. Complicating an understanding of underrepresented students as a group are the variety of studies that have been conducted
pertaining to students within or across specific or sub demographic categories such as students of color, low income, or first generation students. Adding to the complexity, other broad terms such as diverse, disadvantaged, minority, at risk, and high risk are also used. These categorical terms are often used synonymously throughout education literature despite the fact that they may have different meanings. Careful review of the definitions of these terms and understanding of the population being considered is a critical step in appreciating the current context. Deciphering the meaning of the broader terms, considering membership in multiple or overlapping underrepresented groups and understanding how individual and unique student experiences relate to one another are all important in digesting the magnitude of information currently available.

Close consideration of the relationship between underrepresented students and higher education brings to light three overarching themes within professional literature. These themes identify the societal drivers underlying a call for greater access, illustrate specific challenges and barriers for underrepresented students, and evaluate current programs and interventions aimed at addressing the needs of underrepresented students.

**Societal Drivers**

Generally speaking, this first theme includes research on the benefits of higher education including workforce development (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2002), social mobility (Goldrick-Rab & Shaw, 2005) and competitiveness in the global labor market (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005; Perna, 2007). These compelling societal drivers considered in concert with the current education attainment data (US Census Bureau, 2008) support the need to increase access to higher education (Smith et al, 1997);
and question ways to create a college bound culture (Corwin & Tierney, 2007) among populations who are currently underrepresented. In many ways this first category of information identifies and defines why access to higher education is a societal need rather than just a problem for people of color. The larger societal benefits in contrast with the current lack of diverse representation establishes the call for a pipeline to higher education.

**Barriers, Obstacles, and Deficiencies**

The second broad theme among the literature identifies the barriers and obstacles that underrepresented students face. These studies identify issues with socialization and adjustment (Pathways to College Network, 2007); overcoming academic deficiencies (McCarthy & Kuh, 2006); lack of familial support; perceptions of campus climate and race or class related stress (Shields, 2002); and gaps between degree aspiration and degree attainment for students of color and low SES students (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Titus, 2006). Some research has been conducted in an attempt to identify characteristics, either institutional or individual, that correlate with success for underrepresented students (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Titus, 2006) but the quantity of this research pales in comparison to the amount of data concerning the perceived limitations that underrepresented minority and low income students must overcome. Generally the studies within this second pool seek to expand our understanding of the problems encountered when we attempt to address access. As we consider this research we begin to recognize the rational for extending the pipeline beyond access to higher education but through the college experience to the final destination of degree attainment. The goal of
supporting student success via this type of inquiry seems laudable however these studies white wash our discourse by presuming deficiencies in students rather than in the educational environments. They seem to ignore that the problem extends beyond college readiness as evidenced by higher dropout rates and lower degree attainment among well prepared, high-scoring African American and Hispanic students which suggest the problem is not ability. (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

**Institutional Interventions**

The extension of the pipeline through the college experience leads to a more critical examination of the college experience and hence the third broad theme. This third area considers specific programs and intervention strategies geared toward assisting students’ success rather than on the students in the programs. Studies in this arena tend to be both descriptive and evaluative of specific programs (Engle & O’Brien, 2007; Garcia & Paz, 2009; Moore et al, 2007; Valentine et. al, 2009). These findings commonly cite quantitative success indicators such as student persistence and graduation rates or improved grade point averages as proof of program efficacy (Cowan, Pitre & Pitre, 2009). This type of research, on institutional interventions, also tends to focus on remedial strategies rather than proactive programs (Valentine et al, 2009).

**Applying Cognitive Frames**

The broad bodies of scholarship addressed above can be more fully appreciated when considered in concert with the concept of *cognitive frames* (Bensimon, 2005). In her article, *Closing the Achievement Gap in Higher Education*, Estela Bensimon (2005) explains that one’s cognitive frame is essentially how one makes sense of the world. Our
cognitive frame shapes the kinds of questions that we might ask but also what we are able
to see as viable responses to those questions (Bensimon, 2005). In my own attempt to
organize and understand both the conversation and literature pertaining to
underrepresented students and higher education I came to realize that the three pools that
I had identified mapped loosely to the three cognitive frames identified by Bensimon
(2005) in her consideration of the achievement gap between majority and non-majority
students. The three frames identified by Bensimon (2005), *diversity*, *deficit*, and *equity*,
each provide a unique lens through which the majority/non-majority experience is
understood and addressed. Recognizing these frames at play within the larger body of
work related to underrepresented students further helps to explain both the emergence
and focus of the three themes previously identified as well as the need for differently
framed research.

**Diversity Frame**

According to Bensimon (2005), individuals operating in a *diversity frame* tend to
focus on numbers and representation. They see diversity as an institutional characteristic
and something that should be celebrated. The discourse within the *diversity frame* then
centers on the need to enhance access thereby enhancing representation and the focus of
institutional strategies rests with intercultural sensitivity activities mostly focused on
majority (white) participants to ensure their acceptance of diverse (non-white) others.

**Deficit Frame**

In contrast, individuals operating in the *deficit frame* concentrate on the perceived
barriers and stereotypical disadvantages faced by non-majority students. Therefore they
tend to focus on what students have to overcome and the need to offer special services to tackle those obstacles. Meanwhile increased attention on obstacles and the piling on of support services can give the impression that the institution lacks confidence in non-majority students’ abilities and perceives the students to be inferior rather than considering what barriers might exist institutionally either systemically or culturally (Bensimon, 2005).

**Equity-Minded Frame**

In response to the limitations offered by the two previous frames Bensimon (2005) suggests the need to develop an *equity minded frame*. The *equity frame* focuses attention on systemic institutional practices and culture rather than on increased representation or support services. The equity frame moves the conversation from *them* to *us*. Equity minded practitioners wonder how they themselves, their colleagues, and their institutions are perpetuating unequal outcomes for students. Equity framed interventions then look to create change in institutions and in individual thinking with the responsibility for student success placed on the institution as a whole.

Applying Bensimon’s (2005) cognitive frames to the three overarching themes within the conversation of underrepresented students in higher education provides a richer context to the discourse of the various studies previously mentioned. In Chapter 2: Review of Literature, I will expand on the interplay between the diversity, deficit and equity cognitive frames and the existing research. However, this study utilized a CRT framework and interpretive lens as an intentionally equity focused approach. In conducting this research, I intended to shed light on the experiences of underrepresented
students toward questioning some of the taken for granted beliefs and practices in higher education today and in direct opposition to deficit minded thinking. In the following section I describe how this equity oriented approach relates to other components of the conceptual framework of my study.

**Theoretical Framework**

This qualitative study emerges from the belief that reality is subjective and therefore that multiple realities may exist simultaneously. This ontological orientation to the nature of reality is a key foundational consideration of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007). In addition to the basic ontological assumption that reality and therefore truth are subjective, I apply a social constructivist paradigm or worldview to this research. Research paradigms vary among qualitative researchers based on their beliefs and assumptions about the world (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Social constructivism is a worldview where subjective and varied meanings lead “the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas” (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). The subjective meanings of the participants in social constructivist research do not flow from a particular theory but rather are shaped by “interactions with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21).

As a qualitative researcher, I seek to understand and interpret the various realities among participants while positioning myself and my understanding of reality within the research and recognizing the influence of my worldview on the interpretations that I offer (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). As basic interpretive research with a social
constructivist paradigm, my study seeks to identify patterns of meaning across experiences while acknowledging the social constructs at play within both the researcher’s and the participants’ view of reality (Merriam, 2002). My research draws on a social constructivist worldview to inform a basic interpretive (qualitative) approach characterized by broad and open ended questions which allow the participants to “construct the meaning of a situation” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21).

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the mid-1970s with the early work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, “both of whom were deeply distressed over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvi). Inspired by the civil rights movement in the United States and developing first as Critical Legal Studies, CRT became a more organized interpretive community by 1989 (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). In the introduction to Critical race theory: The cutting edge, Delgado and Stefancic (2000) note that CRT is concerned with the ways in which racism is reproduced over time especially the role that systems and structures play in this process. CRT challenges the notions of objectivity, neutrality, even meritocracy. The activist and social justice element of CRT is dedicated to achieving racial emancipation and eliminating oppression (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995). Today, CRT has evolved and expanded into myriad academic disciplines, including education.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) first introduced Critical Race Theory to the field of education. They suggested that educational inequalities were “… a logical and predictable result of a racialized society in which discussions of race and racism continue
to be muted and marginalized” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p.47). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) propose that CRT “is a framework that seeks to identify, analyze and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain dominant and subordinate racial positions in and out of the classroom” (p. 25). Parker and Lynn (2002) further expand this definition by explaining that CRT foregrounds race and draws attention to deeply embedded racism in American society as it seeks to eliminate racial subjugation through sharing the stories of people of color from their own perspective rather than through the dominant or majority lens.

Storytelling plays a key role in CRT, as Ladson-Billings (1998) explains: “The primary reason, then, that stories, or narratives, are deemed important among CRT scholars is that they add necessary contextual contours to the seeming objectivity of positivist perspectives.” (p. 11). By employing a CRT approach, the stories of people of color begin to challenge the existing master narrative especially the propensity of deficit theorizing (Solorzanos & Yosso, 2002). Amplifying the marginalized voices of the non-majority groups highlights counter narratives which test the master narrative and our broader understanding of reality (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). By insisting on a socio-cultural context for experiences, CRT is a perspective of the world that places race at the very center of every discussion and every experience. Critical Race Theory asks each of us to shift our understanding of what is real from the dominant discourse and to listen to the counter-stories of the people whose experience lies outside of the majority (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006).
The dominant narrative regarding underrepresented students focuses on low enrollment and degree completion rates as well as the obstacles that limit their success. Indicative of the need for a CRT inquiry in this arena are the overwhelming amount of studies related to underrepresented minority and poor students which suggest seemingly insurmountable barriers and presumed deficiencies. In this dominant narrative the student becomes the problem and any struggle serves as further evidence of their problematized state. This study attempts to disrupt the master narrative and hold space for the voices and experiences of underrepresented minority and low SES students toward shaping a more informed perspective. A primary goal in applying a CRT lens to this research is to shift the conversation away from the student as the problem by recognizing institutional risks to their success and intentionally highlighting the ways that they are thriving.

**College Thriving**

The concept of *thriving* is linked to models of positive psychology and builds on the idea of “flourishing” from research on psychological wellbeing (Kinzie, 2012). Laurie Schreiner and her Thriving Project colleagues have sparked this positive and holistic take on college student success. They suggest that thriving in college involves “optimal functioning in three key areas that are hypothesized to contribute to student success and persistence: academic engagement and performance, interpersonal relationships, and intrapersonal wellbeing” (Schreiner et al, 2009a, p.3). College Thriving incorporates specific elements within each of the key areas believed to be critical in college student success such as academic engagement, self-regulated learning, goal setting, openness to
differences, citizenship and one’s experience with a sense of community on campus (Schreiner et al, 2009a and 2009b).

This positive approach to the student success conversation also provides a theoretical framework which can challenge the deficit thinking concerning underrepresented students. As a construct, “thriving proposes to explain the difference between students who flourish in college…compared to students who simply survive college by meeting requirements…” (Kinzie, 2012, pp. xii-xiii). In her introductory essay to the *Thriving in Transition* text entitled “A New View of Student Success,” Jillian Kinzie (2012) recognizes the “qualitatively different experiences” (p. xii) among students from the same backgrounds who are attending the same institutions. I am drawn to *thriving* as a construct because of this de-emphasis on quantitative measures of success and the emphasized role of individual experiences. My study seeks to shed light on some of these qualitative differences.

**Summary**

From the Supreme Court to *60 Minutes* there is no lack of popular, legal, and scholarly attention on the issue of diversity and access in U.S. higher education. Current research asserts the benefits of diverse educational environments and the positive impact of diverse environments on student learning (Anderson, 2008; Smith & Schonfeld, 2000), but are the benefits the same for all students? Understanding how the higher education community can address the needs of underrepresented students effectively without further marginalizing them is a large undertaking. Colleges and universities must seek to understand the experiences of all of our students as we attempt to implement strategies.
geared at increasing student retention and graduation rates (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Anderson (2008) encourages higher education administrators to become “agents of change toward attaining social justice” but this type of advocacy is futile without a clearer picture of the actual experience(s) of all of our students. Studies such as this one serve to shed light on the experiences of underrepresented students toward creating a clearer overall picture of the student experience. Making room for students’ voices in the discussion reduces our reliance on assumptions, often based in deficit thinking, and bolsters the likelihood that the strategies and programs that we employ to support student success are relevant for all students.

While the higher education community feels the pressure to enroll and graduate more underrepresented students, we must first acknowledge that we do not truly understand the problem that we are ultimately charged with solving. By relying on quantitative success metrics such as grade point averages and graduation rates we silence the individual voices of the students that we are trying to serve and limit our ability to fully comprehend our current state let alone effectively plan for the future. The lack of qualitative research related to underrepresented student experiences suggests that we may be trying to solve a problem that we currently do not understand at a very basic level.

This research attempts to move the discourse pertaining to underrepresented students past a call for access or the identification of barriers and toward the elimination of inequity in our educational system by foregrounding race and racism and questioning some of our taken for granted assumptions about underrepresented students and their success. By focusing on the experiences of individuals I seek to create a depth of
awareness that surpasses that achieved through program or strategy evaluation. My use of CRT acknowledges the conflict between the call to increase the number of African American, Hispanic and Native American students in U.S. higher education and the dominant belief in falsely labeled “color blind,” “merit based” practices. Listening to students speak of their experiences in their own voice acknowledges that these are not abstract or conceptual issues while humanizing and personalizing the students’ experiences. What is it like to be a student in the pipeline? What can these experiences tell us about what we are or are not doing to contribute to the success, or better still, the thriving of all students? From an equity-minded frame, I ask what we may or may not be doing to exacerbate the underrepresented-ness of current minority populations within higher education. Using Critical Race Theory as the lens through which to view and hear the students’ experiences, I question whether our current systems attempting to eradicate inequity are actually perpetuating separate and unequal experiences.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is situated at the intersection of three overarching conversations within higher education literature namely those of underrepresented students broadly, Critical Race Theory, and college student success. This chapter explores each of these overarching conversations with specific emphasis on the sub-categories of each discussion that overlap and therefore are particularly relevant to my inquiry. Within the underrepresented literature this includes an overview of existing diversity, deficit and equity minded research with intentional emphasis on equity framed approaches. My review of CRT literature outlines the development of CRT and its contributions to education literature broadly as well as higher education specifically. Finally, within the review of student success related literature I focus on explaining and emphasizing the concept of thriving as a deliberate response to dominant narrative among student success scholars.

Underrepresented Students

Estelle Bensimon’s (2005) diversity, deficit, and equity cognitive frames are evident in the current discourse concerning underrepresented minority and low income students in U.S. higher educations. Organizing the current literature within Bensimon’s frames clarifies the limitations of our current understanding and the need for additional research that approaches the problem of access in higher education from an equity minded frame. In the following sections I address specific studies within each pool of research as they relate to Bensimon’s cognitive frames (2005).
Diversity and Access

Current and predicted future economic conditions are creating a greater demand for postsecondary education. Extending education beyond the high school level has become a basic requirement for individual entry into and success within the changing marketplace (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005; Perna, 2007). Higher education is a driver for workforce development (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2002) and social mobility (Goldrick-Rab & Shaw, 2005) with over half of new jobs in the United States requiring some form of post-secondary education (Carnevale, 2008). In fact, predictions on the need for occupational “upskilling” suggest as many as 20 million new jobs will require a bachelor’s degree or higher and that the majority of jobs will require some form of post-secondary credential (Carnevale, 2008).

The need for a highly educated work force and the associated benefits of participating in the labor market are well documented. Unfortunately also well documented are the lower rates of enrollment and degree attainment among Black, Hispanic and Native American people (US Department of Education, 2008). Michael McPherson (2010) of the Spencer Foundation addresses this issue of low enrollment in The Almanac 2010 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education. Referencing the data regarding access and equity in higher education McPherson (2010) states, “As the data presented here show, too many Americans are missing out on the education and training they need. Those missed opportunities are highly correlated with family incomes and parents’ education levels” (p. 34). According to the American Community Survey conducted in 2008 by the U.S. Census Bureau, income level appears to be the issue that
cuts across racial and ethnic lines when it comes to college enrollment and degree completion. Educational attainment patterns across race reveal that low-income young Whites and Asians fare better than their Black, Hispanic, and Native American peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Among poor young adults, a larger share of Whites and Asians (51% and 62% respectively) had reached post-secondary education compared to Native American (30%), Black (37%) and Hispanic (37%) students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). U.S. Census (2008) data also show that Black, Hispanic and Native American students from low income backgrounds represented larger shares of high school non-completers in 2008, between 26-31% as compared to Whites and Asians at 7-13%. This is important when considering access to higher education since certain low-income, college age adults are susceptible to falling through the cracks even before college truly becomes an option for them. At a time when the overarching educational goal of our federal and state policymakers, including the President, calls for an increase in the number of individuals who enter college and ideally attain a post-secondary credential, there are still substantial segments of the population for whom higher education remains out of reach.

That said gains are being made relevant to college entry among our traditionally underrepresented populations. Between 2000 and 2008 the proportion of low income young adults enrolling in post-secondary education increased by 5 percentage points (U.S. Census, 2008) while over the ten year period from 1998 to 2008 enrollment among Black, Hispanic and Native American students grew 127%, 124% and 98% respectively (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2010). This trend is promising when considering access
alone. However, the large number of students who successfully matriculate but then fail to complete their college education or who remain below the poverty line despite attaining their degree serve as a reminder that access to higher education in and of itself is not a panacea.

These data are important in identifying the rationale for the call to increase access to higher education. Research in this area defines the problem of access by both describing the current demography of higher education and calling for a need to increase the college going tendencies in our underrepresented populations. These demographic data tell an important story regarding our current state however they do little to suggest areas for enhancement or change. They make the case for our commitment to diversity however they provide no insight into the experiences of underrepresented students who are college bound or currently enrolled. Upon analyzing and sharing our current state, McPherson (2010) suggests a need for more nuanced discourse and consideration of the social context to fill out our existing quantitative landscape. The data are effective in quantifying the problem but provide little guidance for those seeking to maximize opportunities for students.

**Deficits and Barriers**

The second body of literature pertaining to underrepresented students includes studies that identify factors which contribute to or detract from student success. Most of the research in the current higher education literature fall within this category and operate from a deficit frame (Bensimon, 2005). Generally these studies compare quantitative measures of success such as grade point average or persistence rates between majority
and non-majority students in an attempt to isolate and identify specific obstacles for underrepresented students. While the rationale and discussion of these studies speak of a desire to understand the experiences of underrepresented students, the data collected is overwhelmingly quantitative and the findings tend to suggest a fatalistic view of the deficient “other” or non-white student. For example, multiple studies identify the link between low SES and lower graduation rates (Ishitani, 2003; Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996; Titus, 2006) but family income prior to entering college is not something that students are generally able to effect. Lohfink and Paulsen’s (2005) research on first generation versus continuing generation students, for example, notes that each $10,000 increase in family income level of the first generation students is associated with a 2% increase in the student’s probability of persisting from first to second year. Ishitani’s (2003) longitudinal study on first generation student persistence noted even more dramatic impacts of student SES on success. Lower income was found to be positively statistically significant with regard to attrition such that students whose family income was $25,000 or less were found to have a 49% higher risk of leaving after their first year (Ishitani, 2003). Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal (2001) also report in *Swimming Against the Tide: The Poor in American Higher Education*, that low SES students are less likely to earn a degree from a four year institution when compared to students from average to high SES backgrounds. While these are startling figures that suggest that the issue of underrepresented students in higher education goes well beyond access, studies such as these stop short of suggesting what about being a poor or first generation student impacts success. The nature of these studies quantifies the
disadvantage of the non-normative other and defines the scope of the issue from a privilege/non-privilege binary.

Some of the research focused on identifying barriers does provide a platform for further inquiry into the experiences of underrepresented students. For example, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that lower SES students are 12% less likely to persist from first to second year at private institutions than their public school counterparts. Relying only on the persistence data limits our understanding of why this might be but it suggests a need for better understanding the role that tangible elements such as cost or intangible elements such as campus climate might play for students. Marvin Titus’ (2006) research suggests that low SES students are more successful at highly selective institutions than at less selective institutions. Titus (2006) infers several possible reasons for this higher success rate including a higher level of academic commitment overall at these institutions as well as the likely existence of more support mechanisms and even smaller class sizes. Carnevale and Strohl (2013) also found higher persistence and graduation rates at private, high select institutions and similarly suggest that lower student to staff/faculty ratios and higher levels of support resources in general as important dynamics contributing to student success. While these all seem to be viable explanations, further research into the experience of these students is necessary to truly gain a more accurate understanding.

Finally, some studies in this area focus on the influence of campus culture, social support and self-confidence as factors contributing to success. These studies begin to acknowledge the influence that non-predetermined factors might play in the success of a student but still fit within the deficit frame because they presuppose that solutions for
these needs are internal to students rather than institutionally influenced. For example, Gloria, Robinson, Hamilton, and Wilson (1999) conducted a study of African American students’ persistence at one predominately white institution and found that comfort at the university, belief in self and social support correlated positively with persistence. Note however that this study did not focus on university climate for African American students at a predominately white institution but rather on how successfully the African American students were able to adapt themselves to the university environment, create social support networks for themselves, and the extent to which they believed in their ability to be successful (Gloria et al, 1999). This study serves as an example of the assumption that the success of underrepresented students is controlled exclusively by the student and as such barriers are challenges that they need to overcome rather than the onus being placed on institutions to address racist and/or classist systems and practices.

This deficit-minded body of research attempts to clarify and isolate dynamics that contribute to the barriers faced by underrepresented students. In a veiled attempt to better understand the experiences of underrepresented students these studies focus mostly on quantitative measures which identify differences between them and their majority student peers (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Johnson et al, 2007; Shields, 2002). As a whole these studies operate from a dominant frame, situating underrepresented students as other, and focus on what underrepresented students have to overcome in order to be successful. These studies rely on success metrics such as grade point average and persistence rates in making determinations about the experiences of underrepresented minority or low SES students as a whole without consideration for individual stories or experiences.
Underrepresented students are thereby grouped together in anonymity and presumed to have had similar educational and social backgrounds which predestine them for failure. Research conducted from this deficit frame allows the institutions to blame the students for not trying hard enough or destiny for setting them up to fail rather than focusing internally on what we could or should be doing to identify white privilege, eliminate racism, and ultimately support success of all students. Also, much of the research associating specific demographic characteristics with barriers fails to address the interplay and intersectionality between characteristics such as race, gender, socioeconomic status and being the first person in your family to attend college.

**Equity through Interventions**

The third body of research related to underrepresented students focuses more on the strategies and intervention programs that institutions have put in place to encourage student success. They shift the focus away from the problem of access or the deficits of the students in an attempt to focus on the responsibility that institutions have for ensuring the success of the students that they admit. These studies tend to be evaluative in nature, either of specific programs or of institutions. Here again the inquiry in this area continues to focus on quantitative measures such as retention and persistence statistics or graduation rates to conclude which strategies are beneficial or effective and tend to situate in the conversation on student success.

For example, Engle and O’Brien (2007) conducted a study of 14 large public universities that serve significant populations of low income, at-risk students hoping to identify conditions that support higher graduation rates for these students. Engle and
O’Brien (2007) used regression analysis to control for student characteristics and isolate the effects of institutional practices at 10 of the 14 institutions where the graduation rates for low income students were higher than expected. This analysis identified specific distinguishing practices shared by the 10 institutions that seem to support the higher graduation rate. These practices include identifying support people for the students early in their experience, high levels of student engagement, first year programs, small introductory level courses, an early alert retention system with dedicated staff to attend to students’ needs, and the creation of an institutional culture that is supportive of student success (Engle & O’Brien, 2007). This study provides helpful information in that it identifies specific strategies that are working for these 10 institutions to graduate more low income or at-risk students than expected. However, the study only focuses on large public institutions and does not address the experiences of the students at the campuses at all. The research is based on institutional data and the existence of programs rather than on the actual use or effectiveness of the programs themselves. What would the graduating or graduated students from these campuses identify as the contributors to their success? Would they be the same “best practices” identified in this study?

In fact, in a meta-analysis of research conducted for the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, Jeffrey Valentine and his colleagues (2009) reviewed over 8000 citations and found that while many studies have been conducted on intervention or transition strategies to support college student success the research does not provide a very strong basis for making policy decisions or recommendations. Valentine et al (2009) instead suggest that there is a need for studies that investigate at a
finer level of detail and specifically that look at the interaction between students and programs as a way of identifying which programs are most effective for which students.

The participants in my study are all alumni of the Pre-College Diversity program which is a high school to college transition and preparation program designed for underrepresented students. This study is not an evaluation of PC-Div though the findings illuminate dynamics from the PC-Div experience that support student success in the program and in college.

**Critical Race Theory Literature**

At a fundamental level, Critical Race Theory (CRT) explores the permanence and hegemony of racism. And, at the same time, it looks at the impact of the intersection of race, gender, ethnicity and culture. “A critical race theory in education starts from the premise that race and racism are endemic” and permanent (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25). CRT is a robust theory in that while its original focus may have included only the Black/White dichotomy, and the ways in which the law encoded White supremacy, it has developed into a critical theory which lends itself to the possibility of achieving new and broader understandings of experiences from whatever point of “otherness” we may come. This study employs Critical Race Theory to foreground race explicitly in the experience of underrepresented students and to amplify narratives which contradict dominant, deficit thinking.

There are a number of critical lenses through which I could have chosen to view these experiences. For example, a general critical lens would have allowed me to view the students’ life experiences in the contexts of power or class. I am intentionally
resisting the urge to subsume race under these broader categories because, as Cornel West (1993 & 2001) illustrates effectively in his so titled book “Race Matters”. In an updated introduction to the 2001 edition of this seminal work, West makes an impassioned call for the continued highlighting of race as a central issue in American society. West (2001) states:

The liberal notion that more government programs can solve racial problems is simplistic - precisely because it focuses solely on the economic dimension. And the conservative idea that what is needed is change in the moral behavior of [poor, urban black men] highlights immoral actions while ignoring public responsibility for the immoral circumstances that haunt their fellow citizens. The common denominator of these views of race is that each still sees black people as a problem people…we confine discussions about race in America to the problems black people pose for whites, rather than consider what this way of viewing black people reveals about us as a nation. (pp. 4-6).

Bowen and Bok’s (1998) comprehensive quantitative study of the outcomes of race based admissions practices at highly selective universities, documented in The Shape of the River, is a clear example of the type of counter storytelling necessary to combat diversity and deficit thinking toward make lasting change in U.S. higher education. While the book presents compelling data on the positive outcomes for students of color as a result of race based admissions, the authors acknowledge the need to continue the conversation and study toward improving the in-college experiences and achievement of underrepresented minority students. Over the past 40 years in the United
States, we have tried to become a color-blind culture. Instead, what we have succeeded in doing is minimizing our recognition of the damage done to students of color in education, by eliminating race as an issue of discussion or as a recognized, historical, actor of inequity. CRT offers a view of this struggle from a different perspective and subsequently, provides new opportunities for learning.

**CRT in Education**

Jonathan Kozol’s (1991) *Savage Inequalities* exposed the deplorable conditions for students in K-12 public education systems in the United States. Kozol (1991) began his study of the educational disparities for minority and poor children in urban St. Louis but expanded to other schools systems across the country. In city after city Kozol (1991) was confronted with stark differences in educational resources from facilities to personnel which left him questioning whether we, as a society, had given up on an entire subsection of our youth population. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) responded to Kozol with a call “…to theorize race and use it as an analytic tool for understanding school inequity” (p. 49). Their work began with a set of propositions about the intersection between race and property.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), argued that race continues to have a significant impact in the United States and in education, and that while it has been studied as a way to understand social inequality, “…the intellectual salience of this theorizing has not been systematically employed in the analysis of educational inequality” (p. 50). The connection between property rights and human rights in U.S. society is extremely important to educational equality and can be seen clearly when juxtaposing a public
school from a wealthy community next to one from a poor community. Historically as well as currently, those schools located in wealthy communities which collect substantive real estate taxes have schools which reflect the availability of funds. Schools in poor or less affluent communities, on the other hand, do not have the benefit these resources or the enriched curriculums that those resources are able to support (Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

More than a decade after *Savage Inequalities* (1991), Jonathon Kozol continued his attempts to shine a light on the inequality of educational opportunities in *The Shame of a nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (2005). In *The Shame of a Nation*, Kozol (2005) again shares story after story of decrepit buildings, inadequate funding, and high teacher turnover which contribute to the bleak educational landscape for poor children most of whom are African American and/or Hispanic. Kozol (2005) uses these case study examples to challenge the principles of the *No Child Left Behind* educational policies enacted by former President George W. Bush.

**Higher education.** Within higher education specifically, CRT has been employed to consider a variety of areas including learning environments and pedagogy (Chaisson, 2004; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Maher & Thompson Tetreault, 2003); policies and policy development (Iverson, 2007; Soares, 2007; St. John, 2003); and the student experience (Garrod, Kilkenny, & Gomez, 2007; Stewart, 2013) especially as it relates to campus climate and culture (Felix, Bensimon, Hanson, Gray, & Klingsmith, 2015; Museus, Ravello, & Vega, 2012).
CRT provides a particularly valuable lens through which to consider the academic experiences of students, the curriculum as a whole, and individual teaching practices. For example, Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2003) utilized counter storytelling to unpack her experiences as both a faculty member and an academic administrator responsible for the development of the Teacher Education curriculum of her department. Cochran-Smith (2003) recounts the somewhat painful but nonetheless important process that she undertook to come to terms with the racist messaging in her teaching. CRT offered the framework Cochran-Smith needed to see how, despite her best efforts to culturally aware and racially sensitive; she had presumed and reinforced whiteness as race neutral and thereby normal. The identification of these types of routine practices within teaching and the curriculum, the race neutrality of white and the dominant deficit discourse are common findings in CRT literature pertaining to college learning environments (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Maher & Thompson Tetreault, 2003).

Higher education policies overall and the development of effective policies aimed at equality specifically constitute another component of CRT higher education literature. Joseph Soares (2007) questions the admissions policies and practices at Yale and other elite colleges in The Power of Privilege. Soares (2007) offers an in-depth historical analysis of the development of admissions policies and practices employed by America’s elite colleges as well as actual admission data to question the pervasive myth of meritocracy. Soares (2007) states that:

We want to be a land of opportunity where individuals can make of themselves what they will. We like competition but believe it should be meritocratic; the
contest should be fair with outcomes that are just. Americans believe in education as the best way to sustain a meritocratic society…Yet we have managed not to notice that our most prestigious colleges and universities are beyond the reach of most youths, other than those from families in the top income decile. (pp. 191).

Soares (2007) concludes his text with a comprehensive call to action for elite higher education institutions to get involved in fixing the broken admission system that currently rewards students from highest income levels by ignoring the inequities of K-12 education and the ineffectiveness of the SAT as a measure of aptitude.

CRT analyses of other types of policies have brought to light similar myths and racially based assumptions. Iverson’s (2007) critical race analysis of diversity policies and St. John’s (2003) critical race exploration of higher education financing uncover well intentioned attempts at addressing access and broad diversity interests that ultimately fall short due to dominant racist thinking. For example, Iverson (2007) found that the discourses among the university diversity policies in her study “construct images of people of color as outsiders, at-risk victims, commodities, and change agents” (pp. 593).

In Mi voz, mi vida: Latino college students tell their life stories, Garrod, Kilkenny and Gomez (2007) share a collection of fifteen counter narratives which challenge the dominant notion of Latino college students and their experiences. The students represent varied backgrounds and multiple perspectives including students that never embraced their Latino identity until coming to college, those who were criticized for not being Latino enough, those experiencing intersections of race and ethnicity, poor students and some from the upper middle class, students born and raised in the U.S. as well as citizens
of other countries (Garrod et al., 2007). The editors, in presenting this collection, offer little by way of analysis of the stories other than to group them into the four themes that they identified: resilience, biculturalism, mentoring, and identity (Garrod et al., 2007). In explaining the importance of this project and its contribution to the literature, the authors offer the following:

In the U.S., race and ethnicity enter our consciousness and affect our experiences at every level. These students understand the structural forces that have impeded them, the ways they have been portrayed in the media, and the stereotypes that surround them. Regardless of their backgrounds, Latino students in predominantly white institutions are aware of how they might be viewed by other students and of the assumptions made about them. (p. 2)

The pervasiveness of structural forces, the media and stereotypes identified above relate directly to the last area for review in this section, namely CRT inquiry of campus culture and climate. A considerable amount of research has been conducted on the role of campus climate in student experiences and student success (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Strange & Banning, 2001). However, Samuel Museus, Joanna Ravello, and Blanca Vega (2012) are careful to distinguish between climate: “how people feel within an environment” (pp. 31) and culture: “collective patterns of tacit values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that evolve from an institution’s history and are manifest in its mission, traditions, language [et cetera]” (pp. 32). While both are important in understanding the experiences of students
of color on college campuses, the long term and systemic reach of culture has far greater implications for impact.

In *The campus racial culture: A critical race counterstory*, Museus et. al (2012) explain their use of CRT counter storytelling to construct a composite counter narrative from interview data with 90 students of color at 10 different predominately white institutions. The fictional account of a conversation between two students is offered in juxtaposition to a hypothetical dominant narrative of the same general topic. The counter narrative conveys key understandings of campus culture through perspectives and experiences derived from the lived experiences of students including “the ways that racial and cultural bias permeates the campus racial culture” (pp. 40) and how different elements of the culture “can be perceived by and influence the experience of various groups differently” (pp. 40).

**Student success.** Understanding and describing the success of college students is both a broad and deep conversation in the higher education literature. An overview of the broader success conversation and my orientation to that conversation is provided later in this chapter. However, Critical Race Theory provides a distinctive lens through which we can interrogate the current success conversation. In *Young Black and Gifted: Promoting high achievement among African American students*, Perry, Steele, Hillard (2003) make an impassioned plea for re-conceptualizing the educational experiences and success of African American students:

Coincident with the prevailing ‘narrative of openness and educational opportunity’ is the absence of a conversation about African American school
achievement that is predicated on and that foregrounds the identity of African Americans as African Americans. The conversation about Black achievement often proceeds from the assumption that what is good for one group of children is good for another… (pp. 99).

By way of transition between the CRT and success conversations, this section describes several CRT student success studies. The research highlighted here illustrates the unique insight possible through the application of a CRT framework and/or methodology.

Cerri Banks (2009) examines the complex terrain of being black and being a woman for 19 black undergraduate women from 4 different institutions in *Black Women Undergraduates, Cultural Capital, and College Success*. Banks (2009) uses the story of radio host Don Imus and his infamous remarks about the Rutgers women’s basketball team to illustrate the current dominant discourses regarding black women and black, women undergraduates in the United States. Banks (2009) points out that much of the outrage expressed after Imus’ comments focused less on what he said and more on the undeserved nature of the criticism for the particular women who were the targets of his comments. She explains: “The argument was that *these particular* black women did not deserve this flagrant attack. Implicit in this argument is the faulty idea however that there are some black women who deserve this type of degradation and some who do not” (Banks, 2009, pp. 1-2). This discussion sheds light on the effort necessary for black undergraduate women “to navigate the knotty terrain of who they are as they challenge
the limited representations and stereotypes that render them socially undesirable” (Banks, 2009, pp. 2) and provides the rationale for her study.

The purpose of Banks’ (2009) study of black undergraduate women is to amplify the narratives of black women as they navigated their college experience. Banks (2009) was particularly interested in understanding the ways that these women were negotiating their environment toward social and academic success in direct response to the dominant discourses that position black women as academically underprepared as well as socially undesirable (Banks, 2009). The stories shared by the women in this study support the importance of cultural capital as a key factor in their success (2009). Situating the experiences of black women at the center, rather than the margins, of this conversation allowed Banks (2009) to see both the development and use of cultural capital by these women even though the processes by which they were developing and using this capital were unique. Banks (2009) offers the following explanation:

For example, traditional measures of cultural capital are not the only measurements of college success, even for students who possess them. For some students, privileged social locations give them advantages. Black women undergraduates, who most often have little privilege, are forced to undergo analyses of their schooling lives because of racism, classism, and sexism. These analyses become part of their cultural capital even though traditional definitions of the theory would not identify them as such (pp. 142).

The intentional reflection and analysis of experiences that these women underwent led to an increased understanding of their experiences overall and contributed
to the development of cultural capital. Banks (2009) contends that traditional ways of considering cultural capital as well as the deficit thinking about black women would typically have made these findings invisible. The CRT and feminist perspective in this study, however, provided a necessary interruption to the dominant narratives “and challenge the academic binaries that relegate black undergraduate women to educational victims or glorify them as educational survivors” (Banks, 2009, pp. 4).

Wayne Beckles’ (2008) CRT appreciative inquiry study of African American male student success is another illustrative example of student success related CRT research. In this unpublished doctoral study entitled, *Redefining the dream: African American male voices on academic success*, Beckles (2008) focuses primarily on identifying positive influences on academic success and persistence for African American men at community colleges. In addition to CRT, Beckles (2008) drew on critical pedagogy and appreciative inquiry. By coupling CRT with Appreciative Inquiry, Beckles (2008) engaged his participants in the data analysis and interpretation process. “Participants were afforded the opportunity to be the architects of counter narratives regarding their success” toward sharing participants descriptions of factors that support their success (Beckles, 2008). Themes from across the student experiences contributed to the participants’ understanding of the various aspects which were captured in descriptions such as “My brother’s keeper” and “I am somebody”.

In his Foreword to the book entitled, *Black men in college: Implication for HBCUs and beyond*, Michael Cuyjet (2012) reminds us that calls for the disaggregation of quantitative data by race, ethnicity and gender have provided new and valuable
insights in to our understanding of campus issues and climate. Cuyjet (2012) urges us to continue this disaggregation of experiences in to our qualitative work as well and to resist the urge to treat broad groups of students as having one experience. He cautions that while it may be easy, even tempting to treat Black men as a monolith, for example, their varied backgrounds and sub group identities will impact their overall experience and should be honored as uniquely valuable to our collective understanding (Cuyjet, 2012).

CRT informed interpretations of college student success create opportunities to highlight “the pervasive institutional norms, beliefs, symbols and practices that undermine success for minoritized students in American higher education” (Harper, 2012, pp. ix). Shaun Harper’s (2012) use of the word minoritized as opposed to minority in the previous statement is in itself an example of the shift in mindset that is possible when we challenge currently held and previously uncontested assumptions about what experiences are normal and who is other. This study utilizes a CRT methodology and analytic lens to consider the experiences of underrepresented students at a private, selective university. As discussed further below, this research relates to conversations of college student success from an equity minded perspective and therefore adopts the specific framework of thriving as a holistic and positive success construct to inform counter storytelling.

**College Student Success**

My research is situated within an equity minded framework regarding underrepresented students and, like much of the equity minded research regarding underrepresented students, also situates within the broader conversation of student
success. Traditional definitions of student success have focused primarily on academic performance and graduation rates, but researchers are beginning to expand this definition to include engagement and personal development (Kramer, 2007). Kuh, Kinzie, Shuh, Whitt, and associates (2005) suggest that student success includes “satisfaction, persistence, and high levels of learning and personal development” (p. xiv).

Current approaches to student success research tend to focus either on specific student characteristics or behaviors which correlate to success or the institutional supports available through programs and services. Literature which is both equity minded and student success oriented tends to focus heavily on evaluating intervention strategies and programs (Kramer, 2007). Through evaluative approaches these studies seek to identify practices that create positive outcomes for institutions and students. Often these outcomes are illustrated via quantitative metrics with far fewer studies taking a qualitative approach toward understanding student success (Valentine et al, 2009).

Utilizing a qualitative approach does not guarantee an equity minded focus though and not all studies that purport a student success focus are actually equity minded. Many studies that assert an interest in student success are steeped in deficit thinking and based on the presumption that successful underrepresented students should be studied as the rare exceptions from which other students should model their approach. For example, Kimberly Griffin’s (2006) study of motivational factors in high-achieving Black students claims to challenge the deficit thinking of Black students as low achievers but even in framing her study she undervalues, even dismisses, the role of racism on student success. Griffin (2006) acknowledges the literature regarding the impact of racism but she naively
lumps overt and subtle racism in a grouping of “barriers that Black high achievers face” (pp. 385) which can be overcome through internal and external motivational factors. While I applaud the general purpose of Griffin’s (2006) research, her study serves as an example of one that presents as equity minded on the surface when in reality draws on the dominant presumption that Black students can and will achieve success only when they learn how to cope with the existing racist educational systems that they seek to navigate.

My study does not measure the success of PC-Div alumni or evaluate the PC-Div program as an intervention. Rather, I seek to provide a vehicle for sharing the experiences of underrepresented students toward complicating the current, dominant student success conversation. My interest in challenging the dominant discourse of student success led me to an emerging body of scholarship on college student thriving which shares in this broad goal (Kinzie, 2012; Schreiner et al, 2009a, 2009b). College Thriving draws on the positive psychology movement which previously encouraged a shift in the conversation from mental illness to mental health and well-being (Schreiner et al, 2009a). Laurie Schreiner (2012) describes the development and focus on thriving as a deliberate interruption to the current success conversation in her chapter “From surviving to thriving” in Thriving in Transitions: A Research Based Approach to College Student Success. Schreiner (2012) states:

The construct of thriving was developed in response to the current focus on graduation rates as the ultimate measure of student success in higher education. Although graduation is an important outcome indicative of student success, its very nature as an event that either does or does not occur conveys a survival
perspective…there are broader qualitative outcomes of the college experience that have been overlooked in this perspective…thriving implies more than just surviving…it conveys that a student is fully engaged intellectually, socially and emotionally… (p. 4).

If we limit our definition of success to grades and/or graduation we lose sight of other important affective influences such as the quality of students’ experiences and their overall growth and development. We also continue to default to explanations of success and failure that assume all of the responsibility lies with the students themselves. In A new view of student success, Jillian Kinzie (2012) offers this important caution: “The singular concentration on graduation rates also provides limited insight into the full scope of what we may be contributing to lagging completion rates and, more importantly, what action should be taken to improve student success” (Kinzie, 2012, pp. xix) (emphasis added).

**Thriving Construct**

In two papers presented at the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) conference in Vancouver, British Columbia; Laurie Schreiner, Shannon Pothoven, Denise Nelson, and Eric McIntosh (2009a and 2009b) introduced the research which led to their development of thriving as a student success construct and the Thriving Quotient instrument as a valid measure of the construct.

Schreiner and her colleagues (2009b) theorized that thriving in college results from the “optimal functioning in three key areas…academic engagement and performance, interpersonal relationships, and intrapersonal well-being” (pp. 2). Based on
this definition the team endeavored to develop an instrument to measure college student thriving. The first ASHE paper presented by Schreiner and her colleagues (2009a) entitled *The Thriving Quotient: Advancing the assessment of student success*, outlines the research behind the development of the instrument.

The Thriving Quotient (TQ) instrument began as 198 individual items compiled from 13 scales on 11 existing instruments (Schreiner et al, 2009a). Through multiple rounds of pilot testing and considerable factor analysis the original instrument was consolidated to just 32 items representing five scales (Schreiner et al, 2009a). The five scales: *engaged learning, diverse citizenship, academic determination, positive perspective*, and *social connectedness* were found to have an internal consistency estimate between $\alpha=.80$ and $\alpha=.85$ with an overall internal consistency estimate for the instrument of $\alpha=.91$ (Schreiner et al, 2009a).

In the second phase of research, Schreiner et al (2009a) administered the TQ instrument to over six thousand undergraduate students from 27 public and private universities during the spring of 2009. Participant universities were identified via personal contacts and electronic listservs. Student responses were collected anonymously and confidentially via an online survey. Sampling strategies were determined and therefore varied by participant institution. Comprehensive statistical analysis supports the overall construct validity as well as the five scales as valid measures of *thriving* though additional research is necessary to validate the ability of the TQ instrument as predictive of long term academic success or persistence (Schreiner et al, 2009a).
The development and study of the TQ instrument provides “a brief but reliable and valid tool for assessing students’ academic engagement, psychological well-being, and interpersonal relationships that are predictive of further success and persistence” (Schreiner et al, 2009a, pp. 13). The total TQ score as well as the factor level scores provide an accessible way to easily get feedback on the academic and psychological welfare of college students. As Schreiner et al (2009a) point out:

This capacity encourages faculty and student development professionals to attend to the student whose academic experience seems generally positive, but who feels socially isolated or is having difficulty setting and achieving goals. Having the opportunity to intervene on behalf of students on the margin…not only improves the college experience for the individual student; but may increase the likelihood of his or her persistence (pp. 14).

I do not plan to administer the Thriving Quotient instrument to the participants in my study. While I concede that doing so could provide for interesting data, I am interested in hearing the experiences of the students themselves not in trying to quantify those experiences. The research behind the TQ instrument is relevant for my study however, in that it identifies and validates the thriving construct and the five factors or scales that comprise college student thriving. Thriving, as a holistic and positive conceptualization of student success, provides an opportunity to organize students’ experiences around various factors and understand the potential impact of those individual experiences on their overall college experience.
The second ASHE paper offered by Schreiner, Pothoven, Nelson, and McIntosh (2009b) is based on the same data collection in the spring of 2009 as outlined above. In this second analysis of the data the team sought “to address the limitations of current studies of psychosocial processes with students by adding institutional features into the equation as a control and to expand the identification of the psychosocial processes with students that are most predictive of their academic success and persistence” (Schreiner et al., 2009b, pp. 2). The authors in this study were simultaneously responding to the existing student success conversation and seeking to expand that conversation to take in to account a more complete picture of the student experience. This holistic picture focuses not only on the psychosocial factors of the individual students across multiple dimensions but also takes in to account the role of institutional factors and demographic characteristics on student thriving.

Through hierarchical multiple regression analysis Schreiner et al (2009b) found that “the construct, thriving, accounted for 8% to18% of the variance in outcome variables after controlling for the specified institutional and individual characteristics” (pp. 13). The four outcomes or success variables that correlate with thriving are students’ intention to graduate, their perceived institutional fit and willingness to choose the same institution again, and self-reported college grades (Schreiner et al, 2009b). While the overall correlation between thriving and the success variables was established, it is important to note that Schreiner et al (2009b) did find differences in the relationships between the five thriving factors and these four success variables. Specifically, the two academic factors, engaged learning and academic determination, were found to
positively correlate with all four of the success variables while the intra and inter personal factors of positive perspective, social connectedness and diverse citizenship, correlated with all of the success variables except college grades (Schreiner et al, 2009b). Institutional and individual characteristics did account for some variation in success outcomes but the percentage of variance attributable to these characteristics was marginal with the exception of the college grades outcome (Schreiner et al, 2009b). Higher institutional selectivity correlated with lower college grades, higher percentages of women at an institution correlated with overall higher college grades and individual student grades in high school were the highest predictor of college grades overall (Schreiner et al, 2009b). Schreiner and her team (2009b) did find a moderate negative effect for race (student of color or not) and first generation student status on grades only.

These findings help to clarify the complex picture of college student success by taking in to account a variety of individual and institutional characteristics as well as multiple dimensions of the psychosocial experience of being a college student while also measuring success through quantitative and affective indicators. More research to test the thriving construct is needed and Schreiner and her colleagues acknowledge that a more comprehensive and randomized sampling of institutions and students would add to the generalizability of their initial findings (Schreiner et al, 2009a, 2009b). Schreiner, Pothoven, Nelson, and McIntosh (2009b) also specifically identify a need to explore “more diverse student populations” and “more detailed studies that disaggregate the data by minority student status, gender, or first generation student status” (pp. 19).

Pathways to Thriving
The construct of college thriving, as developed by Laurie Schreiner and her colleagues at Azusa Pacific University is a relatively new area of scholarship. Much of the research conducted to date has focused on the development and validation of the construct itself and the Thrive Quotient instrument (Schreiner et al, 2009a, 2009b). However, a 2011 ASHE paper and subsequent presentation at the 2011 National Student Personnel Association (NASPA) annual convention in Philadelphia highlight additional research conducted by Schreiner and her team which focuses specifically on the pathways and predictors of thriving for students of color (Schreiner, Kammer, Primrose, & Quick, 2011; Schreiner, Vetter, Kammer, Primrose & Quick, 2011).

As described in the previous section, initial studies indicated that students’ levels of thriving were significant predictors of several success outcomes (Schreiner et al, 2009b). Additional research by Schreiner, Vetter, Kammer, Primrose and Quick (2011) explored the differences in thriving across ethnic groups on predominately white campuses. Both the ASHE paper and the NASPA presentation detail a study conducted to understand predictors of college student thriving and specifically whether and how “the pathways to thriving [are] different across student ethnic groups” (Schreiner et al, 2011a, pp. 18). To answer these research questions, Schreiner et al (2011a, 2011b) analyzed data collected from students at 51 different institutions. Students responded to the Thriving Quotient instrument and provided additional information including demographic characteristics, data on their campus experiences and items related to a psychological sense of community (PSC) scale.
The goal of this study was to pinpoint the direct and indirect influences on or pathways to thriving which hold true for particular ethnic groups. Schreiner, Vetter, Kammer, Primrose and Quick (2011) explain that the methodology employed in this study would not determine causality but “the use of structural equation modeling to test the hypothesized paths for thriving allowed for the examination of complex relationships between campus variables, institutional features, demographic characteristics, and levels of student thriving” (pp. 18).

Data analysis of the student responses identified critical factors in student thriving present for each of the four ethnic groupings studied: Caucasian, African American, Asian and Latino. The highest impact on thriving across all ethnic groups came from the psychological sense of community (PSC) factor though the specific contributors to overall PSC were different for each ethnic group (Schreiner et al, 2011a). The strongest contributors to the sense of community, and therefore thriving, for each ethnic group were: involvement in campus activities for Latino students; spirituality for African American students; certainty of major for Asian students; and interaction with faculty for Caucasian students (Schreiner et al, 2011a, 2011b).

These findings add clarity to our understanding of students experiences by showing not just that sense of community is a key component of thriving for all students but, more importantly, that the factors that support a positive sense of community vary significantly among students in different ethnic groups. They further support the importance of understanding the experiences of underrepresented minority students as unique from those of majority students. The research by Schreiner, Vetter, Kammer,
Primrose and Quick (2011) affirms that each pathway to thriving though distinct is a valid route. This research encourages faculty and student affairs practitioners to understand the influences on thriving that exist for various ethnic groups so that we can support each student’s journey rather than assuming that the majority path is the appropriate route for everyone.

**Thriving in Transitions**

The most recent emphasis within the thriving literature emerged with a publication by The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina entitled, *Thriving in transitions: A Research based approach to college student success* (Schreiner, Louis, & Nelson (Eds), 2012). This collection of essays highlights six studies pertaining to various student transitions and thriving. The transitions highlighted include those of first year students, sophomores, transfer students, and seniors. Of particular interest to my study however, are two specific chapters. The first of these chapters considers the experiences of “high risk” students and the second addresses the experiences of students of color at predominately white institutions.

Rishi Sriram and Deb Vetter (2012), in their chapter entitled *Thriving in high-risk students*, share results from two complementary studies of thriving and students who were identified as academically high risk upon admission. In the first study, Sriram and Vetter (2012) conducted a phenomenological exploration of the lived experiences of three students who were admitted on academic probation but who had a grade point average at or above the average for all junior students at the end of their junior year. The
students were interviewed to glean particularly meaningful experiences and commonalities among their stories that contributed to their ability to succeed. Four themes emerged from the interview data, each of which connects to a particular dimension of thriving (Sriram & Vetter, 2012). The success themes and their related thriving dimensions are: (a) a success mindset (Intrapersonal – positive perspective); (b) employing academic strategies (Academic – engaged learning and academic determination); (c) supportive relationships (Interpersonal – social connectedness); and 4) meaningful involvement (Intrapersonal and Interpersonal).

The success mindset theme from the qualitative study led to a second, differently designed study. “The second study utilized an experimental design with quantitative analyses to demonstrate how a thriving intervention can positively impact the success of high-risk students” (Sriram & Vetter, 2012, pp. 87). The findings from this pretest posttest design study illustrate the ability to positively influence mindset in students through targeted education. The findings also suggest that a combination of traditional skill based interventions should be combined with positive mindset interventions rather than be replaced by them in order to maximize impact on student grades (Sriram & Vetter, 2012). The second study is less relevant to my research project though the findings do support the use of qualitatively derived thriving data to effectively influence and expand our current practices.

Kristin Paredes-Collins (2012) offers a more in-depth look at the existing Thriving Quotient (TQ) data pertaining to students of color at predominately white institutions (PWIs) in her chapter within the Thriving in Transitions text. Paredes-Collins
(2012) draws on qualitative data compiled from her previous case study analysis of campus climate for diversity at a private university to illuminate the specific findings concerning students of color from the TQ data set. By sharing the stories of one former participant, Paredes-Collins (2012) provides a richer description of the particular factors found to be predictive of thriving for students of color at PWIs.

Paredes-Collins (2012) points out that previous studies on thriving and students of color show nearly twice as many predictors of thriving for White students as compared to students of color. The most significant predictors of thriving for students of color include a sense of belonging, spirituality and faculty interaction which fall in the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of thriving as opposed to the academic (Paredes-Collins, 2012). These findings alone underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to student success rather than one focused narrowly on academic indicators. Basically these findings remind us that it is possible for a student to be doing reasonably well academically but not be thriving and conversely for a student to thrive even if they are not achieving higher than average grades.

While Paredes-Collins’ (2012) overview of the thriving data for students of color is not offered from an explicitly critical perspective, her approach to storytelling and call for institutional action resonate with the tone of CRT. Paredes-Collins (2012) reminds us that twice as many thriving predictors exist for White students as students of color “meaning that many more campus experiences contribute to their thriving” (pp. 81). Knowing this and in response “interventions and strategies to promote thriving require a distinct strategy to elevate the higher education experience for students of color beyond
survival to thriving” (Paredes-Collins, 2012, pp. 81). The intent of utilizing the thriving construct as a way of initially organizing and understanding the student experiences in this study, is to create opportunities for storytelling that connect to the thriving factors as illustrated in this chapter.

**Summary**

This research draws on components within three much larger conversations in current higher education literature specifically those of (a) underrepresented students broadly, (b) critical race theory, and (c) college student success more specifically college thriving. My study is situated at the intersection of these three conversations by employing an equity minded approach to understanding the experiences of underrepresented students with a critical race theory lens both conceptually and methodologically. In seeking to understand where my research fits related to the current discussion of student success, I was quickly drawn to the positive psychology based model of college thriving. This holistic and non-deficit based approach to understanding the student experience complements both my orientation to the conversation of underrepresented students as well as the basic tenets of critical race theory. The thriving framework provides a comprehensive construct that assists in both organizing and orienting student experiences toward the construction of a more positive counter narrative of underrepresented student experiences.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

In *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*, Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln (1998) explain that qualitative research, “as a set of interpretive practices, privileges no single methodology over any other” (p. 5). In a later chapter in the same text, Egon Guba and Yvonne Lincoln (1998), further suggest that within qualitative research “questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm” (p. 195). Therefore, this chapter identifies the important paradigmatic considerations that shaped the design of this study as well as the specific methodology that I employed.

This qualitative study, drawing upon critical race theory, sought to understand the college experience of students for whom attending a private, highly selective university may have initially seemed out of reach. In the literature these students are often described as *at risk* or *high risk* but other synonymous deficit descriptors such as *disadvantaged* are also used. This study reserves space for the voices of eight alumni of a particular summer college preparation program who, at the time of being interviewed, were enrolled and had completed at least one semester at Research University. I refer to the program as the Pre-College Diversity or PC-Div program. A primary goal of this research is to share a more positively oriented narrative of these students’ experiences including seeking a better understanding of the influence of race, racism and majority thinking on the overall experience of these students in particular as it relates to college thriving. Sharing the students’ reflections on their experiences both during the PC-Div program and since
matriculation provides a first-hand account of thriving experiences that is not dependent on dominant narrative interpretations.

**Research Design**

Qualitative research and the related methodologies honor a belief in the socially constructed nature of reality and the meaning that individuals ascribe to their experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, Merriam, 2002, Schwandt, 1998, Silverman, 2005). Sharan Merriam (2002) states that “all qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds” (p. 39). Proponents of interpretivist and constructivist paradigms share a common goal, namely one “of understanding the complex world of lived experiences from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1998, p. 221).

In *Qualitative Research in Practice*, Merriam (2002) states that basic interpretive studies “are probably the most common form of qualitative research found in education” (p. 38). Interpretive research is also often accompanied by or paired with an additional lens or purpose. A specific research lens or perspective may be closely related to methodology such as a narrative analysis or ethnography or it may be more paradigmatic in nature such as critical, feminist, or postmodern theory (Merriam, 2002). An additional theoretical lens, when applied to interpretive research supplements the general goal of understanding how meaning is constructed toward fulfilling a specific purpose (Merriam, 2002). Thomas Schwandt (1998) explains that “all interpretive inquirers watch, listen, ask, record, and examine” however, the way in which each of those actions is “employed depends on the inquirer’s purpose for the doing the inquiry” (p. 222).
This study is interpretive in nature. By design, I sought to understand the lived experiences of the student participants from their perspective. I also applied a critical race theory lens to this inquiry. Critical race methodology, as described in the following section, provided an additional purpose and perspective to this research (Merriam, 2002; Schwandt, 1998). CRT not only provided a richer and more complex view of the student experiences but also one that is not as commonly represented within the higher education literature.

**Critical Race Methodology**

Critical Race methodology is described by Solorzano and Yosso (2002) as “an approach to research grounded in critical race theory” that “…pushes us to humanize quantitative data and to recognize silenced voices in qualitative data” (p. 38). My study seeks to achieve both of these goals. Through qualitative inquiry I intend to amplify and provide a venue for the voices of underrepresented students who can speak about and for themselves. In doing so this study adds a humanized perspective to the proliferation of existing scholarship that relies on quantitative success metrics and regression analysis in an attempt to pinpoint an answer to deficit framed problems including questions about access and barriers to student success.

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) further identify “five elements that form the basic insights, perspectives, methodology…” of Critical Race Theory (p. 25). Namely these five elements include: (a) the permanence of racism and the compounding factor of race within other forms of oppression, (b) rejection of the notions of color blindness, race neutrality and meritocracy, (c) a call to social justice, (d) positioning people of color at
the center of the conversation, and (e) utilization of knowledge and methods from across disciplines toward shedding light on oppression (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Storytelling is the primary method through which the basic CRT tenets are realized (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Safeguarding space for the stories of people of color challenges the notion of color blindness and places people of color as the narrator of the story rather than merely the object. Storytelling by people of color also allows for the emergence of counter narratives, those that contradict the dominant narrative perception, through which a call to action for social justice is more likely to permeate (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

In her essay, *Just what is critical race theory and what is it doing in a nice field like education?*, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) explains the important role of counter narratives by reminding us that “oppression is rationalized, causing little self-examination by the oppressor. Stories by people of color can catalyze the necessary cognitive conflict to jar dysconscious racism.” (p. 14). The detailed experiences of underrepresented students provide important counter stories to the prevailing narrative of these students as either commodities (numbers to be gained) or issue laden (problems to be managed). Counter stories from the perspective of marginalized group members are epistemologically valuable in understanding current educational practices especially if the goal is to seek change in current practices (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

**Study Design**

This study is based on two in depth, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix
A and B) with eight PC-Div program alumni who have since enrolled and completed at least one semester of coursework at Research University.

**Research Questions**

The following questions guide this study:

1. What are the experiences of underrepresented students, both in the PC-Div program and as students at this private, highly selective, research university?
2. How does race and/or racism shape the students’ understanding of their experiences?
3. How do the experiences of students in this study relate to the three dimensions of thriving: academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal?

**Research Site**

The PC-Div program takes place at a private, highly selective research university in the northeastern United States which I am calling “Research University” for the purposes of this study. Research University is mid-sized and located in an urban setting. The institution provides top ranked programs in engineering, computer science, and natural sciences as well as business, social sciences, and the fine arts including music, architecture, design, art, and drama. With leadership and encouragement from the university president, the institution has been actively engaged in diversity action planning and openly employs affirmative action practices in both hiring and admission.

The university hosts two summer programs for high school students, the Pre-College Diversity (PC-Div) program and a larger, predominately white Pre-College program (PC-PW). These programs run contiguously over a six week period from late
June to early August each year. The PC-Div program focuses on college preparation with rigorous study of math and science as well as formalized standardized test preparation. The PC-Div program intentionally serves “underrepresented students” and is marketed as a “diversity program” (personal communication). The program defines underrepresented students as African American, Hispanic, Native American and low income students (program web site). The program is intentionally gender balanced and has an annual attendance capacity of 50 students. PC-Div tuition, housing and dining fees are fully funded by the university and participants are only responsible to pay for their books, supplies and recreational expenses.

Unlike some programs for underrepresented students, PC-Div is not a remediation program. Students complete coursework in physics, theoretical math, differential calculus, and expository writing while also participating in assigned groups on engineering and science related projects (personal communication). The curricular focus of the program prepares students for the application process at selective colleges and universities while also helping participants become successful students upon matriculation to those institutions. The co-curricular components of PC-Div are also intended to increase readiness for the college experience. The PC-Div program is a residential program and all students participating live together in the same residence hall. The residential counselors are undergraduate students at the host institution who share demographic characteristics with the participants. Some of the counselors are alumni of the PC-Div program themselves. The counselors live with the students providing guidance and support but also structure and oversight.
The stated objective of the PC-Div program is “to increase the number of students in the pipeline by enrolling high school students who will grow educationally and personally and therefore succeed in gaining admission to selective colleges and universities” (Carnegie Mellon University, 2009, p. 3). To that end, the program recruits, admits, and enrolls good students who can become excellent students with the hope that they will go on to study engineering, science, computer science and other math-based or STEM majors.

PC-PW, on the other hand, is intended to mimic the typical collegiate experience for participants and therefore employs the same faculty and coursework offered to fully matriculated students during the academic year. Unlike PC-Div in which all students participate in the same course work, the predominately white Pre-College program (PC-PW) offers students the ability to concentrate in one of seven academic tracks. Additionally, PC-PW is a tuition and fee based program with competitive, need blind admission practices. Financial assistance for PC-PW is not publicly available although a limited number of scholarships for diverse applicants are provided via the same funding source as the PC-Div program (personal communication). Both PC-PW and PC-Div claim to build the skills necessary for success in college; however, they approach this goal through very different curricular and co-curricular practices.

I am particularly interested in the participants’ reflections from the PC-Div program as opposed to other preparation program opportunities because of the specific nature of the program. PC-Div takes place at the same time but completely independently from PC-PW. Despite the varied curricular tracks within PC-PW those participants all
share a common residential and overall co-curricular experience while PC-Div students live across campus participating in their own social programs, residence hall, and with their own support staff. The separation of PC-Div, the program for underrepresented students, from PC-PW is intended to provide a supportive living and learning environment with considerable one on one support and attention given to participants. Despite these well-meaning intentions I am left wondering whether this separation is effective in providing the intended support and motivation for PC-Div students or if instead it systematically reinforces the “otherness” of the participants and therefore contributes to a sense of marginalization.

The PC-Div program is specifically intended to increase the pipeline of “qualified underrepresented students” as viable applicants for admission to selective colleges and universities (program web site). More importantly for the purposes of this study, the website also identifies PC-Div as a summer program with the intention of making “good students excellent” eluding to not only issues of access (diversity) but also to issues of preparation (deficit thinking). Specifically, the pipeline issue is understood to be one of too few students of color, African American, Latino, and Native American, seeking admission to highly selective colleges and universities. Making “good students excellent” suggests that PC-Div participants have the ability to succeed but have been hindered by subpar educational opportunities necessary to make them truly viable candidates for admission to highly selective colleges and universities.

Sample
Qualitative sampling strategies are “based on informational, not statistical, considerations…its purpose is to maximize information, not facilitate generalization” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202). Potential participants in this study were PC-Div alumni currently enrolled full time at Research University for at least one semester. Students may participate in PC-Div beginning at 16 years of age and as early as the summer prior to their junior year of high school. Therefore to ensure that individuals would meet my sampling criteria, potential participants were identified to be students who participated in the 2008 through 2011 PC-Div cohorts (Table 1). Specific students meeting these criteria were identified by the department responsible for managing the PC-Div program at Research University and those students were sent an email explaining the purpose and design of the study and inviting them to participate (Appendix C). Students interested in Table 1.

**Determining PC-Div cohorts for sampling.**

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<thead>
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<th>Expected Graduation</th>
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<td>6th Year</td>
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<td>2008 Sr</td>
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<td>2009 Jr</td>
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<td>2013 Sr</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>First Year</td>
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participating responded to me directly, completed a simple demographic questionnaire (Appendix D), and signed the informed consent form (Appendix E) prior to our first interview.

PC-Div participants are admitted to the program after a selection process that includes the completion of an application and essay as well as submission of personal references. PC-Div participants are selected by the university staff members that administer the program’s academic and non-academic components in conjunction with the university’s undergraduate admission office. Upon admittance, PC-Div participants are asked to make a one hundred dollar deposit to secure their enrollment in the program. Other costs associated with the program such as tuition, housing and dining fees are funded by an endowed account at the institution. Instructional, administrative, and residential staffing for the program as well as evening and weekend events such as dances or movies are also provided from the program’s endowed fund. The majority of participants in the PC-Div program are African American or Hispanic and from families with average to below average gross family incomes (Carnegie Mellon University, 2009). The specific participants in this study are described in a later section of this chapter but they were all alumni of the program and were at least 18 years of age, currently enrolled full time at Research University, and had completed at least one semester of coursework at the university at the time that the research took place.

Data Collection

Thomas Schwandt (1998) posits that “attending carefully to the details, complexity, and situated meanings of the everyday life world can be achieved through a
variety of methods” (p. 222). I conducted two individual, semi-structured, in-person interviews with each study participant utilizing the question prompts outlined in Appendices A and B. These interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed. Participants were provided copies of the recordings and the transcripts with the opportunity to reflect on and further clarify any information provided during our conversation. The consent form (Appendix E) was explained at the beginning of the first interview and participants were asked to sign before the conversation began.

The first interview was semi-structured as outlined in the protocol, Appendix A. I utilized a set of pre-determined questions to prompt our conversation but my goal was to ask broad, open ended questions to solicit responses without having to ask questions that were overly specific. The conversations were largely determined by the participant and what they chose to share but were guided by questions such as "tell me about your experience in the PC-Div program" and "talk about how you ended up here". This initial interview focused mostly on the students’ experiences leading up to and in the PC-Div program as well as their college application and choice process. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by a transcription service. Participants were provided access to an electronic copy of both the audio and the typed transcription via a secure online file sharing platform called “Box”. Participants were asked to review and reflect on the content of the first interview prior to the second interview. Participants were instructed that the first 10 to 15 minutes of the second interview would be devoted to their reflections and reactions from listening to the first interview and/or reviewing the interview transcript.
The second interview was conducted with each participant in accordance with the protocol in Appendix B. The content of the second interview varied somewhat based upon the reflections of the participants on their first interview, the depth or breadth of data collected in the initial interview and what was meaningful for the participant from their experiences. Generally the second interview was more concerned with the college experiences of the participant including intrapersonal, interpersonal and academic dimensions. As mentioned above, the beginning portion of the second interview provided space to reflect on the initial interview. Some participants were more invested in listening to or reviewing the transcript of the first interview than others. I did review the transcripts of all of the first interviews before the second interview though and had made notes concerning questions or points of interest from my perspective. I did take the opportunity to ask clarifying questions or for more information about areas addressed in the first interview to prompt student reflection. This reflection time allowed for member checking, a trustworthiness measure whereby participants were able to authenticate as well as clarify particularly meaningful data (Silverman, 2005).

The second interviews were also transcribed and participants again received an electronic copy of both the digital recording and the typed transcription. Participants were contacted notified via email that the second set of transcripts were available and I asked that any further comments, insights, or reflections be provided to me in writing. Written reflections were not required of participants and no participant offered additional written feedback after our second interview. Several participants did take the opportunity to
thank me for my interest in their experiences however and a few requested to read the final report of my research.

In summary, the following steps reflect the data collection process used:

1. Reply to emails of students expressing interest to schedule the initial interview and provide copies of the basic demographic survey and Informed Consent form electronically

2. Collect the survey and signed Informed Consent; conduct the first interview

3. Share electronic copies of the individual recording and typed transcript with each participant; schedule second interview

4. Conduct the second interview; allow for reflection and clarification from first interview before proceeding with new prompts

5. Share recording and transcript of second interview with participant, request comments in writing

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is described as an *inductive* process whereby patterns and categories of meaning emerge from the data rather than being prescribed ahead of time (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Merriam (2002) recommends that “data analysis is simultaneous with data collection” (p. 14) in qualitative research so that the process of understanding and interpretation begin with the first pieces of data collected. However, in *Doing Qualitative Research*, David Silverman (2005) cautions the qualitative researcher about getting ahead of oneself in analysis and interpretation. Silverman (2005) states that it is tempting “to start on line one of your [first] transcript and to work your way down the page making observations as you go” (p. 164), but what emerges from this technique can be misleading if you have not truly immersed yourself in your data. Marshall and
Rossman’s (2006) seven phase analytic procedure, as outlined in *Designing Qualitative Research*, provides a systematic approach to the inductive analytic process that heeds Silverman’s warning. I utilized Marshall and Rossman’s (2006) seven analytic phases to structure data analysis for this study incorporating analytic questions and adapting procedures to honor and include the basic tenets of critical race methodology. The seven general phases were:

“(a) organizing the data; (b) immersion in the data; (c) generating categories and themes; (d) coding the data; (e) offering interpretations through analytic memos; (f) searching for alternative understandings; and (g) writing the report…”


While these phases provided some structure for data analysis to occur they were not always linear. The phases outlined a process through which meanings were discovered and challenged (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

**Data Organization and Immersion**

The first two phases in data analysis involve getting organized and immersing myself in the data. Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggest specific organization tactics such as the use of note cards or software packages to manage the large amount of data that is common in qualitative research. I took advantage of electronic data management and storage techniques to ensure that I stayed organized. First, I maintained a log of activities, as advised, in an Excel spreadsheet to label and track the data that I collected. The spreadsheet has a numbered row for each participant and columns which record the participant initials, their assigned pseudonym, the date of receipt for the signed consent
and completed survey, dates of each interview and the dates on which the recordings and transcripts were sent to the participant for review. This spreadsheet was saved electronically on a private and secure network space as well as within the secure Box cloud storage in a file which was not accessible by participants. Digital recording files and electronic copies of transcripts were also be stored on the secure network space in addition to them being made uniquely available to each participant via individual folders within the Box cloud storage.

To ensure immersion and a contextual approach to data analysis I took full advantage of the opportunity afforded by the audio recordings of the student interviews. Silverman (2005) recommends that researchers utilize recordings as a way to become intimately familiar with our data rather than just relying on reading and re-reading transcripts. According to Silverman (2005), much of the nuance of a conversation can be lost when that conversation is transcribed. Therefore, I listened and re-listened to the audio recording of each interview several times throughout my analysis process in addition to reading and re-reading the typed transcripts. Immediately following each interview I spent time journaling about the experience documenting both my own reactions to the conversation as well as noting any insights or questions that emerged for me.

Since I utilized a for-hire service to produce the typed transcript of the interviews I was able to use the time that I was waiting for the transcripts to be completed as an opportunity to listen to the audio recordings of the interviews. After listening to each interview I added additional notes to my research journal specifically documenting any
clarifying or follow up questions that I wanted to ask in the second interview. Once I received the typed transcripts from the service I again listened to the recording while reading the transcript and made necessary edits or filled in words that were not discernable to the transcriptionist. This was a time consuming task but it afforded yet another opportunity to immerse myself in the interview data. I repeated this process of listening and journaling then re-listening while editing the typed transcripts and journaling for the second set of interviews as well.

**Generating Categories and Coding**

Marshall and Rossman (2006) recommend the “use [of] preliminary research questions and the related literature…as guidelines for data analysis” (p. 156). Silverman (2005) also recommends the use of the research questions as a place to “start reviewing your data” (p. 152). As such, I began my coding and categorization process in earnest after the second set of transcripts were shared with participants. I initially used the three key areas of experiences from the thriving literature (academic, interpersonal and intrapersonal) as an organizing mechanism for the experiences shared by the student participants. Beginning this more indepth stage of data analysis by generally organizing the experiences allowed for even more familiarization with the stories and experiences of the students before undertaking “the most intellectually challenging phase of data analysis” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 159).

Categories, codes and themes were identified among the data as a result of this “prolonged engagement” (p. 159) and focused attention on the patterns and recurring ideas or language (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). I noted themes that emerged from the data
both in response to specific research questions and by recognizing patterns or similarities
among the students’ stories. I spent time distilling categories or codes that were distinct
from one another but also held true and had consistent meaning across the participant
data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

This initial analysis process also included identifying specific tenets of Critical
Race Theory (CRT) among the data such as the pervasiveness of race and racism or the
prevalence of deficit thinking. The impact of race and racism on the students experiences
was an explicit research question in this study so I intentionally listened and read for
experiences related to racism, dominant/majority culture or deficit thinking. To ensure
that I was attentive to the impact of dominant narratives on my own meaning and
interpretation of the data however, I used a CRT based classification schema to further
my analysis.

a more detailed description in *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. Patton
(2002) describes the use of matrices to allow for cross checking of particular typologies
or theoretical ideas across emerging themes. Marshall and Rossman (2006) explain that
these matrices should not lead our analysis but rather can “suggest holes in the already
analyzed data” or “generate sensitizing concepts to guide further explorations” (p. 159). I
utilized this analysis technique for both the CRT tenets and the thriving constructs by
creating a matrix with themes from the students’ experiences listed in rows and tenets or
constructs as column headers. These matrices provided structure for systematic and
in-depth consideration of principles across the student experiences and aided in a deeper understanding of the students’ experiences.

Once the consistent and unique categories of experiences were identified, I attempted to label the experiences in a way that was true to their meaning. While the “tough intellectual work of analysis is generating categories” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 160), the data must be labeled or marked in some way to identify the specific passages which define and relate to the various categories. Codes can take many different forms but ultimately need to be adaptable as the analysis progresses (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2002). I used both a visual coding scheme through color coding as well as labels which identified the key concept. Color coding specifically meaningful passages in the transcripts assisted in completed the analytic matrices described previously while word or phrase labels helped me to pinpoint the unique meaning of each code.

Analytic Memos and Interpretations

“Writing notes, reflective memos, thoughts and insights is invaluable for generating the unusual insights that move the analysis from the mundane and obvious to the the creative.” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006. P. 161). I kept a research journal throughout the data collection and analysis process where I recorded my feelings and initial impressions. I used a separate section of this journal to record analytic memos that addressed insights gained specifically through data analysis. Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggest that is particularly critical to capture insights gained during the more intense process of data interpretation. Interpreting the data collected involved connecting
themes across the various experiences of the students and distilling the differences and similarities among the 22 codes that I initially identified. Again, immersion in the data and memo writing helped me to stitch these experiences together to provide a rich description of the collective student experiences.

**Alternative Understandings**

While working to organize and make sense of the data that I collected I also challenged myself to consider alternate understandings of the data. Marshall and Rossman (2006) point out, in reviewing this phase of the data analysis process, that just as I discover “categories and patterns in the data, [I] should engage in critically challenging the very patterns that seem so apparent” (p. 162). This process of questioning my initial interpretations and understandings is particularly important in applying a CRT lens. As mentioned previously, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) warns of the ease with which we take for granted and presume the dominant perspective in our story telling and the ways that we understand reality. Recognizing my own limitations and in an effort to guard against the tendency of which Ladson-Billings warns, I secured the assistance of a trusted colleague, “Mary”, who agreed to review and check my interpretations from her perspective as a person of color. Mary both validated my understandings of the students experiences and helped me to see connections across codes that I had not be attuned to previously. Her insight was invaluable in this process.

**Positioning the Researcher**

I am a doctoral student at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. My program of study is Educational Administration and I am in the Higher Education concentration. As a
student of higher education I have a familiarity with the language and culture present on
college and university campuses. While this insider perspective assists in my
understanding in some respects, it also provides an added challenge with regard to
making the familiar strange. In addition to being a student of higher education I am also
employed as an administrator in higher education, at the institution site of this study. I
understand that this adds to my particular burden in attempting to bring an outsider’s lens
to the questions proposed in this research.

I am interested in learning about the experience of the PC-Div participants
because of my own experience as the first person in my family to finish college. I never
participated in a pre-college preparation program but I think that the goal of these types
of programs, to make college a reality for those that might not have otherwise gone, is a
very important one. My orientation toward posing critical questions, which address the
experiences of traditionally marginalized or underrepresented individuals and groups,
draws me to experiences of the PC-Div alumni as well. As a woman, an out Lesbian, and
someone who grew up in a poor family I am acutely aware of the power that dominant
discourse has in shaping a collective understanding despite its applicability to my
experience or individual reality.

I chose to work in higher education because of how influential my college
experience has been in my life. Now, as a PhD student I am interested in learning more
about how other people have made college a reality for themselves. The PC-Div program
is of particular interest to me because of its separation from the larger and predominately
white Pre-College program (PC-PW) that takes place at the same institution and the same
time as PC-Div. This separation raises questions for me about the need to offer two discrete experiences for students and if we have ever engaged in thoughtful inquiry around this reality.

The PC-PW is a much larger umbrella program with seven distinct academic tracks joined via the residential and general out of classroom experiences of the students. The fact that only one of the summer programs for high school students offered at Research University is separated out residentially and socially from the others is interesting to me. The fact that the one separate program is the PC-Div program, the one that serves low SES and racial minority students, is frankly concerning. My social justice radar is acutely tuned in to the experiences of the students in the PC-Div program because while I believe in the purpose and support the intended goal of the PC-Div program, I question the implementation.

This study posed the risk of eliciting strong emotions related to participant experiences especially considering the role that race, gender, or socioeconomic status can play and the current political climate related to these issues. At the time of our interviews the Black Lives Matter movement had not yet begun but emerging movements such as “I too am Harvard” were underway. The broader attention to race, especially race on college campuses, emerged in our conversations naturally as a result. However, though it seemed to ease the discussion and lower barriers for some participants, it is also true that it may have created a hesitancy in others. I approached questions related to the influence of race, gender, and socioeconomic status mindful of the charged nature of these discussions in general. I reassured participants through the duration of the study that their
participation was voluntary, in both being interviewed at all but also their ability to choose what information they were comfortable or willing to share. I acknowledge that some participants may not be comfortable talking with me about potentially sensitive issues such as these in an interview setting especially in our initial conversation. I hope that by providing the opportunity to respond to the typed transcript and the follow up interview process that more trust might be built then allowing for these conversations.

**Interpretive Authority**

It is important that I am honest and forthright concerning my interest and investment in this topic. Karl Marx (1967 in Merriam, 2002) is quoted as saying that critical inquiry is “relentless in the sense that criticism is not afraid of its findings and just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be” (p. 212). As a critical researcher I am interested in creating space for untold or even silenced stories in hopes of identifying and erradicating oppression. I have an obligation in this endeavor to ensure that my participants voices are heard via the space secured by me as the researcher. My role as researcher is not to speak for the participants but rather to share their experiences in their own words and through their chosen experiences. I must also acknowledge that the ears with which I hear the participants’ stories are critical and attuned to issues of inequity or oppression.

I work at the institutional home of the PC-Div program and therefore I acknowledge the potential political tensions in conducting this research in my own back yard (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) suggests that conducting research in environments where you have a vested interest can be particularly challenging. I knew
that I might get requests for identifying information of my participants or push back on
the lens with which I viewed the program. However, I employed suggestions offered by
Creswell (2007) to attend to potential conflicts including working closely with
gatekeepers throughout my study and utilizing several methods of validation. I am not
directly responsible for the program that my participants attended and no one who reports
to me works for the program both of which provide some distance. The PC-Div program
and I ultimately report to the same vice president at the university but the vice president
is not my direct supervisor nor does he directly supervise the PC-Div program.
Regardless the vice president was a key gatekeeper and ensuring that he was fully aware
and supportive of my study was key in helping me navigate potential political pressures
that may have arisen. The vice provost to whom the program direct reports was another
gatekeeper that I identified early on in my planning process. The vice-provost’s
understanding and support of my study provided validity and a vote of confidence that
assisted me in garnering the endorsement of the PC-Div staff.

**Trustworthiness**

When conducting research from a critical perspective it is important to
acknowledge the subjectivity of the researcher as not just present but as “an important
part of the work” (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007, p. 38). In this study I have attempted to lay
bare my presuppositions regarding the PC-Div program and its separation from the other
pre-college program. I have acknowledged my experiences as a first generation college
student and my identification with the struggle of the PC-Div participants to successfully
navigate the transition from high school to college. In qualitative research the investigator
is asked to own and acknowledge their reactions and personal insights throughout data collection and analysis process. Note that the goal in doing so is not to silence our reactions or insights but rather to ensure that participant voices are heard most predominantly in our understanding of meaning (Groenewald, 2004). This call for bracketing and/or memo writing does not dismiss the researcher’s subjectivities it simply gives space for the participants voice first and foremost (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007). In this way I believe that the combination of critical research, specifically critical race theory, and basic interpretive methodologies in this study provides for trustworthiness assurances that come from effectively honoring each of the methodological traditions.

In addition to acknowledging subjectivity Maxwell (1992) recommends attending to descriptive validity, interpretive validity, and theoretical validity. Maxwell offers two other categories of validity but for the purpose of this study the three that I have identified are most relevant. Descriptive validity speaks to the accuracy of information, such as factual accuracy, while interpretive validity refers more so to the meaning ascribed to a particular phenomenon (Maxwell, 1992). The study method employed in this study provided multiple opportunities for member checking of both descriptive and interpretive validity. By providing transcripts and requesting feedback on initial analysis participants helped to ensure both factual accuracy and that their experiences were being understood according to their individual perspective. Theoretical validity is achieved in the final product of the study given that the data gathered adequately describes the phenomena being studied (Maxwell, 1992). Therefore, Chapter IV offers rich
descriptions of the meaningful student experiences provided by the participants in their own words.

**Limitations**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of students who have participated in the PC-Div program and how PC-Div has impacted their college thriving. While it would have been interesting to consider the experience of one or two students prior to the program and then over a prolonged period of time that was not the intention of this study. I will also concede that it would have been interesting and worthwhile to compare the experiences of students from PC-Div with those from PC-PW toward attaining a better sense of the actual differences in those two lived experiences though that was also not the goal of this research. The separation and juxtaposition of these two programs is very interesting to me and may result in future study of the similarities and differences across the program experiences. With this preliminary study, however, I seek to bring to the experiences of the PC-Div students in to clearer focus. I believe that it is important to start my inquiry in this area with an in-depth understanding of these experiences from the students themselves, not in contrast to others but as fully valued and worthy of consideration on their own.

I do have an interest in the PC-Div program as an overall experience but again this study served as an introduction to the experience of the program while later research may focus on developing a more holistic picture of the program through a case study analysis or ethnographic approach. It was also not my intention to conduct a formal evaluation of the PC-Div program. I acknowledge however that my understanding of the
students’ experiences especially employing a critical race theory perspective provides an opportunity for evaluative comments. Holding true to a foundational premise of critical race theory I do offer specific recommendations for action as a result of this study.

This study examined the experiences of only eight students who all participated in the same pre-college program and attended the same university. The results of two in-depth interviews with each participant served as the data from which the experience themes shared in Chapter IV are drawn. These themes represent my understanding of the experiences that the student participants chose to share with me through our conversations. These themes are not presented as nor should they be interpreted to be representative of a broader overall experience but rather they are reflective of the stories that were shared by the participants as meaningful at one point in time. While limited in these ways it is important to remember that generalizability was not the intent of this study.

**Study Participants**

The eight participants in this study all attended at least one PC-Div program session at Research University between 2007 and 2012. They are five men and three women who ranged from first year students to fifth year seniors at the time of the interviews. Three of the eight students participated in two PC-Div sessions (in back to back years) while five only attended for one summer. The most commonly attended PC-Div session was 2012 with three of the participants attending that year. Four of the study participants identified themselves as African American, two identified as Asian American, one identified as Latino and one identified as multi-racial. Five of the
participants shared that they are Pell Grant recipients and two stated that they did not know. Only one of the eight participants was not Pell Grant eligible. Seven of the participants indicated that one or more of their primary care givers had attended college and five of those seven indicated that the care giver had completed their degree. The most common high school setting among participants, with four, was suburban, near but outside of a city. Two participants attended high school in large urban areas, one in a mid-sized or small urban area, and one in a rural area. The participants represent a variety of academic programs including Biology, Architecture, Professional Writing, Global Studies, and a variety of engineering disciplines. Seven of the eight participants were scheduled to return to the same university the following year to continue their studies and one was scheduled to graduate. Appendix F identifies each of the eight participants by pseudonym and provides the responses to the basic demographic survey as answered before the initial interview.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter I share the meaningful experiences that emerged from my conversations with the student study participants. Given the intentions of this study, I give particular attention to the influence of race, racism, and deficit thinking on these experiences while highlighting aspects of college thriving. The eight study participants were all enrolled full time at Research University at the time of our interviews and all had previously participated in the Pre-College Diversity (PC-Div) summer program. The PC-Div program has the goal of Making Good Students Excellent with a specific focus on serving underrepresented minority students (Walton, personal communication).

I have identified four themes among the student experiences which are: (a) tone setting dynamics; (b) sense of belonging; (c) sense of self; and (d) defining success as growth. While these themes highlight commonalities among the students’ experiences, they are in no way intended to generalize their experiences or the experience of PC-Div participants as a whole. In the following sections I will describe each of the four themes including the various groupings of experiences that make up each theme.

Description of Themes

Each of the following themes brings together a set of meaningful experiences from among the student participants in this study. It is noteworthy that the three themes describing the students’ experiences build on one another. Though not intentional, the reflective opportunity provided by in depth interviews seems to have created space for a sequential narrative to emerge among the student experiences. In addition to the personal
experiences of the student participants, the interviews also brought to life specific
dynamics within the PC-Div program that contributed to the participants’ growth as
individuals and as students. Evaluation of the PC-Div program was intentionally not the
focus of this study, however the consistent mention of certain program dynamics offers
valuable insight into the overall student experience.

**Tone Setting Dynamics**

Among the many salient experiences of the study participants was the role that
several critical dynamics of the PC-Div program played in their thriving both while in the
program and since matriculation. These characteristics were offered in response to open
ended questions about the program and participants thoughts on the benefits of their
participation. All eight participants identified the same aspects of the program as
beneficial elements in their success. Some of these program dynamics also contribute to
the creation of other meaningful experiences which are highlighted later in the chapter.

The meaningful program characteristics as identified by the students are: (a) a cohort of
like-minded but diverse peers; (b) modeling and individualized attention from older
students, faculty and staff; (c) the provision of insider information and opportunities for
networking; and (d) holding high expectations for student success.

**Like-minded and diverse cohort.** First among the unique dynamics of the
program that the students mentioned as pivotal to their success was the relationship
among the relatively small group of diverse peers that made up their cohort. In every
interview students highlighted the important role that the positive dynamic among the
students in the program played. This is particularly interesting because there are five
unique cohorts represented among the participant experiences. Over all five of these groups, students described their cohorts as *familial* and many of them stated that it was the first time they felt like they were truly among people like them. Rysa, a female, African American student who attended PC-Div in 2012 stated that “there weren’t cliques like in high school and you didn’t have to pretend or hide things [about yourself].” Jay, a male, Asian American, who also attended in 2012 described the supportive camaraderie of the group saying “it wasn’t competitive but we pushed each other, we made each other better because we were all like already pretty smart and we liked to push each other.” Mike, an African American male student who participated in 2008 and 2009 admitted that he was skeptical of his cohort coming together at first. Mike had been attracted to the program because of the minority serving mission and he admitted that he expected the students in his cohort to be just like him. Upon meeting the other students though, he was surprised. Mike said:

> It was just that shock of everyone being different [than what he expected] and automatically processing that as them being weird like, what kind of minority kids are these? That was my initial thought…we had black people that didn’t listen to rap music…didn’t use the same slang or curse words…I really didn’t understand that difference because I never had to before.

Despite these initial uncertainties Mike did experience the close knit community that others described and even attributes the intimate peer relationships as the reason that he wanted to return for a second year. Phil, a multi-racial male student who participated in the 2010 PC-Div session, described himself being enamored by the others in the program
and feeling like the connections that he was making with them were more important than the academic program. Phil said, “I was more concerned about the relationships [than the coursework]…like these people are really awesome and I want them in my life more.”

Abe, a male, Latino student who attended in 2007 and 2008 agreed with the supportive feeling among the cohort and he also identified the connection that emerged from being among a diverse group. He explained:

Everyone was a minority there [at PC-Div] so nobody was a minority. I mean just everyone was so different so nobody was different in a way, like we were united by the fact that we were different…It was refreshing…people would say like this is the first time in my life where I’m not the only black kid or I’m not the only Mexican kid or the only Asian kid.

Erin’s reflections, as an African American female who attended in 2011 and 2012, expand on the experiences shared by other participants by naming a prior sense of internalized deficit thinking that was challenged by her cohort experience. She shared that “coming to [PC-Div] was just different, seeing a bunch of people who I guess are ‘high risk minority’ but were like ambitious and like wanted to study. That was different…I guess it was kind of inspiring.”

Ultimately the small size and sense of camaraderie among the PC-Div cohort contributed to shared commitment and ambition among the student participants. As Erin described: “I definitely experienced a lot of camaraderie, we all kind of struggled together…we all wanted to do well but not so much that we wouldn’t help each other. That’s a component that I had not experienced [before] and it felt good.” The ways that
this cohort dynamic contributed to internalized feelings such as safety and normalcy and how those feelings provide a spring board for success are further explored in later themes.

**Individual attention.** Student Resident Assistants, faculty, and professional program staff offered personalized and focused attention and as such created a second critical component of the PC-Div program. Several students acknowledged the work of the Resident Assistants (RAs) as the reason why they were able to bond with one another as described above. Phil felt very strongly about the role of the RAs in creating and maintaining a positive dynamic.

> It is absolutely essential to have a good RA staff. If anything like the RAs have to be on point because they would really make the experience great…I guess they were always engaging, we would all come out in the hallway and pow wow and if anyone wasn’t out there then our RA would go bang on the door and be like why aren’t you talking with us, get out here. They were always making sure that everyone was included and having a good time and staying out of trouble. I think what made them great was that they were really invested in the program.

In addition to creating opportunities for connections among the participants, the RAs served as role models, even aspirational peers for PC-Div participants. Similarly to Erin questioning the ‘high risk’ status of herself and her peers, Mike described seeing the RAs as students that he could emulate. Mike explained that he found himself thinking: “maybe I shouldn’t aim too low, maybe I can aim for a top university…there are people like me here, maybe I do have a legitimate chance at coming here or another top university.” Abe
also described the RAs as challenging stereotypes that the students held previously. The students may not have even recognized these preconceived notions but Abe’s description sheds more light on those beliefs. He describes the RAs as “smart and interested in learning but also comfortable socially…in to music or sports or whatever like regular people.” In both Mike’s and Abe’s reflections there are indications of internalized deficit thinking. They had concerns that top tier institutions were not places for them or that being smart meant that they were not normal. Recognizing how these students had internalized the deficit thinking that dominates the narrative regarding underrepresented students is noteworthy and underscores the particular value of experiences described in later themes including feeling normal and relieving the burden of representation.

In addition to the attention and modeling provided by the student RA staff, individualized access to faculty was another key program dynamic. Jay described the PC-Div program as “customizable” because students were able to select additional project classes that aligned with their individual interests. These project courses gave students access to additional faculty, beyond those teaching in the core classes, and did so in small group settings within specialty areas such as Robotics, Bio-Medical Engineering, and Computer Programming. Abe referenced the relationship that he built with a Physics professor, “It wasn’t so much what he said to me but it was kind of how he was, it just inspired me…[our talks] gave me direction and it gave me confidence too.” Aditi, an Asian female who attended the 2010 PC-Div session, highlighted the importance that one on one attention in the academic arena played in her experience.
I felt like [the program] was really hands on, the lab professor from that summer still recognizes me. The small classes were great and everyone was really passionate about what they were doing including the faculty and [teaching assistants]. It was exciting and energetic, it was a lot of fun to be around people who were just as excited and as passionate.

The professional staff that coordinate the PC-Div program were also highlighted as invested mentors for program participants. William, an African American male who participated in PC-Div in 2007 shared how valuable the director of the program was for him in dealing with struggles during the program including failing the required math class. “She always made me feel like yes it is hard but you have allies here.” William felt that the program staff cared for him as an individual which helped to establish the trust that he needed to be able to confide in them and lean on them for support. Mike also appreciated the individual attention that he received from a program staff person which ultimately encouraged him to think of ways that he might play this role for others. “I really grew from being someone who just kind of stuck to my own kind to being much more open. I realize that I have the opportunity to positively influence others too, in the way that I was influenced.” Mike made this comment in recounting a conversation that he had with one of the PC-Div staff members which fueled his interest to work for a similar program after his graduation.

**Insider information.** Another consistent sentiment that I identified from among the student interviews pertains to their ability to access information that they perceived to be special or privileged. At first I considered each of these experiences as examples of a
code that I was calling *You Don’t Know What You Don’t Know*. Upon deeper consideration, however, I realized that it was not just that the students were provided information that they did not know about previously. The meaningful component of receiving this information was more of a recognition by the students that the PC-Div program had given them a leg up in the admission and financial aid process as well as in their overall transition to college. To some extent the access to information and people had helped them to see things that they didn’t realize were to be known previously but, the most meaningful aspect was the feeling that the insight would not have been possible without the PC-Div program. The insider information was beneficial but it was the intentional sharing and access to that information that made it particularly meaningful. Aditi, for example, credits the program with helping her to see what was possible for her by saying:

I can safely say that I would not have applied to a school of like [this one’s] reputation without [PC-Div]. I just wouldn’t have been as aware of the different schools that are available to apply to number one. Number two, I was looking out for finances.

Aditi, like the other students, was aware of the high cost of selective, private universities as well as her designation as a “high risk” student. She had assumed that a well-regarded state school close to home where she could commute was her most realistic college option. PC-Div helped her to realize that information that she hadn’t known previously about financial aid and college tuition meant that she had many more options. It also fueled her confidence as an applicant which led her to seek admission to several top tier
universities. William also credits the PC-Div program with providing valuable insider information on how to “play the game”. William noted that a lot of important information about how to successfully navigate the admission process for highly selective schools is not available to a large number of people.

I think a lot of parents literally have no idea what the game looks like. You have people who are doing everything right and they want to apply to a place like this and the school is like, okay well give us your subject test and they’re like what’s a subject test. That was our first time hearing about it and of course, if you are hearing about a subject test two weeks before you have to take it you’re probably not going to do well. Some people didn’t take the subject test because they couldn’t even afford them and they don’t know to apply for a waiver. I place fault on the guidance counselor but she didn’t expect that someone was going to want to end up in a place like this. I didn’t hear it from my school so the kid whose mom or dad didn’t graduate from college, they may love them 1000% but they are like, I guess you just get good grades, take the SAT and go.

In addition to the types of logistical or procedural information that William noted above, he also shared other elements to the admission game that remain unknown to many applicants. For example, as I spoke with William, he identified the politics of college admission processes, the need to package and identify one’s self, and the weight placed on knowing the right people involved in the process as significant components to the admission game. He also acknowledged that while there are ways that students could use
these elements to their advantage, even their existence, let along how to use them, remains hidden.

One of the ways that insider information and networking opportunities were made available to participants in PC-Div was through a required college preparation seminar. The seminar was co-led by staff from the Office of Admission and allowed students to work on personal statements and application essays, learn about the variety of institutions that exist and how admission decisions are made, prepare for interviews, and develop a better understanding of college finances by navigating the financial aid system and deciphering the real cost of tuition. Rysa commented on the importance of this seminar course.

I felt that they cared about us. [The admission counselors] were going above and beyond to make sure that we knew what we were doing. They even told us how to prepare for the interview. They said, make sure that you dress appropriately, this is a conversation but not with one of your friends, no cursing and make sure you don’t have your cell phone.

Rysa recognized that the admission counselors were trying to help them beyond just presenting information. The staff made them aware of pitfalls that they had experienced previously and tried to position the students to have a strong interview by sharing their insight in to the process with them. The admission counselors did not assume that the PC-Div students would know what to expect in an interview or that they would get this kind of advice from others. Instead the counselors determined what suggestions might be most helpful to all students and shared them accordingly.
Finally, students credited the insider information that they received at PC-Div with generally aiding in their transition to college. “I knew what to expect,” said Jay, “it made coming to college my freshman year a lot easier.” Some of what Jay and others acknowledged had helped to ease their transition were simple by-products of having spent considerable time on the campus. Many of the students, for example, acknowledged feeling as if they had a leg up on other first year students because at least they knew where their classrooms were located and where they could eat. However, students highlighted more than just this exposure to the campus as being critical in easing their transition. William, in particular, shared multiple ways that he felt the program had helped with his transition. First, William shared the significance of learning how to navigate relationships with others in and out of the classroom. As an only child, the experience of living and learning so closely with a group of people presented new challenges for him. He said, “I guess what I learned…it taught me a lot socially…I understood the social landscape of college a lot better having been here.” William also credits the program with teaching him better strategies as a student.

I think that there are a lot of things about [succeeding in college] that have to do with [PC-Div]...like I had to learn how to study and not just memorize facts, that was a cool thing coming out of the program.

William also identified learning how to recognize when he is struggling, how to fail but then recover, and how to get help to his PC-Div experience but these experiences are addressed in greater detail in later themes.
**Aspirations and expectations.** The students shared that prior to PC-Div they had received both subtle and overt messages of the low expectations that others had for them. Mike actually talked about some of the internal conflicts that he had experienced prior to the PC-Div program that left him feeling that he may be betraying his upbringing and his family by wanting more than what he saw around him at home. Mike grew up in a predominately Black, inner city neighborhood. People that grew up in his neighborhood tended to stay in the neighborhood and very few attended college with even fewer actually completing their degree. The environment within PC-Div helped to ease the conflict that he felt about wanting more but also valuing his upbringing. Mike said:

It made it cool I guess, to be ambitious, to go out and seek more than what is just around you. It was ok to want more and not feel bad about it like thinking that you were better than your family or people at home.

Where Mike had previously felt guilty for having aspirations beyond his neighborhood, the high expectations of the PC-Div program helped him to feel more resolved about his own desires. Rysa also shared a similar experience;

You have the conflict, the constant barriers, trying to bring you down, but then you have these people who believe in you, people that say you are good enough, people that say “you can do this”…that was the whole thing that [PC-Div] was trying to push. Their motto was *making good students excellent*. How you see yourself is evidently how you’re going to show yourself to others and how you’re going to perform.
The students recognized the importance of others belief in their abilities as motivation but almost permission to strive. The high expectations that others had for the students served as evidence of faith in their capacity to achieve. Mike noted that he felt fortunate to be exposed to a new way of thinking because he saw the difference between himself and his peers at home.

I am the only one [of my high school peers] at a top university and I just think, why was I motivated to aim high in the first place? That’s like one thing that I really owe to [PC-Div]. That really helped me.

High expectations coupled with the support mentioned previously created an environment where each student could achieve individualized success. Jay’s experience as an Asian male coming from a suburban community sits in stark contrast to Mike and Rysa. Jay came to PC-Div with high aspirations for himself and high expectations from his family. Despite Jay’s strong academic background, confidence and familial support he also felt appropriately pushed by the PC-Div program. Jay cited professors, RAs, and PC-Div professional staff as individuals who set a high standard without creating a stressful environment, “they just, I don’t know, there wasn’t like a stressful situation…they did a good job of telling us what they expected…like study hard and try academically. It wasn’t like ‘I have to go do work’, it was like an uplifting experience.”

The challenge provided by high expectations was balanced with the support offered through an individualized approach and belief in the students’ ability to succeed. Jay went on to describe the program as beneficial for everyone because “they know how to push you and there’s still more room to grow.”
The faculty, staff and older students that made up the program team also contributed to the high expectations for the students by modeling high achievement themselves. This dynamic is somewhat described above as it relates to role modeling but the following perspective from Abe underscores the important role of aspirational peers: “the [RAs] were the coolest people…like these people were so cool and it was the first time that being smart was cool. These people were the total package. We wanted to be these people!”

**Separate programs.** The significant role of these tone setting dynamics and the way that they shaped the overall experiences of the program participants is an especially important finding given my initial concerns about the marginalization of PC-Div students from the Pre-College Predominately White (PC-PW) program. As I explored my participants’ awareness of and experiences with the PC-PW program it became clear that while they were very aware of the differences between their program (PC-Div) and the PC-PW program, they did not believe those differences to be problematic. Actually, the differences between the two programs including access to a diverse cohort; individualized attention from faculty and staff; and insider information and networks were the exact dynamics that made the program especially meaningful for the students. Erin, for example, shared that she was aware of the other program but did not feel excluded from it. Rather, she felt “lucky” to have the PC-Div opportunity.

I didn’t feel inadequate or any lesser than them [the students in PC-PW], I felt like, I don’t know, like I was *lucky*. I was doing like this hard course work, attending this prestigious college and I was doing it for free.
Erin’s reflection, echoed by others, challenged me to see the differences in the two programs from the students’ perspective. As I listened closely to the students descriptions of the differences between the two programs I realized that those differences were perceived as positive distinctions by the PC-Div students rather than stigmatizing limitations as I had feared.

**Sense of Belonging**

The second theme among the student experiences relates to developing a sense of belonging in PC-Div and at Research University which ultimately supported student success. This sense of belonging emerged from feeling accepted and normal as well as believed in and cared for. The intimate and non-judgmental atmosphere established in the PC-Div program helped the students to feel safe and accepted as they matriculated and became a part of the community at Research University. Many of the students actually cited this dynamic as the reason why they applied and ultimately chose to attend Research University. For example, Rysa and Erin both described feeling “at home” at the university while Aditi described feeling like she was “a part of the place.” Jay specifically called out safety in saying, “I felt comfortable here, I’m not sure but it definitely made me feel safe, it felt like I had a safety net.”

**Feeling normal.** First among the dynamics that contributed to a sense of belonging was the feeling of being normal and accepted. As stated previously, some of this sense of normalcy was a byproduct of the composition of the PC-Div program. Abe observed, for instance, “Everyone was a minority so no one was a minority.” This dynamic will also be explored in a later theme as it relates to shedding the burden of
representation that students had experienced in other settings. However, for the purposes of exploring belonging it is important to note that feeling *one of many* instead of *one of few* was significant for these students. Rysa reflected on these feelings:

> It wasn’t something that we talked about, it was just a feeling. Most of the people were black or Hispanic and so it was easier to talk to people. Race did play a part in it. I felt like it’s more chill, it’s ok.

Erin also expressed feeling more of a sense of belonging with her PC-Div peers even more so than with her own family members. She shared that she believed her family members and people in her community were not very ambitious so she felt more of a connection within the PC-Div community where other people shared similar interests and goals.

Unlike the other participants, Mike was able to see the positive potential of being in a program with people like himself, racially and intellectually, even before attending the program. No other participant had been drawn to PC-Div’s focus on serving underrepresented minority students however Mike recognized it as an exciting and unique feature.

> That’s the one thing that attracted me to the program because the idea that I’d be surrounded by like some of the top kids from around the nation who looked like me was something different…the idea kind of enticed me you know? I didn’t know what it would feel like to be surrounded by other minority kids who were top in their class or in their city.
Additional positive impacts that emerged for Mike and the other students, beyond feeling normal, are explored further in the third theme, Sense of Self.

The demographic composition of the program, mostly African American and Latino/a students, fostered a sense of normalcy among the students but the interpersonal dynamics within the program also played an important role in feeling accepted and normal. As described earlier, the close personal relationships that were nurtured in the program by the RAs, faculty and program staff contributed to students feeling that they were welcomed and belonged. Phil described that “there was no reason to be self-conscious or concerned [at PC-Div]. Everyone there would accept me regardless and if anyone did have a problem they would be upfront about it.” Aditi credited feeling like everyone was treated equally as significant in feeling normal and accepted as well. Specifically, as a woman Aditi appreciated that “they gave us all the same opportunity and we were all the same in terms of like our classes and our duties and everything.” For Aditi the consistency of expectations not only sent a strong message that all of the students were capable but it also normalized the struggles that the students ultimately experienced throughout the program. “I guess because everyone around me was going through the same experience it was knowing, like okay, this is actually hard stuff, it’s not you being inadequate or anything, it’s actually difficult stuff and like people are working very hard.” Normalizing struggle, recognizing it as part of the experience rather than attributing it to other characteristics, was very important in helping the students to feel as though they belonged in PC-Div, at Research University, but also in a higher education community altogether.
**You can do it.** Another dynamic that contributed to the students’ sense of belonging in PC-Div as well as at Research University as a whole was knowing that others believed in their ability to succeed. This sense of confidence that others had in their abilities was particularly impactful during the times when the students themselves were questioning their abilities. Some of this discussion is similar to the previously mentioned high expectations and aspirations set by the program itself but it is unique in that here, the students are referencing personalized expressions of others belief in them specifically. For example, Rysa cited winning an award for being a hard working student as a significant validation of her abilities. Formal recognition provided a means of acknowledgement for other students as well but more common were sentiments of belief that were infused into the environment. “Just having a positive environment overall,” said Jay, “and then having people, your professors and people in your classes, encouraging you and telling you that you could do it.” A positive environment that expected success and minimized setbacks was cited again and again by students as particularly meaningful in supporting their success.

Students noted the role that others played in helping them maintain a broader perspective when facing a stumbling block. William, Rysa, Mike and Erin all shared experiences with failure during the PC-Div program where a family member or someone affiliated with the program encouraged them to maintain perspective on their larger goals. Erin described an example conversation with the program director:
[She was] like okay, step back from your one test, a lot of people fail tests, so step back and look at the big picture. It was really helpful because I was like, uh, this is the worst thing in my whole life.

Many of the students shared that they had not experienced failure before attending the PC-Div program. The program was intentionally designed to push them to achieve at a higher level though so it was critical that the students received adequate support to balance the challenges that they were encountering. The external belief in their abilities helped the students not to internalize these minor failures. Shifting focus away from failure and refocusing on longer term success is a foundation for developing resiliency which is discussed later in the section on Defining Success as Growth.

In addition to dealing with specific failures, Aditi also identified the importance of others’ support when she is feeling overwhelmed.

There are definitely points when I’m like okay, this is a bit overwhelming, here’s that hard work that everyone talks about [experiencing in college]. So then having people tell you that it’s okay, like having support from other sources gives you the push you need.

As Aditi described, the belief by others in one’s ability to succeed served to sustain students at times when they are struggling to believe in themselves. Erin credited her family with providing a similar push. “Definitely my family members who are like I’m proud of you, like you are doing so well, and stuff like that, it inspires me to continue on my path.” Even though Erin had been unsure whether her family would support or condemn her for aspiring to achieve in college, Erin found the belief of her family in her
ability to succeed sustaining in times of need. William also spoke eloquently about how others’ belief in him underscored their care and concern which, in turn, supported his ability to thrive, not just survive.

[The PC-Div staff] are a group of people that cares about you as a person and as a student. That’s not something you’re going to get in a lot of places you know and a lot of people need that…you know that your wellbeing is more important to someone than the statistic that you represent in terms of whether you graduate in four years and what your GPA is. It makes you, you can engage in this place a little bit more, with a little more fearlessness than you already were. William’s comment pushes back on the dominant success narrative which focuses on statistics and minimizes the individuality of students. As a student in the pipeline, William knows that his persistence or success is valuable to the institution and that his particular interests or wellbeing could easily get lost as a result. Therefore the sustaining or even substitute belief expressed by others is, itself, an important dynamic that helped students get through challenging times and, it is also an expression of care for them as people not just as statistics.

**Caring environment.** As William points out above, belief in the students’ abilities coupled with genuine caring generates a particularly impactful combination. Several students shared specific examples of ways that kindness, care and concern have been expressed to them both in the program and in college. These expressions of authentic concern for the students’ well-being reinforce the sense that the students belong and are a valuable part of the community. In particular, Rysa acknowledged that
experiencing authentic concern for her wellbeing in PC-Div has extended beyond the program and to her experience since matriculating. She described knowing “that it’s not fake niceness, it is genuine kindness” and that contributes to her feelings of comfort at Research University as a whole. She, like William, feels confident that the expressions of kindness that she receives emerge from an authentic place of concern as opposed to supporting ulterior motives such as institutional interests or out of obligation like just checking boxes. Aditi pointed to the fact that her lab professor from PC-Div recognized her on campus, after the program and still asks about how she is doing as an example of care. This experience, a professor’s recognition of her and inquiry in to how she is doing, serves as an example of the simple yet powerful and authentic gestures that are important in helping students feel like they belong. Finally, Mike expressed a broad feeling of care across the environment and the positive impact of that feeling on his success, “I look at how much I grew over those two years [in PC-Div], it really shows me that there was a caring environment for us here…you know, people really wanted to see us do well.”

The experiences of feeling normal, that other’s believed in their ability to succeed and that people cared about and for them contributed to a sense of belonging for the students both in the PC-Div program and at Research University. The sense of belonging was critical to the students’ ability to challenge themselves and to grow both of which are themes explored further below. Sense of belonging is also important to consider in response to my questioning of the separation of the PC-Div program from the PC-PW program. Mike participated as a student in PC-Div and worked as a counselor for the PC-PW program so he has an intimate understanding of both programs. In talking with Mike
about the differences between the two programs and his thoughts on whether the two should remain separate he stated:

It’s hard you know because if you dissolve [PC DIV] in to the bigger program like does it have the same impact…If we all lived together it may have been harder to get extra help…we really wouldn’t have had as many conversations about, you know, being a minority.”

Mike’s questions about the potential impact that changes to the program could have on student comfort (i.e. asking for help and talking openly about their experiences as minority students) speaks to the importance of establishing a sense of belonging. Mike’s reflections also extended my understanding of the program separation questions addressed previously. As you recall, unique dynamics afforded by PC-Div, as a smaller, independent program, such as camaraderie, individual attention, and insider information were noted as contributors to student success. Mike takes the benefits of the separate program a step further and suggests that the separation also assisted in creating a sense of security, not just belonging, among PC-Div students. Mike’s lifting up of the separation as means for creating both a sense of belonging and a sense of safety exemplifies the value of this type of inquiry. It serves as a cautionary tale for well-intentioned outsiders, like myself, who seek to make equity minded decisions but can easily overlook or undervalue the actual lived experiences of students.

**Sense of Self**

The third theme emerging from the student interviews builds on the earlier experiences with the PC-Div program and the sense of belonging that were previously
described. This theme relates to the students finding a more realistic sense of self. Erin used the phrase “doing me” as a way of describing this phenomenon while my colleague [Mary], who has assisted in my interpretation and understanding of the student experiences, offered the phrase “able to just be” as an alternative. Both Erin and Mary are addressing the dynamic of an emerging sense of self or individual identity but Mary’s word choice relates well to the sentiments described below pertaining to the burden of representation. In general this third theme groups together ways that the students were able to explore what it means to be themselves, without pretense and free from judgement. These experiences were cited by students as critical components in their ability to grow and thrive. Therefore, this theme encompasses student experiences with exploring independence and taking risks as well as asking for help and being vulnerable explicitly addressing the importance of being able to let go of the burden of representation. It also includes the students’ experiences in moving away from a reliance on external drivers, particularly in their academic pursuits, and towards a more internal sense of motivation.

**Independence and risk taking.** Multiple students expressed the pleasure that they took in exerting their independence while in the PC-Div program. “I felt so mature, being able to do what I wanted,” expressed Aditi. For the participants, exploring independent decision making and taking risks to try new things began during PC-Div and continued in college. These experiences were noted as important components in students developing a sense of self. Examples of exerting independence range from shopping for
themselves and doing their own laundry to choosing when and how much time they
would spend socializing and paying their own bills. Phil shared his experience by saying:

I applied for financial aid by myself this time. I’m just doing my own grown up
things, living alone, having to pay rent…I’m working, I’m sustaining myself. I
don’t ask my parents for any help. I don’t want any money from them. I try really
hard to be independent.

Students also identified how their forming sense of self led to taking other risks
such as meeting new people, pursuing new academic interests, and launching new
initiatives on campus. Aditi, who had identified feeling mature previously, also shared
her experience in taking risks academically.

I guess it was just eye opening like because before I’d written myself off…after
being here like it really encouraged me to like try harder and like apply myself
which is how I kind of settled on Biomedical Engineering. It was a bit of a stretch
for me.

Aditi was willing to try for the degree that she really wanted even though she was
initially intimidated by the rigorous coursework. Erin’s experience of working to
establish a minority focused professional association within the Architecture department
provides another example of risk taking. Despite initial push back from the department on
the need for a specialized professional organization, Erin has continued to build allies and
draw in support to start a specific, minority serving organization at Research University.
Erin had shared that in high school she was one of very few African-American students
which led her to try to blend in and not call too much attention to herself. In stark
contrast, as a college student, Erin is advocating for herself and other non-majority students while working to bring about needed changes. Erin is able to see this change in herself, she said, “I’m more self-advocating now…I definitely seek out opportunities more so than I would have done [previously] because I see the potential benefits.”

**I can’t do everything on my own.** Another significant element in the students’ ability to succeed was their willingness to ask for and accept help. Seeking help whether personal or academic could be viewed within the discussion of risk taking however the participants’ experiences with help had unique features in comparison with other risks so they are presented separately.

Asking for and accepting help was a significant experience for the participants in this study. The students shared that help had previously carried negative connotations and as such was associated with weakness. Mike expressed his initial embarrassment about feeling like he needed help. He wanted to be self-sufficient and admitting that he couldn’t do everything on his own felt like defeat. Ultimately Mike realized the shortcomings of this thinking, “Once I got to the point of accepting that I can’t do everything on my own…that’s when I really started to do better.” Rysa shared that she was able to shift her thinking about receiving help after she received reassurance from an RA regarding her poor performance on the Calculus placement exam. The RA’s belief in Rysa’s ability and assistance in reframing her performance allowed her to feel comfortable asking questions. Rysa said:

My RA was like everyone is just as smart to come here, this is a chance to work on your skills. I wanted to get better in math and I just wasn’t getting it
sometimes. So I went there every day [to academic development for supplemental instruction]. I asked questions. I would go there every single day for my math class.

Jay shared that learning to utilize resources for help in PC-Div allowed him to be more comfortable doing so as a full time student. “Doing a little bit [utilizing the TAs and professors for support] in PC-Div like I kind of knew it was a good option and because it worked in PC-Div I figured it would work in college,” he said. But not every student learned to seek help early on. Phil described a two year long process where he attempted to adjust to the work load in college but failed to take advantage of the support resources available.

In retrospect I chalk up my [past] poor performance mainly to just not utilizing the resources. I guess just being lazy. Looking back I really regret not utilizing those resources but I do [use them] today. I realize that it is easy to do well if you want to, they throw a ton of resources at you and there are help sessions every day.

Phil said that the extra effort that he is putting in coupled with access the support resources has made all the difference in his academic performance.

Being able to look to others for support and assistance was a huge shift for students who were accustomed to being successful. William recalled that up until the PC-Div program he had never needed to learn how to cope with not knowing or understanding something. He had not really needed to study in high school and had been
able to do well. Facing new challenges meant that William needed to develop new strategies as well.

I needed to learn when I was sinking. I learned how to ask for help. I learned the discipline that it takes to admit that you don’t know something and plan for how to learn it if you didn’t get it the first time…and those are probably some of the most important skills especially for surviving a place like this.

Normalizing help seeking behaviors at PC-Div established a healthier pattern for many of the students who came to understand that resources are provided both to keep you from struggling as well as in case you find yourself struggling. However, some students identified that their initial uncertainty about asking for and getting help stemmed from fear of how others might perceive them which is why this experience relates to being able to be themselves, flaws and all. The validation that came from a sense of belonging to the community contributed to the security needed to admit what they didn’t know and receive help from others. There are particular complexities related to asking for and receiving help as described by the participants in this study. The next set of experiences begins to unpack and name the burden that many students described as a hindrance to risk taking including help seeking as well as their ability to just be.

**Burden of representation.** Each of the participants who identified as African American acknowledged a burden that they carry with them related to representation. The students did not refer to it specifically as a burden of representation but broadly they identified with the need to portray a certain image of strength and success so as not to validate negative stereotypes.
When somebody like you sees what’s going on, that you are struggling, you’re more comfortable talking about it and addressing it. Before I felt like, you know, I can’t really show them that I’m vulnerable or anything. I can’t let them know that I’m suffering.

In this quote, Mike describes the importance of being allowed to struggle without fear that his struggle would be attributed to his race. The other participants in the study identified with feeling judged or that assumptions were made of them based on others’ perceptions but the need to represent strength was unique to the African American participants. For example, Mike described the pressure to perform by saying, “I realized, you know okay, there is this lack of expectation for us [in society] so naturally people are going to think that they have to show out…fight harder.” Rysa’s comments echoed Mike’s, she shared:

I’m sensitive to other people’s perceptions you know, I feel like I don’t want to cause any stereotypes…for someone to say, you know that’s how Black people are, I just feel like I have to act a certain way, be careful of my actions.

In contrast to these experiences Jay, who identifies as Asian, stated that he believes that people make assumptions about him based on his race but “I can’t control what people think of me and that’s just a fact so I just try to do what I can to control myself.”

While several students talked about their concern of inadvertently validating stereotypes held by others, fewer had been confronted with negative stereotypes directly while in PC-DIV or at Research University. Students were able to name past experiences with subtle or overt expressions of racism outside of these environments though. William
talked about this dynamic and described it as feeling like “race is just under the surface” at an institution like Research University. William said that he believes it has become impolite or improper to acknowledge stereotypes or racist beliefs therefore those beliefs persist but are pushed below the surface. Then, when they eventually emerge, they have the tendency to “take the person of color hearing them by surprise or catch them off guard.” As an example, William described a conversation with several of his friends where they were all sharing colleges to which they had applied but that it quickly turned in to a conversation about affirmative action policies and questions about his admission to several schools. Erin shared an experience where she was surprisingly confronted with a friend’s assumptions about Black people saying, “My one friend was just like, yeah, you are the whitest Black person I know, that type of thing.”

Mike, as noted in the initial quote above, moved past his fear of validating negative stereotypes because of the existence of mentors and helpers that looked like him. Phil, who identifies as multi-racial, experienced a similar ability to counteract the sense of representation but more as a part of a group or cohort rather than because of mentors. Phil was comforted by the diverse group of peers which allowed him to feel like race was not as much of a factor in how he or others would be perceived. He said: “PC-Div took race out of the equation, we didn’t have to worry about that, it wasn’t an issue.” Both Mike and Phil describe experiencing some relief from the burden of representation among their peers and within the PC-Div program. This served as an important aspect of learning to be able to be themselves. For Mike it allowed him to be vulnerable and
acknowledge his struggles to other people while for Phil it contributed to his ability to accept past failures as part of the learning process and move forward.

**Internal motivation.** The final component of this Sense of Self theme is marked by a shift in the students to more internal motivation as opposed to external drivers especially related to academics. Specifically several students, in describing their experiences, talked about discovering more of their own interests rather than only pursuing subjects in which they had previously shown aptitude or been directed to consider. They also described moving away from grades as a measure of success and became more interested in aligning their academic course work with their interests and learning for learning sake.

Abe is a good example of this type of movement. He, like the other participants in this study, had always been expected to attend college but he did not necessarily know why or what he wanted to study. Abe said, “I was going to college because everyone was telling me to go. I had no reason of my own.” Ultimately he chose to major in Physics because he had been told that he was good in math and science and it seemed interesting to him. After a year and half as a Physics major though Abe found himself unhappy and considering a change. Abe shared, “At first I felt like I was quitting and I was embarrassed but I needed to be honest with myself and I realized that I needed to make a decision that was best for me.” Now Abe feels more personally satisfied by his course work, he said “there’s a satisfaction that I get when I’ve figured something out and that is more fulfilling than showing off what I know.”
Aditi explicitly named this sense of internal motivation as a key factor in her success. As you may recall, Aditi took a risk by pursuing a major in Biomedical Engineering in addition to studying Chemical Engineering. She expected that it would be a stretch for her academically but she described her decision as coming from “more of that internal motivation and like being more driven as a student rather than just settling for something.” Aditi acknowledges that the course work has been challenging and says that sometimes she is amazed that she has persevered.

Last year was really hard, a lot of work and sometimes I’m not sure, like I can’t believe that I made it through, but that’s why like that has to be internal motivation because there’s no way that you could survive with just external motivation.

She had been a student who relied on pressure from her mother to get her homework done in high school. Now, in college, she specifically credits internal versus external motivation as the means for making it through the challenges that she has faced.

Phil and Jay also identified an ability to push through challenges as an outgrowth of internally based motivation. For example, Phil’s poor grades served as the wakeup call that he needed to put in more effort. He acknowledged that he had been lazy and just wasn’t trying his best which he believes may have derived from a miss match in major. Phil changed engineering concentrations and found that it aligned more with his interests resulting in increased motivation. Phil shared, “I look forward to going home and doing my homework problems now which I didn’t before, mainly I really get the subject material now, I’m paying more attention.” Jay similarly credits his ability to persevere
through challenges to a sense of internal motivation but one that comes from him feeling fortunate and grateful. Jay explains;

There have been a few times where I’ll be in the library and thinking this really sucks, this problem set, this homework but then I’ll be like but it is also really awesome, like I’m so glad that I have this opportunity and so thankful for all that has led me here. That drives me too, like why I keep doing it.

Mike and Erin both shared that they were previously motivated by external forces such as career earning potential or pleasing others but both came to terms with the need to develop more of an internal compass for success. Mike came to Research University focused on finding a job that had high earning potential. He chose engineering because he thought he could make a lot of money but he quickly realized that he was not interested in being an engineer. Mike talked about coming to terms with finding a major that aligned more with his interests.

I was just pretending that it was something that I wanted to do. I’m not here to do what people think I should do [because I had always been good in math]. I switched to Professional Writing and it has pretty much opened up a whole new world for me. I’m enjoying it and getting great grades which is interesting because I’m not even worried about grades anymore.

Erin’s field of study, Architecture, is a different environment and as such has presented her with a different set of challenges though they have resulted in a similar internal compass. “I’m not going to drive myself crazy and not get any sleep by trying to make a project perfect. There will be something that they don’t like regardless so I just have to
decide for myself what is good enough.” As an architecture student Erin faces regular critiques of her work and the feeling that she is being judged on subjective rather than objective metrics. This type of environment has required her to shift from trying to please others to asserting and feeling confident in her own design choices.

Each of the students entered into their educational journey with different experiences and expectations. Some of the students were grappling with the guilt of feeling like they were abandoning their upbringing by seeking out a college degree. Some students struggled with feeling like they were not prepared enough or did not have the right background to be successful at a prestigious institution. Students had depended on others’ belief in them and of their abilities at times when their own belief in themselves had waned. Ultimately each of these experiences led the students to a firmer sense of what they could achieve, on their own or with help from others, as well as who they were independent of others’ perceptions of them and what they wanted to achieve for themselves.

**Defining Success as Growth**

The final theme that spans the experiences shared by students relates to the way that they acknowledge and define success for themselves. The consistency with which the students defined their success in terms of growth is noteworthy. Whether through descriptions of intrapersonal growth such as increased confidence or resiliency; interpersonal growth such as the desire to learn from others; or intellectual growth exhibited through the establishment of a personal academic identity, each of the students in the study shared multiple examples of their own growth as evidence of their college
thriving. Abe offered a great analogy that summarized the importance of setting a personal definition of success based on growth. He offered:

The goal shouldn’t be to be number one or the best in comparison with others but rather to be the best that you can be. For example, say that you are getting ready to run a race and you want to set a goal for yourself. You could set your goal to come in first place or you could set a goal of beating your personal best time. If you set your goal to come in first then you could achieve that without necessarily bettering yourself. You could win a race, be first, but have one of your slowest times … success is about setting a goal and achieving it, about growth, about deciding for yourself what success means and getting it done rather than trying to impress others.

Abe offered a lot of insight related to growth in addition to this insightful reflection on success as growth. His broad categorization of the ways that he has grown helped to pull out the growth experiences that others had highlighted less explicitly.

**Self-confidence.** One of the relevant components of growth for the students is evidenced through increased feelings of confidence. In continuing the reflection shared above, Abe asserted;

I think I’m awesome. I’ve been more diligent with reminding myself the good things as opposed to just settling for the bad things…I don’t know exactly what I want to do in life but at least I have a little bit of direction and enough confidence to just dive right in.
Abe was not alone in expressing the ways that he was able to develop more confidence in his abilities even in the face of uncertainty. Aditi, for example, shared that she is currently facing another big transition as she looks to graduate this year. She realizes that feeling prepared for the next stage of life, for her, is not about knowing everything that there is to know or having everything figured out but instead comes from an internal belief in herself and her ability to figure things out. “When I graduate, I feel like I’ll be ready for whatever hits me.” She is feeling ready for the challenges that may lie ahead because she has confidence in herself.

In fact, several of the experiences previously cited also included evidence of increased self-confidence. Erin’s willingness to advocate for herself and other students via the establishment of a professional association for minority Architects was an outgrowth of increased confidence for example. Also, many of the experiences where students credited others for support ended with the recognition that the support, role modeling, or belief in them had contributed to an increase in their own sense of confidence. Rysa named her belief in the connection between the PC-Div experience and increased confidence in our conversation by saying, “I personally feel that a pre-college program like PC-Div generally boosts your self-esteem and makes you respect yourself more. It makes you feel more confident about yourself.” For all of the students in this study, a marked increase in self-confidence served as a notable component of their growth as individuals and to their ability to be and feel successful.

**Resiliency.** Challenges and failures were acknowledged as a natural part of both the PC-Div and college experiences by the students. All of the students expected to be
pushed, even yearned for and welcomed the opportunity to be challenged in ways that they had not been previously. Therefore, learning how to cope with those challenges appropriately, by not over interpreting or under valuing their implications on one’s ability to be successful in the long term, was a particularly meaningful growth experience for the students. One insight related to the importance of resiliency came from my discussion with William. He shared that his ability to get by without putting in much effort prior to PC-Div proved to be a significant impediment in his on-going success. It was his prior success, which had come with little effort, rather than the struggles that he faced that had actually made it most difficult for him to recognize and cope with the challenges presented in college. “So while I learned a lot in my education,” he said, “I never actually trained myself to deal with not knowing something, if that makes sense. I didn’t know what to do when I don’t know it.” William developed resiliency by being able to recognize and acknowledge his own limitations and seek help from outside resources, as shared previously.

Abe described the humility that comes from failure. His first Physics exam of freshman year provided a self-described “reality check”. “It sort of revived my humility because I wasn’t able to just get by [with what I knew], I had to earn it.” Here again, Abe was recognizing the need to approach the problem that he was facing from a different perspective. Abe was also able to appropriately calibrate his response to this set back and ultimately he chose to pursue a different academic path. He did not allow the failure to derail him though, instead he exhibited the resiliency needed to make a change and persist. Jay also described the importance of overcoming failure as a tool for personal
growth, “I feel like that’s what really makes you a better person is if you can overcome your like failures and struggles. So I guess, I just try and think of it like that and do my best.” Aditi offered her reflection on the importance maintaining a healthy perspective on both success and failure which is a hallmark of resiliency. Aditi said:

I mean I have a pile of rejection letters for internships and stuff, it’s not like I’m unfortunate or that I’ve gotten everything that I’ve tried, it’s just that I have tried a lot of things and then like there are a few that have worked out.

**Not just about me.** Several students noted significant growth experiences in how they viewed their relationships with other people. This *interpersonal*, as opposed to the *intrapersonal*, component of growth relates to letting go of the need to compete with other people or the need to be right that students shared they had held previously but also just a genuine curiosity about others. As Abe shared, “I stand to learn a lot from everybody, everyone is a teacher.”

Rysa identifies her growth in the way that she interacts with her peers through the types of conversations in which she is willing to engage. She attributes the change to her own recognition that conversations are meant to be an exchange between two people.

I would only talk about things that were in my comfort zone,” she said, “Now I can easily hold a conversation. It’s not just about me anymore. It’s learning about other people as well. I think that’s a huge difference that I notice about myself. Previously Rysa felt like she could only talk about something that she understood and knew but she has grown to understand that dialogue means learning about and from the other person not just sharing what you know.
Mike shared that he realized he was harboring a sense of competition between himself and other students which had been limiting his own ability to achieve. Mike said, “Once I found my own rhythm and started leaning on people as support rather than [seeing them] as a basis for measuring myself that’s when I really started picking it up and doing well.” Aditi’s self-imposed interpersonal limitation was her belief that she needed to be as knowledgeable or as smart as another person in order to be valued by them. Aditi was able to recognize this characteristic in herself through the mentorship role that she has played with younger students. Initially she found that her mentees seemed shy or reticent to engage. As she worked to understand this dynamic she learned that their hesitation came from fear that they would ask the wrong question or not seem intelligent. “I was like, I don’t know everything. I’m not perfect.” she said, in explaining the interaction with her mentees. This was an important realization for Aditi who was able to see how she had acted similarly especially with older peers or individuals she perceived to have more experience. Finding herself in the power position provided her with a new and helpful perspective on relationships.

**Academic passion and pride.** Finally the students described experiences that extended the sense of internal motivation, described previously, toward creating an intellectual or academic sense of identity and even pride. Locating their motivation internally allowed for deeper reflection on interests and passions which served to codify academic or intellectual identities for students. As a first year student, Erin is still developing this sense of identity for herself but she recognizes passion as a quality that she admires in others. She shared being inspired by an architect known for sustainable
and environmentally conscious building practices who recently got rid of all of his possessions in an effort to better understand the excesses of modern living. By contrast, Aditi who is a senior, is fully embracing this sense of academic identity. She described it by saying, “Now it’s more like, this is stuff that I need to know, I need to understand and I want to know.”

Phil is also able to recognize his growth in relation to how he views himself academically. After changing majors from Mechanical Engineering to Electrical and Computer Engineering (ECE), Phil found his niche. “I was intimidated because ECE is very difficult to get into. I’m just looking back, like on my evolution as a programmer now, I feel like really proud.” Phil’s identity as a programmer is an important part of how he views himself now and, as he notes, serves a point of personal pride. Abe also had the experience of changing majors which contributed to his establishment an academic identity. Abe shared, “I found something that I wanted to do. I found work that I was proud of and proud to contribute to. I just found something that I really care about.”

Jay’s experience also echoes the importance of caring about the material he is studying. He shared that he has noticed a shift when it comes to seeking help with his classes. Specifically he is no longer using outside help for classes where he is struggling but instead for the ones in which he is most interested and invested. In explaining the shift he said, “I want to do the best in that class because that’s the topic that I’m most interested in and so I wanted to really excel and like learn my best.” The statement by Jay, as well as those shared above, illustrate the shift toward learning for learning sake or learning because of deep desire to know or understand.
Mike’s struggles with letting go of the perception of himself as a math person in order to pursue his interests in Professional Writing serves as the final of the academic identity examples. Mike was able to recognize that just because he had been good at something previously and people had a set of opinions about his abilities did not mean that he had to stick with that path. As shared above, Mike shifted from being motivated by high paying engineering jobs to considering what type of career could fulfill him personally and it paid off. Mike said:

> Once I found enjoyment in the things that I was learning I automatically went out and wanted to learn more on my own…just being passionate about what I do and just embracing the fact that I’m different…I’ve kind of learned to embrace who I am and use it as like something interesting that I have to offer.

While other students also changed majors and found their niche, no one made as significant of a shift in academic identity as Mike. Mike went from being a math guy studying engineering to asserting himself as a writer and he did so within the context of a very rigorous, STEM focused institution. The change was personally and intellectually fulfilling for Mike and he shared that he had absolutely no regrets. He also shared the joy that he has found and how that inspires his desire to learn more.

**Summary**

The four themes of tone setting dynamics, sense of belonging, sense of self, and defining success as growth, illustrate the meaningful experiences shared by the student participants in this study. The dominantly held deficit perspectives of underrepresented minority students were well known and even believed by the student participants of this
study prior to their participation in the PC-Div program. The experiences highlighted in the above themes show how the students grew to challenge and disprove the dominant discourse as they carved their own path to success.

While it was not my intention to evaluate the PC-Div program in particular, the students shared valuable dynamics within the program that they cited as contributing to their thriving both in the program and in college. For example, the creation of majority status for minority students provided a release from the burden of representation for program participants and contributed to students’ willingness to rely on others for support and risk failure. Additionally expressions of belief in the students’ abilities, high expectations and aspirations; and the provision of strong mentors and role models all contributed to a firm footing upon which the students continued to build and grow.

Overcoming the prominence of low expectations for students like themselves proved to be a salient obstacle for the participants in this study. The experiences shared by the students highlight the important roles that belonging and authenticity play in one’s ability to thrive and be successful in college and beyond. Firm grounding in belonging and belief created a safe space for students to let down their guard and be themselves. They experienced less fear that they would be perceived as representatives of their race and move past the need to prove themselves as infallible. Minimizing these burdens allowed students to explore their independence and take more risks. Significant among the risks taken were asking for and receiving help; accepting encouragement from others; and being interpersonally vulnerable. Students also experienced a shift from external drivers such as grades or other’s expectations to more of a sense of internal motivation
based on their own desire to succeed. The previously established safety net allowed the students to explore with a lessened fear of failure and consequently the opportunities to thrive were enhanced.

With the underpinning of being accepted as a whole person present, the participants in my study defined success through evidence of their own growth. Personal growth was exhibited through increased self-confidence; an ability to cope with setbacks; an openness to learning from others; and the establishment of a self-defined academic/intellectual identity.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The demands for increased access to higher education for underrepresented minority populations often calls for the need to develop a student *pipeline*. Using the pipeline metaphor, the problem of *underrepresentation* is defined as the need to deliver students swiftly and smoothly to and through our colleges and universities. This simplified characterization of the problem is alluring but pipeline conversations gloss over the complex societal and educational issues at play in the lives of students and on our campuses. For example, in *The Shape of the River: Long Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions*, William Bowen and Derek Bok (1998) caution higher education administrators who are drawn to this misleading characterization of the overarching problem and question the usage of pipeline imagery altogether. Beverly Tatum (2007) also cautions against oversimplifying the problem and specifically calls out inequities in secondary education and the interplay of dynamics such as race and poverty as aggravating factors that can impede a student’s ability to succeed. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings of my study in the context of previous research and scholarly literature pertaining to minority students and college success including the contributions of this study as well as its limitations; to present implications of the findings for professional practice; and to propose areas for future inquiry.

A primary goal in conducting this study was to add to our current understanding of minority students’ success from an equity minded perspective. Two semi-structured
interviews with eight individual students generated the data for interpretation in this research. I utilized a basic interpretive qualitative approach with a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens to deliberately disrupt deficit framing and amplify the voices and experiences of students who are currently underrepresented in higher education. CRT attempts to call out the dominant narratives that situate people of color as other and therefore not normal or even deficient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Parker and Lynn (2002) explain that CRT foregrounds race and amplifies the stories of people of color from their own perspective, rather than through a majority lens, in hopes of eliminating racial subjugation. “[A] critical race theory in education starts from the premise that race and racism are endemic” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25) and calls on educators to shift our understanding of what is real by seeking out counter narratives told by people whose lived experience is outside of the majority (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). The stories or counter narratives that emerge test previously held assumptions and understandings of reality (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

**Discussion**

Chapter four described the four themes that emerged from the experiences shared by participants and acknowledged ways that race and racism impacted the students’ understanding of their experiences. The themes identify the important role that the dynamics of the Pre-College Diversity (PC-Div) program played in setting a tone for student thriving. They also illuminate the value of establishing a sense of belonging, the importance of testing and fine tuning one’s sense of self, and the ways that the students used growth as a way to describe their success. Considered as a whole, the findings also
suggest counter narratives that highlight the ways that deficit thinking and racism permeate not just the research on the student experience but also the actual student experience itself. In what follows I offer three brief vignettes as preface for my discussion. Using excerpts from the data, I have constructed composites of multiple students experiences in an effort to disrupt the master narratives surrounding minority students, access and student success. These purposefully disruptive stories serve as counter storytelling, a hallmark of Critical Race Theory. Following each vignette, I discuss the juxtaposition of my participants’ counter narratives and the dominant deficit discourse.

**Counter Storytelling**

Storytelling is a powerful tool for creating meaning, increasing understanding, and for challenging myths (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Counter storytelling is a strategy used by CRT scholars to contradict dominant, racist perceptions. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) define counter storytelling as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (p. 26). Counter stories stand in opposition to dominant narratives that privilege the experiences of the majority as normal thereby presenting ready opportunities for new insight. In *Storytelling for Social Justice*, Lee Ann Bell (2010) offers that counter stories “help us connect individual experiences with systemic analysis, allowing us to unpack in ways that are perhaps more accessible than abstract analysis alone, racism’s hold on us as we move through the institutions and cultural practices that sustain racism”. Stories, in general, offer a more engaging and
therefore more accessible opportunity to uncover patterns that are accepted as normal but actually perpetuate racial privilege (Bell, 2010).

**Minoritized Not Minority**

I can’t control what other people think about me and that’s just a fact. I think people assume that they know my race when they look at me but then are surprised when I talk about my parents and their background. I’m mixed, it’s like an interesting conversation piece but to be perfectly honest I don’t really identify with race. I identify as American. I think being the child of immigrants, my parents were really focused on assimilating and didn’t want to stand out so I don’t really identify with either race. I don’t see myself by race. Don’t get me wrong, I see race I just think that it describes people but it doesn’t identify people. I think, in this generation, that people really accept that race isn’t too big of a factor. I’ve noticed that my dad will change the way that he talks when he’s on the phone with work, so he sounds more white. Like there’s a legacy of segregation and discrimination but it is starting to fade out. I don’t believe that we live in a colorblind society but I don’t think it is as big of a problem as it was before. I don’t get too worked up by things. I have been stopped on campus by security and asked to show my ID and I’ve heard people use hurtful words. It’s like you have to choose in that moment, do I let this go or do I stop and explain why that’s wrong. It’s hard, I only intervene like that a couple times a year. Otherwise you become that person, the over sensitive one. I don’t want to be the explainer of everything anyway. Here at school we are encouraged to talk about things and share with one another so we can learn. I think that’s good except for me these kinds of things aren’t like ‘hot topics’ they mean more
than that. They actually impact the way that I live my life. Talking about it is actually a lot more emotionally taxing for me, it’s easier to not talk about it. It can be hard because people will weigh their opinions of things, like if Black people get followed in stores or stopped by police more often, against your actual experiences you know. They think that their opinions are the same as my experiences. It’s exhausting when people do that but if I challenge that then I’m reading in to things or making assumptions. Aren’t they making assumptions too? I guess I really didn’t know the impact of that until I came to an environment where I was considered one of the few. I think the best way to end racism is to just stop talking about race.

This vignette suggests multiple ways that a minoritized student status is socially constructed. The term minoritized is used intentionally to highlight the process by which students are assigned a contextualized minority social status which carries with it any and all related dominant perceptions (Benitez, 2010; Harper, 2012; Stewart, 2013). Students find themselves minoritized “through the beliefs and social processes enacted by other groups who place them in a position of the minority or other” (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015, p. 8) all while attempting to navigate rigorous educational environments. Minoritization is something that we, those in the majority, do to non-majority students. In the counter story above we can hear the ways that being minoritized negatively influences others perceptions, decreases the student’s own sense of worth, and undervalues the lived experiences of the student. The deficit thinking surrounding non-majority students permeates beliefs about the students’ abilities and relegates them to a less than status. It is a process that happens to the student despite their attempts to minimize an identification
with race. This narrative also illustrates the expectations placed on minoritized students as teachers. Students can become overwhelmed by the educator role that they are expected to play either through confronting racist comments or sharing personal experiences from which others can learn. This expectation becomes an additional means of minoritizing students as they become dually set apart as expert others and also labeled as hypersensitive to their difference. Being minoritized also involves having one’s experiences named and evaluated by those in the majority based on what is assumed to have been the intent behind an interaction. Each of the ways that students are minoritized should call in to question the overall riskiness of our campus environments though the dominant narrative continues the process of othering by assigning a multitude of barriers and deficits.

Much of the scholarly discourse continues to minoritize students by utilizing quantitative success metrics and deficit thinking which problematize the student rather than calling the educational environments in to question. In *Closing the Achievement Gap in Higher Education*, Estela Bensimon (2005) identifies the dangers of our current dominant discourse by naming the cognitive frames from which this discourse commonly flows. Bensimon (2005) urges those seeking to make positive changes to challenge the existing *diversity* (representation and numbers based) or *deficit* (focused on barriers and obstacles) framed thinking in favor of a more *equity minded* approach. Making such a change in approach requires shifting our focus away from the students as the problem and instead critically assessing our institutional practices, educational environments, and overall culture (Bensimon, 2005).
Diversity framed literature focuses on the need for more students in the pipeline from currently underrepresented populations and addresses the rationale for doing so by identifying societal and institutional drivers that support the call for increased diversity. The PC-Div program, of which all of my participants are alumni, is itself a response to the diversity framed, pipeline conversation. The program, in making good students excellent, seeks to create a pool of competitive, diverse applicants who can gain admission and succeed at highly selective colleges and universities (personal communication). This goal seems laudable however, despite good intentions, approaching the problem from this perspective can actually serve to commoditize students as valuable assets for institutional gain. This commoditization dehumanizes the students by placing a higher value on the diversification of our colleges and universities than on the wants and needs of the individual students. In this way, the diversity framed literature exemplifies the Critical Race Theory concept of interest convergence wherein calls for change in minority conditions are made only to the degree that they serve the interests of the dominant majority. CRT scholars call out instances of interest convergence with the intent of achieving true social justice for all. By minoritizing and commoditizing students, the dominant discourse serves the needs of higher education institutions not the students themselves. This dynamic contributes to why our student success conversation is focused largely on institutional factors such as persistence and graduation rates rather than an individual growth and achievement.

The counter story above and the data from which is was constructed call for a shift in focus away from problematizing our students. They suggest, instead, a need to
evaluate our environments including institutional culture and reclaim some of the onus for student success. Much of the research in the student experience arena places blame on students and quickly attributes their struggles to demographic characteristics over which they have no control. These knee jerk attributions unduly stigmatize the set-backs and failures of minoritized students while normalizing them as part of the learning process for majority students. By focusing on students as the problem we perpetuate a system that not only expects non-majority students to struggle but actually facilitates it by attributing failure to race, accepting failure as a given, and making help seeking shameful. These racist assumptions can foster a defeatist mentality among students who internalize lowered expectations and labels such as high risk. These assumptions also create a vicious cycle of struggle wherein students, burdened by pressures of representation, are told to access resources for help but fear negative perceptions of them individually and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes in general.

Accessibility Not Access

I realized even before coming to PC-Div that there was a game to be played when it came to applying to college but the PC-Div program helped me understand how to play to my advantages by helping me really understand that game. I always thought that going from high school to college would kind of be like going from the junior varsity to the varsity team, like the sport would be the same but it would be a more competitive league. Sometimes though it feels more like going from junior varsity to the Olympics, like sure it’s the same sport but nothing that you did before works, it just a whole new level.

There’s just a lot more to the game than what appears on the surface. I worked hard in
high school - did all the right extra-curricular activities, took AP classes – to make sure that I had a good resume but when it came time to apply for colleges I also paid attention to how I packaged myself. I was honest when I shared that my father had been killed by gun violence but I chose to leave out that I was the product of an upper middle class, educated family and my father’s death was a tragic accident. I gave people what they expected or maybe event wanted to hear. My essays shared how I had learned to face and overcome an extreme challenge and I let the admission committee make assumptions about who I was based on the pieces of my experience that I shared with them. I wasn’t dishonest but I was strategic. It doesn’t mean that I necessarily like the game or agree with it but seriously, given all of the other stuff that I have to deal with being a young black man, should I really just flat out refuse one of the few benefits that I might actually get? You know, I’ve been accused of being an affirmative action case so many times, mostly by my Asian friends. People are polite when they are first getting to know you but now that I have been here a few years, people are more honest about how they really feel. The assumption is that if you are Black the doors are just flung wide open for you. Honestly, I’m fed up with defending race conscious admission practices especially to my Asian friends. I’m like look, I don’t understand why this is something that you are bringing up with ME. I mean most of the people that go to Harvard, where you applied and didn’t get in, don’t look like me and the people that make those decisions at Harvard don’t look like me either so why are you making this about me? Do you really think that the problem is the 9% of Black students at Harvard? Why do you assume that it is the
Black kids that took your seat and not some legacy white kid, why is it ok to question how I got in?

The societal benefits for increasing access to higher education have been well established in the literature and include the need to build and maintain a skilled workforce capable of addressing the challenges of our new global, knowledge based economy (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2002; Goldrick-Rab & Shaw, 2005; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005; Perna, 2007). These societal drivers have garnered attention from board rooms to the oval office and invigorated a nationwide conversation about the need to get more students to and through college. However, despite the resounding call to increase both access to and persistence through post-secondary education, our efforts continue to fall short. As colleges and universities work to increase access and offer programs aimed at supporting student success we still find underrepresentation among racial minority students. We also continue to find that racial minority students and students from low income families are less likely to persist to graduation than their majority peers (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Ishitani, 2003; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001; Terenzini et.al, 1996; Titus, 2006). The higher education community may see the needs and have good intentions but our current efforts are woefully lacking. Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl (2013) published a report for the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University entitled Separate and Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege wherein they accuse the higher education community of being complicit in reinforcing the current systemic inequities. My findings suggest that our inability to
make positive headway in these areas may be due, in large part, to our own lack of understanding of the problem that we believe we are addressing.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) generally questions the role that systems and structures play in reproducing racism and challenges concepts such as colorblindness, race neutrality and meritocracy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). A belief in meritocracy, basically that people are rewarded and able to achieve based on their merit, is central to the capitalist and individualistic American Dream ideal. A meritocratic belief presumes that all people have the same potential to achieve and to the same levels of success through the application of effort. The counter story above directly confronts the meritocratic myth by shedding light on the ways that the perceptions of others and existing racist systems undercut one’s ability to achieve. It challenges the meritocracy myth by calling out the college admission game and the ways that non-majority students become pitted against one another rather than questioning the dominance of the majority. Hard work does not provide a guarantee when it comes to playing the admission game especially at highly selective, private institutions.

The importance of increasing diversity in higher education especially at highly selective, research institutions is supported by the findings in this study. However, this support is derived from perspective of the benefits to the individual student rather than through the lens of institutional benefits. For example, categories of experiences such as feeling normal and having a cohort of students like themselves contributed to an overall sense of belonging among students. Study participants also identified the importance of role models and aspirational peers on their ability to feel as if they belonged and that they
could be themselves. Additionally, reducing the burden of representation felt by the students allowed them to take risks and develop resiliency in the face of set-backs. My findings also highlight the importance of affectual dimensions including confidence, resiliency, feeling normal, and experiencing genuine care from others on students’ overall growth.

These findings support the importance of creating a richly diverse student population and therefore the call for increasing enrollment of currently underrepresented students. However, the underlying needs identified in my findings contrast the current access discourse which presumes that disinterested or deficient students are just not accessing higher education. My findings amplify dynamics such as insider information and lowered expectations that create accessibility barriers. We need to shift our focus away from access towards that of accessibility. This important shift in focus changes the discourse from the need to increase the number of students accessing our institutions (them) to one focused on how we can increase the accessibility of our institutions (us). This shift requires an understanding of institutions as a whole which goes well beyond the current focus on evaluating programs or strategies aimed at increasing student retention. Specific suggestions for ways to undertake these types of assessments are provided in the Implications for Practice section below.

**Survival Not Success**

* I grew up in a small town that was mostly white. All my friends were white, all my teachers were white. I stood out, I just did. I tried to stand out for all the right reasons. I was hard working. I did well in school. I was respectful. But being Hispanic meant that I
felt like I was always trying to prove to them that I was good enough. I think people just thought that I wasn’t capable of much. I had to fight with my guidance counselor in my school in order for her to even let me get tested for the gifted program. She had an idea of who the gifted students were and I didn’t fit that profile. I always felt like I couldn’t do badly on a test or goof off because I would just reinforce some stereotype that people already had about me. My Nana told me when I was really little that I should always expect to work a little bit harder than everyone else if I wanted to get ahead in life.

“Everyone should work hard baby girl”, she said, “but if you want to make something of yourself then you are going to have to do more to prove yourself, it’s just the way it is”. That idea has always stuck with me. Attending the PC-Div program helped me to finally feel like it was ok to ask questions, that it was normal to feel a little insecure but that it was also normal to not know something. It meant so much to have other people believe in my abilities even when I was questioning myself. The RAs and professors helped me to stay focused on the big picture and not get too bogged down in the little set-backs or struggles. Even though my experience has been mostly positive here, there are still things that just come up and take me off guard. Like I overheard a girl on my floor talking in the lounge about how she tries not to hate Black people but that she still feels that way. I guess things like that shouldn’t surprise me but they do, it just makes me cautious about meeting new people and makes it more comfortable to be with other people like me. My roommate said to me, you know all of the Black and Hispanic people at this school, and I’m like well, you know, there’s not that many of us.
This counter narrative disrupts the dominant success conversation by illustrating the additional expectations placed upon minoritized students. The dominant narrative suggests that non-majority students are less successful given their own ability deficits or barriers such as lack of familial support. The counter story offered above suggests that the deficits are not inherent to the students but instead manifest from the environment. The added expectations in needing to work harder than others and prove oneself lead to increased pressure and stress, lack of confidence, misattribution of the reasons for struggle and unwillingness to seek out help. In this story the student is able to manage the burden of representation and feeling the need to work harder through the help of peers and mentors but the impact of these dynamics should not be underestimated.

While some researchers are broadening the definition of student success to include components such as satisfaction, engagement, and learning; the measurement and analysis of student success remains largely quantitative (Kramer, 2007; Kuh, et. al., 2005). The dominant narrative of student success in college relies on institutional persistence and graduation rates as the primary means for assessment with majority status students serving as the norm against which other students are measured. The reliance on quantitative metrics leads me to question whether we are truly attempting to understand student success or if we are content with the notion that students are surviving our institutions. The current understanding of minoritized students’ success is even more troubling. Presumptions that white, majority student experiences are normal have led researchers to problematize non-majority students as deficient and risky.
The students in this study pointed to their growth as evidence of success. Their focus on the ways that they had grown and developed as a hallmark of success suggest that broadening our traditional definitions of success would be more resonant with student experiences. Laurie Schreiner’s (2009) Thriving Project at Azusa Pacific University offers a new take on the student success conversation by introducing the concept of college thriving. The notion of thriving builds on the psychological wellbeing research regarding flourishing and is generally linked to positive psychology (Kinzie, 2012). Schreiner and her colleagues (2009a) define thriving as “optimal functioning in three key areas [which] contribute to student success and persistence” (p. 3). From their research, three overarching areas necessary for thriving have emerged which are academic engagement, interpersonal relationships, and intrapersonal wellbeing (Schreiner et al., 2009a).

The Thriving Project collaborators have worked to further define college thriving by establishing and validating the Thrive Quotient which compiles numeric values from across various dimensions to produce an overall thriving score (Schreiner et al., 2009a & 2009b). In conducting this research and validating their instrument, the team has successfully identified five specific dimensions within the broader categories of a student’s experience that correlate strongly with overall thriving: (a) engaged learning; (b) academic determination; (c) positive perspective; (d) diverse citizenship; and (e) social connectedness (Schreiner et al., 2009b). My findings support the importance of experiences within each of these dimensions as contributors to student growth. The students in my study easily identified evidence of their interpersonal, intrapersonal and
academic growth. They do not define their success by GPA or persistence but rather by growth. The growth experiences that they shared included moving from external to internal motivation; discovering intellectual passion and pride; increased confidence and resiliency; and an ability to both learn from and depend on others.

When it comes to understanding the success or thriving of students, one’s cognitive frame and subsequent assumptions make all of the difference. As one participant, William, aptly noted “you see what you want to see”. You can choose to see changing majors, an experience common among the participants, as evidence of uncertainty and struggle or you can listen to the students describe that journey and recognize it as a powerful claiming of their own personal and intellectual pathway. The move from what others wanted or expected of them to a path of their own choosing.

Summary

CRT asserts that racism is both normal and endemic in American life (Solorzano & Rosso, 2002) and therefore counter storytelling serves to expose taken for granted racism. Counter storytelling pushes us to change how we think by providing powerful testimony of individual experiences while also bearing witness to institutionalized practices of inequity which dominant narratives tend to either minimize or outright deny (Bell, 2003). The three counter stories above provide an opportunity to better understand the impact of race on the experiences of students seeking to successfully navigate postsecondary education. Each of the stories provides insight in to the ways that racism, often in the form of deficit thinking, serves to minoritize students and create high risk environments for them. The counter stories also provide concrete challenges to the myths
of colorblindness and meritocracy, which suggest that all people have the same potential to achieve success through hard work. In the following section I will continue this discussion by considering how we might shift our efforts away from getting students to access and survive our institutions and instead focus on the accessibility of our institutions for minoritized students including ensuring conditions that optimize students’ ability to thrive.

Implications for Practice

There are a number opportunities for institutions and professionals seeking to create and maintain environments supportive for all students which are suggested from this study. The beneficial program dynamics that the students identified from their PC- Div experience could intentionally be applied to both the development of new programs as well as our overall approach to working with students. The specific components inherently suggest practical opportunities for consideration. Creating cohort experiences, mentoring programs, and ensuring individualized attention could help to set a tone of genuine care and camaraderie which in turn supports student growth. Additionally, strategies that provide intentional networking opportunities and practical suggestions for how to succeed can build confidence by readily providing students insider information and resources that they need rather than hoping that they find it on their own. Finally, the tone setting program dynamics also suggest a need to critically consider the perspective with which we are approaching our work with students and the programs that we are building to support them. This requires understanding and naming the why of our work,
not just what and how. Are we setting our expectations high and assuming success or are we expecting difficulty and assuming struggle?

These suggestions however are similar to many of the current strategies employed to assist minoritized students. They focus attention on the students with the assumption that they are the problem that needs to be addressed. The overt and subtle messages that students receive regarding their non-majority status, the degree to which they are welcome on campus, and our low expectations of them cannot be underestimated. If we truly desire to see students thrive in our environments then we must challenge the existing deficit thinking and racism upon which our current systems and structures are built. I am excited to consider the ways that this research can influence our practice in higher education. It excites me because I am a practitioner at heart but also because CRT calls for a deliberate reframing of the problem from one of them to one of us. In this section I will intentionally suggest strategies to identify the privilege and racism that exists on our campuses as we seek equity rather than diversity in our practice.

**Recognizing Privilege and Bias**

The findings of this study suggest that students have a basic need to feel a sense of belonging and safety in our communities. These findings support Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy framework which suggests that higher order needs such as growth or intimacy are not possible without first attending to one’s basic needs including safety. I bring up the discussion of safety knowing full well that there has been a lot of backlash recently to the notion of *safe spaces* with a specific concern that too much focus on safety stifles discourse and contributes to coddling (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Frankly, the assumption
that attending to our students’ need to feel safe leads to coddling is a clear example of the privilege that runs rampant in our campus environments. This privileged thinking presumes a race neutral, colorblind perspective on safety which underestimates and devalues the experiences of students who are minoritized.

In contrast, the findings of this study and the resulting counter stories suggest that we have yet to fully understand the challenges inherent in our environments including the ways that privilege permeates our cognitive frame. I previously shared a personal revelation of my privileged thinking as a result of listening to students in this study. I approached this project wondering whether Pre-College Diversity (PC-Div) students should be integrated into Predominantly White Pre-College program with the belief that we had marginalized the PC-Div program creating separate and unequal experiences. In so questioning I took for granted the experiences of the PC-Div students based on privileged assumptions that the PC-PW program would be better, would offer them more opportunities. Mike’s assertion that students needed a safe space to fail and to find themselves free from the burden of representation and minoritization challenged my privileged perspective. The less risky environment, created within the PC-Div program, sparked confidence and resiliency in the students which they were able to continue to draw on well after the program. Mike’s reflections pushed my own understanding of inclusion and the privileged assumptions that I brought to bear.

We, in higher education, espouse the belief that diverse environments create unique opportunities for learning. However, opportunities for community members to learn from and with one another are only possible to the degree that everyone is willing
and able to engage. If we seek to create environments where in all people feel as though they can challenge one another including those in authority then we must start by attempting to understand why some may feel more vulnerable doing so than others. As practitioners we often encourage students and colleagues to take risks and be vulnerable with one another as a way to spark new understanding. In our attempts to encourage growth we need to keep our privilege in check by remembering that some of our students do not have a choice about being vulnerable. Minoritized students experience vulnerability without any choice in the matter. The seminal student development work of Nevitt Sanford (1966) reminds us of the importance of balancing the amount of challenge presented to someone with the appropriate amount of support. As we consider the experiences of minoritized students we must critically question whether our environments provide a balance of both challenge and support as Sanford suggests. Certainly an over emphasis on support while eliminating challenge would seem to constitute coddling however, attending to safety does not mean excluding challenge. To the contrary, safety is the necessary condition within which challenging discourse or dissent can take place.

As practitioners are we attentive to the privileged assumptions inherent in our environments? Are we attempting to uncover them or are we waiting for them to be identified for us? What are we doing about them once we are aware of them? As evidenced above, seeking counter stories from minoritized students is one way that we can become aware of privilege.

**Increasing Accessibility by Identifying Racism**
Counter stories assist in identifying privilege and can reveal ways that our privileged perspectives influence practice and policies. Additionally, racist assumptions can become apparent through formal assessment campus climate and culture. Assessing climate involves understanding how people feel within an environment while evaluating culture includes unpacking institutional norms, assumptions and traditions embedded in language, values and actions (Museus et al, 2012). Campus climate studies have become relatively common practice however the degree to which the findings of those studies are influencing day to day practice is unclear. Higher education administrators and campus officials should ensure that climate study findings are used as key data for setting priorities including the dissemination of financial resources. Understanding climate is important, however, given the long term and systemic influence of campus culture, attempts to increase its understanding are especially critical. Fortunately, the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California has pioneered a comprehensive, theory based approach designed to help institutions who are invested in this work. The Equity Scorecard is a “strategy consisting of tools, activities, and processes to assist campuses in embedding equity in to their structures, policies, and practices” (Felix, Bensimon, Hanson, Gray & Klingsmith, 2015, p. 25).

An institutional commitment to assessing and addressing climate and culture is an expression of care. Students in this study described the importance that feeling cared for and seen as more than just a statistic had in their ability to grow. The students also expressed their sense that racism was just below the surface in their day to day experiences. As safety and intimacy increased so too did the likelihood that racist beliefs
would emerge. As practitioners we must proactively engage in assessment of campus climate and culture as a way to shed light on taken for granted racist assumptions. We are responsible for getting these conversations out of the shadows and creating space where difficult and uncomfortable dialogue can take place. We must realize that already minoritized students currently feel responsible for ensuring that this type dialogue takes place. We must take up the mantel for constructive dialogue regarding race and difference. We need to model ways to respectfully engage in potentially uncomfortable conversations as a community.

**Emphasizing Student Growth and Learning**

Finally, practitioners can take our cues on student success from the students who intentionally focus their energy and attention on growth. Our current systems send mixed messages to students and emphasize the wrong things. For example, we say that we want students to explore and try new things but then we over rely on grade point average as the only real measure of success. If I’m judged by GPA then I’m going to play to those rules. If GPA really doesn’t matter than why is so much riding on it?

As the folks responsible for setting requirements for students we have the opportunity to integrate and normalize behaviors that we believe to be valuable in to their experiences. We can set exploration as an expectation through curricular and co-curricular opportunities embedded in core academic requirements, first year experience programs, or the residential curriculum. Efforts to flip the classroom are also resonant with the idea of emphasizing learning rather than grades. In the flipped classroom model, in class time is reserved for discussion and practice that engages students and faculty in
learning and lecture content is delivered outside of class meetings often through electronic means. We can also reconsider grading options to better allow for learning. For example, homework assignments could be required as part of participation points but not graded to underscore and reinforce the role of those assignments in helping students practice and grasp new concepts. Another suggestion to de-emphasize grades would be to make specific gatekeeper classes only available as pass/fail. Alternatively or in addition, students could be allowed to replace lower course grades from their first year if they retake the course in later years and earn a higher grade. In addition to understanding systemic dynamics that might hinder some students from taking advantage of support resources, as addressed above, we can also seek out ways to normalize help seeking behaviors. Supplemental instruction or individual meetings with course staff could be required components of courses where individualized attention and additional time for complex concepts would increase student learning. It has become fairly common to integrate tutors and tutoring sessions into residential experience but these efforts could be further enhanced by social norming campaigns similar to those that have been done around alcohol use or counseling services especially for new students for whom the thought of accessing support services may seem particularly unfamiliar or risky.

As we seek to increase the diversity of students in the pipeline and address issues of representation we are quick to identify and track students early in their educational career. If a student like Mike shows ability in Math then he is directed to Math based opportunity programs designed to feed the STEM pipeline. Being a Math guy becomes part of his prescribed identity and later his lack of interest in math, despite his ability, is
harder to overcome. Mike may have the ability to succeed in Math but not thrive. If we are interested in student’s thriving rather than surviving then we need to resist the urge to lock students, especially minoritized students, into predetermined tracks. Instead, we should invest in ways to help students find their academic passion and pride. The experiences of students in this study would suggest that assessing the college thriving dimensions of academic determination and engagement could be a valuable way to better understand how well aligned a student’s field of study is with their interests and passions.

We also need to establish ways for students to monitor and measure their own growth and development. The findings of this study suggest that opportunities such as co-curricular transcripts or other ways for students to keep track of and reflect on what they have learned can provide valuable opportunities for students. The self-generated feedback from these types of tools augments or even contradicts the story offered by a student’s grade point average. The college experience is more than just the academic experience. Helping students to reflect and monitor their growth across the inter and intra personal as well as academic aspects of their experience honors the entirety of their experience and offers a fuller picture of their overall success.

**Limitations and Future Research**

As interpretive qualitative research, this study was designed to seek out information and increase understanding of student experiences rather than to offer generalizations about the student experience or experiences of underrepresented minority students as a whole (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I intentionally chose a qualitative design for
this study to contrast the dominant emphasis on quantitative measures of student success. Therefore, my findings offer insights into the experiences of non-majority students but the commonalities across their experiences are not representative of the minority student experience generally. The findings shared in Chapter four are limited to the eight student participants and the experiences that they chose to share with me at the time of our interviews and their understanding of those experiences at that point in time. Because I was interested in understanding the students’ experiences and the meaning that they associated with the experiences, I only collected data for this study through semi-structured individual interviews. I did not conduct focus groups or observations of the students. I also did not collect program artifacts or speak with any of the faculty and staff that worked on the PC-Div program. Future research seeking to better understand the program dynamics could employ a case study approach to more fully explore contributions to student success.

This study was limited to a small group of students who all attended the same pre-college preparation program and then the same university for their undergraduate education. These students were selected because of their common experiences in both the Pre-College Diversity (PC-Div) program and at Research University. I recognize the limitations in only including students with a shared background however for the purposes of this study, I was most interested in commonalities rather than in making comparisons. The dominant pipeline discourse led to my initial interest in the PC-Div program participants. By only including students who had participated in this program I was able to clearly identify not only the similarities across their experiences but also to see
similarities in how they understood those experiences. Future research in this area could expand understanding by including participants from both the PC-Div and Pre-College Predominately White (PC-PW) programs at Research University or other pre-college programs to intentionally understand similarities and differences between and across experiences. Similar studies could also focus on minority undergraduate students who had not participated in any pre-college experience to consider their experiences from the perspective of thriving.

Further research is necessary to more fully explore initial findings suggested by this study. It is my assertion that each of the themes presented in Chapter four built on one another. The program dynamics assisted in building a sense of belonging which led to a greater understanding of self that resulted in overall student growth. Exploring this seemingly sequential relationship could be done through interrogation of a variety student development theories. For example, how might intentional analysis using Schlossberg’s (1989) concepts of marginalization and mattering or Rendon’s (1994) assertions about validation further our understanding of thriving among minoritized students? My findings also suggest that future ethnographic or narrative research aimed at capturing and sharing the in-depth accounts of student experiences could be particularly insightful. The combined use of Critical Race Theory and narrative methodologies would be beneficial for future studies with a similar purpose. Additionally, mixed methodology companion studies that could consider quantitative metrics such as Thrive Quotient scores in concert with qualitative experiences would also provide interesting opportunities for new understanding.
Conclusion

This study provides insight into the experiences of minoritized students in high-risk educational environments. By employing a Critical Race Theory lens and utilizing the positive college thriving framework, my findings challenge the existing master narrative that commoditizes and minoritizes students from underrepresented populations and accepts their survival to graduation as evidence of success.
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: FIRST INTERVIEW
Appendix A

Interview Protocol: First Interview

Hello, first name. Obviously you know that I am recording our conversation because we just talked about my turning the recorder on. First let me say thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I appreciate that you are willing to share your experiences with me and take time out of what I know is an already busy schedule. Do you have any questions about the consent form that was provided to you or about the study in general? Again, I do appreciate your participation but I also want to make sure that you know that if at any time you would like to conclude our discussion today or if you decide that you no longer want to participate in the study that is completely fine and there is no penalty for that and no hard feelings either. Ok?

Presuming that there are no questions and the student has signed the consent form proceed.

Ok, well I thought the best place to start would just be to tell me a little bit about you…

This interview is intended to be semi structured in that my hope is for the participants to speak freely but I am interested in responses to the following questions that I will insert as needed if they are not addressed as part of the participants story telling.

1) How did you come to be a participant in the PC-Div program?

2) Talk about your experience in/during the program (Please talk about the educational experience as well as the social experience.)
Additional probes if needed: What was most beneficial? What surprised you? What did you learn? Was there anything that you did not enjoy? Was there anything that did not meet your expectations?

3) Were you aware of the other pre-college opportunities (PC-PW) available at Research University? At other schools? Why did you attend PC-Div as opposed to those other options?

4) Describe what it was like to leave PC-Div and go back home?

5) What led you to where you are now (college, major, location)?

6) Looking back, how ready do you think you were for the transition to Research University?

   In what ways were you not ready or what helped to ready you?

7) When you think of who you were as a PC-Div student and who you are now, are those two people similar or different? In what ways? How do you see yourself today versus how you saw yourself as a PC-Div student?

Thank you again for your time. I have really enjoyed our conversation and I appreciate your assistance with this study. I will be in contact soon with the transcript from our conversation today and instructions on what I would like for you to do with that. Thanks so much and I’ll talk to you soon.
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: SECOND INTERVIEW
Appendix B

Interview Protocol: Second Interview

Part 1. Reflection on first conversation and opportunity to clarify or add insight

Hello, it is good to see you again. You have had an opportunity to read and respond to the transcript from our first conversation but I’m wondering as you have reflected more on that if you have any thoughts or things that you have been thinking about? What did it feel like to read through that conversation? Were there any surprises for you as you read back over the transcript?

I know that you had the chance to clarify or add things to your initial responses but is there anything else that you want to talk about related to that first discussion?

Part 2. College experiences

Prompts for this follow up interview will focus more on the college experiences of the students. Depending on the experiences shared, I will intentionally probe one or more of the three elements of college thriving (Schreiner, 2010). Possible prompting questions for this follow up interview could include:

1. In our last conversation we just started to talk about your experiences in college, can you talk a little bit about your experience in college so far?
2. Can you talk about the resources that you have used either from your PC-Div experience or not to support you now?
3. Who are people that have supported you?
4. What experiences do you consider influential in your experience to date?
5. In what ways, if any, have race and/or gender played a role in your experiences?

Depending on our first interview, I may also ask about some of the perceived differences between the PC-Div experience and PC-PW such as:

1. Why do you think PC-Div is separated from PC-PW overall? What do you think about the separation? Do you think that separation had any impact on you as a PC-Div participant at the time that you were in the program or as you look back?

2. Is there anything that you would change about PC-Div if you could?

3. What do you think about programs that target certain populations like students of color, women or people of lower SES?
APPENDIX C

EMAIL SOLICITATION
Appendix C

Email Solicitation

Hello, my name is Holly Hippensteel and I am a graduate student at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. I am also the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs at [Research University]. My colleagues in the [Research University PC-Div office] agreed to forward this email to you on my behalf because I am hoping to conduct a study involving past participants of the [PC-Div] summer program. The study would involve interviewing past participants about their experiences during the program, transitioning to college, and as college students.

As a participant in the study you would be asked to partake in two separate one on one interviews with me. The purpose of the first interview would be to get to know more about you and your life experiences including those that brought you to [PC-Div] as well as experiences in and since the program. The second interview would be a follow up from our first conversation. The questions that I will ask in the second conversation will depend largely on the discussions in the first round of interviews. I will be audio taping these conversations and I will provide you a copy of both the recording and the transcript.

I am interested in learning about your experience with [PC-Div] because of my experience as the first person in my family to finish college. I never participated in a program like [PC-Div] but I think that the goal of [PC-Div], to make college a reality for those that might not have otherwise gone, is a very important one. I chose to work in higher education because of how influential my college experience was in my life. Now, as a PhD student I am interested in learning more about how other people have made
college a reality for themselves. I am interested in better understanding the [PC-Div] experience and the experience of [PC-Div] alumni once they are in college.

If you are willing to participate in these interviews please respond to this message or call me at 412-268-1962 to receive more information. I have attached the informed consent form for this study which all participants would need to sign either before or at our first conversation.

Thank you for considering my request and I hope to hear from you soon.

Holly
APPENDIX D

BASIC DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY
Appendix D

Basic Demographic Survey

The following demographic information is being collected to assist in describing my participants as a group. This information will be compiled and reported only in the collective. The demographic information will also assist in comparing my participant group with the demographic profile of the SAMS program overall. This information will not be connected to your interview responses and will be stored separately from interview responses.

Gender:
- female
- male
- transgender
- other
- prefer not to respond

Race/Ethnicity:
- African American
- Asian
- Caucasian
- Latina/o
- Multi-racial
- Native American
- Other: ____________________________
- prefer not to respond

Are you a US citizen or permanent resident? (circle response)  YES  NO

During what year(s) did you participate in the [PC-DIV] program?  _______________________

What year did you graduate from high school?  _______________________

How would you describe the area where you attended high school?
- urban- large metropolitan area
- urban but smaller city
- suburban – near but outside a city
- small town
- rural

Do you qualify for a Pell Grant as part of your financial aid package? (circle response)  YES  NO  Do Not Know

Did one or more of your parents or primary guardians attend college? (circle response)  YES  NO  Do Not Know

If yes, did the person(s) who attended graduate/complete their degree? YES  NO  Unsure

What is your college and major(s)?  _______________________

Which option below describes your plan for the spring ’14 semester?
- Continuing in school, returning to same institution
- Continuing in school but transferring to a different institution
- Taking some time off voluntarily
- Taking some time off as mandated by my institution
- Have decided to pursue options other than higher education
- I am scheduled to graduate in F’13.
APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT
Appendix E

Informed Consent

**Study Title**
Voices from the Pipeline: an interpretive, critical race theory study of thriving among underrepresented college student alumni of a targeted pre-college preparation program

**Investigators**
You are being invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Holly Hippensteel, in partial fulfillment of the degree requirements for her PhD in the Higher Education Administration from Kent State University. This study is supervised by Susan Iverson, PhD and has received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Kent. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study you may stop at any time during the study with no consequence. You will receive a copy of this document for your reference.

**Purpose**
The purpose of this study is to understand the college experiences of past participants of a summer college preparation program targeted at helping promising yet underrepresented teenagers become successful college students. Participants are asked to reflect on their experience in and since the program and the impact of the program on their overall college experience. Ultimately the study will seek to answer questions such as: What is the college experience for students from populations that are historically underrepresented in American higher education? Did the students’ experiences in the program impact their opportunities to thrive in the college environment? How has race and racism shaped the students’ experiences?

**Procedures**
I will conduct two semi-structured interviews with each person who agrees to participate in this study. The interviews are a time for me to learn about your experience in the SAMS program and since completing the program. I will record our conversations to ensure that I do not miss parts of the conversation by trying to take notes while we are talking. I plan for the interviews to be about one hour in length but will gladly continue our conversation if time and interest permits. Participants will be provided copies of the recordings of our conversations as well as a typed transcript and will be given a chance to add to the conversation or clarify anything that was said after the fact in writing.

**Risks and Benefits**
This research poses no risk to you except in the time that it will take to participate and that it will require you to talk about your personal experiences. Questions regarding the role of race, gender, and socio economic status on your experience will be included in this study and may elicit emotional responses. Participants can refuse to answer any
question that feels too personal or too emotionally difficult without consequence. Participation in this study will not benefit you directly. However, your participation in this study will help to illuminate the experience of students in this program, those of students aspiring to attend college in general, and of students often deemed at risk. Additionally the findings of this study may shape future decisions specific to program format or more broadly related to meeting the needs of talented and diverse students.

**Privacy and Confidentiality**
Identifying information will not be included with the interview data that you provide. Your signed consent form will be kept separate from your interview data, and responses will not be linked to you. Identifying information such as signed consent forms and the demographic survey will be kept in a secure location. Holly Hippensteel will have direct access to this personally identifiable information with the Institutional Review Boards and faculty supervising this study having access to the extent that it is necessary for data auditing and integrity purposes. Research participants will not be identified in any publication or presentation of research results; pseudonyms for individuals, the program, and the institution will be used in reporting findings from this study.

**Contact Information**
If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Holly Hippensteel at 412-268-1962. This project has been approved by both the Kent State University (IRB #13-406) and Carnegie Mellon University (HS13-520) Institutional Review Boards. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the Kent State IRB at 330-672-2704 or the Carnegie Mellon Office of Research Integrity and Compliance at 412-268-7166.

**Consent Statement and Signature**
I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me for future reference.

Participant Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________________
APPENDIX F

PARTICIPANT RESPONSES TO DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY
Appendix F

Participant Responses to Demographic Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>PC-Div Year(s)</th>
<th>HS Area</th>
<th>Pell</th>
<th>1st Gen</th>
<th>CG Deg</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Plans</th>
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<td>11 &amp; 12</td>
<td>R</td>
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<td>GBL</td>
<td>Grad</td>
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</table>

Response Key

Gender: F = female; M = male

Race: AA = African American; Multi = multi-racial; Asian = Asian American; Latino

HS Area: SU = small urban; R = rural; Sub = suburban; LU = large urban

Pell: Y = yes; UK = unknown; N = No

1st Gen: Y = yes; N = no

CG Degree (primary caregiver complete degree): Y = yes; N = no

Major: ARC = Architecture; BIO = Biology; BME = Biomedical Engineering; CHE = Chemical Engineering; ECE = Electrical and Computer Engineering; GBL = Global Studies; MEG = Mechanical Engineering; WRT = Professional Writing

Plans (future semester): Stay = continuing next semester; Grad = graduating
REFERENCES


