

## ABSTRACT

ANDREWS, ERICA JENINE. Faculty Perceptions of the Equity Gaps in First-Year Student Progression for African American Community College Students. (Under the direction of Dr. Audrey J. Jaeger).

Nationally, community colleges continue to have lower retention, completion, and transfer rates for African American students (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019). Specifically, 55% of African American students who enroll in postsecondary education at two-year colleges leave without earning a credential in 6 years. Teaching and learning must be a central focus if colleges desire to produce sustainable change (Stout, 2018). Student success literature compels faculty to create data-driven strategies to improve teaching and learning (Hora et al., 2017). However, there is little research on the outcome of faculty members' attempts to interpret student success data (Kisker, 2019). Early momentum metrics during the first year are essential leading indicators of student success (Belfield et al., 2019; Driscoll, 2007; Jenkins & Bailey, 2017). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine faculty perceptions of the reasons for the equity gap between African American students and all other students at Hillman Community College in first-year curriculum student progression.

The theoretical framework for this basic qualitative study was Argyris and Schön's (1978) single- and double-loop learning theories. Equity-mindedness provided a conceptual framework for this study, as equity-mindedness was a lens to interpret faculty members' responses to early momentum metrics. Data were collected through semistructured interviews of 10 college faculty who have taught first-year community college students. The findings confirmed deficit-mindedness is the governing cognitive frame and suggested that a facilitator can serve as a proxy for the cognitive framing necessary in the equity-minded sensemaking process when data are presented to practitioners. Faculty expressed ownership of their role in closing the equity gap for first-year African American students through adjusting teaching

practices to improve student success and initiating engagement with students. In addition, findings underscored the need for racially disaggregated first-year student progression to be made accessible to all faculty and integrated into continuous improvement processes, especially for faculty who teach first-year students. The implications for practice that emerged from this study are applicable to faculty, department chairs, deans, and senior administrators who aim to close racial equity gaps and improve outcomes for African American students. This study contributes to knowledge around how faculty make sense of student success data and may help guide how data-driven decision-making processes should be shaped when efforts originate with faculty interpreting data.

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Faculty Perceptions of the Equity Gaps in First-Year Student Progression for African American  
Community College Students

by  
Erica Jenine Andrews

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APPROVED BY:

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Dr. Audrey Jaeger  
Committee Chair

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Dr. Michelle Bartlett

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Dr. Carrol Adams Warren

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Dr. Mary Rittling

## DEDICATION

I give all glory, honor, and praise to God for carrying me through this journey, and I dedicate this dissertation to You. To my extraordinary husband, Keith, there are no words to describe how your ongoing demonstration of love has supported and propelled me over the past 25 years. To my mother, Alice, your sacrifice, love, and modeling what it looks like to pursue goals in the midst of hardship paved the way for me. To my late father, Napoleon, you saw this milestone long before I ever dreamed it and always lovingly affirmed me. And to my sons, you are my greatest gifts, and I pray that my journey to completing this dissertation has modeled for you that you can do anything with God's guidance and with persistence and grit. Thank you to my family for being my biggest cheerleaders, a soft place to land when I was discouraged, making sure I practiced self-care, sacrificing time together so I could pursue this goal, and for listening to countless hours of me sharing about my coursework and dissertation topic. We did it!

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Erica Andrews holds a bachelor's degree in psychology as well as master's degrees in social work and higher education administration from the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor. She has 20 years of professional experience in student affairs and community development. Throughout her career, she has been dedicated to social justice and equity and is committed to improving postsecondary access, retention, and success for minoritized students.

Erica had the honor of being selected as a Rackham Public Engagement Fellow at the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor, and at North Carolina State University she was selected as an Achieving the Dream Fellow and a Belk Center Fellow for the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research. In her current role as a community college director, Erica provides oversight for Counseling, Career Services, and Disability Services. She has served as a long-time volunteer organizer for GirlTrek, a national health organization, and is a member of the National Council on Black American Affairs (NCBAA), a council of the American Association of Community Colleges.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

A college degree is an asset that is linked to improving an individual's physical, social, and economic health (Hout, 2012; Schudde & Bernell, 2019). Individuals who do not hold a postsecondary degree are more likely to be unemployed, experience poverty, and have a poor quality of life (Castro et al., 2020; Ross & Van Willigen, 1997). The number of jobs available to individuals with just a high school diploma has decreased over the last 30 years (Carnevale et al., 2018a). Postsecondary education is necessary to achieve economic mobility. "More than ever in the United States, a college education is a prerequisite for economic mobility and financial stability" (Davidson et al., 2019, p. 2). A 2019 study by Opportunity Insights, a Harvard University institute, uncovered that fewer than 25% of African American children who are born below the poverty line move to the middle-class, while 46% of White children who are born poor reach the middle class (Chetty et al., 2020). Minorities will exceed 50% of the United States population before 2050 (Jones et al., 2021; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The U.S. cannot ignore the issue of equity and leave millions of people of color behind. The gaps in postsecondary credential attainment must be tackled by institutions. When disparities in educational outcomes remain invisible, they are not discussed or ameliorated (Bensimon, 2005). Data help community college faculty understand student progression (Stout, 2018), yet many faculty are not given the opportunity to view quantitative data on student outcomes or engage in discussion about it (Bensimon et al., 2016; Phillips & Horowitz, 2017).

Over 100 years ago, community colleges were created as a way of helping students transition to college. Community colleges have grown to become a tool used to help underrepresented students achieve educational and economic success (Wyner, 2019). More undergraduate students of color are enrolled in community colleges than any other sector

(Espinosa et al., 2019). Community colleges are a gateway to higher education and the middle class for people of color (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012; Zatynski et al., 2016). However, White Americans have a higher likelihood of completing postsecondary education than Americans of color (AACC, 2012). Approximately 40% of students who enrolled at a community college in 2011 earned a credential within 6 years, including 46.7% of White students and 26% of African American students (Espinosa et al., 2019). Nationally, community colleges continue to have lower retention, completion, and transfer rates for African American students (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019).

Colleges need to do more to examine the barriers that prevent African American students from advancing and address equity gaps (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). Community colleges want to impact student success (Wyner, 2019); however, they cannot address the lack of student success without drastically changing their approach to racial equity. Improving retention and completion rates requires that colleges become more equitable (Costino, 2018; Elrod & Kezar, 2016; McNair et al., 2016). Bauman et al. (2005) asserted that in order to effect change, colleges must view the enormity of the inequities that impact underrepresented populations by looking at disaggregated data. It is ineffective to view educational outcomes within the student body as a collective. Disaggregating data that measure student success helps colleges begin to understand where the needs exist and can raise the urgency needed to encourage systemic change (Kotter, 2012). However, disaggregating data by race and ethnicity is not standard institutional practice for many colleges (Bensimon, 2005; Felix & Castro, 2018). Creating student success-focused initiatives without looking at the root causes of the problems of why students are not succeeding is a formula for maintaining the status quo (Bensimon, 2005).

The responsibility of becoming equitable does not stop at the macro-organizational level. Bensimon (2007) argued that “institutions have difficulties producing equitable educational outcomes partly because practitioners lack the specialized knowledge and expertise to recognize the racialized nature of the collegiate experience for African American and Latino/a students and adjust their practices accordingly” (p. 446). Teaching and learning must be a central focus if colleges desire to produce sustainable change (Stout, 2018). Faculty play a significant role in the academic lives of community college students. Students usually have more hours of contact with faculty than they do staff and look to faculty for direction when they are experiencing both academic and personal challenges. Faculty play a large role in student success; therefore, it is essential that they understand how to best serve students of color. Having a sense of belonging within the college environment, having an empathetic instructor, and developing a relationship with an instructor are linked to increased retention (O’Keeffe, 2013). Minoritized students who are left to navigate the collegiate environment on their own and who feel alienated or like they do not belong are more at risk for unsuccessful transitions to college (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Research has revealed that faculty interaction is the most impactful determinant of student success for students of color (Costino, 2018). Students who feel validated by their instructor are more likely to communicate with the instructor (Wood & Newman, 2017).

Given the impact faculty have on student success, especially for students of color, faculty should be given the opportunity to regularly review educational outcomes data that are disaggregated by race and ethnicity, as doing so will increase their awareness of the equity gap (Bauman et al., 2005). In order to effect change, individuals must study the enormous inequities that impact underrepresented populations (Bauman et al., 2005). However, increasing faculty awareness of equity gaps does not guarantee that faculty’s assumptions about the root cause of

the equity gap will take into account the challenges that students of color face. According to Bensimon et al. (2007), “The usefulness of data depends on the questions, interpretations, and judgments made by individuals” (p. 35). How faculty interpret data can have greater consequences than the report of the data; in addition to reviewing raw numbers, individuals must also discuss the implications of the data (Bensimon et al., 2016).

In May 2019, the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS, 2019a) released its first equity report which compiled data from the Curriculum Registration, Progress, and Financial Aid (CRPFA) Report as well as the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Data for the equity report were amassed for all 58 community colleges across the North Carolina system and focused on the cohort of first-year students who were not in high school, had no experience with postsecondary education, and were enrolled in classes beginning in Fall 2017. Data from dual enrollment students were not included. The report included data for curriculum students—students enrolled in a program of study associated with earning college credit toward a certificate, diploma, or degree. The report had four sections: access, first-time curriculum student characteristics, first-term curriculum student progression, and first-year curriculum student progression. The equity report called attention to racial inequity and gaps in access and student progression for first-year students enrolled in curriculum programs. Student success is a statewide priority and access, as well as academic progress, are important parts of achieving the goal of economic and social mobility (Boggs & McPhail, 2016). The equity report showed that African American students trailed behind all other students in almost all of the categories that were used to measure student progression for first-time, first-year students, including course success, persistence, and credit accumulation (NCCCS, 2019a).

### **Statement of the Problem**

First-year persistence and retention rates for African American students at community colleges are significantly lower than all other ethnic groups (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Fifty-five percent of African American students who enroll in postsecondary education at 2-year colleges leave without earning a credential in 6 years (Shapiro et al., 2018). First-year student success measures are benchmarks that project completion (Baldwin et al., 2011). In the NCCCS (2019a) Equity Report, first-year student progression was categorized as “first-term and first-year leading indicators of academic success, including course success, persistence, and credit accumulation” (p. 1). The problem addressed in this study was there is insufficient information in the literature focused on what faculty, individuals who work closely with students, perceive as reasons for the equity gap between African American students and all other students in first-year curriculum student progression (Kisker, 2019).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine faculty perceptions of the reasons for the equity gap between African American students and all other students at Hillman Community College [pseudonym] in first-year curriculum student progression.

### **Research Questions**

This basic qualitative study addressed the following research questions:

- 1) What are faculty perceptions of the equity gap between African American students and all other students related to first-year curriculum student progression?

- 2) What are faculty perceptions of the institutional barriers that contribute to the equity gap between African American students and all other students related to first-year curriculum student progression?
- 3) What are faculty perceptions of their role in reducing the equity gap between African American students and all other students related to first-year curriculum student progression?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this basic qualitative study was Argyris and Schön's (1978) single- and double-loop learning theories. Argyris and Schön made a distinction between two types of learning: single-loop learning and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning is attempting to solve a problem by maintaining the same assumptions, norms, and objectives but changing the actions taken to correct an error (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Double-loop learning involves correcting errors by questioning established rules and norms when attempting to determine a solution to a problem. Double-loop learning occurs when an individual reframes the assumptions, norms, and objectives that contribute to why they adopt specific actions and strategies. There is a shift in the individual's cognitive frame (Argyris & Schön, 1996).

Cognitive frame describes the mindset, knowledge, or assumptions individuals draw upon, based on their life experience, that inform the decisions they make, what they view as important, and how they respond to situations (Contreras et al., 2008; González et al., 2006). Bensimon (2005) explained that faculty either take on a deficit-minded or equity-minded cognitive frame when considering the root of lackluster student outcomes. Bensimon (2012) described the deficit-minded cognitive frame as funds of knowledge that prevent an individual

from attributing a student's deficiencies to racial inequity but instead assign them to a deficit that is typically associated with that racial group. According to McNair et al. (2016):

Deficit-minded thinking involves blaming the students for being underprepared, rather than blaming the social systems that perpetuate inequities in education. It involves the belief that certain students cannot learn how to navigate the complexities of higher education, that they are unmotivated, or that they lack the intellectual capacity to succeed in certain programs. (p. 83)

The equity cognitive frame looks inward to how the organization or individual contributed to a student's inability to reach successful educational outcomes and reflects on policies and practices that inhibited the student. In the equity cognitive frame, the individual or organization has agency over identified problems. Bensimon (2005) described this approach as equity-mindedness because the educational outcomes are viewed within the context of systemic inequities, biases, expectations, and action. The deficit-minded cognitive frame is considered single-loop learning because the solutions to problems are externalized. Equity-mindedness is double-loop learning because the problem is internalized to the individual or organization instead of externalized to the student. There is an ability to have an impact on challenges that are assessed through equity-mindedness (Bensimon, 2005).

Malcom-Piqueux and Bensimon (2017) defined equity-mindedness as "a schema that provides an alternative framework for understanding the causes of equity gaps in outcomes and the action needed to close them. Equity-mindedness encompasses being (a) race-conscious, (b) institutionally focused, (c) evidence-based, (d) systemically aware, and (e) action-oriented" (p. 6). Equity-mindedness provided a conceptual framework for this study, as it was a lens to interpret faculty members' responses to the NCCCS Equity Report. The underlying assumptions,

norms, and objectives of faculty can impact the actions they take to try to ameliorate the gap in student progress.

### **Significance of the Study**

African Americans have a higher likelihood of experiencing poverty, less education, and decreased access to high-skills jobs than Whites (MDC, 2016). Postsecondary education is critical to economic mobility. A high-quality credential leads to strong labor market outcomes in job growth, job openings, and a livable wage. According to MDC (2016):

Stalled upward economic mobility is persistent across North Carolina, not only in pockets of rural poverty but in the most dynamic urban areas. The imperative is clear: we need to build an infrastructure of opportunity to ensure all our citizens have a clear path to family-supporting work, that employers have the workforce they need to grow and innovate, and that our civic culture is one that supports prosperity for all. (p. 1)

The goal of myFutureNC is to close the educational attainment gap in North Carolina by “ensuring that by 2030, 2 million North Carolinians have a high-quality credential or postsecondary degree” (Steering Committee of the myFutureNC Commission, 2019). The Steering Committee of the myFutureNC Commission (2019) presented a call to action report to the State of North Carolina that outlined how to build and sustain momentum toward the 2030 goal. One of the action areas highlighted was “data-driven execution and improvement” (p. 65). A critical step in the action plan was to pull together data that help “stakeholders make critical decisions about postsecondary preparation, access, and success” (p. 65). The commission expressed interest in first-year performance pipeline data for high school graduates attending community colleges (Steering Committee of the myFutureNC Commission, 2019). Data are

recognized as a central component of improving student success, and practitioners must be involved in the process (Hora et al., 2017).

Student success literature compels faculty to create data-driven strategies to improve teaching and learning (Hora et al., 2017). However, there is a lack of research on the outcome of faculty members' attempts to interpret student success data (Kisker, 2019). This study contributes to knowledge around how faculty make sense of student success data and responds to a call for community college faculty to view persistence data and engage in dialogue concerning why equity gaps exist (Kisker, 2019). The results of this study help guide how data-driven decision-making processes should be shaped when efforts originate with faculty interpreting data.

### **Overview of Methodology**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine faculty perceptions of the reasons for the equity gap between African American students and all other students at Hillman Community College in first-year curriculum student progression. Qualitative research provides the opportunity to investigate the meaning individuals give to their experiences (Creswell, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A basic qualitative design was selected because it allows researchers to study "(a) how people interpret their experiences, (b) how they construct their worlds, and (c) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24).

Data were collected through one-on-one semistructured interviews with full-time faculty who have taught students in their first year of college. Research was limited to one institution to permit an in-depth study into faculty perceptions (Baker & Sax, 2012). Additionally, the study was limited to full- and part-time faculty who taught at the institution. Purposeful sampling was

employed to select participants, including faculty with varying employment lengths at the college and from different schools within the college.

The audio and video of interviews were recorded on a video-conferencing platform, with participant consent. Following each interview, data were transcribed and coded. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method. Initial, in vivo, process, and values coding were used during the first cycle coding (Saldaña, 2021). Axial coding was utilized for second cycle coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2021). Analytic memo writing was adopted during coding to aid in data analysis (Saldaña, 2021). An electronic database was used to store and organize data hosted on a password-protected cloud-based platform.

### **Assumptions**

The following assumptions were made for this study:

1. Interview participants were honest in their responses and did not withhold information.
2. Colleges are capable of changing the academic trajectory of students by changing institutional practices.
3. Faculty want students to succeed (Tagg, 2007).

### **Organization of the Study**

The research study is presented in five chapters and organized in the following manner. Chapter 1 contained the introduction to the study to provide context and included the problem and purpose statements, research questions, theoretical framework, and significance. Chapter 2 will offer a review of relevant literature on first-year student progression, African American students in higher education, institutional barriers for African American students, the impact of data on teaching and learning, and the importance of faculty viewing data. The theoretical and

conceptual frameworks will be further explored. Chapter 3 will contain the details of the research design, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 will provide a presentation of the research findings of interviews conducted with faculty. Finally, Chapter 5 will include the relevant findings, implications for theory and practice, and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine faculty perceptions of the reasons for the equity gap between African American students and all other students at Hillman Community College in first-year curriculum student progression. The literature review will begin with an overview of the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) and equity and will highlight first-year student progression metrics. Next, student success for African American students in higher education and institutional barriers for students of color will be examined. The theoretical framework: single- and double-loop learning, and the conceptual framework: equity-mindedness will be described, followed by an exploration of the relationship between faculty, students, and data.

### **The North Carolina Community College System**

Dallas Herring is highly regarded within the NCCCS. Herring became president of the NCCCS Office in 1963. He was an advocate of the open-access or open-door model of a community college. Herring believed in the power of education to transform someone's life. Early in his career, Herring sat on a local school board and later was on the board of education for the state of North Carolina. He believed that the educational system should meet students where they are regardless of whether a student was interested in technical education or a traditional program. Lochra (1978) cited Dallas Herring's 1966 speech to the North Carolina Legislature. In the speech, Herring stated:

We must take the people where they are and carry them as far as they can go within the assigned function of the system. If they cannot read, then we will simply teach them to read and make them proud of their achievement. ... If their needs are for cultural achievement, intellectual growth, or civic understanding, then we will simply make

available to them the wisdom of the ages and the enlightenment of our times and help them to maturity. (Lochra, 1978, p. 59)

The NCCCS's (n.d.) 2018–2022 strategic plan outlined four themes to improve the educational pipeline for students and colleges. One of the themes was creating clear and supported pathways for student success by achieving the goal of “providing a continuum of education, training, advising, and support to help learners make informed decisions that lead to credentials and careers” (p. 6). The strategic plan highlighted the need to decrease equity gaps for underserved students. It also emphasized the importance of increasing the capacity of faculty to assess learning outcomes to ensure there is continuous improvement (NCCCS, n.d.). The NCCCS Equity Report (NCCCS, 2019) sought to “call attention to patterns of inequity at the system and college levels by documenting gaps in access and academic progress across demographic populations, specifically race/ethnicity and gender” (p.1). The compilation of this report and the NCCCS dashboard allow faculty and staff to have ready access to learning outcomes data. While access to this information is beneficial, it is uncertain if many faculty review these student success data. Additionally, of the faculty who have seen the data, it is questionable how they have interpreted the data, as this is of greater consequence (Bensimon, 2007; Bensimon et al., 2016). Data help community college faculty understand student progression (Stout, 2018). Engaging faculty in reviewing learning outcomes helps them connect student learning to completion (Wyner, 2019).

### **Early Momentum Metrics**

Most students who enroll in a community college visualize a brighter future through the lens of completing their education. They are expecting higher education to produce economic results (Davidson et al., 2019). In their early definition of success, community colleges focused

on enrollment; however, during the past 10 years, community colleges have moved toward emphasizing completion (Boggs & McPhail, 2016; Wyner, 2016). Community colleges began to realize that if students are successfully matriculating but are leaving without a credential, the college is not effecting change. Initiatives like Completion by Design and the Quality Enhancement Plan were born out of this shift. Guided Pathways is a newer iteration of completion-focused programming (Bailey, 2015). There are four pillars of Guided Pathways: (a) clarify the path to the student's end goal, (b) help students choose and enter a pathway, (c) help students stay on the path, and (d) ensure students are learning (Bailey, 2017). It could take years to measure if the changes implemented by Guided Pathways are successful, so early momentum metrics during the first year, such as first-year persistence, gateway course completion, and credit momentum are essential leading indicators of student success (Belfield et al., 2019; Driscoll, 2007; Jenkins & Bailey, 2017). Metrics such as completion rate and transfer rate are lagging indicators because there is a delay between when students begin college and when these can be measured. "Lagging indicators are summative measures with little power to directly influence outcomes because they are collected at the end of students' college experiences" (Piland & Piland, 2020, p. 136). Colleges that measure early momentum metrics as a general practice have the opportunity to obtain a picture of student success during the first-year and make completion-focused changes as necessary.

### **First-Year Community College Student Progression**

The first year is a critical period for college students (Connolly et al., 2017; Driscoll, 2007). Students establish their identity as learners, determine their academic and career goals, and adjust to the new demands of pursuing higher education. Students who can gain traction during their first semester are more likely to persist. Students who stop out are less likely to

complete their degree (Ross et al., 2012). Traditionally, student success has been thought of as a product of students' efforts, background characteristics, behavior, and involvement on campus (Bensimon, 2007; Kuh et al., 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). In a study by Taylor and Bedford (2004), most faculty associated student characteristics with the reason for noncompletion. Student characteristics included adjustment to college, study skills, motivation, relationships outside of the college, and balancing multiple demands. The focus of the findings was on these characteristics instead of faculty and the institution. Faculty also referenced shortcomings such as high schools failing to prepare students for college and students' uncertainty about their desired program of study and career (Taylor & Bedford, 2004). Problems with student persistence are thought to occur due to students being underprepared instead of practitioners lacking knowledge (Bensimon, 2007). Focus on student deficit gives faculty the impression that issues of student noncompletion are out of their control and that initiatives should be focused on changing students rather than modifying institutional practices, course design, and teaching (Taylor & Bedford, 2004). Faculty do not have agency over lagging indicators such as graduation rates; however, they influence leading indicators such as course retention, semester-to-semester persistence, and course success (Piland & Piland, 2020).

First-year student progression is measured by metrics that include first-term and first-year persistence, gatekeeper course success, and accumulation of credits (Baldwin et al., 2011; NCCCS, 2019). Gatekeeper courses such as English and mathematics can hinder student persistence as students who are not successful in these courses may stop out and decide not to continue pursuing higher education (Eagan & Jaeger, 2009). Satisfactory academic progress is useful to measure because continued monetary support for students who have been awarded financial aid depends on meeting satisfactory academic progress. The U.S. Department of

Education allows each institution to determine its standard and policy around satisfactory academic progress (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). The NCCCS (2019a) established that to meet the satisfactory academic progress standard, students must complete at least 66.7% of the credit hours they attempt and maintain a 2.0 grade point average (GPA). Students who violate this requirement are placed on academic warning. If they do not increase their cumulative course completion percentage and GPA during the next semester, they become ineligible for financial aid due to unsatisfactory academic progress. Students who lose their financial aid during their first year are more likely to not return for their second year, so these are essential first-year student progression metrics to measure. College credit accumulation, also known as credit momentum, measures the number of credits students complete in their first semester and first year (Belfield et al., 2019). The faster students accrue credits, the more likely they are to experience first-year student success and earn a postsecondary credential within 6 years (Baldwin et al., 2011; NCCCS, 2019). Research by the Community College Research Center (Belfield et al., 2019) revealed “sizable gaps in rates across all of the early momentum metrics” (p. 4) for African American students, including first-year persistence, gateway course completion, and credit momentum. These findings are consistent with the experience of many African American students in higher education.

### **African American Students in Higher Education**

Overall, the postsecondary enrollment rate has increased over the past 20 years, and African Americans have followed this trend (Hussar et al., 2020). Yet, the enrollment of African Americans in higher education is still disproportionately lower than Whites in relation to the national population (Carnevale et al., 2018b). African American students are more likely to attend community colleges than 4-year colleges or universities (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013;

Espinosa et al., 2019; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014). The role of community colleges in the United States is specific. According to Rose et al. (2014), “Community colleges have historically served as the gateway to higher education for underserved communities nationwide” (p. 347). Community colleges are open access and do not have the rigorous admissions process of 4-year institutions. Open access gives students the ability to participate in higher education when they previously may not have had the opportunity.

African American students have lower first-year persistence rates at community colleges than students from all other ethnic backgrounds (Espinosa et al., 2019; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Additionally, the 6-year completion rate is lower for African Americans than any other racial group (Espinosa et al., 2019). Fifty-five percent of African American community college students do not earn a credential within 6 years of the first time they enroll (Shapiro et al., 2018). Increased access does not guarantee success or completion.

### **Gender Differences in African American Students in Higher Education**

There are gender-based differences in student success for African American students in higher education. African American female students outperform African American male students in both retention and graduation rates (Moss, 2019). According to Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study data provided by the U.S. Department of Education, the first-year persistence rates for Fall 2011 cohort students seeking a bachelor’s degree was 84.2% for African American females and 78.5% for African American males (Espinosa et al., 2019). The trend of African American males underperforming compared to African American females also extends to the community college (Bush & Lawson Bush, 2010; Dabney-Smith, 2009; Ngang, 2020). However, there are still gaps in success for African American women attending

community colleges. African American female community college students lag behind female community college students of all other ethnicities in persistence and completion (Patterson, 2020; Walpole et al., 2014). Challenges such as caring for children while participating in higher education disproportionately impact female college students in comparison to male students, but African American female community college students experience a more significant toll because of their higher likelihood of being low-income and needing to work while also caring for children (Valadez, 2000; Walpole et al., 2014).

Given the low persistence rate for African American men, community colleges have attempted to find ways to address the disparities, including various adaptations of minority male success initiatives. Despite these efforts, Baber et al. (2015) asserted that this type of intervention is individualized among community colleges and does not offer the best solution because many of the challenges African American men face are rooted in systemic and structural practices. Baber et al. argued that rather than focusing on getting African American men on the correct track, the focus should be on the track itself and changing institutional policies and practices. Achieving racial equity and eliminating barriers, policies, and practices that inhibit individuals from progressing are vital to actualizing social justice (Hill & Curry-Stevens, 2017). The success of African American students during their first year and beyond requires that colleges identify institutional barriers that act as obstacles.

### **Institutional Barriers**

Institutional barriers can impede or inhibit students from reaching their academic goals. There are a number of barriers for students of color related to institutional strategy, environment, and perception. Strategic barriers include a lack of institutional focus on racial equity and short-term professional development that lacks long-term commitment. Environmental barriers consist

of the campus racial climate, and perception barriers focus on the assumptions that students understand processes and how to navigate college.

### **Strategic Barrier: Lack of Institutional Focus on Racial Equity**

Historically, the aim of community colleges was to provide access, but not racial equity (Baber et al., 2019). Equity must be a central topic of conversation at colleges because if the United States is to bridge the wealth gap, it is essential to ensure that the needs of underrepresented students are being met. If colleges want to create impactful change and improve retention and completion, they must view student success as a racial equity issue and address it. Some colleges want to address equity through the lens of income instead of directly addressing racial equity; however, when colleges fail to address racial equity head-on and opt to generalize the equity discussion, it makes it challenging to understand the impact of race in higher education (Ching, 2013). Being race-conscious helps directly impact students affected by specific race-based inequities (Felix & Castro, 2018). Creating racial equity is central to advancing the goals of community colleges.

Racial equity change must be implemented at every level of the institution to create a lasting effect (Hill & Curry-Stevens, 2017). There must also be a change in culture and buy-in from senior leadership (McNair et al., 2020). The successful completion of all students should be a guiding principle woven across the college, and racial equity must be integrated into the organizational culture. Additionally, colleges must have a practice of regularly disaggregating student success data by race. Some colleges are still blind to equity-related issues and choose to look at their student population as a collective instead of disaggregating data and identifying strategies that will meet their diverse population's needs (McNair et al., 2020). Faculty must regularly view student data that has been disaggregated by race and ethnicity to better understand

the equity gaps that exist (Bauman et al., 2005). Reviewing disaggregated data that illustrates these gaps in student success helps build the case for an intentional institutional focus on racial equity.

### **Strategic Barrier: Short-term Professional Development Lacking Long-term Commitment**

Felix and Castro (2018) called for more training and technical assistance for colleges to help them understand and address racial inequity and build capacity. Hill and Curry-Stevens (2017) argued, however, that equity training alone is insufficient because the attitude and behavior change resulting from participating in such training is short-lived. Parker et al. (2016) conducted a 5-day intensive training on micro-messaging as well as instructional and classroom interventions. Parker et al. assessed STEM faculty both before and after the training to measure the following factors: belief that all students can learn, knowledge of how the classroom environment is either encouraging or discouraging to students, understanding how to decrease classroom microinequities, and classroom interventions. Results showed that the faculty members' ability to identify and change their classroom practices improved during the professional development series. Still, there was no statistically significant change in faculty members' belief that all students can succeed in STEM fields. Many organizations, regardless of industry, try to solve problems by just conducting training for employees; however, this is not a cure for systemic and deep-rooted issues. Short-term professional development is not the solution to racial equity gaps. Organizations must make a long-term commitment to racial equity because change does not come overnight (Equity in the Center, 2018). Dabney-Smith (2009) concluded that adopting policies and practices that support African American first-year male community college students is the most effective tool to prevent attrition. The same argument

can be extended to African American first-year female college students as well. Short-term faculty training does not sustain long-term change (Parker et al., 2016).

### **Environmental Barrier: Campus Racial Climate**

Campus climate can impact the academic success and overall collegiate experience of African American students (Solórzano et al., 2000; Wood, 2010). African American students perceive discrimination in their campus environment more than White, Asian-American, Native American, or Latino students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). African American students also recognize institutional microaggressions, including lower expectations of their success and a racial campus climate that is tense both outside and inside of the classroom (Solórzano et al., 2000). Harper and Hurtado (2007) highlighted the importance of institutions intentionally evaluating campus climate with regard to race and advised ongoing assessment of campus racial climate and using data to guide the institutional transformation. Faculty play a significant role in creating an inclusive campus climate and learning environment as they shape their classrooms' culture and make decisions regarding how course content is relayed to students (Campbell-Whitley et al., 2012; Koo, 2021; Parker & Trolan, 2020; Roksa & Whitley, 2017). Taylor and Bedford (2004) recommended a retention-focused initiative where the emphasis is shifted from student deficits to improving teaching and learning practices. Many community college faculty begin teaching in higher education as masters-level professionals in their discipline but lack any pedagogical training (Beaumont, 2020). The absence of guidance around best practices in the classroom can have unintentional consequences to the perceived campus climate for African American students and overall student success.

## **Perception Barrier: Assumptions That Students Understand Processes and how to Navigate College**

When students enter a classroom, some faculty assume that they understand the unique language and processes of higher education. At the 2018 Dallas Herring Lecture, Dr. Karen Stout, President and CEO of Achieving the Dream, stated:

We also know that for many of our students, the college process is filled with unknowns. While our institutions may seem logically organized to those of us who work within those systems on a regular basis, our students—particularly first-time students with little knowledge of what to expect at college—often encounter what appears to be a maze of disconnected courses, services, and technologies they must navigate to find the supports they need. (p. 13)

Community college faculty may not know which students are attending college for the first time, their level of preparation, or the barriers they face. The open-access format of community colleges increases the opportunity for students from underrepresented backgrounds to obtain higher education. Faculty must be prepared to identify institutional barriers and help students navigate them. It is the institution's responsibility to provide better systems and practices for students and improved support and professional development for faculty.

### **Theoretical Framework: Single- and Double-Loop Learning Theories**

Single- and double-loop learning theories guide theoretical framework of this study. The learning theories provided an appropriate context for examining how faculty view student success data and are applicable to the higher education setting. For example, Altose (2017), Joseph (2020), and Watson (2019) used double-loop learning as a framework to study topics in

higher education, including strategies for student success, improving student outcomes, and practitioners' perception of data and how they use it to inform their decision making.

Single- and double-loop learning theories are rooted in theories of action. According to Argyris and Schön (1974), theories of action are “a unit of description for the knowledge that informs action” (p. xxi). Theories of action include espoused theory and theory-in-use. Espoused theory describes an individual's beliefs, assumptions, and intentions for action. Theory-in-use explains how people actually act. Argyris et al. (1985) stated, “Espoused theories are those that an individual claims to follow. Theories in-use are those that can be inferred from action” (p. 82). When espoused theories and theories-in-use are out of alignment, effectiveness is reduced (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

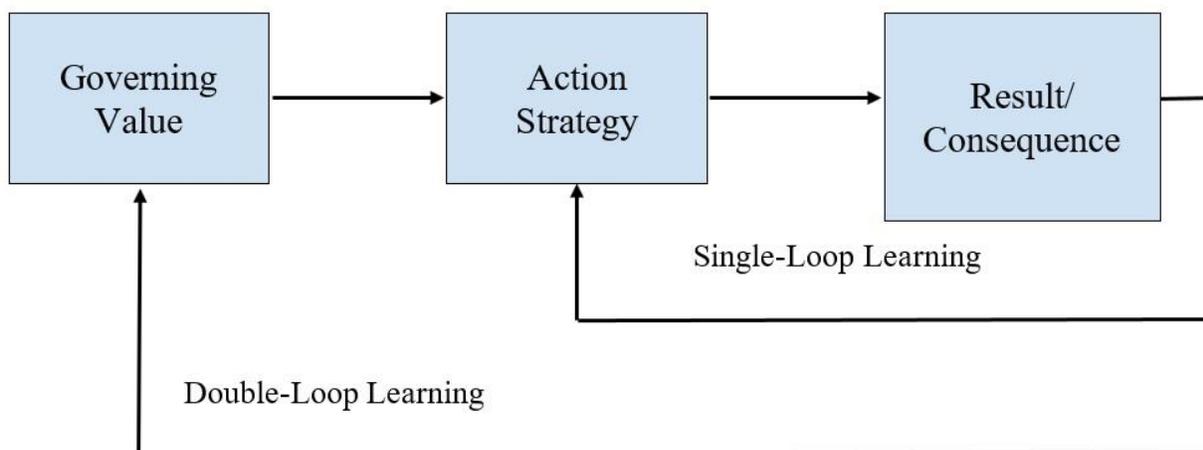
Argyris and Schön (1996) developed the concept of organizational learning to explain how individuals within an organization acquire and maintain knowledge (Allen, 2017; Putnam et al., 2014). Organizational learning is the “process of detecting and correcting errors, errors which are a feature of knowledge that inhibits learning” (Argyris & Schön, 1996, p. 116). Single- and double-loop learning models are an application of the theories of action within an organizational learning context. When espoused theories and theory-in-use do not align, an error is created (Putnam et al., 2014). Single- and double-loop learning are two levels used to correct the error.

When a challenge occurs, and the result is not favorable, single-loop learners change the action strategy instead of considering adjusting their governing values (Figure 1). Single-loop learners “externalize the problem by attributing it to forces and circumstances that are beyond their control and resort to compensatory strategies as treatment for problems that are perceived as dysfunctions” (Bensimon, 2004, p. 26). Single-loop learning learners see the problem as occurring outside of themselves instead of changing their assumptions, norms, and values

(Argyris & Schön, 1978). Double-loop learning focuses internally by questioning and reframing the assumptions, norms, values within the individual or organization to correct the error (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Bauman, 2002). Instead of defaulting to first altering the action strategy, the goal is to adjust the governing value. Double-loop learning is a reflective process (Putnam et al., 2014). Bensimon (2005) connected single- and double-loop learning theories to the cognitive frames of deficit- and equity-mindedness. These cognitive frames shed light on the perceptions of individuals and the lens through which they see problems.

**Figure 2.1**

*Single- and Double-loop Learning*



*Note.* Adapted from “Double-Loop Learning in Higher Education,” by J. Tagg, 2007, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 39(4), p. 38 (<https://doi.org/10.3200/CHNG.39.4.36-41>). Copyright 2007 by Heldref Publications.

### **Deficit-Mindedness**

Cognitive frames, similar to governing values, are the “interpretive frameworks through which individuals make sense of phenomena” (Bensimon, 2005, p. 101). Deficit-mindedness, the “dominant cognitive frame” (Center for Urban Education, 2020, p. 25) is the fund of knowledge

when an individual attributes inequities to minoritized students' shortcomings. The deficit-minded cognitive frame is considered single-loop learning because the solutions to problems are externalized (Bensimon, 2005). Deficit-minded thinking results in dismissive statements that question a student's motivation, preparedness, work ethic, or prioritization of their education (Bensimon, 2005). Furthermore, deficit-minded thinking includes stereotypical generalizations such as labeling students as "at-risk" or "disadvantaged" (Bensimon, 2007, p. 451). In the deficit-minded cognitive frame, gaps in educational outcomes are attributed to student characteristics (Bensimon, 2007). Deficit-mindedness does not support equity because the focus is on repairing the student's inadequacies instead of repairing the systems that produce inequities. Deficit-mindedness allows poor practices to remain at institutions (Dowd et al., 2018). The goal of deficit-focused strategies is to fix the student (Bensimon, 2005).

Diversity-mindedness is another cognitive frame that is not equivalent to equity. Diversity and equity are not the same and must be approached with different strategies (Bauman et al., 2005). Some colleges make diversity their goal and aim to increase racial diversity. Individuals with diversity-minded cognitive frames are focused on "how diverse the student population is or how it lacks diversity, but more likely than not, they will be blind to the fact that the very students whose presence makes campus diversity possible are themselves experiencing unequal educational outcomes" (Bensimon, 2005, p. 102). Increasing the number of students of color on college campuses increases access; however, it does not address equity gaps and it does not mean that students are being well-served by the institution (Bauman et al., 2005).

### **Equity-Mindedness**

The equity-minded cognitive frame is double-loop learning because the problem is internalized to the individual or organization instead of externalized to the student. In this study,

the conceptual framework of equity-mindedness was used to examine faculty perceptions of the reasons for the equity gap between African American students and all other students at Hillman Community College in first-year curriculum student progression. Equity-mindedness originated with the Center for Urban Education and the work of Dr. Estella Bensimon. The equity-minded cognitive frame is funds of knowledge that look inward to how the organization or individual contributed to a student's inability to reach successful educational outcomes and reflect on policies and practices that inhibited the student. In the equity-minded cognitive frame, the individual or organization has agency over identified problems and educational outcomes are viewed within the context of systemic inequities, biases, expectations, and action (Bensimon, 2005). Bensimon et al. (2007) stated that "Equity-mindedness is a multidimensional theoretical construct derived from concepts of fairness social justice, and human agency articulated in several disciplines including critical race theory, feminist theory, and critical discourse analysis" (p. 32). According to the Center for Urban Education (2021), equity-mindedness is:

the perspective or mode of thinking exhibited by practitioners who call attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes. The practitioners are willing to take personal and institutional responsibility for the success of their students, and critically reassess their own practices. It also requires that practitioners are race-conscious and aware of the social and exclusionary practices in American Higher Education. (para. 1)

Malcom-Piqueux and Bensimon (2017) reported that equity-minded practitioners have the following attributes: "(a) race-conscious, (b) institutionally focused, (c) evidence-based, (d) systemically aware, and (e) action-oriented" (p. 6). In recent years, action-oriented has been updated to equity-advancing (Center for Urban Education, 2021).

### ***Race-Conscious***

Institutionalized racism plays a large part in creating the systemic barriers and inequities that minoritized populations experience (Ching, 2013). Colleges cannot address equity and leave race out of the discussion. The equity planning process must be race-conscious (Felix & Castro, 2018). Equity-mindedness requires institutions to have uncomfortable conversations and not “use socioeconomic status as a proxy for race” (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017, p. 6).

### ***Institutionally Focused***

The policies, practices, and structures of institutions have resulted in the unintentional marginalization of minoritized students (Bensimon, 2012). Therefore, it is the responsibility of colleges to consider their role in creating equity-mindedness. Activities such as regularly disaggregating data, conducting equity audits, and eliminating deficit-minded culture move the focus away from repairing inadequacies in the student and center it on the institution (Felix & Castro, 2018; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). Equity-minded practitioners look at the shortcomings of the institution instead of student deficits.

### ***Evidence-based***

Equity-minded practitioners are willing to view data disaggregated by race and ethnicity to understand the gaps in student outcomes (Witham et al., 2015).

### ***Systemically Aware***

African Americans are disproportionately affected by poverty and have experienced the generational impact of segregation and racism (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). Equity-minded practitioners are aware of the systemic nature of these problems and the inequities they create.

### ***Equity-advancing***

Equity-minded practitioners take action by increasing awareness of inequities on their college campuses (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017).

Equity-mindedness is a cognitive frame that focuses the problem on the institution or faculty instead of externalizing it to students. Faculty's cognitive frame is relevant to student success. Faculty play a significant role in the academic lives of community college students. Students usually have more hours of contact with faculty than they do staff and look to faculty for direction when they are experiencing both academic and personal challenges (Kisker, 2019; Stout, 2018).

### **Faculty-Student Relationships**

Students interact with faculty first and more often than anyone else at colleges (Kisker, 2019; Stout, 2018). Faculty generally have a consistent presence each week, whether in-person or online, as the teaching and learning process is relational. They are often the first at the institution to learn about crises or other events students are experiencing. Faculty who authentically want to connect and make a difference in the lives of high-risk students influence their success (Lundberg, 2003; Schreiner et al., 2011). Students have the opportunity to informally associate with faculty directly before or after class as well as during office hours and through email correspondence. The exchanges are valuable in helping students resolve confusion about course content and, if desired, share their academic and career goals. As first-year students attempt to transition to college, these professional relationships can benefit their educational outcomes. Students' interactions with faculty influence persistence and completion (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Kuh et al., 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Taylor & Bedford, 2004). Students with lower interaction levels with faculty are less likely to persist (Ross et al., 2012).

Faculty engagement particularly impacts student persistence and academic success for African American students (Bush & Lawson Bush, 2010; Doug, 2020; Jones, 2019; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014).

Rendon (1994) postulated that validation is more important to the persistence of students than engagement. Kinzie et al. (2008) specified:

Validation activities in the teaching and learning context include calling students by name, working one-on-one with students, praising students, providing encouragement and support, encouraging students to see themselves as capable of learning, and providing vehicles for students to support and praise each other. (p. 33)

The validation provided by faculty gives students a sense of belonging that contributes to their success (Barnett, 2007; Bensimon, 2007; Schreiner et al., 2011). Students perform better when they feel embraced by their environment and validated. Historically underserved students especially need validation (Kinzie et al., 2008; Rendon, 1994). Microaggressions and other factors such as isolation, stereotyping, and alienation can decrease African American students' sense of belonging and impact their transition to college and performance (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Strayhorn, 2018). Each faculty member comes into the classroom with their own biases (Parker et al., 2016). Faculty must learn to identify how they can intentionally or unintentionally communicate these biases. It is also essential that they understand how to build a teaching and learning environment that is inclusive and supportive of all students. Teaching and learning must be a central focus if colleges desire to produce sustainable change, and data are an integral part of the teaching and learning process (Stout, 2018).

## **The Impact of Data on Teaching and Learning**

Colleges cannot close equity gaps in completion without focusing on teaching and learning, as it is an essential part of student success (Stout, 2018). First-year student progression metrics, including course success, persistence, and credit accumulation are determined by academic performance. If African American students are not performing as well as students from other races and ethnicities in first-year student progression, it is logical to look closely at disaggregated data related to teaching and learning to learn about areas of improvement. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Hart Research Associates, 2015; McNair et al., 2020), only approximately 30% of colleges regularly disaggregate data related to course and credit completion. Disaggregating data by race and ethnicity helps ensure that everyone remains accountable for closing equity gaps (Dowd et al., 2018; Harris & Bensimon, 2007; Turk & Taylor, 2019). Reporting data en masse instead of disaggregating it by race and ethnicity hinders inequities from being visible and impedes racial equity (McNair et al., 2020). Teaching and learning data should be regularly disaggregated by race and ethnicity.

Researchers advise that institutions also adopt data-informed decision-making as a best practice (Hora et al., 2017; Kisker, 2019; Parnell et al., 2018). Using data to inform teaching and learning is valuable to both instructors and students. Palucki Blake (2017) wrote, “Data-informed decision making can be used to improve assignments, courses, and curricula, of course, but it also helps make the good teaching and learning occurring on our campuses more visible, as well as more critically informed and intentional” (p. 38). Faculty are responsible for making decisions that directly influence student success. Given the agency they have over teaching and learning, faculty should be included in efforts to improve educational outcomes and close equity gaps (Burns, 2017; Kisker, 2019; Stout, 2018; Wyner, 2019).

### **The Importance of Faculty Viewing Data**

Institutions need to prioritize measuring student outcomes as well as routinely displaying and communicating about data as such practices help faculty buy into student success efforts (Parnell et al., 2018). Student success data should be transparently accessible to faculty. A lack of openness with data decreases faculty awareness and removes the opportunity for faculty to understand the current state of educational outcomes. Faculty should have access to and review course- and department-level student success data as these metrics can help them learn more about barriers to success and motivate them to change their pedagogical approach (Dowd et al., 2018; Kisker, 2019).

Instructors give quizzes and exams to students, and the results of these assessments help faculty better understand if their practices are effective and what adjustments need to be made to improve student learning. Stout (2018) stated, “In the hands of individual faculty, data can help identify how students are progressing through not just their own courses, but also through the programs they are part of” (p. 10). Faculty can help locate equity gaps in persistence and completion data and identify areas where additional data or inquiry is needed (Turk & Taylor, 2019). Pierce College’s 3-year graduation rates increased from 19% to 35% after they made course-, department-, and instructor-level student success data available to all faculty through dashboards (Long, 2017; Stout, 2018). Dashboards are useful because they make data more accessible. Yet, according to McNair et al. (2020), “simply ensuring practitioners can access data is not enough. Equally important is the nature of the language used to talk about data and to frame the gaps that might emerge when disaggregating data by race” (p. 72).

The act of viewing data as a stand-alone practice is not sufficient. Each person has a different lens through which they interpret data and apply knowledge to challenges at an

institution (Bensimon et al., 2016; Hora et al., 2017). Examining data and then discussing it helps faculty build new knowledge (Bauman et al., 2005). Yet, faculty are usually not given the opportunity to discuss disaggregated data (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Bensimon, 2005). Unlike Turk and Taylor (2019), Bensimon et al. (2016) asserted that most faculty are also not used to working with quantitative data and have difficulty interpreting data, understanding trends, and identifying equity gaps. Some faculty are apprehensive about engaging in a discussion centered on student success data (Phillips & Horowitz, 2017). According to Bichsel (2012), this hesitancy occurs at many institutions because faculty “fear or mistrust data, measurement, analysis, reporting, and change” (p. 17). Other barriers include faculty not having confidence in how data can be used to improve their professional practices, especially if they do not control this process. (Baker & Sax, 2012). It is a missed opportunity when colleges only reveal student success data to faculty and do not also give them the chance to discuss the data. How faculty interpret data can have greater consequences than the data that are reported; in addition to reviewing raw numbers, individuals must also discuss the implications of the data (Bensimon et al., 2016). Faculty regularly discussing data should be a part of the institutional culture (Witham & Bensimon, 2012).

Bailey and Alfonso (2005) defined a culture of evidence as one where data play a significant role at an institution and faculty use data to help make decisions. Dowd (2005) developed this idea further and clarified that institutions must build a culture of inquiry instead of a culture of evidence by making the practitioners the focus instead of the data. Data cannot stand alone, as individuals are needed to subjectively analyze and make meaning of it (Alford, 1998; Dowd, 2005; Witham & Bensimon, 2012). In a culture of inquiry, “the emphasis shifts from the data to the decision-maker as the locus of change” (Dowd, 2005, p. 2). Giving faculty

the opportunity to view and reflect on data provides them with the agency to consider how practices impact the equity gap.

### **Faculty and Sensemaking of Data**

An individual can engage in sensemaking from a deficit-minded cognitive frame or an equity-minded cognitive frame. McNair et al. (2020) argued, “It is crucial that institutions gather and analyze qualitative and quantitative data in order to understand student experiences, learning, and outcomes. Equally important, however, is the process during which practitioners reflect on and make sense of data to inform their actions” (p. 53). The Center for Urban Education defines equity-minded sensemaking as a “process of critical reflection, contextualization, and meaning-making” (McNair et al., 2020, p. 61). The goal in equity-minded sensemaking is not for the individual to figure out how to solve the problem of equity gaps. Instead, it is to “foster a culture of inquiry so that institutional and practitioner action is guided by evidence and directed at those practices that contribute to or exacerbate inequities” (McNair et al., 2020, p. 62). Equity-minded sensemaking involves the following: (a) examining racial inequity by viewing disaggregated data (b) interpreting the equity gaps as a sign that institutional and individual practices are not effective (c) asking how and why these practices are not serving the students who are encountering inequities (d) asking how can they contribute to closing equity gaps (McNair et al., 2020). Faculty must engage in equity-minded sensemaking of data as their role is central to student success (Bensimon, 2005).

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine faculty perceptions of the reasons for the equity gap between African American students and all other students at Hillman Community College in first-year curriculum student progression. Qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because it allows researchers to better understand how individuals assign meaning to things occurring in their natural settings and context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This basic qualitative study addressed the following research questions:

- 1) What are faculty perceptions of the equity gap between African American students and all other students related to first-year curriculum student progression?
- 2) What are faculty perceptions of the institutional barriers that contribute to the equity gap between African American students and all other students related to first-year curriculum student progression?
- 3) What are faculty perceptions of their role in reducing the equity gap between African American students and all other students related to first-year curriculum student progression?

This chapter begins with a description of the basic qualitative research design and rationale. Next, the researcher's positionality, research setting, participant selection, and data collection and analysis are outlined. The chapter concludes by addressing credibility, dependability, transferability, and ethical considerations.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

According to Creswell (2007), "qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring

into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). Qualitative research was the best approach to study how faculty perceive and interpret what they experience (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The researcher served as a key instrument and gathered data by conducting interviews using open-ended questions instead of administering a survey or questionnaire (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The focus of this study was to investigate how faculty make sense of the equity gap in first-year student progression for African American students. Conducting a basic qualitative study helps researchers understand: “(a) how people interpret their experiences, (b) how they construct their worlds, and (c) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). “A central characteristic of all qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds. Constructivism thus underlies what we are calling a basic qualitative study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). In this study, the researcher observed how faculty interpreted the data, constructed their role in improving the data, and the meaning they attributed to the data.

Basic qualitative studies are the most common approach to qualitative research used in the field of education (Merriam, 2009). “Data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). In this study, data were collected from one institution. Baker and Sax (2012) described how limiting their study to one institution allowed a close focus on faculty perceptions. The meaning faculty give to their experience of the data helps reveal their cognitive frame. Meanings do not just appear unexpectedly with no foundation. “Meanings are constructed by humans as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42–43). Qualitative studies are rich and descriptive as words and pictures describe the researcher’s results instead of numbers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Researcher Positionality**

Merriam (1988) stated that in qualitative studies, the researcher is “the primary instrument of data collection” (p. 34) in the collection and analysis of data. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that it is important that researchers “position themselves” in the research and acknowledge how their “personal, cultural, and historical” experiences shape how they interpret data (p. 71). My desire to conduct this research study stemmed from my interest in drawing awareness to the equity gaps that exist for minoritized students. I am an African American woman who has been engaged in social justice work throughout my career. I completed my undergraduate degree as a traditional-aged college student, and I was never a community college student. However, I have experienced some of the same barriers that African American community college students face as they attempt to navigate predominately White institutions. Earlier in my career, I taught as a graduate student instructor at a large university; however, I have never held a faculty role at a community college. Currently, I serve as an administrator at a community college in North Carolina where I interact with community college students daily.

I am an outsider because I have never held a position as a community college faculty member. At the same time, I am an insider because I share the same race as individuals represented in the data participants in the study viewed. Glesne (2011) clarified, “researchers cannot control positionality in that it is determined in relations with others, but they can make certain choices that affect those relationships” (p. 157). I am aware that my social identities may bias my research. In order to mitigate potential bias, I memoed to consider how my experiences, values, biases, and assumptions may have inadvertently shaped data collection and data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Research Setting**

Hillman Community College is a midsized college in North Carolina with an enrollment of approximately 2,800 curriculum students. There are notable contrasts in the two counties the college serves (Chambers County and Emerald County [pseudonyms]) in socioeconomic status and racial and ethnic composition. The institution offers degree, diploma, and certificate curriculum programs in the schools of Arts and Sciences, Career and Technical Education, and Health Sciences. Hillman Community College also offers noncredit continuing education courses in adult basic skills, customized training, and personal interest classes. Using Fall 2017 cohort data, approximately 60% of the first-time curriculum students were White and 40% were racially minoritized. Nineteen percent of first-time curriculum students were African American.

### **Participant Selection**

The target population for this study was Hillman Community College faculty who have taught curriculum students in their first year of college. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to select individuals who provided the most clarity to the research questions. Purposeful or purposive sampling is a nonprobability sampling technique that is recommended when the desire is to locate “information-rich [participants] from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (Patton, 2015, p. 53). After completing the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval process at my university and the institution, the institution’s IRB sent a recruitment email to all full- and part-time faculty. Qualified individuals volunteered to participate in semistructured interviews. I continued to interview participants until saturation was reached, the point where themes and responses are repeated, and new details do not emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Walker, 2012). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated:

In purposeful sampling, the size of the sample is determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus, redundancy is the primary criterion. (p. 202)

### **Data Collection**

Data for this study were collected by conducting one-on-one semistructured interviews virtually via video conferencing. An interview “is a conversation that has a structure and a purpose” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 5). Interviewing is regarded as one of the most valuable methods used to collect qualitative research data (Patton, 2015). It involves “a process in which a researcher and a participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (DeMarrais, 2004, p. 55). Interviews help researchers investigate things that cannot be observed, such as interpretations, feelings, or intentions (Patton, 2015). Interviewing was the best method of gathering the information needed to answer the research questions in this study. Semistructured interviews were navigated by a list of research questions that varied in structure to allow for greater flexibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Questions were framed as pertaining specifically to African American students. I completed a trial run of the interview questions with two faculty members who were unrelated to the study to provide the opportunity to refine the protocol and interview questions as needed.

Faculty who responded to the recruitment email and expressed interest in participating in the study were emailed the informed consent form detailing how confidentiality and data would be protected. Interviews were conducted using a video-conferencing platform. I requested permission from the participants to digitally record the interview, communicated the general nature of the study, and explained that it was voluntary. Participants were informed they could

withdraw and not continue with the process at any point. Prior to beginning the interview, participants were asked if they had any questions about the informed consent form, and I requested their verbal consent before proceeding. If there were challenges with the video conferencing technology, the interview took place via phone. Using video conferencing was a good alternative to face-to-face interviewing and had the added benefit of the ability to record the audio and video of the session (Namey & Trotter, 2014). No compensation was given in exchange for participation in the study.

Prior to beginning the interview, participants were presented with Hillman Community College data on first-year student progression consisting of “first-term and first-year leading indicators of academic success, including course success, persistence, and credit accumulation” (NCCCS, 2019, p. 1). Data were inclusive of both dually-enrolled and nonhigh school students. Participants were allowed to reference the data throughout the interview. I used a semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix A) to conduct the interview. Interview questions for this basic qualitative study were guided by the theoretical framework (Merriam, 2009). During the interview, I was mindful of engaging in best practices, such as asking probing questions for further understanding, avoiding leading questions, and not sharing my impressions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A demographic survey was given to participants at the conclusion of the interview (see Appendix B). Interview data were transcribed, and any potentially identifying information was removed. I used pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of participants and cloud-based password-protected platforms to store data.

### **Data Analysis**

The goal of data analysis is to “make sense of data [by] consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read” (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016, p. 202). It is recommended that data analysis begin at the onset of the data collection process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1994). After each interview, the data for this study were prepared and organized through transcription (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Direct identifiers including discipline and school within the college were removed to decrease the likelihood of reidentification. Analytic memos were also captured following each interview during data collection. Miles et al. (2014) highlighted that memos are “not just descriptive summaries of data but attempts to synthesize them into higher level analytic meanings” (p. 95). Memos were organized by date and keywords and were password protected using a cloud-based platform.

I began the data analysis process by reviewing the transcripts, recordings, and memos on different occasions—scanning first then reading them thoroughly (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Agar (1980) recommended, “Read the transcripts in their entirety several times. Immerse yourself in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts” (p. 103). Marginal notes were taken in the transcript and included any data that appeared to be relevant to the study. These notes were kept separately from memos and captured reflections, ideas, and things to consider or ask during the following interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This basic qualitative study used the constant comparative method to analyze data. The constant comparative method uses inductive and comparative reasoning and is commonly used in qualitative research (Charmaz, 2014; Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that “the constant comparative method of data analysis has been adopted by many researchers who are not seeking to build substantive theory or grounded theory” (p. 228). This method aims to arrange data into categories and discover patterns or relationships between the categories (Leedy, 1997). There are four fundamental steps

to the constant comparative method: (a) identify units of data, (b) use open coding to organize the units, (c) group assigned codes into categories, and (d) discover patterns or themes that recur across the categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process is not linear and takes place throughout data collection (Charmaz, 2006). Units of data, such as words or phrases, can stand alone and respond to part of the research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Coding was completed utilizing the Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) Atlas.ti. First and second cycles of coding were used to analyze the data (Saldaña, 2021). During the first cycle coding, I used open, in vivo, process, and values coding. Open coding, also known as initial coding, notates units of data present in the transcripts and memos and assigning codes. In Vivo coding allows the faculty's perspective and voice to be represented, as it uses direct quotes as codes. Process coding utilizes words ending in "-ing" to indicate action occurring in the data (Saldaña, 2021). Values coding is beneficial for capturing the perception of participants through their values, beliefs, and attitudes.

Second cycle coding utilized axial coding by looking for similar codes that repeatedly occurred and grouping the codes that appeared to go together (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2021). These groups of assigned codes formed categories. "The names of the categories and the scheme you use to sort the data will reflect the focus of your study" (Merriam, 2009, p. 178). The categories allow researchers to identify patterns and themes that inform the research questions and subquestions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is the level of confidence in the findings of a research study. Credibility, dependability, and transferability are criteria used to establish

trustworthiness in qualitative research studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility pertains to the believability of a study. Practitioners use applied research results to influence how they interact with the people they assist, so the results must be accurate (Merriam, 2009). Credibility was ensured for this study through the use of triangulation. Denzin (1978) encouraged the use of multiple sources of data as a method of establishing credibility. I used data triangulation with participants by selecting faculty with varying lengths of employment at the college and from different schools within the college. Additionally, I used member checking to establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were emailed a brief summary of the themes they shared during the interview and were given an opportunity to provide clarification if needed. All participants who responded verified that the identified themes were accurate. Another credibility strategy, given my position as a researcher, was monitoring bias and assumptions using memos (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Probst & Berenson, 2014).

In qualitative studies, dependability is referred to as reliability. Reliability refers to how well results can be replicated if a study is repeated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, the phenomena in qualitative research are not static, so dependability cannot be considered in the same way as reliability (Shenton, 2004). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested three strategies to increase the dependability of a study: triangulation, monitoring the researcher's position, and using an audit trail. In addition to triangulation and memoing, I kept an audit trail by "describing in detail how the study was conducted and how findings were derived from the data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 265).

Transferability is the degree to which the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A widely used strategy I sought to employ to increase transferability was to provide a rich and thick description of the institution, participants, and

findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These details provided context and will help other researchers and institutions “assess the similarity between them and the study” after viewing the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 257).

### **Ethical Considerations**

As the researcher for this study, I completed the IRB approval process at North Carolina State University and the institution in which the study was conducted. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study. Participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. All recordings, memos, and transcripts were stored digitally on a password-protected cloud-based platform.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the methodology that was employed for the research study. Basic qualitative studies are common in the field of education and use an interpretive-constructivist approach to determine how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their experiences and construct their world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This basic qualitative study was conducted to explore how faculty interpret data that reveal an equity gap in first-year student progression for African American community college students at their institution. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method. The themes and recommendations that emerged from this analysis will be presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine faculty perceptions of the reasons for the equity gap between African American students and all other students at Hillman Community College in first-year curriculum student progression. Data were collected by college faculty participating in semistructured interviews using purposeful sampling to address the following research questions:

- 1) What are faculty perceptions of the equity gap between African American students and all other students related to first-year curriculum student progression?
- 2) What are faculty perceptions of the institutional barriers that contribute to the equity gap between African American students and all other students related to first-year curriculum student progression?
- 3) What are faculty perceptions of their role in reducing the equity gap between African American students and all other students related to first-year curriculum student progression?

This chapter presents the research findings of interviews conducted with faculty members from Hillman Community College, a midsized college located in North Carolina. Four themes emerged following data analysis: (a) internal and external contributors to the equity gap in progression for first-year African American students, (b) faculty initiating engagement with African American students inside and outside of the classroom to foster progression, (c) faculty understanding and implementation of effective teaching and learning practices, and (d) faculty and senior leadership need to prioritize race and racial equity and data are the foundation.

The participant sample included 10 full- and part-time faculty within the schools of Arts and Sciences, Career and Technical Education, and Health Sciences with lengths of service

ranging from 3 months to 18 years. Four participants were African American and six participants identified as White. The study was limited to faculty who teach curriculum courses and all reported experience teaching first-year students. Faculty participated in one semistructured interview conducted virtually via video conference lasting approximately 60 to 75 minutes. Direct identifiers including discipline and school within the college were removed to decrease the likelihood of re-identification. Pseudonyms were assigned for each participant as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participant Profile*

Pseudonym	Gender	Years of Service at the College		
		0-4 Years	5-9 Years	10+ Years
Demetria	Female	X		
Ralph	Male		X	
Samantha	Female	X		
Tiffany	Female			X
Justine	Female		X	
Lena	Female			X
Elyse	Female		X	
Ted	Male	X		
Greg	Male		X	

After answering general introductory questions at the beginning of the interview, participants were asked to rate their knowledge of issues related to equity in higher education. Two faculty rated themselves as “very knowledgeable,” two self-rated as “knowledgeable,” and the remaining reported that they were “somewhat knowledgeable.” Then faculty were shown

early momentum metrics for Hillman Community College, including first-year student progression, gateway course completion, first-semester satisfactory academic progress, and first-semester credit momentum.

A few participants acknowledged that they were not surprised by the data as they had seen similar data previously. However, other instructors expressed surprise when viewing the data. Elyse admitted, “That’s really surprising me how low all of the numbers are.” During her reflection, Tiffany shared, “I think faculty would be very interested in knowing this data...I didn’t know this until you presented it. I think this is something that every faculty member here would like to see.” Greg reported, “I’d never seen information this specifically laid out before...so this is kind of eye-opening for me for sure.” Other reactions to the data included “sad,” “depressing,” and “scary.”

After early momentum metrics were presented, participants were asked to describe what comes to mind for them when looking at the outcomes, specify gaps observed for African American students, and share their opinion concerning why these gaps exist. Faculty were then asked questions to engage them in equity-minded sensemaking, including examining what institutional practices are barriers to African American students and how they can contribute to reducing equity gaps (McNair et al., 2020). During the interview, questions were framed as pertaining specifically to African American students; however, faculty did not always use the terms African American students or Black students within each response. Additionally, some participants used African American and students of color interchangeably. Table 2 outlines the themes and subthemes that emerged from the study.

**Table 2***Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
External and internal contributors to the equity gap	
Faculty initiating engagement with African American students inside and outside of the classroom to foster progression	Intentional relationship building and outreach  Helping students who are struggling and need resources
Faculty understanding and implementation of effective teaching and learning practices	Faculty receiving professional development on teaching and learning practices  Faculty adjusting instructional practices to improve student success
Faculty and senior leadership need to prioritize race and racial equity and data are the foundation	Faculty are not viewing data disaggregated by race as a regular practice  Increasing awareness of issues related to race and racial equity  Faculty sensemaking of data disaggregated by race

**External and Internal Contributors to the Equity Gap**

**in First-Year African American Students' Progression**

Participants were asked to describe what has contributed to the equity gap noted in the data for first-year African American community college students around first-year progression, gatekeeper course success, accumulation of credits, and satisfactory academic progress.

Participants identified external and internal contributors to the equity gap. External contributors were defined as outside of the control of the college. Internal contributors were defined as within

the control of the institution. Faculty detailed more external contributors than internal contributors when considering what influences the equity gap in first-year progression for African American students.

### **External Contributors to the Equity Gap**

External contributors to the equity gap were classified as reasons that are outside of the control of faculty or the institution. External contributors identified by faculty included economic-, family-, race-, social-, and educational-related issues. Eleven external contributors were identified. In particular, faculty discussed low socioeconomic status, the need to work while attending school, limited access to technology, transportation issues, and family responsibilities as external factors related to the equity gap.

#### ***Low Socioeconomic Status***

Almost all participants mentioned low-socioeconomic status as a contributor to the equity gap for African American first-year students. African Americans were associated with experiencing a higher likelihood of poverty and a more significant impact of low socioeconomic status. Fundamental needs such as housing and food were identified as in jeopardy for some students. Tiffany remarked, “We’ve got some students who don’t know where they’re going to sleep at night. We’ve got students who don’t know when they’re going to get anything to eat.” Low socioeconomic status was also mentioned as a factor impacting academic status. African American students who lose financial aid after their first year due to not meeting satisfactory academic progress cannot return the following academic year. Low socioeconomic status was also associated with students who are employed in addition to taking courses.

### ***Working While Attending College***

Most participants identified that many African American students are working and attending college classes, as many need to support their families financially. Ralph stated, “Work is a big one. 9.5 times out of 10, students of color are working. That can easily get in the way if they’re working full time and then trying to juggle other responsibilities.” He elaborated:

I have high school students right now that are of color that are working and are dually enrolled, which, personally, I can’t imagine. But that’s the reality for some of our students. “I’m in high school, I’m in college, and I’m also holding down a job at the same time.” That definitely can be a huge barrier for a lot of our students.

Faculty perceived that the demands of working, balancing deadlines for assignments, and attending class could overextend some students and make course completion difficult as they lacked the resource of time. Further complicating the situation are issues with accessing technology, which can consume valuable time for study.

### ***Technology Access Issues***

According to faculty, poor internet connection or no access to proper technology makes it difficult for some students to complete coursework. Some students live in rural areas and do not have broadband service, so they attempt to complete homework on their cell phones. Reflecting on the experience of students with this challenge, Greg inferred, “They just don’t have good quality access to the internet or something like that. And so they’re wholly dependent on things that they can get done while they’re on our campus, for example, and maybe they’re not on our campus for very long.” Technology is woven into most aspects of college coursework, so faculty assumed that limitations with access to technology could also limit course success. As faculty

discussed these limitations, they also mentioned some students' access to reliable transportation as a factor in their academic success.

### ***Transportation Issues***

Some students are limited by transportation because they do not have a car or are dependent on a family member or friend to drive them to campus. If this person cannot transport them, this means that they will miss class. Tiffany explained how this is a challenge for students:

So I would say that in my interaction with my students...my African American students is that there seems to be a lot more going on at home. There was one time I had a student that had an issue with transportation. I didn't know that. And this person kept being absent for class. And then once I reached out to him and said, "Hey, can you tell what's going on?" And he said I don't have a way to get to the campus. And I said, well, we have resources, we can help you.

Faculty shared that a lack of dependable and accessible transportation impacts attendance and seated classes have an attendance requirement. Faculty also mentioned that students often have other responsibilities such as family caretaking that impact their ability to be present and active in class and course activities.

### ***Family Caretaking***

Some first-year African American community college students act as caretakers for family members. Justine shared, "Factors that influence the accumulation of credit come from maybe not taking as many credits because they have to work or because they have to take care of their younger siblings potentially because their parents are working." Additionally, some students have children, and childcare was often mentioned as a factor in the gap in first-year

student progression. Describing a student's challenge with attendance in her class, Vanessa explained:

I have a student right now. She's about to be done. I sent her an email saying, "Listen, you're going to get dropped, and then if you miss one more day...you don't have but one day." And then she came to class with her daughter. That was her solution because she didn't want to be dropped from the class.

The student brought her child to class; however, according to the college's student handbook, students are not allowed to bring children to class, so the student was turned away. Several faculty recommended the benefit of community colleges having an on-site daycare for students to drop off children as needed. They explained that some students learn better in seated courses, but most seated courses are offered during the daytime when childcare is limited, so on-campus childcare would increase access to courses for students with children. The challenges faced by African American students such as access to technology, transportation, sufficient income, and family responsibilities were only part of the issues noted by faculty in the semistructured interviews. Faculty also noted students experience external contributors such as a perceived sense of not belonging due to lack of student racial diversity that influences their feelings of acceptance and feeling a part of the campus.

### ***Perceived Sense of not Belonging due to Lack of Student Racial Diversity***

A lack of racial diversity among students on the campus may contribute to students' sense of belonging or feelings of importance in the educational space. A few faculty described a lack of racial diversity amongst students at the college. Samantha stated, "I personally have been surprised at how few African American students we actually have at the college. So I would think that you would, that someone would, feel more out of place with a smaller percentage. ... It

seems like there are not very many minorities.” Samantha continued by expressing her concern about students’ perception of their sustainability for college. She shared:

I think that at least a lot of the college students I’ve talked to, they seem to have this idea that they don’t belong here, or they can’t be successful. And maybe there is a lack of persistence because they perceive that it’s easier for others than for themselves, maybe, or they believe that everyone else belongs here and they don’t.

Faculty perceived that African American students might struggle with a sense of belonging due to lack of representation and feeling that there is no community to support them.

### ***Lack of Motivation***

Instructors who reported a lack of motivation as a contributor to the equity gap referred to minimal engagement from students who do not take their education seriously after high school and accept mediocre grades as long as they can pass the class. Demetria reflected on her time as an adjunct instructor and experience with some of the challenges for African American students, “The most that I saw was a lack of motivation, a lack of engagement, and that effort and owning the learning process. The drive wasn’t there as much as the other students.” Elyse shared her perspective about how students who are not doing well in courses are perceived as lacking motivation. She said:

So, I think sometimes students who are struggling are just viewed as apathetic or not working hard enough, or it’s okay to just let them fail out and keep the people who are doing it moving forward. But that really doesn’t provide that equity we’re talking about.

According to Elyse’s perspective, a deficit-minded perception and assumptions that students lack motivation can influence the action of faculty. A lack of motivation was also attributed to students having lower standards for achieving and not valuing education.

### ***Low Value of Education***

A few faculty members shared that higher education is not a priority for some students' families due to the expectation that they work to support their families. Greg reflected on the prioritization of college for some students he has encountered in [Gilbert City] and shared:

Sometimes education is maybe not the primary resource that parents in those circumstances are thinking about. It's like, "Okay, well, we got the family business, this is what you're going to be doing next. And so you need to kind of just finish up high school, and then we're going to move you into whatever career it is that you're going to do."

Justine commented on the same dynamic occurring in [Gilbert City]; however, she specified that she does not believe that the low value placed on education for some students and families in [Gilbert City] is a race-specific issue but an economic one. Samantha discussed how some students are not experiencing success in her course because they are low-income and have reluctance to ask for help when they do not have proper equipment or resources.

### ***Internalized Stigma Around Receiving Help***

Faculty spoke of the reluctance of some African American students to reach out for tutoring and wondered if it was associated with the stigma attached to receiving help. Justine commented that students might not, "feel comfortable getting extra help, getting support. Maybe that's not been something that all students are instructed to do equally, or maybe they just don't feel comfortable asking for help." Greg shared the same sentiments: "People generally don't ask for help because there are a lot of factors that come into it. Maybe it's a pride thing, or maybe it's not wanting to feel like they need the help." In addition to having a reluctance to ask for help,

faculty thought that some African American students are not successful because of gaps in their K-12 education.

### ***K–12 Gaps***

Almost all participants referred to gaps in K–12 education as contributors influencing the equity gap in first-year student success for African American students. Demetria explained, “If the achievement gaps were not addressed prior to entering these college-level gatekeeper courses, then the gaps will be wider. They become wider once they begin in college-level courses. If they already had gaps, the gaps are wider because the pace is faster.” Faculty also mentioned the economic disparity between high schools. Faculty noticed that affluent high schools have more resources and, therefore, prepare students better for college than high schools located in low-income areas. Participants alleged that high school success is often dictated by socioeconomic status and access. According to Justine:

So I think about a student in [less affluent city] versus a student in [more affluent city].

Those kinds of supports that they may have in place at their high schools may influence their knowledge in [discipline]. And then they’re automatically going to be put into lower [discipline] classes in high school or even placed into lower level classes in college.

The interplay between race and socioeconomic status is also seen when comparing African American students who are first-generation college students versus those who have a parent who completed college, which is often tied to socioeconomic status. Faculty perceived that this difference in support could impact student success.

### ***Lack of Support System Within the Student’s Family***

Many students attending community colleges are first-generation college students and experience challenges attempting to navigate the systems within a college environment.

Explaining her perspective that African American students, who are not first-generation, are typically more successful than first-generation students because they had a role-model to support them, Samantha shared:

African American students that I've had, that were successful, a lot of times it was, they would go back to their parents having gone to college, and then moving on, and maybe the ones that were not as successful didn't have that experience, like they didn't have a parent or someone to look up to that they could see that had been successful, like a brother or sister.

Some faculty assumed that first-generation college students might not have a proper support system. Ralph commented on his experience with this population: "I think some of our first-generation students that are of color will have that additional barrier of not having a support system and not knowing how to navigate this terrain." Students may not have someone in their family who has completed college but may have access to individuals who provide support in other ways. Faculty connected support to persistence as illustrated by Samantha, "I think that perseverance, if you don't have anyone you can go back to and they say, 'Oh no, you don't know. It was hard when I was in college. You're going to be fine, you can do this.'

The external contributors to the equity gap identified by faculty included low socioeconomic status, the need to work while attending school, limited access to technology, transportation issues, and family responsibilities encompass some of the equity gaps. Faculty attributed a lack of student success in first-year student progression for African American students to these reasons. Access to resources, familial support, students' value of education, and preparation prior to attending college were also shared as factors. Additionally, faculty presented internal contributors to the equity gap after viewing first-year progression data.

### **Internal Contributors to the Equity Gap**

Internal contributors were classified as being within the responsibility of the institution. Faculty identified how lack of racial diversity in faculty, an emphasis on new initiatives, and perceived inequities between campuses present unintended barriers for African American seeking to attain academic success at Hillman Community College. The factors mentioned were associated with institutional shortcomings. Two contributors were related to issues connected to racial equity.

#### ***Lack of Racial Diversity in Faculty***

Some participants addressed a lack of diversity within the faculty at the college. Ralph shared:

We don't have a lot of teachers of color. There's a lot of reasons why that ends up being the case based on where we are and a variety of other factors. But not having that representation does affect student success. It affects students' perceptions of whether they belong, and when they don't see people like themselves in upper positions, it sends a message implicitly that can work against students and can function as a barrier.

Lena agreed with Ralph's perspective. She shared, "The practice of not having people of color in some cases, that sometimes people of color are drawn to people of color sometimes, and not having that there can be a deficit with an institution." Elyse shared a similar perception regarding the need for representation within faculty of color. "We notice a gap, just in our program alone. We don't have any instructors that are not White."

However, two faculty expressed there is adequate racial and ethnic diversity within the faculty, as evidenced by the representation in their department. A faculty member stated, "I personally think we have good representation with faculty that are Black or some other

underrepresented populations. I think there are some good role models.” Vanessa had the same viewpoint, “Faculty and staff, in my department, we have a pretty good representation of African Americans.” These faculty used their own departments as a point of reference when answering this question, as did Lena, whereas Ralph and others looked across the college when assessing representation as it can vary by department. According to participants, low diversity of racially minoritized faculty can impact first-year progression because the lack of representation can send a message to students that they do not belong.

### *Emphasis on new Initiatives*

Initiative fatigue was used to explain why there may not be more awareness at the college regarding the gap in first-year African American student progression thus perpetuating the problem. A few faculty members mentioned that rolling out various new initiatives serves as a distraction by taking attention away from exploring the equity gap for African American students. Ralph clarified:

I do think it's very easy to keep going in the day-to-day, and you're focused on this new initiative and that new initiative and every other thing under the sun, but you're not really paying attention to the students that you serve. It's very easy to do, and I think we're guilty of doing it.

Additionally, faculty spoke to how guidelines from the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) office regarding student learning changes often and therefore, they must constantly adjust. Tiffany shared:

By the time you get a student planned for what they're supposed to do then you got to make changes to that plan because of what's coming down from Raleigh. So I think that's

another issue that you will hear faculty say is a problem too when it comes to this particular gap.

Instructors discussed the expectation that they embrace changes within the institution that impact them both inside and outside of the classroom. Changes within the college were also perceived to impact students inequitably.

### *Perceived Inequities Between Campuses*

Several faculty mentioned the demographic differences in race and socioeconomic status between campuses based on the makeup of the two counties the college serves. “Gilbert City” is a small rural community located in “Chambers County” which has a higher percentage of poverty than “Emerald County”. A faculty member shared, “I will say that the larger percentage of the African American population is definitely on the [Gilbert City] campus.” The demographic data confirmed this assumption; [Gilbert City] has a higher concentration of African American students. Some faculty believed that racially minoritized students may contend with other challenges that may influence their success based on their geographic location. For example, Justine shared, “The students are coming from higher poverty areas in our county; that could impact the success rates of any students but students who are minority represented may have other issues.”

Several faculty mentioned a perception from the perspective of faculty and students that one campus is better served than the other campuses and receives more resources and attention from the college. Ralph explained:

We haven’t necessarily even paid much attention to the campus that has a good chunk of our students of color. We serve multiple campuses, but it could be argued that we don’t serve them all equally. Our campus, which is probably 50/50 on the Black/White scale,

close to half and half, tends to face a lot of neglect. There's not a lot of resources at that campus. The class scheduling tends to be more sparse there, and, quite frankly, the students get left behind there.

Ralph continued by disclosing that many programs have been removed from that campus and it could be perceived by students that they are not as valued as students on the other campus in a suburban area as that campus has a new building, more programs, and greater availability of resources.

Samantha discussed her perception of how the campuses are served and stated, "I have noticed a lot of difference there between [Chambers County] and the campus in [Emerald County], and I know they're trying to bridge ... I just think it's not equal. Yeah, it's not equitable. ... We probably still need to work on that." Lena also noticed a similar observation, "The practice of not being in one community more than you are in another is very apparent here." Faculty believed that the inequities in how campuses are served impacts the difference in first-year student progression for African American students.

Internal contributors to the equity gap identified by faculty included lack of racial diversity in faculty, an emphasis on new initiatives, and perceived inequities between campuses. Participants believed that these contributors might influence the success of first-year African American students either directly or indirectly. Two contributors were related to students' perception of faculty representation and how the college is serving students. One contributor was an unintended consequence of the college's focus on growth and development.

Participants identified internal and external contributors to the equity gap in first-year student progression for African American community college students. Participants outlined more external contributors than internal contributors when asked to describe what has influenced

the gap noted in the data for first-year African American community college students. In later questions, faculty were asked to reflect on their role in closing the equity gap in first-year student progression. The next section is a presentation of faculty's reflections related to their personal responsibility in addressing the equity gap in first-year student progression for African-American students at Hillman Community College.

### **Faculty Initiating Engagement with African American Students**

#### **Inside and Outside of the Classroom to Foster Progression**

The second theme of this study was faculty initiating engagement with African American students inside and outside of the classroom to foster progression. Participants were asked to reflect on their personal role in closing the equity gap for African American students at Hillman Community College. Faculty discussed their perspective regarding taking ownership of their role with initiating engagement with students enrolled in their classes. Two subthemes emerged from this theme: (a) intentional relationship building and outreach and (b) helping students who are struggling and need resources. Participants identified that relationship building begins with establishing trust and rapport. Participants also placed emphasis on being alert to students who are experiencing challenges, connecting students to resources, and extending support beyond the classroom.

#### **Intentional Relationship Building and Outreach**

Faculty emphasized the importance of having a student-centered approach by establishing the foundation of the student-instructor relationship through building rapport and trust as well as intentional engagement with African American students instead of waiting for students to communicate with them. Faculty identified these actions as strategies that help increase student

success. Interactions between faculty and students occur both inside and outside of the classroom.

### ***Building Rapport and Trust***

Faculty described the need to have strong interpersonal relationships with students rooted in first establishing rapport and trust. A faculty member shared about his prioritization of building rapport with students:

So in my mind, my role starts with, okay, what can I do with the students that are in my classroom? ... And how can I interact with students in a meaningful way so they can get what they need and feel comfortable and connected to the course and to me and then move forward?

Vanessa added, “Faculty members need to have a vested interest in each student. And don’t come to class on your first day with a preconceived notion about who these people are. Learn and get to know people for who they are.” Lena expressed that by establishing rapport and relationships, some students will engage more frequently than others. She stated increased engagement is due to the instructor building trust and an environment where students can feel safe to ask questions. Lena shared:

Yes, with some students they’re going to want to connect with you more than other students. And that’s because they’re beginning to develop a trust relationship with you. And yes, you do have some students that have more questions than others, but to answer those questions in a clear, thorough manner...building the relationships are also key to that student success.

Elyse shared similar statements regarding how she is “purposeful in interacting with every student” and builds relationships with students so they know help is available. Elyse stated:

Personally what I try to do is know my students and not get into personal business, but be there as far as we can. We are fortunate in our department. We really develop strong relationships with our students and are very clear early on that “we’re here to help if you want it.”

A component of faculty building trust and rapport includes communication. Building trust and rapport with students through communication was highlighted as a foundational part of establishing relationships with students.

Several faculty mentioned communication as an essential part of trust-building between faculty and the student. For example, Tiffany offered, “It’s just getting that conversation going, that communication going.” Greg echoed her thoughts by adding, “finding a way to initiate conversations as much as possible.” These conversations happen during class time and are intentionally initiated by faculty when class is not in session. Justine described her approach, “I’m keeping up with them, sending them some encouraging words to keep going and persist. So that connection, I think, would be helpful for faculty to make with students outside of the classroom.”

Communication was viewed as an intentional practice guided by faculty initiative for the purpose of establishing rapport and building trust. Faculty viewed communication as essential to their role in helping all students succeed; however, they identified a trust relationship is essential in meeting African American students’ needs and reducing their barriers to success. Faculty shared an understanding that engagement with African American students must be purposeful and intentional.

### *Intentionality With African American Students*

While faculty emphasized that they are invested in the success of all students, they highlighted the importance of intentional engagement with African American students. Justine shared:

Engagement, I think, is important...trying to engage all populations, but especially these populations that are in the gap [experiencing inequities in educational outcomes], the ones that are performing lower need to be...there has to be attention paid.

Justine later added, “I do try to pay attention to my Black students, in particular, to try to make sure that they feel supported.” Demetria offered an example of how she provides positive reinforcement for African American students, “I had to be more intentional with my African American students to engage them and keep them engaged. So consistent communication, weekly reaching out: “I see that you did your work– awesome!” providing affirmation: “this is what you’re doing well, but this is what you need to do differently” to support keeping them engaged.

One participant spoke at length about engagement with racially minoritized students. He underscored how there are different approaches to engagement for students of color and non-students of color, and communication can be perceived differently due to students’ racial or ethnic background. He remarked that it is essential for faculty to be aware of this difference in communication style:

Unfortunately, best practices for engaging students of color are not necessarily best practices for engaging non-students of color. There needs to be more rapport building. There has to be an expanded understanding of what some of the behaviors from students of color really mean. So, for example, certain behaviors can be perceived negatively like

students that are chronically late or students that are talking during class or students that don't ask for help, so on and so forth. I think a lot of these are not understood by a wide array of faculty regardless of the ethnicity or race of the instructor. So, I do think there are teaching components that affect whether or not students will persist. Something like rapport building, for example, which can matter to students of color can be very challenging for some instructors to figure out.

When asked how he would describe his interaction and engagement with African American students in his classes, Ralph explained his efforts with helping first-year African American students navigate the college. He shared:

I try to work as an intermediary and help out when I can and show that I'm available, communicate with folks, get to know the students a little better, understand what they're going through, and not be dismissive of their personal lives, and sort of go from there. So it's a little different than other students if I'm being honest. There's a part I have to be...there's a part that I'm aware of, with all of my students, regardless of demographic background and whatnot, but for students of color, there's additional things that are different than other students that I have to keep in mind and then go from there.

Ralph expounded on his previous comments by highlighting the need to be approachable when working with African American students. He stated he is intentional about initiating engagement. Ralph explained:

It's rough because I do find that typically African American students, especially African American males, are not going to be the students that engage with instructors the most. So I do have to put in more of a conscious effort to sometimes initiate contact and show that I'm available and approachable. Compared to other students who will just walk right

up to me and do something like ask a question. Sometimes I find that my students of color will not ask me a question, I have to prompt it because we have to work on that rapport building, that relationship building first. So the nature of those interactions is a little different. I do normally have to initiate, and I have to keep in mind that there may be various factors that underlie what's going on. Some factors I may not be able to see. And thus, it's okay to initiate and to not just expect the students to come to me. That's been one of the biggest changes I've had to make.

The participants in this study affirmed Ralph's comments, reporting that building relationships with students helps validate and affirm the students and provides a foundation for student success when they experience challenges and need support.

### **Help Students Who are Struggling and Need Resources**

Participants expressed that when students face difficulty with course material and across the larger college faculty feel ownership of their role in acting as a bridge to resources and giving additional effort beyond just teaching content. Greg explained that some things are outside his control as a faculty member, but he believes faculty have agency over their engagement with students. He also elaborated on how faculty should maintain expectations for all students, but also make an intentional effort to engage with students who are experiencing challenges, such as African American students impacted by equity gaps. Greg shared:

I guess I would say that the biggest thing is, again, like I said at the beginning, [not] just trying to have the same expectations for all students but coming back and trying to find and meet these students where they are. So that means figuring out ways to help them in whatever way that you can. Now, obviously, I can't drive all these students to class, and I don't have the wherewithal or the ability to fix any access problems necessarily. I don't

have that in my power to do that. But I try to do everything that is within my power, from my personal perspective, try to give them what they need, and to open up that dialogue and ask those questions like, “Hey, what can I do to help you?”

Faculty use student engagement to help them know when there are students struggling in courses, which requires awareness to notice changes with students. Elyse elaborated, “So definitely I make my point to know everybody and kind of figure out who needs more help than others and provide that.” Vanessa spoke to being alert to student needs:

I mean, I interact and engage with them well, I think. I do pay attention to what they do and don't do, and if I see students that are struggling or not taking something seriously, I'll say something to them. And I pay a lot of attention, I will say that.

Samantha shared that her approach to decreased student attendance is to offer positive reinforcement and to remind each student that they are a valuable part of the class and their presence is missed.

We also sometimes will reach out to students if they've not been attending as much and say, “Well, you did this in class, and that was so exciting. And so, we really need you in class to keep going, and you've got this.” And I've seen students come back from that, where they lose interest, and you pull them back.

Samantha stated she is also mindful of students who may have a lower engagement with course material and proactively contacts them to encourage them to re-engage. Tiffany explained how her investment in engagement with students is with course success in mind and to help students focus. Tiffany acknowledged, “If I'm not addressing their concerns, and if I am not listening to them, then they're not going to have their mind into the course and the program the way I need them to be.”

Most faculty agreed that the focus should not be on teaching course content alone, but instructors should be invested in initiating engagement with students. Faculty like Vanessa believed that it begins with a fundamental interest in student success. She summarized:

If you see a trend in a student, or if you see that they've started off very well coming to class every day, or every day that your class meets, they will turn in assignments, and all of a sudden, it stopped. Like what happened? What caused that to happen? Reaching out to the student...And that's what I do.

Instructors reported that being proactive and investing in student success also applies to when students are experiencing challenges in the classroom. Positive interactions can affirm students; however, negative interpersonal interactions can work against student success. During her interview, Vanessa shared a story regarding an African American female student who came to her because the student had a negative interaction with another instructor who misunderstood her intentions. The student expressed confusion regarding course content, and asked the instructor questions for clarity. The instructor then asked the student if she was attempting to argue with him. Vanessa wondered if the instructor had the wrong perception of the student's intentions and reflected on how the instructor's words affected the student. The instructor missed the opportunity to use the dialogue with the student as a way of connecting as well as clarifying information because the student was experiencing challenges with the course material. Although the student had a contentious relationship with her other instructor, she felt comfortable enough to come to Vanessa and express her feelings regarding the situation and receive feedback on how she can best navigate through it.

### ***Bridge for Resources***

Faculty expressed that they often see themselves as a bridge of connection between the student and the broader institution as they understand the inner workings of the college and how to best navigate academic and student affairs. In addition to conveying the information on resources to students, participants expressed the importance of physically connecting students and, as Elyse stated, “walking them to resources” when possible. Elyse explained her perspective on faculty members’ role in helping students navigate college resources:

The hardest part is walking in and finding the resource. Once you have it, it’s not too hard to use it, but it’s hard to find it, and so I think if we provided easier tracks for finding resources before they get into trouble as opposed to trying to get them back on track after they get into trouble, I think that might be more effective and then just providing more resources for helping to offset some of the challenges that they’re meeting.

In addition to physically connecting students to various areas within the college, faculty shared that instructors must stay abreast of changes within programs and resources to offer that information to students and keep in mind students who may benefit from those resources. Elyse elaborated:

Well, they need to be educated in them. They need to be proactive in identifying students who may fit into that gap, essentially. And then they need to be versed on what resources are available and find ways to connect the students.

Lena embraced the same perspective about her role in reducing the gaps in first-year progression for African American students. Lena shared:

My role is to keep the student informed as best I can, as to what the program offers, as best [as I can] to what the college offers, and how we can support their success. As faculty, if we can keep abreast of the different things that the college offers, and then not only that, reaching out when we have a question, [we can demonstrate for students how to seek help].

Lena shared an example of the type of role-modeling she uses with students to link them to resources. She stated:

So if there's an admissions question, reach out to admissions, counseling, registrar, whatever other department that we need to go ahead and just reach out and say, "I have a student here. And these are some questions that she or he has. And so tell me what we can do to support the student." And that's the way I always usually say it, "What is it that we can do to support the student? How can we work together?" So, it's got to be a *we* approach, not an *I* approach.

Lena shared that she understands that at times faculty must call resources across the college on the student's behalf. She recognizes that sometimes she can get a faster response from faculty and staff than the student navigating the situation alone. Lena asserted, "Sometimes when faculty support and they call, things get done quicker for a student than if a student were to go on their own and try to get it done."

Tiffany shared her experience with a former African American student who was frustrated and appeared upset each time he came to class. She reached out to the student and learned that he was managing personal and financial challenges in addition to the course load for her class. Once she took the time to connect him to campus resources, she noticed a change in the student's demeanor during class. She recounted:

I think that sometimes students feel like nobody cares. Nobody wants to help them. And that's just not the case. Because as soon as they start talking, and as soon as they realize, "Hey, I've got this resource available. This is somebody that I can go to that is willing to help me," I think that once you figure out how we can get rid of that issue, I think you would see that a lot more students would be successful.

Participants in this study recognized their role in connecting students to needed resources which they acknowledged is a way to provide continued support for African American students and close the equity gap. Participants understood that connecting students to campus resources will require them to give additional support to students and engage with them outside of the stated expectations within the classroom. Faculty's role in closing the equity gap means they may have to apply extra effort to help students succeed, and that effort must be individualized for every student.

### ***Give Extra Effort When Needed***

Faculty expressed there are times when it is necessary to go above and beyond and offer extra assistance to students because each student is different and their needs are unique. While considering her approach to working with students, Elyse offered, "giving extra effort on our end to help them be more successful, providing one-on-one tutoring with the instructor so that they can have that content." Greg supported the same approach stating, "And to whatever end that requires us to go to if it's extra effort that has to be put in, I would hope that would be the case, regardless of the student's background or anything like that." He later continued, "If this student begins to show signs of fading away, or not turning in work, or not coming to class, there is an extra effort on the part of faculty." Likewise, Lena compared supporting students to giving toward an investment:

You may have some students that may need extra support from you as an instructor. Taking that time and putting that time in for that student is like investing. You want to invest for a reason because you'll see quality in their return. So if we invest in our students, we will see that quality in our return. ... And sometimes that means as an instructor coming out of our comfort zone, sometimes that means meeting with students after hours, that after-hours phone call, or that after-hours Zoom meeting that you will have with that student.

After viewing the early momentum metrics, including first-year student progression, gateway course completion, first-semester satisfactory academic progress, and first-semester credit momentum, faculty identified their role in initiating engagement with African American students is to promote student success as a strategy to close equity gaps. Participants expressed ownership of being intentional with building relationships with students through establishing trust and rapport as well as assisting those who are experiencing difficulty and need to be connected to resources. These actions are important to the teaching and learning process and inform faculty when shaping practices that lead to student success and help close the equity gap for African American students at the college.

### **Faculty Understanding and Implementation of Effective Teaching and Learning Practices**

The third theme, faculty understanding and implementation of effective teaching and learning practices, emerged from the analysis of participants' responses as training and practical application in the classroom. Two subthemes emerged within this theme: (a) faculty receiving professional development on teaching and learning practices and (b) faculty adjusting instructional practices to improve student success. Some faculty received formal training before accepting a role as a community college instructor. Others explained they did not have any

understanding of instructional best practices when they began as community college faculty and developed skills over time. Overall, faculty agreed that the college has increased efforts to offer professional development for faculty over the years, but there is still a need to strengthen faculty understanding of how to differentiate instruction for diverse student populations. Participants discussed the need to adjust their teaching practices through personalizing and modifying instruction to meet students where they are and address diverse student needs and learning styles.

### **Faculty Receiving Professional Development on Teaching and Learning Practices**

The faculty role at Hillman Community College requires a master's degree; however, it does not require training on instructional practices. Faculty reported they either had received formalized teaching and learning training prior to becoming an instructor or they had to navigate learning these best practices on their own after accepting the role. They also revealed the institution's approach to professional development around teaching and learning.

### ***Formal Training in Instructional Practices***

Some instructors reported formal training on instructional practices prior to becoming community college faculty. Their first experiences were in K-12 education before moving into higher education. Formalized training in pedagogy gave them a foundation of how to differentiate instruction. Demetria disclosed that she had graduate-level training in teaching methodology and instructional practices. She articulated how having a knowledge of pedagogy and data helps her understand how to best approach students who are enrolled in her classes.

Demetria shared:

That's just a mindset of my knowing that if I know the data of the students that I'm going to serve prior to beginning, I can be able to differentiate my instruction, I can be able to know that I need to have some check-ins, I can be able to provide personalized

instruction, provide more time to address concerns so that opportunities of completion are higher than according to what the data says that they have a higher risk of not completing.

Samantha, who completed a K–12 teacher education program, shared that since transitioning from a high school teacher to a college instructor she sees the close parallels between each position. She paired her formal education with one-on-one guidance from her department chair and additional training.

Faculty who did receive formal teaching and learning training recognized that most community college instructors do not have academic preparation in instructional practices. Justine explained, “How did I learn to teach? So, unlike a lot of faculty – I wouldn’t say a lot – but unlike most faculty, I have my bachelor’s in education...So for me, I brought in my knowledge from undergrad.” Justine discussed how her understanding of foundational teaching methods combined with previous teaching experience at community colleges as an adjunct and full-time instructor helped her be better prepared for her current teaching role whether teaching adult learners or high school students. “I was able to translate those skills that I had, from my student teaching, and from my experience into the college level, pretty naturally, but also having adult students too, you do have to teach slightly differently.” Like Samantha, Justine did not overlook the value of mentorship in her professional development in helping her grow. “I had great, great mentors. I’ve always had really good mentors and supervisors. So, through observations, through suggestions, through watching their classes as well, and having a background in education. I think all of that helped.” Justine affirmed that it would be beneficial for faculty to receive more training to help them grow in their teaching practices. “I don’t think community college faculty are trained enough actually, in teaching.” While three participants

reported they had formalized training prior to accepting a role as community college faculty the remaining participants disclosed they did not have the same preparation.

### *No Formal Training in Instructional Practices*

In comparison to the faculty members who moved out of K–12 settings into the college environment, some participants expressed they did not have any formalized training but instead, when they first started teaching community college, they relied on trial and error, or learning from what worked. A participant reflected on his transition into higher education, and when asked how he learned to teach, remarked:

Whew, trial and error. [laughter] I got my start doing tutoring first. I didn't know the first thing about community colleges until I got a tutoring job at one. By tutoring, I learned a lot about the students. I learned that the students represented a wide array of aptitudes. It wasn't lesser than, it wasn't greater than, there was a good mix. And then, by starting at [basic] level and learning to work with students who really didn't understand some of the fundamentals, I found myself constantly having to face assumptions and push myself to constantly think, "Okay, what's the student's perspective?" I had to do that every day when I started out because my students would always tell me, "Oh, I don't know what this is, I've never heard of that before." And sometimes I'd be legitimately surprised, but then, sometimes I wouldn't because we all come from different backgrounds. So, much of my start was trial and error.

Elyse started working in higher education first as an adjunct:

As an adjunct, I essentially just got thrown into it. And they said, "Go teach." Okay, so I'd had some background in [discipline], but hadn't really taught, so it was like, "Well, here's a course, now go." And you just kind of get your feet wet and learn, learn from

your mistakes, and go forward. So I probably would look back on my first couple of courses with horror now. But at the time, you just kind of do the best you can. So there wasn't a lot of onboarding or anything that was helpful to being successful, I don't think.

Faculty who received formal training on instructional practices identified that this preparation helped. Although not all participants had formalized training prior to beginning their role as an instructor, overall, they acknowledged that the college is growing in offering teaching and learning education for faculty.

### ***Professional Development on Teaching and Learning Practices***

There was consensus among most participants that the college makes efforts to provide professional development for faculty. Some faculty stated they participated in workshops offered by the newly created Center for Teaching and Learning, which was designed to provide internal technical skill development and resources for all faculty. A participant described the work of the Center: "They do weekly sessions for tools and setting up your class and different things on teaching. So that's available as of this year." In previous years, internal professional development was not as consistent. She commented:

I remember in the past going to a presentation on working with high school students in a class. So that was one that was done, but again, they're not regular. So, if you were here 3 or 4 years ago, maybe you saw that but the past 2 or 3 years, and if you just started as a faculty, maybe you've never seen a presentation like that.

Lena, however, had a different perspective and recounted that the college had offered professional development consistently throughout her time as an instructor. She shared:

Ever since I've been here, and even as an adjunct, the college always had training. The other thing that I like is that they've always been able to budget money for us to get professional development outside of the college.

Faculty viewed these opportunities as valuable because the training helped support them in their roles as instructors. Responses revealed, however, that not everyone takes advantage of internal resources such as the Center for Teaching and Learning because they are interested in growing in professional development in their field of study instead. Ted and Elyse indicated separate motivations for not taking advantage of professional development. While Ted related his noninvolvement to his position as an adjunct instructor, Elyse stated she is focused on becoming more skilled in the content area she teaches. When asked about professional development opportunities shared by the college, she reflected:

They send out little things from time to time that could be helpful. I won't say I really take advantage of a lot of what they send out, mainly because I'm more interested in [content area] courses than I am in best practices and writing rubric scores or something like that. But I think they try and send out different opportunities to try and keep you engaged in learning and how to be a better instructor.

The two adjunct instructors, Demetria and Ted, said they had not received any professional development on improving teaching and learning practices. Ted clarified that due to his role as an adjunct instructor, he does not prioritize professional development. However, Demetria spoke to the importance of instructors receiving ongoing professional development and training with instructional practices and the connection to closing the gaps in African American first-year student progression. Demetria asserted, "I believe that if instructors are not receiving on-time and consistent feedback on their instructional practices or support, then they're not going to be

able to adjust their instruction to increase student achievement or increase African American student achievement.” Ralph agreed with Demetria and affirmed the need for more training for instructors on how to differentiate instruction for students:

There definitely would need to be more training on what it means to work with diverse populations. Getting out of that mindset that we’re supposed to teach all students the exact same way and that’s how you achieve equity, which is actually the reverse. It’s how you keep certain things in place. Breaking that sort of mentality and addressing what this starts to look like on macro-and micro-levels in the classroom would definitely be helpful.

Faculty who received training in teaching and learning practices shared that it helped prepare them for their current role as instructors and that they understand how to differentiate instruction. Faculty who did not receive formal training recounted that they learned best practices by mainly trial and error and learning from their mistakes. Participants’ acknowledgement of the need for more training on addressing the diverse needs of all students, including marginalized populations, was also mentioned alongside faculty adjusting their instructional practices.

### **Faculty Adjusting Instructional Practices to Improve Student Success**

Faculty adjusting their instructional practices to improve student success emerged as a subtheme within the theme of faculty understanding and implementation of effective teaching and learning practices. A one-size-fits-all approach to instruction of students was criticized as this does not meet the needs of a diverse student body. Instead, faculty emphasized the practice of personalizing and modifying instruction for their students.

### ***One-size-fits-all Approach to Instruction***

Faculty reiterated the importance of not taking a *one-size-fits-all* approach to teaching and an emphasis on continuous training to meet African American students' needs. Tiffany commented, "We have this tendency to ... we're subject matter experts, we're professionals. We have this tendency to think we know our stuff, we know what's in the best interest. Sometimes we think what works for one works for all." A one size fits all approach was seen as not beneficial to the learning of students as instructors acknowledged their role in personalizing and modifying instruction. Rather, participants advocated for training in data-informed gaps. Justine advocated, "being trained to address some of the gaps would be helpful." Demetria agreed with the need for additional training. She shared:

Having specific workshops for staff or faculty to address the disparity, to address meeting those needs of African American students. I think that the barriers are not even known because the practices are so institutionalized, or they are habits that are ingrained. [The practices are] actually barriers to providing successful outcomes for African American students.

Ralph discussed the creation of a model that would help guide faculty on their role in instructional design that meets the needs of students. Ralph envisioned:

a proactive model on course design when talking about instructors and things that they're doing in their classes that can be helpful. Then continued training on the back end. Making sure that all entities involved understand their role in helping all students achieve what they need to achieve.

Participants' stance on the importance of not taking a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction was also underscored in their views on personalizing and modifying instruction as a strategy to close the gap in first-year progression for African American community college students.

### ***Personalize and Modify Instruction***

Seven of the 10 faculty interviewed mentioned the need to modify instruction to meet the needs of students when considering their role in addressing the equity gap that exists for African American first-year community college students. Demetria expressed this perspective as she reflected on some students' difficulty with first-year progression. She said, "It could be that their learning style was never met or they didn't know their learning styles and an instructor didn't differentiate to support their learning style." Instead of focusing on what students lack, Lena offered, "You have to meet students where they are." Participants discussed the need to review data on first-year student progression, changing perspectives about a *one-size-fits-all* approach to teaching a diverse student body, using data on first-year student progression to modify and personalize their teaching practices, and barriers to change among faculty.

**Reviewing Data on First-Year Student Progression.** Faculty expressed that being given data on first-year student progression helped them understand the scope of the problem and commented that such data could help other instructors see the gap and acknowledge that student success requires an adjustment for faculty. Samantha reflected, "It makes you wonder if we need to look at how we're teaching differently." Justine expressed similar sentiments:

Again, I think for them to be aware that there is a gap, I think even just, eyes open, this is going on, what can you do? How can you teach a little bit differently so that you're still meeting those objectives but also meeting the needs of your students? And that one-size-fits-all doesn't work.

The data brought the gap to the forefront for faculty and actualized the need to address it. The participants considered data presented in the interview as evidence of the problem in success for first-year African American students and something that supports the need for modifying instructional practices. Participants who were not aware of the gap expressed appreciation concerning the opportunity to view the data and grow in their awareness of how African American students were performing in relation to all other first-year students. Faculty also highlighted the importance of changing perspectives concerning a *one-size-fits-all* approach.

**Changing Perspectives About One-size-fits-all.** The concept of not using the one-size-fits-all approach came up during a discussion about instructors' responsibility in closing equity gaps. Demetria stated, "Sometimes you have to curtail your teaching or adjust instructional preparation and planning to meet the needs of students and not every student— regardless of color or race, ethnicity, religion—learns the same way; not one size fits all." Tiffany considered her fellow faculty members who "think what works for one works for all." She stated:

They need to understand this does exist; it is not a myth. It is something that we have data to show it exists, and we need to make sure that we are being open-minded and aware that we need to be. We need to be willing to modify our methods of instruction and the way we communicate, and the way we go about helping our students. Because what one ... what Susie Q may need might not be what Barry G needs.

A faculty member expressed that faculty should move from merely observing the equity gap in data to acknowledging the gap and allowing it to influence their practices as instructors. She reasoned:

I think realizing that there is a gap and then trying to ... even just acknowledging that there's a gap. I think it's important for all faculty and for each of them to look at their

practice and see what they can do. ... I think they have the ability to make a change and not be colorblind. I think being colorblind is ... I used to think it was okay. I didn't even realize that it wasn't really ... that isn't what you want to be. You need to address that there is a difference. There's a difference in background and experience, and addressing that and then trying to make changes to your teaching is important.

Faculty recognized the importance of acknowledging difference and modifying their teaching practices as needed.

**Using Data to Modify and Personalize Teaching Practices.** Participants were then asked to discuss the influence of first-year student progression data disaggregated by race on their teaching practices. Specifically, participants were asked to reflect on how they use data disaggregated by race to inform their decisions as an instructor. A faculty member replied:

The answer to that is tricky because I've done plenty of research on this, and I've learned to apply certain practices which are working to an extent, but I try to use the data when I do run across it as a reminder that all of our students are not coming in with...they're not starting on the same playing field. And as much as we'd like to say, "Oh, all the students are equal," no, they're not. They're not all starting at the same point, necessarily. They all come from different backgrounds, different experiences, and that will play a role in how they progress. I try to be mindful of that without necessarily singling out my students of color. I try to be mindful of what I'm doing in the classroom that either seems to perpetuate the statistics we already have or help to correct it and then go from there. But it definitely serves as a reminder that, regardless of where I would like to think we are, we're not there yet.

Ted believed it would be beneficial to have more data about what contributes to the lack of success for first-year African American students, stating that having the “right data” allows for instructional design that supports student success. Demetria emphasized that not having full knowledge of disaggregated data by race is a barrier because it limits instructors. She mentioned:

If we know the data, then we can utilize it to not only drive instruction or adjust our instruction but be able to connect with the different departments to see what support services are there, so we can point students, specifically African American students, in the right direction.

**Barriers to Change Among Faculty.** Ongoing change was seen as a necessary practice when considering instructional methods. Justine shared, “Those methods constantly have to change.” She added, “I think that awareness and then making that change in your teaching practice to make that adjustment.” Participants recognized that not all faculty are open to change and committed to evolving in their instructional methods. Tiffany acknowledged her own practice of embracing change but expressed that changing teaching methods for the good of students is not something to which all instructors ascribe:

So you have to be open-minded to where you got all kinds of different individuals in one class, and you need to be able to modify your methods going forward. That’s gonna be a little bit easier said than done. Because you’re going to have faculty who just don’t want change; they’ve been doing the same thing for 30 years and that’s just the way they’re gonna do it. And that’s unfortunate because we have to constantly evolve...I’ve got a variety of students with a variety...different personalities and learning methods, things like that. But what I feel would work and would be perfect, and in my opinion, is completely laid out, very well organized, very well detailed, and all that, you always have

that one student that's gonna come up with something. So you just have to work with that student, and you have to be willing to do it. So, in my opinion, I just think that faculty need to be willing to evolve, and they need to be willing to be transparent and communicate effectively, to be able to provide the appropriate resources for our students. Justine shared that some instructors do not desire to be creative with their instructional practices but instead just want to teach the content because there is pressure for them to meet learning objectives. Justine saw this as a missed opportunity to increase students' understanding of the material. She believed the barrier might be influenced by instructors' content areas as some subjects require more creativity when seeking to adjust instructional practices. When considering what hinders some faculty from changing their teaching methods, Justine added, "I think maybe lack of creativity in faculty might be what causes that rift there. I can't creatively teach this. I just have to teach it." She also expressed that faculty's hesitation to embrace change may also be influenced by their lack of desire to take additional time or have the proper resources.

Though some instructors received formal training prior to becoming a community college instructor, they overall agreed on the importance of the college continuing to help faculty grow in their skills of differentiating instruction for students. Faculty identified that understanding teaching and learning practices and adjusting instructional practices as needed are actions within the realm of their control and could impact African American student success. Personalizing and modifying instruction was seen as essential to prevent a *one-size-fits-all* approach. Additionally, participants acknowledged the role of data in assisting them with understanding how instructional practices should be adjusted.

## **Faculty and Senior Leadership Need to Prioritize Race and Racial Equity and Data are the Foundation**

The fourth theme is faculty and senior leadership need to prioritize race and racial equity and data are the foundation. During their interviews, faculty examined data as a part of the study. This exercise elicited reflections regarding how faculty view and discuss data disaggregated by race. Faculty examined data on first-year student progression, gateway course completion, first-semester satisfactory academic progress, and first-semester credit momentum. Faculty then engaged in sensemaking about the data they reviewed. The subthemes that emerged from this theme are (a) faculty are not viewing data disaggregated by race as a regular practice, (b) increasing awareness of issues related to race and racial equity, and (c) faculty sensemaking of data disaggregated by race. Findings revealed that according to faculty, there are no ongoing practices of disaggregating first-year student progression data by race and ethnicity. Additionally, participants reported individual and institutional hesitancy with discussing race and racial equity. As a result of reviewing the early momentum metrics provided, faculty maintained equity-minded responses while reflecting on their role in closing equity gaps for African American students.

### **Faculty are not Viewing Data Disaggregated by Race as a Regular Practice**

Faculty reflected about HCC's practices around first-year student progression data and making aggregate and disaggregated data accessible. It was the first time many participants had seen racially disaggregated data on first-year student outcomes. Demetria and Ted, both adjunct instructors, shared they have not been given the opportunity to view any student success data, including first-year student data, even in aggregate. Ted confirmed, "I have not seen any data from other classes. I can only see my students this semester and how they're performing. So I

have no visibility into other classes and how other students are performing. Maybe that will come over time. But I haven't seen it yet." Ted clarified that this could be partially due to time constraints as an adjunct instructor:

I have not seen or been given an opportunity. Well, let me take that back. In full disclosure, there's been a few emails that come in, and there were one or two emails that might have touched on that topic but to be honest, as an adjunct, I pay less attention to some of those emails. So maybe there was something in one or two of those emails about issues, instructional effectiveness, or something. So, I don't have the ability to attend sessions like that because of balancing two jobs.

In contrast, Ralph mentioned that student outcome data on educational outcomes of students in their first year was shown to the entire college faculty and staff during convocation, but it was presented in aggregate form and not disaggregated by race or ethnicity. Ralph stated:

Yes, we've viewed that data off and on in the past, specifically during Convocation. I know at least a couple of years, we have looked at that data before from the NCCCS's website. They provide this data on a yearly basis. When we looked at that data, we looked at it more so from a performance measure standpoint because some of these data points are connected to performance measures that determine whether or not we get funding for the following year.

Some faculty expressed that they have access to course success data for the courses they teach each semester, but it is aggregate data. Elyse explained, "So we definitely look at attrition and first-year outcomes and all of those things. But again, it's not around ethnicity." Greg noted a similar approach to how data are viewed within his department:

I'd never seen information this specifically laid out before. I mean, obviously, we've spent [time] within our department, we've looked at success rates within our classes, and within those other sorts of gateway classes that exist, but we don't generally get into the nitty-gritty of like, well, here's how the different groups are doing in your class.

Greg reported a lack of knowledge regarding the specific academic challenges experienced by African American students because it was not made known through the aggregate data.

### ***Aggregate Data can be Deceiving***

A faculty member clarified that data in aggregate format could be deceiving because it can mask the reality of outcomes for specific populations and give the appearance of a higher rate of success. He elaborated:

I think one part of the issue is that in looking at some of the data over the years, generally speaking, HCC has done well with reaching certain performance measures. So, since we've done well with meeting some of our performance measures, in general, some of what's happening underneath, that gets hidden. With statistics it's all about how it's framed, so from the state's perspective race is not necessarily looked at. Thus, race starts to disappear from the conversation if you're talking about money. It only comes into the conversation if you find that your overall percentages aren't meeting what they need to meet, and then, when you start digging, that's when you can start to see the stories and start to realize, "Oh, there's a racial thing happening here." Otherwise, I think some of that data disappears because otherwise, we appear to be doing fine. ... It's harder to perceive a bigger problem underneath it all. ... The data disappear under that because no one thinks to look at it because it doesn't seem to be a problem since we're getting our money.

According to the participants, aggregate data can hide what is occurring for students based on race and ethnicity because it reports on student progress as a whole. Therefore, changes are needed in how data are presented.

***Data are not Disaggregated by Race but Should Be***

When asked about the college's practices of disaggregating data by race all participants either stated that the college is not disaggregating student data by race and ethnicity, or they mentioned that they were unaware of any practices surrounding disaggregated data. Instructors acknowledged that student success data are in aggregate and that there are efforts to determine why gateway course success is low overall but these discussions do not look at the data from a race and ethnicity perspective. Participants acknowledged that disaggregating gateway course data by race and ethnicity might help the college better understand the problem of low success rates. A faculty member reported, "If we addressed any one of these ethnicities it might help. It hopefully would help bring everyone up... We haven't drilled into ethnicity... I don't remember the last department meeting that we talked about; it's been some time." Ralph had the same perspective, "First off, we don't look at data points by race, or if we do, nothing's been done with it. I'm going to say we don't look at it."

As a former adjunct, Demetria was unaware of any practices of disaggregating data by race. Ted expressed the same sentiment, "I didn't even know this data was out there. I didn't even know there was a concern. So, if you asked me that question before today, I'd be like, I don't know. I didn't even know it was an issue." Lena expressed interest in seeing the college adopt practices of regularly disaggregating data by race. Lena stated:

I would love to see that happen. I think it would be even more interesting for us to delve into, as a matter of fact, to see where are those lines, where are those percentages so that we can step back through the lens and see what we need to do to improve it.

Greg discussed how his department has looked at data disaggregated by non-high school students compared to high school students, but not by race and ethnicity. “I don’t have a real recollection of any of that data being stratified by anything other than just where students are coming from,” Greg offered. By that I mean, based on are they more traditional college students, are they CCP, early college, that sort of thing.” Greg reflected on his lack of knowledge and awareness regarding the gap in first-year student progression for African American students and shared, “It never ... I don’t know; for some reason that never struck me as interesting.”

Samantha shared that her department has viewed student success outcomes for their department by race, but not on a regular basis. Justine and Samantha teach in the same department. Samantha explained, “Last spring, the department looked at these same statistics. And we brainstormed ways to improve it.” Justine shared, “We drilled in on the [course] success because overall, it’s not great. And then when you drill into the demographics, you can see some stark differences.” Justine mentioned that it is difficult to stay focused on data disaggregated by race when other required initiatives are being established within the department. Reflecting on Reinforced Instruction for Student Excellence (RISE), a system-wide initiative aimed to shorten students’ pathway to college-level gateway courses, Justine said, “And then with RISE coming in, too, with that new support course, that took some of our attention away from this data.” Faculty acknowledged that having limited focus on these disaggregated outcomes also hinders further discussion regarding the data.

### *A Need to Discuss Data Disaggregated by Race*

The majority of faculty also acknowledged that they had not been given the opportunity to discuss first-year student progression data disaggregated by race. Tiffany explained that it is likely that sharing this type of data with faculty would lead to further discussion and interest. Tiffany commented, “I would think faculty would be very interested in knowing this data. To listen to what other experiences people are having [so] you can start connecting the dots...our conversations are normally very informal when it comes to data.” Ralph stated, “We have not had those kinds of conversations and looking at the data in that way.”

After reflecting on a question about what prevents faculty from having greater awareness of this type of data, Vanessa said, “Well, I don’t know necessarily, if it’s held back from us. ... I guess if it gets talked about, then maybe we’ll probably look at it more.” Later, when asked what prevents faculty from engaging in more discussion on first-year student progression data disaggregated by race Vanessa added, “Why are we not talking about it? You know, I can’t really answer that question why it’s not being talked about, but it’s something that should be talked about.”

As faculty considered HCC’s practices concerning data related to first-year student progression, some faculty shared that they were unaware of this type of data. Others stated they had seen it previously, but it is usually in aggregate. Participants, overall, identified that the college does not have a standard practice of consistently disaggregating data by race and ethnicity. Additionally, faculty shared that there needs to be more discussion about data disaggregated by race and increasing awareness of the equity gap.

### **Increasing Awareness of Issues Related to Race And Racial Equity**

Several participants highlighted the need to increase faculty awareness of the equity gap and problems related to race. A faculty member shared his perspective:

Before you can start to resolve any issues, you have to be aware of what issues are in place. In my case, I was already aware of this equity gap for a while, but we do have some people here that are clueless that the gap exists, including possibly some administrators. I would like to say that the first part of that is being aware of the problem.

According to this participant, a standard practice of disaggregating data by race would increase visibility of the issue. He criticized the college for not routinely examining disaggregated data: “I think the way we handle data, the way we’re looking at it is definitely a faulty practice, which is a barrier because it masks the problem that’s actually in play.” Greg shared that if the college would help faculty increase awareness of the issue he would have further understanding of how he can make changes in his classroom, a place where he has influence and the ability to affect change. Greg stated:

I think raising awareness of what is and is not, that there are resources that we can use to help all faculty members go, “Okay, well, here’s where the gap is; you may have not realized it, but here’s where it is, and what ideas can we all come up with together to fill that gap and to lessen the gap.”

Ted shared that a benefit of faculty having an awareness of disaggregated student outcomes data by race is that it allows faculty to be in alignment with the goals and objectives of their position. From his perspective, if a specific demographic of students is more likely to not succeed in a course, faculty should be aware of contributors that decrease success. Ted stated, “You’d want to ensure to the best of your ability that instructors had awareness, and we’re taking certain steps to

ensure that all students succeed. And if particular demographics are at risk, then you would need that [information].” Ted’s assertion was that faculty awareness influences their action and ability to be a part of reducing gaps. Ted elaborated:

I want that student to be successful; I need to know the things that are potentially going to impact that success. So, if I know a certain demographic has a higher likelihood of not succeeding, but I need a little more data, maybe what are the factors that lead to that? You know? Is it work-life balance, time, flexibility? So, could it be the way that I assign classes leads to their demise or assign assignments? And I say, demise, their inability to succeed? If I have the right data, I can change that’s a simple fix, right? Um ... you see where I’m going with this, it’s instructional design, it’s assessment, to get them to the point of success.

Participants believed faculty are unable to act if they are unaware of data. A faculty member suggested, “Maybe more faculty need to see the data.” When speaking about the impact of viewing data, Samantha shared how previously seeing racially disaggregated student data prompted her to engage. She stated:

It kind of takes a highlighter and highlights it so that you’re aware... But the fact that I saw the data probably changed how much I reached out, period, even to a non-African American student. I probably just reached out more because I’ve seen how reaching out has made a big difference for certain individual students. I don’t know if it’s going to make a difference overall in the whole statistic, but it does for individuals. I’ve seen that.

According to the faculty who took part in this study, the opportunity to view data can increase awareness and willingness to act on the behalf of students.

Faculty discussed their perception of the racial climate for African American students, hesitancy to discuss or address race through courageous conversations, and leadership from college administration around the topic of race and racial equity. There were a range of perspectives regarding how African American students are experiencing the college.

Additionally, faculty identified that there was some hesitancy amongst faculty and the greater College with discussing the topic of race, and thus it is often avoided. Participants called for more guidance from senior leadership in both acknowledging the equity gap and increasing awareness collegewide.

### ***Racial Climate***

The discussion about racial climate revealed three faculty perspectives: no awareness of the racial climate, the racial climate is fine, or there is no overt racism. The instructors who stated that they did not have awareness about the racial climate noted that they are tuned in to their own classrooms instead where they try to create a fair and positive environment. A faculty member mentioned, "I'm not quite sure what the climate is outside of the classroom. And again, in the classroom, my classroom, I feel it's positive." Tiffany explained that while there are some things that need to be done to increase inclusion, she believes the college has a "harmonious environment". She reflected on her time with the college and elaborated, "I've never had a student come to my office to tell me that they did not feel welcomed, or that they were insulted or anything along those lines in the class." Some faculty had the perspective that the college is not overtly racist and that overall students of color will report that they have had a positive experience. However, other faculty report there is more to the racial climate than what appears. Ralph explained, "I wouldn't say that the college is overtly racist. So, I think that any student of

color that comes here would find that they're going to have pleasant experiences with the people that they interact with." He added:

On the surface, I would say we look fine, but then I would say beneath the surface, that is where problems would start to emerge. When you start to look at, as you mentioned, the data and see some of the discrepancies... I don't think the college has an obvious problem with race, and I don't think the students would obviously notice it when they arrive. But I think it's something that they can start to feel once they start to peel back the layers and they may not even realize that they're feeling it.

Lena shared a similar perspective when reflecting on the racial climate for African American students at the college. "It is as though it doesn't exist because it hasn't been discussed, hasn't been brought to the forefront," she said. "Students haven't had a chance to voice their opinions. ... It's as though everything is ice cream and cupcakes."

Faculty revealed three distinct perspectives about the racial climate including no awareness of the racial climate, the racial climate is fine, or there is no overt racism. Some faculty are tuned into their classroom but lack awareness of the racial climate of the broader campus. Other participants determined that the climate was cohesive and met the needs of students. The third perspective was that there were no obvious issues with race at the college; however, there are issues that exist below the surface that have not been addressed. These perspectives revealed a continuum of thought regarding how students are experiencing the college and that more discussion could be beneficial regarding the racial climate.

### ***Hesitancy to Discuss or Address Race Through Courageous Conversations***

Ralph spoke about the college's hesitancy to address the topic of race. He stated, "So in terms of race at this college, it's definitely not something that I would say this college is

comfortable talking about, so let's start there." Ralph elaborated, "I think the college is treating race as a dirty word, and it is not trying to touch it if it can help it, but it's trying to present the illusion that it's doing something." He recounted that the college has not had specific conversations focused on racial equity and race, adding, "I think if you were to survey people at this college, they'd probably say we don't have a race problem; they'd say that everything's good, everything's dandy."

Greg appeared to express some internal struggle in processing this data because he wanted to be mindful of the data but did not want to make generalizations regarding his African American students. He spoke about the importance of "meeting those students where they are, and not singling them out." Greg shared that his lack of awareness of the equity gap for African American students is rooted in a desire to treat students equally and not make generalizations.

Greg explained:

I can say for sure, for me, like not wanting to make generalizations about any group of any student type, be it a certain race or anything. ... Like there's a whole, like, to my mind, there's a whole slew of other factors that could come into play. So to be honest, I never, it didn't occur to me to say, oh, 'This is probably because ... it could be, but it could also be any number of things, and you don't want to make those sort of generalizations because there are faulty logic elements that could come into play there. Like okay, I have this group of African American students who are in different classes, and they're all struggling. Do I make the assumption that it is because of that? Well, no, I don't want to make an assumption that it's racially related. That's not the way to go at all. And so that ... so okay, well, it's probably because I'm not conveying something the way

that I need to, or it's probably because I didn't give them the ... it's just easier to make that pathway and just assume.

Greg also expressed that increasing awareness of the gap compels people to confront and discuss it. He explained:

I think it's a good thing. Because if it's not opened up and you're not being made aware of it, then it just becomes this thing that continues to exist that nobody wants to talk about because it feels awkward, or uncomfortable, or whatever. Or you don't feel like, "Oh, I'm not the person who's going to solve this problem. So we're just not going to talk about it."

Lena provided a different perspective and shared that there must be courageous conversations.

She remarked:

Have courageous conversations, perhaps even speaking with students of color, to see if they will sit down and have a conversation. Tell me about your experiences. Having a clear, honest forum where there's no harm. We're here to hear and support you. How can we support you better?

Lena reported that biases, faculty not thinking it is relevant, and being afraid of the unknown prevent some faculty from engaging in more discussion around race and first-year student outcomes.

Some faculty mentioned that it would be beneficial for faculty to receive training on closing racial equity gaps and assisting diverse students. Demetria commented, "having specific workshops for staff or faculty to address the disparity or to address meeting those needs of African American students.

Justine shared about faculty participating in professional development centered on equity:

Faculty who choose to go those avenues will do it and then others will. ... If they're not told that they should be looking for trainings, then they may not. They may just go to ... look at a conference on teaching [their content area], and maybe not go to the equity. ... So, I think unless people are told that this is really what you should be looking at right now because that is an initiative of the college to really try to close these gaps. They may not choose to.

Other participants shared the same sentiment as to why faculty may choose to not participate in equity-related professional development. Greg also mentioned that faculty are more focused on completing their day-to-day work such as grading, teaching classes, and other administrative tasks.

Elyse reported that faculty are more likely to seek out data disaggregated by race if it impacts their course success. If they do not perceive any impact on their courses, they are less likely to seek it out. She shared:

Unless it's been some sort of, I don't wanna say mandate, but some sort of initiative by the campus to be more aware of that and to incorporate strategies, then there really isn't a reason in the hustle and bustle of everything else, I don't know that there's going to be an impetus to go out and find it.

### ***Leadership from College Administration***

Some participants mentioned a need for the administrative leadership of the college providing the impetus to communicate the need to address the equity gaps. Lena said, "Administration needs to be aware and with that awareness take action. It's one thing to be aware, and it lies dormant. It's another thing to be aware, and you begin to take action." A

faculty member shared his belief that the data reflects the institution's practices and reluctance to address race. He emphasized:

When I look at this data, and I see that the numbers are low across the board, I have to say, to some degree, the college is going to be complicit as well. To have these data points and to be able to look at it and see, "Our students of color or Black students are constantly at the bottom of all of our statistical stuff. Why is that the fact?" I don't think the college has made significant strides in really trying to understand what's at the root of that. What's at the root of our practices that tends to help these students over here do what they need to do, but somehow pushes these students over here away. We haven't really gotten to the root of what all of that would look like.

According to Justine, influence and direction regarding addressing the equity gaps for African American first-year students should be a top-down process. She explained:

There should be a directive to really focus on these to focus on the gaps. Because honestly, faculty will just go semester to semester teaching and not even realize that there is a gap. So, I think there has to be communication about the gap. And then, from the President['s office], this is something that we need to invest in and then filter down through Academic Affairs.

Greg initially considered this perspective; however, he then reasoned that the drive should come from faculty. He shared:

I think that it has to be something that I mean, certainly the easiest responses if there is more push towards that data from the top than the trickle-down will be very clear. But I think it can work the other way too. Like if we as faculty were a little bit more progressive in terms of saying, like, let's dig into this and see if we can figure out what to

do. I feel like it would go up the chain as well because I'm certain that again, there are small things that everybody could be doing to help work to fill those gaps on a smaller scale. ... So I think that is certainly a solution for faculty to take it on and be able to say, okay, let's talk about these things and figure out what's going on and what we can do. The other way would probably have more of a mandate-like effect, and I don't know if that's necessarily what we want. But I think we need individual faculty members to be able to step up and say, "Okay, let's figure out what's going on here."

Participants presented the notion of senior leadership embracing ongoing discussion regarding race and racial equity and increasing awareness of the equity gap for African American students as a way of addressing the barrier. However, faculty also identified that they have the greatest impact on creating change within their classroom.

### ***Focus on the Classroom***

Faculty spoke about understanding that some things are out of their control. Their focus is on the domain where they have influence, their classroom. Ralph explained:

So my role—I try to look at it in the context of what I can do per my classes and then per the individual students in my classes. I try to start from there. It's very hard. In the past, I've tried branching out through workshops to push beyond the boundaries of just my role. But without being in certain positions—I'm not a department chair. I'm not the supervisor of someone in Student Services. It's hard to effect change in areas that I don't have dominion over. But I do have dominion over my classroom.

Greg took a similar approach:

I think that's my main goal. ... I can only ... not only ... but my main priority has got to be the students that I have access to, which is the students that are in my classes. And so that's got to be my starting point.

The value and need to disaggregate data by race as a practice of the institution was highlighted by faculty. Participants shared varied perspectives regarding the racial climate of the institution. Additionally, they called attention to hesitancy amongst faculty and college leadership to address the topics of race and racial equity. However, faculty acknowledged that their most significant influence on the equity gap for first-year African American students is inside the classroom.

### **Faculty Sensemaking of Data Disaggregated by Race**

During this study, faculty examined data on first-year student progression, gateway course completion, first-semester satisfactory academic progress, and first-semester credit momentum. Most participants explicitly stated that there was a clear gap between African American students and all other students. However, a couple of participants did not make this distinction when discussing their first impression of the data. Although faculty demonstrated deficit-mindedness at the beginning of the interview, ultimately, all faculty engaged in equity-minded sensemaking of the data when discussing the role they should play in closing the gaps in first-year student progression.

#### ***First Impression of Data***

Faculty were asked to describe what came to mind as they viewed the outcomes for first-year students. Most participants identified the gaps for African American first-year students, as seen in the data. Samantha detailed, "It looks like our students do very differently based on their race." However, there were two faculty who did not immediately make this explicit distinction.

Vanessa stated, “One demographic of students seems to be far behind everyone else” and then began to explain that it may be related to K–12 gaps. Greg shared, “I would say, by and large, there seems to be—at least from HCC’s point of view—a fair amount of struggle with, with completion, successful completion across the board.” He then spoke to the overall gaps in gateway course success and first-year student progression. Both participants did not specify the gaps that existed for African American students until they were asked to speak “more about the gaps that you see for students of color” or to talk “about the gaps that you see for African American students.” These faculty did not highlight the racial inequity seen in the data during their initial discussion.

### ***Approach to Data***

At the beginning of their interviews, faculty self-identified their knowledge of issues related to equity in higher education in a range from somewhat knowledgeable to very knowledgeable. Additionally, each participant engaged in some deficit-based reasoning during the interview. For example, when Samantha was asked who should be responsible for closing the equity gaps in the data, she stated, “I mean, I think the more we all own it, probably the better it’s going to be. Like, I think we tell the students about the gaps maybe. And we say, you guys can change this, you can be the people that can do this.” Although faculty had different levels of understanding of equity and exhibited deficit-mindedness during their interview, all faculty also engaged in equity-minded sensemaking at times, as evidenced by the identified themes and the data.

Faculty showed ownership of the need to understand the reasons behind the data. Ted, an adjunct instructor who looks at data analytics as a part of his full-time job, spoke of his desire to assess the root cause of outcomes and approach to sensemaking. He explained:

I look at data, and I ask “Why, why, why, why?” I don’t stop at the first one. I keep digging. ... “Why is it that’s happening? What’s the source of that? What are the things that are highly predictable?” Right? You know, ”What are the variables that lead to these outcomes?” ... I know that it’s typically not one thing from my experience.

Demetria spoke of a similar need to understand the “why” behind data and to then take ownership of improving outcomes:

I believe it’s very important to look back at where, if there was a shift in the data, start there what happened during that year in every department to see why the number is so low. And then planning what can be done, what we are doing well and strengthen that, and then addressing what we’re not doing well.

Samantha addressed the need to look intently at the reality demonstrated within the data and then take action. She argued, “These are not like, made-up statistics. These are actual facts. And so yeah, I think being honest with it and striving to improve it.” During her interview, Tiffany’s experience with sensemaking illustrated a transition from deficit-minded responses to equity-minded sensemaking. Early in the interview, when asked how should the gaps for first-year African American students be addressed, she responded:

I think we just really need to find out why. Why exactly are they not progressing? Is it because they’re not necessarily meshing with their instructor? Is it because they don’t feel involved? They don’t feel included? They don’t feel engaged? Is it because I hate to say it like this, but are they just signing up for classes so they can get financial aid and they just don’t ... they barely show up for class? You know, what exactly is going on?

Later in the interview, when asked about the role of faculty in reducing the gaps, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, Tiffany stated:

They need to understand this does exist. It is not a myth. It is something that we have data to show it exists, and we need to make sure that we are being open-minded and aware that we need to be willing to modify our methods of instruction and the way we communicate and the way we go about helping our students.

When asked about her specific role in reducing the gaps, Tiffany stated:

I think for me it's good to see this because it makes me more mindful of what the data is saying. That we have a population that is struggling ... it makes me think to myself, I need to be more cognizant about this, that you don't know what all is going on. So whenever you get an email with a student saying, "Hey, can I get an extension?" "Hey, I fell asleep, and I just flat out forgot this, but I have it done. Would you accept it?" That type of thing. Because my rule of thumb has always been, it's not fair to extend out a deadline when I've got other students that have submitted it by the deadline. To me, that's just not fair to other students in the class. However, by seeing this, this makes me more [mindful] that you don't really know what's going on. You don't know why they overslept. Why do they need an extension?

As faculty discussed the role they should play in improving the gaps in first-year progression for African American students, faculty maintained equity-minded responses and did not share deficit-related thoughts regarding the data. Lena reported, "We definitely have a role. The role again is to look equitably at all of our students and to meet them where they are." Similarly, Elyse expressed that faculty need to "try and kind of meet them where they are to help them be successful. So I think that's really important, at least for what I can do to help." A participant shared that the assumptions that some faculty have about students must change. She said, "I think maybe an understanding that students don't all come in with the same background

and not making so many assumptions.” Greg exemplified faculty’s ownership of their role in reducing the equity gap when he stated:

The thing that I can do is look at what I’m currently doing and try to figure out if it is best to reach as many students as it can. And is it varied and differentiated enough to make sure that as many of my students as possible are successful?

Similarly, Ralph acknowledged the need for the college to have ownership and to contribute solutions for improving outcomes for African American students. Ralph described:

Although the students have things going on in their lives that we can’t fix, like the fact that they have to work, or that they have transportation issues, or childcare issues, or whatever personal issues they have, there are ways that we can respond in-kind that works to the students’ benefit and would show that we’re concerned about their success and would show that we’re able to help them and meet them halfway somehow. And I think the fact that our data points are still low suggests that we have not found those things yet.

The fourth theme addressed the need for faculty and senior leadership to prioritize race and racial equity, and data are the foundation. According to faculty perspectives, data are not being disaggregated as a regular practice at the institution. Additionally, they reported that more awareness is needed regarding issues of race and racial equity. Although most faculty exhibited deficit-mindedness at the beginning of the interview, after reviewing early momentum metrics, they were able to engage in equity-minded sensemaking when discussing the role they have in closing the gaps in first-year student progression.

## Summary

This study was conducted to explore faculty perceptions of the equity gap in first-year student progression for African American community college students. Ten full- and part-time faculty within the schools of Arts and Sciences, Career and Technical Education, and Health Sciences participated in the study. The researcher utilized purposeful sampling to select participants, including faculty with varying employment lengths at the college and from different schools within the college. Upon the completion of semistructured interviews, data were transcribed, coded, and categorized. Four themes emerged including: (a) internal and external contributors to the equity gap in progression for first-year African American students, (b) faculty initiating engagement with African American students inside and outside of the classroom to foster progression, (c) faculty understanding and implementation of effective teaching and learning practices, and (d) faculty and senior leadership need to prioritize race and racial equity and data are the foundation.

After early momentum metrics were presented, participants were asked to describe what came to mind when looking at the outcomes. Faculty identified more external contributors to the equity gap than internal contributors. External contributors were defined as outside of the control of the college. Internal contributors were within the responsibility of the institution. Participants reported that their personal role in closing the equity gap involved taking ownership of their responsibility to initiate engagement with students enrolled in their classes. Faculty also highlighted the need to adjust their teaching practices through personalizing and modifying instruction to meet students where they are and address diverse student needs and learning styles. Finally, participants expressed the need for more awareness to be given to the issues of race and racial equity at the institution, and data were acknowledged as a tool to assist in this process.

Chapter 5 offers an interpretation of the findings through the lens of the literature as well as theoretical and practical implications and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings**

The problem addressed in this study was an insufficient amount of information in the literature focused on what faculty, individuals who work closely with students, perceive as reasons for the equity gap between African American students and all other students in first-year curriculum student progression. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine faculty perceptions of the reasons for the equity gap between African American students and all other students at Hillman Community College in first-year curriculum student progression. Community college faculty were recruited using purposeful sampling and participated in semi-structured interviews. The research study addressed the following research questions:

- 1) What are faculty perceptions of the equity gap between African American students and all other students related to first-year curriculum student progression?
- 2) What are faculty perceptions of the institutional barriers that contribute to the equity gap between African American students and all other students related to first-year curriculum student progression?
- 3) What are faculty perceptions of their role in reducing the equity gap between African American students and all other students related to first-year curriculum student progression?

This chapter contains a discussion of the key findings, implications for theory and practice, and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion of Key Findings**

The key findings of this qualitative study were: (a) external and internal contributors to the equity gap, (b) equity-minded sensemaking of data, (c) faculty's ownership of their role in

closing the equity gap through adjusting teaching practices to improve student success and initiating engagement with students, (d) the need for faculty to view and discuss data disaggregated by race as a regular practice, and (e) how the topic of race and racial equity should be addressed by the institution. These findings respond to the research questions of the study and solidify what is found in the literature. A new finding of particular significance is the role of a facilitator as a proxy for equity-minded sensemaking of data, as faculty can engage in equity-minded sensemaking of data regardless of their previous knowledge of equity.

### **External and Internal Contributors to the Equity Gap**

Faculty identified external and internal contributors as perceived reasons for the equity gap in first-year student progression between African American students and all other students. External contributors were defined as being outside of the responsibility of the college. Internal contributors were attributed to shortcomings within the institution. Early in the interview, faculty were shown data depicting early momentum metrics for first-year, first-time community college students, including first-year persistence, gateway course completion, and credit momentum, as these are leading indicators of student success (Belfield et al., 2019). Faculty were asked to describe their initial thoughts as they viewed the outcomes. Once the gap existing for African American students had been identified, either initially or through probing questions from the researcher, faculty were then asked to share their opinion concerning what contributes to the gap. Faculty identified a larger number of external contributors than internal contributors. External contributors perceived by faculty included: low socioeconomic status, working while attending college, technology and transportation issues, family caretaking, lack of student racial diversity, a lack of motivation, a lack of value for education, internalized stigma around receiving help, gaps in K–12 education, and the lack of a support system.

External contributors, for the most part, are deficit-minded because they are attributed to shortcomings within students' characteristics or as an expected result of their educational or socioeconomic backgrounds (Bensimon, 2005). Cognitive frames are the "interpretive frameworks through which individuals make sense of phenomena" (Bensimon, 2005, p. 101). Faculty associating lower rates of student success with reasons such as a low value of education, a lack of motivation, or a lower socioeconomic status is a result of their cognitive frames or assumptions that connect inequities to reasons outside of themselves or the organization (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Bensimon, 2005). The finding that faculty mainly attributed the gap in first-year student progression for African American students to external contributors supports that deficit-mindedness is the "dominant cognitive frame" (Center for Urban Education, 2020, p. 25), as illustrated in the literature. However, the findings illustrate that faculty can still engage in equity-mindedness despite an initial frame that is deficit-minded.

Faculty also identified internal contributors that influence the equity gap in first-year student progression. Internal contributors perceived by faculty included a lack of racial diversity in faculty, competing initiatives at the college, and inequities between how campuses of the institution are served. Internal contributors are categorized as equity-minded because, through reflection, they look inward to how the organization or individual has negatively impacted student success (Bensimon, 2005, 2012). Two of the internal contributors identified by faculty were focused on the institution's approach to race. Specifically, the representation of faculty of color across the college and the perception that the rural campus with a higher percentage of African American students is not as well-served as the suburban campus with a smaller percentage of African American students.

It is important to recognize that external contributors can indeed factor into African American students' lack of success in their first year of college (Ratledge et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2017). For example, when students lack resources such as technology and transportation due to their low socioeconomic status, these external contributors can have a negative impact on students' ability to persist in college courses (Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018; MDC, 2016). However, when faculty focus only on student deficits, it can give the impression that the problem of students' lack of progression is not within the scope of the faculty's control because it is impossible to change large systemic issues. Therefore, the focus remains on altering the student instead of reassessing institutional or teaching practices (Taylor & Bedford, 2004). Asking faculty to describe their perceptions of barriers within the institution and their role in closing the gap shifts them to an equity-minded cognitive frame as the "locus of change" (Dowd, 2005, p. 2) is centered on the faculty and the institution.

### **Proxy for Equity-Minded Sensemaking of Data and Faculty Owning their Part**

According to the findings presented in this study, faculty can engage in equity-minded sensemaking of data regardless of their previous knowledge of equity. Equity-minded sensemaking involves: (a) examining racial inequity by viewing disaggregated data (b) interpreting the equity gaps as a sign that institutional and individual practices are not effective (c) asking faculty how and why these practices are not serving the students who are encountering inequities, and (d) asking how faculty can contribute to closing equity gaps (McNair et al., 2020). At the beginning of the study, faculty were asked to describe their perception of what contributes to the equity gap in first-year progression between African American students and all other students. The majority of the responses were deficit-related and centered the student as the reason for the equity gap. However, over the course of the interview, all faculty shared equity-

minded reasons for the equity gap as the shift was made to center the individual or institution as responsible for reducing the gap in first-year student progression for African American students. For example, early in the conversation, a participant shared one reason for the equity gap is that some students come from families where education is not valued and students are expected to start working to support the family after high school. Later in the interview, as he reflected on his role in reducing the equity gap, the participant stated he believed it is his responsibility to view his current teaching practices and determine if he is reaching all students. The participant shared he should evaluate if his instruction is differentiated enough to ensure that as many students are successful as possible.

Early momentum metrics such as fall-to-fall persistence, credit momentum, and gateway course success center students in the data. The data are not based on instructor success or effectiveness in teaching the course. Therefore, when instructors began to discuss reasons for the equity gap, it was logical to focus on reasons related to the student and be deficit-minded. Dowd (2005) encouraged institutions to create a culture of inquiry by focusing on practitioners instead of the data as the “locus of change” (p. 2).

In this study, the researcher served as a proxy for equity-minded sensemaking of data by asking questions that centered faculty and the institution in the data. The researcher demonstrated the concept of double-loop learning by engaging the participants in a discussion of their role in closing the equity gap for first-year progression for African American students. Single-loop learning involves correcting the error by externalizing the problem (Bensimon, 2004). Double-loop learning is equity-minded because instead of altering the action strategy and externalizing the issue, the goal is to adjust the governing value (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Bauman, 2002). In this study, instead of continuing conversations regarding limitations and shortcomings of the

student, participants shifted the governing value, assumption, or cognitive frame by centering faculty and the institution as having responsibility for student success. As practitioners, faculty must be “willing to take personal and institutional responsibility for the success of their students, and critically reassess their own practices” (Center for Urban Education, 2021, para. 1). This finding suggests that an individual can serve as a proxy when it comes to giving context within the sensemaking process for data. Likewise, since early momentum metrics center students, institutions must intentionally reflect on the faculty or the college’s practices if the goal is equity-minded sensemaking.

One way the faculty in this study demonstrated the shift from centering the student to centering the institution was to think about specific situations when they could demonstrate a more equity-minded approach with students. One participant initially hypothesized that the gap may be the result of students enrolling in classes to receive financial aid. Later, this same participant acknowledged that sometimes she does not know the reasons why students make certain choices concerning their academics. The participant realized that she needs to understand more about what is at the root of the problem that results in poor student outcomes. The participant shared an example of receiving an email from a student who requested an extension for an assignment. The student had the assignment completed but failed to upload it by the deadline because they fell asleep. The instructor’s rule was to not extend the deadline for one student because she felt it is unfair to other students who work to meet the deadline. However, the participant stated that after seeing the early momentum metric data and the existing gap, she began to realize that there is a population of students who are “struggling” and she may need to look more closely at reasons why the student missed the deadline.

Bensimon (2007) noted how researchers can draw upon their knowledge related to the success of minoritized students to help practitioners build awareness of inequities and assess their practices and assumptions. Likewise, acting as a facilitator, the researcher in this study was able to use student success data paired with the researcher's cognitive frame to assist faculty in moving from deficit-mindedness to engaging in sensemaking as they considered institutional barriers for African American students and their role in closing the equity gap. How faculty interpret data has longer-lasting consequences than simply reviewing the data (Bensimon et al., 2016). An individual's interpretation of data influences their actions related to the data and whether they use either single-loop learning or reassess their assumptions and use double-loop learning. If decisions are made about how to proceed after viewing data, the interpretation of the data should be framed in an equity-minded way.

### **Faculty Adjusting Instructional Practices to Improve Student Success**

Teaching and learning are central to creating sustainable change at community colleges and closing equity gaps (Stout, 2018). In this study, faculty presented that instructors should not take a "one size fits all" approach to instruction. In considering their role in reducing the equity gap in first-year student progression for African American students, faculty stressed the importance of "meeting students where they are," "supporting students' learning styles," and differentiating instruction to adapt to students' learning styles in the course. Faculty shared that some instructors have a wrong approach and perception that "what works for one works for all." As they engaged in equity-minded sensemaking and owned their role in closing the equity gap, participants stressed the importance of faculty "constantly evolving," being open-minded, aware, and adjusting their teaching practices and approach to meet students' needs.

Data can help faculty understand how they may need to modify their instructional practices or acknowledge a need for change, as data give evidence of gaps in student success. In this study, the data and opportunity to engage in equity-minded sensemaking increased faculty awareness of the disparities and influenced them to reflect on how they may need to change their instructional practices or assist students experiencing challenges. One participant commented that having an understanding of data helps faculty use it to adjust instruction and to connect with other departments across the college so they can best direct African American students to resources. A participant who works closely with data as part of his job highlighted “having the *right data* allows for instructional design that supports student success.” This perspective is also supported in the literature, as McNair et al. (2020) emphasized that sometimes additional data are needed to provide clarity when considering equity gaps.

### **Faculty Initiating Engagement with Students**

Faculty in this study expressed ownership of their role in initiating engagement with students and understanding how their interactions impact student success. For example, a faculty member shared, “Building the relationships are also a key to success.” Another instructor commented, “I do what I can to help all students succeed, but I try to pay attention to my Black students in particular to try to make sure that they feel supported.” Participants believed it is their responsibility to be student-centered and establish relationships with students by building rapport and trust. Faculty explained their belief that priority should be given to actions that allow students to recognize that faculty can help them and are invested in their success. These actions include initiating conversations to get to know students and giving positive affirmations and reinforcements to let students know they are valued members of the class. Faculty acknowledged their need to be proactive in leading instead of waiting for students to communicate with them.

One participant reflected, “How can I interact with students in a meaningful way so they can get what they need and feel comfortable and connected to the course and to me and then move forward?”

This finding is consistent with research on student success, especially for minoritized populations. The student-instructor relationship is of particular importance to African American students’ academic success and persistence (Bush & Lawson Bush, 2010; Doug, 2020; Jones, 2019; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014). Faculty mentioned the need to give particular attention to African American students. A participant described:

I had to be more intentional with my African American students to engage them and keep them engaged. So consistent communication, weekly reaching out, “I see that you did your work – awesome!” Providing affirmation, “This is what you’re doing well but this is what you need to do differently,” to support keeping them engaged.

A different instructor disclosed that she gives additional attention to African American students as she was already aware of the gap in student success for this population. Another instructor decided to engage more with African American students because of his perception that students of color are less engaged than non-students of color. This faculty member’s perspective was based on deficit thinking while the other faculty member’s perspective was founded on an understanding of data that informed and influenced her behavior.

Faculty determined their role in helping students is two-fold. First, instructors should be alert to assess when a student is having challenges with the course content and assignments. Second, instructors should proactively reach out to the students to offer assistance. Participants expressed they feel responsible to contact any student who decreases in engagement with the course or “show[s] signs of fading away, not turning in work, or not coming to class” and exhibit

additional effort toward the student as needed. Faculty also explained they should serve as intermediaries between students and campus resources, which involves understanding the inner workings of the college so they can identify students who are experiencing challenges and connect them to supportive services.

### **Faculty are not Viewing and Discussing Data Disaggregated by Race as a Regular Practice**

An institutional barrier that emerged through the analysis of the data was that faculty are not viewing and discussing first-year early momentum metrics disaggregated by race. This barrier contributes to the equity gap between African American students and all other students related to first-year curriculum student progression. According to participants, the disaggregated data by race they reviewed during the interview was the first such information many of them had seen regarding first-year student outcomes.

All of the participants were able to identify the gap for first-year African American students while reviewing the data. They either identified it independently or through follow-up questions from the researcher. Participants reported that the college does not have a practice of disaggregating data by race; therefore, many faculty lack awareness of the gaps for first-year African American students. The disaggregated data shown during the interview are available on public data dashboards located on the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) website. Although these disaggregated data for first-year outcomes are accessible to all faculty, most faculty in this study were not cognizant of the data or did not know how to find the data independently. This finding is aligned with the literature as Bensimon (2005) as well as Felix and Castro (2018) indicated many colleges have not yet shifted to displaying outcomes data disaggregated by race and ethnicity.

In this study, faculty reported that a consequence of the college not disaggregating student outcomes by race is that it masks the reality of how African American students are progressing. An example was shared by a participant regarding state performance measures. Since performance measures data are presented in aggregate, the gap in first-year student progression for African American students is hidden. The NCCCS state performance measures are reviewed every 3 years. Three of the performance measures approved in 2018 included fall-to-fall progression and student success rate in college-level math and English. These early momentum metrics can be used as leading indicators of student success (Belfield et al., 2019; Driscoll, 2007; Jenkins & Bailey, 2017). Colleges are granted additional performance-based funding that is dependent on how they achieve in the areas designated by the state. If their rate meets or exceeds the excellence level determined by the NCCCS, the college receives additional funding. NCCCS (2019b) reports performance measure data in aggregate. Therefore, unless a college intentionally disaggregates performance measures data by race and ethnicity to assess how all students of color are faring, institutional leaders may draw false conclusions regarding how students are progressing. There is no impetus to look at disaggregated data because it appears that overall student success is going well. This finding is problematic because reporting data in aggregate hinders inequities from being visible and serves as a barrier to racial equity (McNair et al., 2020). The first-year student experience is not a monolith, and faculty need to be allowed to view disaggregated data on first-year student outcomes to serve students most effectively and close the equity gap.

When faculty are allowed to view racially disaggregated data this centers racial equity. As evidenced by the data, racial equity and first-year progression for African American students were not at the forefront of the minds of most faculty who were interviewed for this study. Instead, faculty revealed they are more focused on sharpening

their knowledge in their content area or meeting the demands of the various initiatives offered by the college. Two of the faculty participants were from the same department and disclosed they previously viewed data disaggregated by race within their department, but the practice occurs infrequently. One of the reasons faculty gave for the lack of focus on racially disaggregated data was an attempt to meet the demands of implementing Reinforced Instruction for Student Excellence (RISE), an initiative intended to create a more accessible pathway for students to college-level gateway courses. Ironically, faculty reported they could not focus on viewing early momentum metrics disaggregated by race because they were focused on an initiative that directly impacts early momentum metrics.

Early momentum metrics such as first-year persistence, gateway course completion, and credit momentum are leading indicators as they help colleges assess student success during the first year (Belfield et al., 2019; Driscoll, 2007; Jenkins & Bailey, 2017). Faculty cannot influence lagging indicators such as graduation rates in the same way they can impact leading indicators such as course retention, semester-to-semester persistence, and course success (Piland & Piland, 2020). When faculty view first-year student progression data disaggregated by race they have the ability to learn more about what strategies work best for various groups of students both inside and outside of the classroom and make necessary adjustments to serve students who are part of racially minoritized populations. It allows them to engage in reflective practice and have agency. Faculty are a critical component of the teaching and learning process. As a faculty participant mentioned during the study, having a better understanding of first-year progression data will allow faculty to align with student success objectives and change their approach as needed.

The nonpractice of viewing disaggregated data is a barrier that contributes to the equity gap and means there is no discussion happening about the needs of students according to race

and, therefore, no opportunity for equity-minded sensemaking of data (McNair et al., 2020). The first part of faculty engaging in equity-minded sensemaking of data is giving faculty access to and awareness of the data. Therefore, institutions must be aware of barriers faculty face surrounding access to and understanding of first-year student progression data, as hindrances in these areas immobilize faculty from equity-minded sensemaking of data and equity-minded action. One participant stated, “I guess if it gets talked about, then maybe we’ll probably look at it more.” There is an opportunity for this process of data review and dialogue to be cyclical. Faculty observe data, which encourage them to engage in dialogue, and conversely, faculty engage in dialogue about data, which encourages them to seek out more data to improve student success. Sensemaking of data will also encourage greater attention focused on race as an institution, which will highlight the equity gaps and provide an opportunity to close those gaps.

### **Confronting Race as an Institution**

Faculty interviewed for this study reported three different perspectives regarding the racial climate for African American students at the college: (a) no awareness of the racial climate, (b) the racial climate is fine, or (c) there is no overt racism. The instructors who shared they did not have awareness about the racial climate across the campus disclosed that their focus is on the atmosphere within their classroom. Their goal is to create a fair and positive environment for all students. One instructor called the racial climate “harmonious” while the remaining instructors stated the climate is not overtly racist. Faculty admitted there may be underlying issues, but the topic of race has not been addressed directly by the college.

Equity-minded practitioners are race-conscious and understand that working to close equity gaps includes acknowledging and understanding the systemic nature of inequities and how race and racism contribute to equity gaps (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). Lack of clarity

of the racial climate and a solid approach to racial equity can be an institutional barrier (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Faculty reported that “on the surface, things look fine” when considering the racial climate for African American students and that “it is as though it doesn’t exist because it hasn’t been discussed.” These statements indicated that some faculty believe there should be more investigation about how African American students experience the college environment. This perspective was also reflected when faculty reported the college does not have a practice of disaggregating first-year student progression data by race when the data present a clear gap in success for African American students. Several participants mentioned a perception from some faculty and students that the suburban campus located in a more affluent county receives more resources and attention from the college than the rural campus that serves a larger percentage of African American students. These data suggest a need for more race consciousness across the college.

Participants explained some hesitancy amongst faculty and the larger institution to discuss race because faculty feel uncomfortable with the topic or do not understand how it is relevant to their role. When asked what prevents faculty from engaging in more discussion around first-year student outcomes specifically around race, one participant responded, “Biases, fear of the unknown, [they are] not interested, [they] don’t think it’s relevant.” Equity-mindedness requires having uncomfortable conversations about race (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). Students bring their social identities into the classroom, which includes their race and ethnicity. Some students confront issues resulting from racial inequities. The concept of faculty being race-conscious is not about fixing students because of the race-related challenges they may experience but, rather, learning how faculty can change their assumptions and approach to working with students as a result of their understanding of race and racial equity.

Racial equity requires acknowledging racial inequities that exist. Professional development on racial equity can contribute to this understanding.

### **Racial Equity Professional Development**

Participants mentioned the need for the college to offer professional development on racial equity to help them learn more about supporting African American students. One participant stated the college should focus on the following:

Having specific workshops for staff or faculty to address the disparity, to address meeting those needs of African American students. I think that the barriers are not even known because the practices are so institutionalized, or they are habits that are ingrained. [The practices are] actually barriers to providing successful outcomes for African American students.

Another participant mentioned that he had previously led equity-related workshops, but the efforts did not lead to lasting change because he did not have college-wide influence. One participant expressed that faculty feel pressure to meet the learning objectives for their courses, so training or activities that do not appear to impact that goal directly are not prioritized. When given a choice regarding professional development, the faculty in this study stated instructors often choose to expand learning in their content area instead of attending training on equity-minded practices. As a result, equity is not on the radar of many faculty. Therefore, as one participant asserted, the institution needs to help faculty understand how equity impacts their course success. Faculty in this study also stated that most new instructors do not receive training on instructional methods prior to teaching at a community college. This may place greater importance on professional development opportunities that allow them to expand their teaching acumen. This finding highlights that in addition to offering professional development on

instructional design for new faculty, a college's commitment to racial equity should be woven into the onboarding process using an equity-minded approach to help faculty understand their role in closing equity gaps.

Workshops or training on racial equity may be beneficial for helping faculty learn more about the disparity in student success for African American students and their role in addressing it. However, it is essential that this professional development is not short-term for the sake of proving completion of the effort (Equity in the Center, 2018; Hill & Curry-Stevens, 2017). Equity-mindedness must be etched into the institution's organizational culture to create long-term impact and change, which requires buy-in from senior college administrators (Hill & Curry-Stevens, 2017; McNair et al., 2020). Some faculty recommended senior leadership give instructors a "directive" to focus on equity gaps because otherwise, faculty will remain unaware of the gap and not see it as a priority. One participant believed such a strategy could work; however, his perspective was also that it would have a "mandate-like" effect and offered that consideration should be given to the impact individual faculty with awareness of the gap can have on creating change within their classrooms and encouraging dialogue about racial equity amongst their colleagues and administrators. The influence of faculty should not be downplayed; however, long-term sustainable change requires the buy-in and investment of senior college administrators and the board (Equity in the Center, 2018). If the focus remains solely on reaching learning objectives and administrators do not make the connection between equity-mindedness as a strategy to help faculty reach learning objectives, deficit-minded culture will remain dominant.

## **Implications**

Faculty are significant to the teaching and learning process, and their role is essential to student success in higher education (Doug, 2020; Jones, 2019; Kisker, 2019; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Stout, 2018). Data are necessary to assist faculty in understanding student progression; reviewing data aids faculty in connecting student learning to completion (Stout, 2018; Wyner, 2019). The rate of first-year persistence for African American community college students is lower than students from other ethnicities (Espinosa et al., 2019; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). This study was conducted in response to a call for more research on faculty viewing persistence data and engaging in dialogue (Kisker, 2019). The theoretical and practical implications of the study are relevant to faculty, department chairs, deans, and senior leadership.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This study offers theoretical implications as it utilized Argyris and Schön's (1978) single- and double-loop learning theories as a theoretical framework and equity-mindedness as a conceptual framework. Single- and double-loop learning theories serve as a model for correcting errors within an organizational learning context. Single-loop learners "externalize the problem by attributing it to forces that are beyond their control" (Bensimon, 2004, p. 26). Double-loop learners internalize the problem by questioning and reframing their assumptions, norms, and values to correct the error (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Bauman, 2002). Bensimon (2005) connected single- and double-loop learning theories to the cognitive frames of deficit- and equity-mindedness.

This study illustrated how the theoretical and conceptual framework could be used at a community college with faculty. It confirmed that reframing funds of knowledge or cognitive

frames could be a collaborative process, and individuals do not need to have an extensive understanding of equity to engage in equity-mindedness. The data can influence the actions of the observer as individuals are encouraged to make data-informed decisions. If the framework in which data are presented is not equity-minded, the actions that follow will likely not be equity-minded as deficit-mindedness is the “dominant cognitive frame” (Center for Urban Education, 2020, p. 25). Therefore, it is crucial how data are presented for practitioners; discussion of data should be facilitated by someone with an equity-minded cognitive frame. This study augmented the theoretical and conceptual frameworks by introducing the influence of a facilitator in affecting an individual’s cognitive frame. The findings posit that funds of knowledge from an equity-minded individual can help shift another individual’s thinking from deficit-mindedness to equity-mindedness. In addition to theoretical implications, this research offers practical implications for both individuals and institutions.

### **Practical Implications**

The implications for practice that emerged from this study are applicable to faculty, department chairs, deans, and senior administrators who aim to close racial equity gaps and improve outcomes for African American students. Leaders in higher education have the ability to impact student success and improve outcomes for African American students. The implications for each employee group are explored here to increase understanding about how equity-mindedness can influence an institution.

### ***Implications for Faculty***

The early momentum metrics shown to faculty during this study were publicly available on the NCCCS website; however, most participants did not know where to specifically locate this data. All participants in the study teach first-year community college students. Faculty are

encouraged to use data to drive instruction and create strategies to improve teaching and learning (Hora et al., 2017). Some faculty reported they have access to course success data for the courses they teach. The findings for this study underscore the need for all faculty to also know where to access first-year student progression data, including gateway course success, satisfactory academic progress, and credit accumulation data. Faculty cannot use data if data are not provided or if they do not know data exist or where to find data for student success decision-making.

Faculty also need to have the opportunity to discuss first-year student success data that are disaggregated by race. This might include a discussion with faculty who teach the same courses to understand how first-year students are performing across the college. These conversations should also include dialogue concerning how students of color and, given the existing equity gap, African American students are progressing during their first year. If colleges intend to increase first-year student progression for African American students, faculty input is an essential part of these efforts including faculty's reflection on practices that are not serving African American students well. Data should guide these discussions.

Data disaggregated by race and ethnicity helps increase faculty awareness of racial equity gaps (Bauman et al., 2005). Faculty are encouraged to be intentional with inquiring how African American students in their courses are experiencing the practices of the class and larger college. Faculty in this study identified that they should play a role in closing the first-year student progression equity gaps by initiating engagement with African American students and adjusting instructional practices to meet student needs. Knowledge about how African American students are experiencing the college will assist faculty with maintaining awareness and making informed decisions as they are crafting teaching and learning best practices and adapting to the needs of students.

### *Implications for Department Chairs and Deans*

African American students are more likely to attend 2-year community colleges than 4-year colleges or universities (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Espinosa et al., 2019; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014). However, they are less likely to complete their program of study in 6 years compared to other racial groups (Espinosa et al., 2019). Early momentum metrics such as first-year student progression, gateway course completion and credit accumulation are leading indicators that allow colleges to monitor student performance with the opportunity to adjust practices as needed (Belfield et al., 2019; Driscoll, 2007; Jenkins & Bailey, 2017). Thus, early momentum metrics help faculty to pivot as necessary to support the teaching and learning process. Community college deans and department chairs who supervise faculty who teach first-year students should ensure leaders are weaving racially disaggregated first-year student progression data in faculty and one-on-one meetings. These leaders should be engaging in discussions that are framed in an equity-minded way so that adjustments can be made to help increase the number of African American students who are completing courses and obtaining a credential. Academic affairs administrators provide leadership for faculty and set priorities regarding what faculty must accomplish inside and outside the classroom.

The findings in this study revealed that faculty are committed to following through on priorities established by the college. Deans and department chairs should be responsible for maintaining awareness of the equity gap and regularly monitoring how the data progress while also disseminating this information to faculty. Discussion should not just occur amongst faculty who teach the same content area but also across divisions (Kisker, 2019). For example, there are benefits to career and technical education instructors, department chairs, and deans having a solid understanding of how students are progressing in the arts and sciences because general

education classes are required to complete a degree. Drawing on the findings of this study, as academic affairs leaders are presenting data, they should present it in a way that is equity-minded as the cognitive frame used by the facilitator presenting the data can establish if practitioners are able to engage in equity-minded sensemaking.

Facilitators with an equity-minded cognitive frame are best suited to engage faculty in the sensemaking of data. Equity-minded facilitators should have the following attributes: “(a) race-conscious, (b) institutionally focused, (c) evidence-based, (d) systemically aware, and (e) action-oriented” (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, p. 6). Additionally, when speaking with faculty, facilitators should create an environment where faculty can feel safe to explore their perspectives and share without judgment or penalty based on their responses. If the discussion involves a group, the facilitator should review group norms or ground rules to establish a setting where participants can engage in reflective practice. The conversation should be framed within the context of teaching and learning as this is a central component of the work of faculty. Faculty may share deficit-minded responses when initially viewing data; however, these responses do not negate faculty’s investment in student success. When engaging faculty in equity-minded sensemaking of data, facilitators should begin with questions that center the institution and department and its role in closing equity gaps before moving on to questions regarding the role and responsibility of faculty. Since faculty are connected to the institution and the department, there is an element of shared ownership.

### ***Implications for Senior Administrators***

In an effort to create systemic and long-lasting change, senior leaders should consider establishing policies and procedures that build in the expectation that data across the college are disaggregated by race and ethnicity as a standard practice. Participants of this study reported that,

to their knowledge, the college does not have a practice of disaggregating first-year student progression data by race. As a result, many participants were surprised to learn of the equity gap as the performance of African American students was “hidden” within aggregate data. Additionally, two of the internal contributors to the equity gap were focused on the institution’s approach to race. This finding may point to the need for the institution to focus more on race and how African American students are experiencing the college environment. Senior administrators establish the urgency of issues that colleges address and can change the culture of an organization. Senior leaders should explore creating a culture where there is an ongoing discussion concerning racial equity and race consciousness, especially in light of the marginalization of people of color within society. Colleges should create a culture and environment of openness and curiosity where faculty, staff, and students feel safe and supported discussing race. These discussions should be framed in an equity-minded manner; to accomplish these types of discussions, administrators may need to increase their knowledge about race, racial equity, and equity-mindedness.

Socioeconomic status should not be used as a substitute for discussing race (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). There are clear socioeconomic differences between the two counties the college where this study was conducted serves, but given the racial and ethnic demographic differences between the counties, and faculty perception of inequities in how campuses are served, the college should consider disaggregating data by race amongst each county to see how African American students in the more rural county with a lower average income are performing in comparison to students in the suburban county where the college also has a campus.

The theoretical and conceptual framework confirmed that a facilitator with an equity-minded cognitive frame can assist with shifting the cognitive frame of practitioners despite the practitioners' governing cognitive frame of deficit-mindedness. The implications for this study are applicable to faculty, department chairs, deans, and senior leadership. Faculty should have access to first-year student progression data disaggregated by race and be encouraged to view and discuss it in an equity-minded manner within their departments and across the college. Institutional procedures should standardize the practice of disaggregating data by race, and the college's culture should normalize discussion on race and racial equity. These efforts will help close the equity gap at community colleges. The findings of this study also led to recommendations for future research that can spur the efforts to close the equity gap for African American students during their first year at community colleges.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was conducted to investigate the perceptions of community college faculty regarding the equity gap in first-year student progression for African American students. Community college faculty are an integral part of the teaching and learning process and overall student success. The examination of faculty perspectives regarding the equity gap offered guidance on how student success data should be presented to faculty and approached by institutions. The researcher plans to explore further how to best facilitate equity-minded dialogue with faculty in future research. Given the boundaries of this study, consideration should also be given to the following suggestions to extend research in this area and add to knowledge regarding equity-mindedness.

First, given the size of the institution in this study, direct identifiers such as race and ethnicity were removed to decrease the likelihood of re-identification of the faculty participants.

As a result, there was no analysis of participants' race and ethnicity in relation to their responses. Future research that examines the race and ethnicity of faculty in connection to how they make sense of data regarding the equity gap in first-year student progression for African American students would allow further analysis of how social identity influences perception and impacts equity-mindedness. Since this research study focused on data related to African American students, research can be extended by a comparative analysis of the responses of African American faculty in relation to faculty of other races and ethnicities. Data analysis could also compare qualitative data gathered from White faculty with faculty of color. Social identity can influence perception and the lens through which individuals see the world (Kteily & Richeson, 2016). Additionally, privilege may impact the responses of participants. Investigating how the race and ethnicity of community college faculty shape the data sensemaking process may contribute more insight into how data should be presented and discussed.

Relatedly, the research site for this study was a predominately White institution. Additional research could be conducted to explore how the racial and ethnic diversity of the community college student body impacts equity-minded sensemaking for community college faculty. Minority-serving institutions are colleges and universities primarily composed of minoritized students. Future research can be conducted through a comparative analysis of community colleges that qualify as minority-serving institutions that serve a higher percentage of African American students to predominantly White community colleges that serve a lower percentage of African American students. The study could be conducted to examine how the diversification of the student body by race and ethnicity influences faculty perception of the equity gap.

Finally, this study was limited to faculty perception of equity gaps and institutional barriers for African American students enrolled in their first year at community colleges. Research could be extended on assessing the experience of African American first-year students by conducting an “equity-minded content analysis” (Center for Urban Education, 2020, p. 4) of campus documents for courses that serve predominantly first-year students and other documents targeted toward first-year students across the college. The Center for Urban Education (2020) offers guidance to colleges on conducting a document review and outlines steps that can be followed using content analysis as a methodology. Future researchers can assess documents related to the early momentum metrics illustrated in this study as this is the focal area identified with the equity gap. These documents may include syllabi and exams for gateway courses, instructors’ written communication to students, financial aid forms, and transcripts from speeches and events targeted toward first-year students (i.e., new student orientation). After gathering documents for review, researchers could code the content for how information is communicated and how it addresses students, equity, and equity-minded practices (Center for Urban Education, 2020). Additional research on this topic may offer more insight into implicit or explicit bias present in the communication offered to first-year African American community college students and equity-minded communication at community colleges.

### **Conclusions**

A college degree is associated with improving individuals’ economic, physical, and social well-being (Hout, 2012; Schudde & Bernell, 2019). However, African American community college students have a lower first-year persistence rate than any other ethnicity (Espinosa et al., 2019; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). First-year student data are early momentum metrics that serve as leading indicators to project program

completion (Achieving the Dream Cross-State Data Work Group, 2012; Belfield et al., 2019; Driscoll, 2007; Jenkins & Bailey, 2017). In addition, data assist community college faculty with understanding more about student progression (Stout, 2018). Yet often, faculty are not given the opportunity to view data regarding student outcomes or engage in dialogue concerning it (Bensimon et al., 2016; Phillips & Horowitz, 2017). Costino (2018) illustrated that faculty interaction is the most impactful determinant of student success for students of color. Given the essential role faculty play in student success and the teaching and learning process, research was needed to learn more about what faculty perceive as the reasons for the equity gap between African American students and all other students in first-year student progression.

This basic qualitative study was conducted to examine faculty perceptions of the equity gap through their participation in semi-structured interviews utilizing purposeful sampling to address the research questions. The findings suggest that a facilitator can serve as a proxy for the cognitive framing necessary in the equity-minded sensemaking process when data are presented to practitioners. Deficit-mindedness was confirmed to be the “dominant cognitive frame” (Center for Urban Education, 2020, p. 25) for community college faculty when considering the reasons for the equity gap in first-year student progression for African American students. However, participants engaged in equity-minded sensemaking of the data when the researcher asked questions that centered faculty and the institution. Faculty identified that it is their responsibility to establish rapport and trust with students through initiating engagement and reflected on the importance of adjusting their instructional practices to meet the needs of students. Participants reported that to their knowledge, the college is not disaggregating first-year student progression data by race as a standard practice and making it accessible to faculty, which masks how African American students are performing at the study site.

The findings of the study offer insight regarding practices to establish a foundation for faculty engaging in equity-minded sensemaking of student success data. Racially disaggregated first-year student progression data should be made accessible to all faculty and integrated into continuous improvement processes, especially for faculty who teach first-year students. Early momentum metrics provide an opportunity for institutions and faculty to course correct. Faculty should participate in facilitated discussions of first-year student success data disaggregated by race within and across disciplines. Discussions should be framed in an equity-minded way by the facilitator as context is given to the data, and faculty are encouraged to consider their role in closing equity gaps. Finally, community college senior leaders are critical to this process. These efforts cannot be sustained without a top-down commitment to race consciousness and culture shift for the organization.

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**APPENDICES**

## Appendix A: Participant Interview Questions

### *Interview Protocol*

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

### Questions for Participants

#### *General*

1. What is your position at the College?
2. Are you a part-time or full-time employee?
3. How long have you been at the College?
4. In which program or discipline do you teach?
5. Have you held any other roles at the College or other community colleges?
6. How many years have you taught at the community college level full-time? If applicable, how many years have you taught at the community college level part-time?

#### *Equity Gaps in First-Year Progression*

7. Describe what comes to mind when you are looking at the outcomes of our first year students.
  - a. Tell me about any gaps in outcomes among students.
  - b. Tell me about any gaps for students of color.
8. In your opinion, what factors have contributed to the gap in first-year persistence specifically for African American students?
  - a. What factors contribute to the gap in first-year gatekeeper course success for African American students? Gatekeeper courses are intro level courses like ENG

- b. What factors contribute to the gap in the first-year accumulation of credits for African American students?
9. How should gaps in educational outcomes for African American students be addressed?
  - a. Who should be responsible for reducing these gaps?
10. What was your awareness of the gaps in outcomes for African American students before this conversation?
11. What role should faculty have in reducing educational opportunity gaps for African American students?
12. What role should faculty play in improving the gaps in first-year student progression for African American students?

*Faculty Use of Data*

13. Discuss a time when the College provided an opportunity for you to view data on the educational outcomes of students in their first year?
14. In what ways do you use data disaggregated by race to help you make decisions as an instructor?
15. Where can faculty at the College access the data I am showing you today?
  - a. When is it available?
  - b. How often is it updated?
16. What practices does the College have around disaggregating student outcome data by race?
17. What opportunity are you given to discuss data with other instructors who teach the same course(s)?
  - a. Discuss data across the department?

- b. Discuss data across the institution?

*Experience of Students*

18. What challenges do African American students experience outside of the College?
19. What is your understanding of the racial climate at the College for African American students? What informs your understanding of the racial climate?

*Institutional Barriers*

20. What institutional practices at the college are barriers to African American student success?
  - a. How do these barriers impact students?
  - b. What contributes to these barriers?

*Relationships with Students*

21. How would you describe your interaction and engagement with African American students in your classes?

*Professional Development*

22. How did you learn to teach at the community college level? What professional development has the college provided to help you improve teaching and learning practices?
23. What professional development does the college provide on racial equity?
  - a. Have you participated in the training?
  - b. How long was the training?
  - c. What was covered?
  - d. What follow-up has there been since then?

24. What professional development on racial equity have you arranged on your own (reading articles, classes, conferences, workshops, etc.)?

*Ensuring Equitable Outcomes*

25. Tell me how you prioritize racial equity as a faculty member.
26. What role should the college play in improving the gaps in first-year student progression for African American students?

*Conclusion*

27. Is there anything I did not ask you about in this interview related to faculty, educational opportunity for students, equity gaps for African American students, or related topics that you would like to share?

## Appendix B: Demographic Survey

### Gender

Female

Male

### Race/Ethnicity

American Indian or Alaskan Native

Asian

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latino

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

White

### Age Range

18-30

31-40

41-50

50+

### What is your highest level of education?

Technical or occupational certificate

Associate degree

Some college coursework completed

Bachelor's degree

Master's degree

Doctorate degree

- Professional degree

Which school are you affiliated with at the College?

- Arts and Sciences
- Allied Health
- Applied Science

Total number of years of teaching experience:

- Less than one year
- 1-3 years
- 4-7 years
- 8-10 years
- 11+ years

Have you previously taken curriculum courses at a community college?

- Yes
- No