ABSTRACT

MCCUTCHEN, GABRIELLE BROOK. Community College Faculty Perceptions of Their Role in Closing Equity Gaps. (Under the direction of Dr. Chad Hoggan).

Higher education is critical to the earnings potential and other outcomes for Black/African Americans and Hispanic/Latinx Americans (Carnavale & Strohl, 2013) who attend community college at higher rates than any other type of institution of higher education (CCRC, 2021). However, they graduate at lower rates than White and Asian students; only 28% of Black/African American students and 36% of Hispanic/Latinx students who started community college in 2014 graduated with a credential from a two-year or four-year institution in six years (CCRC, 2021). Community college practitioners have created new programs to support students' financial and academic needs, including food pantries, transportation benefits, accelerated developmental education, and guided pathways. These efforts help individual students, but community college faculty must also examine and innovate their teaching practices to close the persistent equity gaps for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students (Bensimon, 2007; Stout, 2018).

While community college faculty make up 13% of all "instructional staff" employed in higher education in the United States (IPEDS, 2020), there is limited research on the impact community college faculty have on student outcomes (Bustillos et al., 2011) and the overall community college faculty professional experience (Levin, 2018; Townsend & Twombly, 2007), including community college faculty perceptions of their roles in closing equity gaps for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to increase understanding of the perceptions community college faculty hold of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. The Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model

(Harris & Wood, 2016), and specifically the model's noncognitive, academic, environmental, and campus ethos domains, served as the framework through which community college faculty perspectives were organized and analyzed. Interviews with community college faculty who were employed at a community college that has made several institutional efforts to support minoritized students, including creating and staffing an Office of Equity and Inclusion, creating an equity action plan, and supporting employee participation in Racial Equity Institute training revealed six findings. The findings included the (a) the importance of the community college faculty role in student success, (b) the dynamism of the community college faculty role, (c) the limitations of the community college faculty role in closing equity gaps, (d) the emphasis community college faculty put on good teaching practices to close equity gaps, (e) the value of community college faculty-student interactions, and (f) the role of community college faculty as internal validating agents. These findings were analyzed within the context of the case study approach and relevant literature to reveal conclusions and recommendations for practitioners and future research.

Community College Faculty Perceptions of Their Role in Closing Equity Gaps

by
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DEDICATION

I could not have accomplished this research and dissertation without the support of my wife Laura Martin and our daughter Mae. They were incredibly patient and willing to discuss qualitative research methods, equity-mindedness, and higher education data points over dinner more frequently than I should admit. I am incredibly grateful for them every day, and especially when I consider the sacrifices we have made as a family for me to earn a doctorate in education.

BIOGRAPHY

Gabrielle (Gabby) McCutchen is a first-generation college graduate and holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. After attending college in her hometown, she moved to Santiago, Chile to teach English to adults. What was planned as an adventure and excuse to live in a foreign country became a passion and career goal. She returned to the United States and pursued a Master of Arts degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. Teaching English in Chile led her to a passion for helping English language learners translate their real-world experiences, and oftentimes their professional training and credentials in other countries, to academic and professional opportunity in the United States. And teaching English as a second language at multiple community colleges in Portland, Oregon led her to a passion for community college teaching and students.

Gabby currently serves as Provost for Arts and Sciences and the Scott Northern Wake Campus at Wake Technical Community College in Raleigh, North Carolina. She previously worked at Durham Technical Community College for almost 20 years as a faculty member, coordinator, chair, assistant dean, dean, and assistant vice president. She started her full-time community college employment in the developmental English classroom and developed a strong ACA 122 College Transfer Success course, co-authoring the textbook *Success by Design* just in time for the course to be included in the 2014 Comprehensive Articulation Agreement. She has provided leadership for a variety of community college academic and support services, including developmental education; first-year experience; tutorial services; library, student engagement; food pantry; College and Career Readiness; curriculum development, assessment, and compliance; Prison Education Program; and—her favorite—faculty development.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For many Americans, higher education is perceived to be the means to higher earnings potential, and the 18- to 22-year-olds who make up Generation Z and are traditionally aged college-going students agree that it is easier to be successful with a college degree than without (Fishman et al., 2017). Higher education benefits individuals' earnings potential (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012; Baum et. al., 2013; Carnavale et al., 2020) and protects them from layoffs (Carnavale et al., 2020). Many Americans pursue higher education through certificates and associate degrees at their local community colleges. In fact, higher education institutions in the United States confer similar numbers of certificates and associate degrees as bachelor's degrees. In 2016, public and private colleges conferred 1,948,500 certificates and associate degrees compared with 1,920,800 bachelor's degrees (Carnavale et al., 2020).

Higher education is especially critical to the earnings potential for Black/African Americans and Hispanic/Latinx Americans (Carnavale & Strohl, 2013). Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx people attend community colleges in high numbers. Specifically, in 2018, 44% of Black/African American undergraduates and 55% of Hispanic/Latinx undergraduates attended community college (CCRC, 2021). However, they graduate at lower rates than White and Asian students; only 28% of Black/African American students and 36% of Hispanic/Latinx students who started community college in 2014 graduated with a credential from a two-year or four-year institution in six years (CCRC, 2021). The frequently celebrated diversity of community college students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018; Malcom-Piqueux, 2018) is also used to justify the existence of disparities in student outcomes; however, the compositional diversity of community college students is the result of social inequalities, not

student characteristics (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Malcom-Piqueux, 2018). "The social and economic characteristics of community college students are often termed *demographic* (implying that they are hereditary) rather than *ascriptive* (meaning that they reflect positions in a stratification system)" (Goldrick-Rab, 2010, p. 443).

One challenge that Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx community college students face is higher rates of enrollment in developmental education courses as a result of comparatively limited access to high school courses and experiences that prepare students for college-level coursework; instead, they attend under-resourced schools with fewer academic options or may be encouraged to take vocational courses (Cabrera et al., 2005). Students who begin in developmental education courses have a longer path to graduation and rarely successfully complete that path (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Also, first generation college students are more likely to be Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx, attend community college, and persist to the second year of college at lower rates than students who have at least one parent who attended college (Chen & Carroll, 2005). In fact, first generation status is a strong predictor of reduced rates of academic persistence in studies that account for students' gender, race and ethnicity, and financial aid status (Chen & Carroll, 2005).

Another challenge that minoritized community college students face is financial. According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:12), 55% of students enrolled in community colleges were categorized as low income while only 38% of students enrolled in public four-year institutions were categorized as low income (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014, as cited in Malcom-Piqueux, 2018). Community college students are also more likely to be classified as independent (60%) compared with students who attend four-year institutions (32%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014, as cited in Malcom-

Piqueux, 2018). Related, students who attend community colleges are more likely than students who attend four-year institutions to report experiencing food and housing insecurities, including homelessness, which approximately 14% of community college students have experienced (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018).

Like the students they serve, community colleges frequently struggle financially. Institutions of higher education that enroll more students of color tend to have larger enrollments yet receive half as much funding per capita than predominantly White institutions (Goldrick-Rab & Kinsey, 2013, as cited in Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). By design, the open-door policy of community colleges strives to provide open access and second chances, but community colleges fail to provide equal opportunities because "they are not funded adequately to do the job of producing equitable outcomes in a society with such a high degree of social and economic inequality" (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015, p. 7). Despite these institutional fiscal challenges, community college practitioners have created new programs to support students' financial and academic needs, including food pantries, transportation benefits, accelerated developmental education, and guided pathways. These efforts help individual students, but community colleges practitioners must also examine and innovate their teaching practices to close the persistent equity gaps for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students (Bensimon, 2007; Stout, 2018).

Benefits of Higher Education

Higher education attainment benefits the individual, local communities, and the United States in a variety of meaningful ways. An individual's higher education attainment is directly connected to their earnings potential (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012; Baum et al., 2013) with students who complete a bachelor's degree receiving the greatest

benefits in terms of salary and protection from layoffs, students who complete associate degrees and certificates receiving some benefits in terms of salary and protection from layoffs, and students who complete only a high school credential receiving fewer benefits in terms of salary and protection from layoffs (Carnavale et al., 2020). Individuals who earn higher education credentials are more likely to have health insurance; pension benefits; the habits of active citizens, including voting and volunteering; and healthier lifestyles that require less medical intervention (Baum et al., 2013; Carnavale et al., 2021). In addition to the advantages that individuals with higher education credentials enjoy, there are larger benefits to local and state communities and across the United States.

Local, state, and federal economic indicators benefit from a better educated populace. The Great Recession that started in 2007 damaged the employment gains achieved in the previous decade and more severely impacted individuals without higher education credentials. Specifically, 80% of the jobs lost during the Great Recession were held by individuals with a high school diploma and no higher education credential while individuals with bachelor's degrees and higher not only avoided these job losses but in some cases benefited from job gains (Carnavale et al., 2013). In addition to labor market outcomes, Americans' education levels are tied to tax revenue. For example, in the American South, fewer jobs demand post-secondary credentials than other regions of the United States, which yields considerably less overall wealth and lower tax revenue. According to the report *A Decade Behind: Breaking Out of the Low-Skill Trap in the Southern Economy*, "…if the Southern states doubled their respective shares of workers with a bachelor's degree, they could increase tax revenue between 75 and 150 percent" (Carnavale & Smith, 2012, p. 8). The increase in tax revenues would allow federal, state, and local governments to redirect funds away from income support programs, such as Supplemental

Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) and the National School Lunch Program (Baum et al., 2013). As a result of a thought experiment conducted at Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, researchers concluded that if all racial and ethnic groups achieved the same high levels of educational attainment, including graduating from college, then the United States would experience "increased tax revenues and GDP; decreased spending on criminal justice, public health, and public assistance programs; and smaller gaps in earnings and, thereby, potential cumulative savings, which contribute to wealth accumulation" (Carnavale et al., 2021, pp. 8-9). The thought experiment also identified several nonmonetary benefits to closing equity gaps in educational attainment, including improved health outcomes, reduced crime and incarceration, decreases in rates of divorce, improvements in critical thinking skills and civic engagement, resistance to authoritarian viewpoints, openness to pluralistic orientation, increased sense of agency and empowerment, and increased rates of happiness (Carnavale et al., 2021). These nonmonetary benefits to closing equity gaps in educational attainment run parallel to the societal detriments caused by economic inequality in the United States, where there is limited economic mobility despite the pervasive "land of opportunity" metaphor (Stiglitz, 2012). Finally, the United States cannot achieve its goals to remain a global leader without improving the educational outcomes of all students to maintain and increase a highly educated workforce (Whitham et al., 2015).

Community College Student Demographics

The nearly 10 million students who attended a community college in the 2017-2018 academic year comprised 44% of all undergraduates in the United States (CCRC, 2021). A historic goal of America's community colleges is to serve students who lack traditional access to universities because of restrictive admissions processes, high tuition costs, and other institutional

barriers. Students who enroll in associate degree and certificate programs at community colleges are more diverse than bachelor's degree-seeking students; community college students are more likely to be Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, low-income, and older (Carnavale et al., 2020). In 2018, 55% of Hispanic/Latinx undergraduates, 44% of Black/African American undergraduates, 45% of Asian undergraduates, and 41% of White undergraduates attended community college (CCRC, 2021). While Hispanic/Latinx and Black/African American students are well represented in enrollment numbers, they lag Asian and White students in graduation rates. Specifically, 51% of Asian students and 48% of White students who started community college in 2014 graduated with a credential from a two-year or four-year institution in six years. However, within the same timeframe, Hispanic/Latinx students graduated at a rate of 36%, and Black/African American students graduated at a rate of 28% with a credential from a two-year or four-year institution (CCRC, 2021). Gaps in student success presented here are not meant to further perpetuate deficit-minded thinking about Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students by highlighting how they underperform compared with White and Asian students. This study acknowledges that Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students are provided neither the same opportunity nor the appropriate supports to participate and succeed in higher education (Harper, 2015, as cited in Jones, 2019).

Like the national trends, White students in the state of North Carolina are more likely than Black/African American students and Hispanic/Latinx students to enroll and succeed in community college. In 2017, 65% of White North Carolinians 25 years old and older had some college education while only 54% of Black/African American and 34% of Hispanic/Latinx North Carolinians 25 years old and older had some college education (North Carolina Community College System, 2019). White North Carolina community college students are also more likely

to have graduated, transferred, or still be enrolled in college-level coursework four years after entering college at a rate of 59%, higher than Black/African American students who met the outcomes at a rate of 42% or Hispanic/Latinx students at a rate of 50%. Of these three demographic groups, only White students exceed the overall average of 54% (North Carolina Community College System, 2022a).

This is not a new phenomenon; while overall completion rates for community college students have increased, gaps between completion rates of White students and Black/African American students have been consistent for years (Juszkiewicz, 2020). In order for many people of color to achieve economic outcomes like equitable and sustainable wages and political outcomes like informed and active democratic participation, they must first achieve equity in community college graduation rates (Whitham et al., 2015). Simultaneously, researchers argue that rather than spending fiscal and political resources on efforts like affirmative action to increase access for more students of color into selective, higher-resourced, and higher-performing colleges, society should instead focus spending those resources on improving the quality of community college programs where students of color are already enrolled (Carnavale & Strohl, 2010).

Role of Community College Faculty in Student Learning

The dominant paradigms of student success in higher education (Kuh et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) focus on students' behaviors, characteristics, and prior preparation that support their academic success. Faculty, other higher education practitioners, and students' classroom experiences do not factor into common models of student success (Mora & Rios-Aguilar, 2017), and the dominant paradigms are based on the experiences of majority students, not students on the margins (Bensimon, 2006). Additionally, efforts to decrease equity gaps in

graduation rates have focused on programs and supports that exist outside of the classroom and have not yielded high rates of success (Stout, 2018). Community college faculty have the most frequent point of contact with students, and greater attention is needed on what happens in the classroom if colleges are going to increase rates of success for all students (Stout, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

When considered through the lens of equity-mindedness (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015), persistent equity gaps between the success rates of White students and the success rates of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students indicate limitations in the learning of community college practitioners, not community college students (Bensimon, 2005). Additional research is needed on the role that community college faculty play in supporting the academic success of all students, especially Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students who graduate at the lowest rates (CCRC, 2021). Specifically, research is needed on community college faculty perspectives on their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in educational attainment for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to increase understanding of the perceptions community college faculty hold of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. In addition to their unrivaled role in student learning, community college faculty are vital to the degree to which a community college fulfills its mission, the reputation of the institution in the community, and the durability of institutional memory and culture (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Further, many community college faculty are future college leaders; 84% of community college presidents have taught full-time or part-time prior to becoming presidents (Duree, 2007, as cited

in Nevarez & Wood, 2010). The study has the potential to identify the most salient parts of faculty perspectives that can be emphasized in future equity-minded faculty development and professional learning opportunities. Community college leaders can use this research to organize meaningful environments, activities, and incentives that support faculty professional learning that leads to improved teaching practices and high rates of success for all community college students. Most importantly, the results of this study can be leveraged to improve the success rates of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students who attend community colleges.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide this qualitative case study:

1. What do community college faculty perceive as their role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students?

2. What do community college faculty perceive as their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students?

The goal of this research is to better understand faculty perceptions of their roles and their institution's roles in the academic success of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. Common theoretical frameworks emphasize how students' behavior and backgrounds determine their success in higher education (Kuh et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and recent community college reforms have focused on initiatives that occur on the periphery of the classroom, for example, new student orientation and intrusive advising (Stout, 2018). These frameworks and reforms are valuable but minimize the responsibility and role community college faculty have in supporting the academic success of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students and closing equity gaps in educational attainment.

This research helps to fill that gap in the scholarship and national discussion on improving equitable outcomes for all students, especially Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. Community college leaders and reformers can more effectively engage community college faculty in making pedagogical changes if they better understand these perceptions that community college faculty have of their influence and roles. Knowledge of community college faculty perceptions can inform faculty engagement in cycles of inquiry and eventually lead to changes in policies, practices, and culture, and then—most importantly—in student outcomes (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

While Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students attend community colleges at higher rates than they attend other institutions of higher education, most theoretical and conceptual models that describe student experiences and behaviors that support their academic success do not address the distinctive perspectives of minoritized college students or the particular context that is the community college setting. The Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model is unusual in that it does consider the perspective of minoritized students who attend community colleges (Harris & Wood, 2016). The SEO Model was developed by Harris and Wood as an expansion of their Five Domains Model that described Black/African American male student success in community colleges based on research on the experiences of Black/African American men in post-secondary education, Black/African American identity development, and student development theories (Harris & Wood, 2016). The Five Domains Model also takes into consideration that Black/African American students who attend community colleges are more likely to be non-traditional age, employed, married, and parenting than Black/African American students who attend universities (Wood & Harris, 2014). Further,

Black/African American students who attend community college typically have received fewer years of high school experience in key subjects like math, science, and foreign languages than Black/African American students who attend universities (Wood & Harris, 2014). The researchers developed a framework that is specific to the community college setting and the students who attend community colleges. In the SEO Model, the researchers expanded the Five Domains Model to include all men of color who attend community colleges, not just Black/African American men who attend community colleges. Additionally, the SEO Model is based on an expanded literature review of and research on men of color, and it incorporates preliminary findings from an early administration of the Community College Survey of Men (CCSM) (Harris & Wood, 2016). The SEO Model is also informed by Astin's (1993) well established Inputs-Environment-Outcome (IEO) Model that emphasized the importance of what students bring to the learning experience based on their backgrounds and attitudes by categorizing them as "inputs." Additionally, Astin's (1993) IEO Model distinguishes between inputs and the environment in which students experience learning and campus life while indicating that inputs influence environment which influences outputs (Harris & Wood, 2016).

Like Astin's (1993) IEO Model, the SEO Model starts with *inputs*, specifically the background/defining factors and the societal factors that influence students' decisions to attend community college. The background/defining factors include students' demographics, full-time or part-time enrollment status, and previous experiences in formal education settings. Societal factors in the SEO Model include "the larger sociocultural forces that lead men of color to community colleges and the internalized societal messages that shape perceptions of men of color" (Harris & Wood, 2016, p. 38). The researchers describe these inputs as including factors that neither students nor faculty can control; however, when the inputs are ignored or not

considered in the development of learning experiences and environments, the students of color experience observable, negative impacts (Harris & Wood, 2016).

The next major component of the SEO Model includes four *socio-ecological domains* that include the experiences that students have while enrolled at community colleges; the socio-ecological domains directly influence student success for students of color at community colleges (Harris & Wood, 2016). The researchers identified these domains as socio-ecological because "they capture the interplay between salient sociological and environmental factors that interact and shape student success outcomes" for students of color enrolled in community colleges (Harris & Wood, 2016, p. 38). The first of four socio-ecological domains is the noncognitive domain, which describes the affective responses students of color have to their interactions with the people and structures within the community college context. Specifically, the noncognitive domain includes the following intrapersonal factors: self-efficacy, locus of control, degree utility, and action control (Harris & Wood, 2016). The degree to which students of color believe in their abilities to succeed academically (self-efficacy) and their perceptions of the control they have over their academic success (locus of control) contribute to the noncognitive factors that influence their academic success. Similarly, the value they place on the credential they are working towards (degree utility) and the effort they put toward their academic success (action control) also influence their academic success and are included in the noncognitive domain of the SEO Model (Harris & Wood, 2016).

The second of the four socio-ecological domains of the SEO Model is the academic domain which focuses on students' academic experiences and outcomes. The academic domain considers students' interactions with faculty both inside and outside the college classroom, interactions that have been shown to positively impact students' academic success (Lundberg &

Schreiner, 2004), especially for students of color (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). The academic

domain also considers student use of academic services, such as tutoring and counseling, and

students' commitment to their course of study (Harris & Wood, 2016).

The third of the four socio-ecological domains of the SEO Model is the environmental

domain, which includes student commitments outside of their higher education experiences.

These commitments frequently compete with students' academic goals for time, attention, and

other resources. The environmental domain includes family obligations, employment, stressful

life events like divorce, death, and job loss (Harris & Wood, 2016). The SEO Model incorporates

Rendón's theory of validation (Rendón, 1994) to differentiate between internal and external

validating agents. External validating agents, according to the SEO Model, include students'

significant others, family members, friends, and other individuals in the students' lives outside

their academic experiences. These external validating agents can play an important role in the

environmental domain (Harris & Wood, 2016). The internal validating agents, on the other hand,

are organized into the last socio-ecological domain of the SEO Model.

The final socio-ecological domain of the SEO Model is the campus ethos domain.

Internal validating agents, such as faculty, administrators, and student services personnel, are

organized into the campus ethos domain alongside the policies, programs, resources, and daily

life of the community college as an institution (Harris & Wood, 2016). To support the emphasis

of the important role that the institution plays in sustaining a culture that fosters the learning and

success of students of color, the SEO Model incorporates Bensimon's (2007) ideas of equity-

minded practitioners and institutional responsibility to minoritized students (Harris & Wood,

2016). Additionally, the campus ethos domain incorporates students' sense of belonging, a

component of the student experience that for students of color is foundational to whether they

will use campus resources, seek support from faculty, and engage fully in the life of the institution (Harris & Wood, 2016).

The third major component of the SEO Model after the inputs and socio-ecological domains is the *outcomes*. The inputs influence the socio-ecological domains which in turn influence the outcomes. That is, students' backgrounds and sociocultural experiences influence their experiences in the noncognitive, academic, environmental, and campus ethos domains. Likewise, students' experiences in the four socio-ecological domains influence students' ability to achieve important academic outcomes. The SEO Model outcomes include persistence, degree attainment, GPA achievement, transfer, goal accomplishment, and labor market outcomes (Harris & Wood, 2016). In several components of the SEO Model, community college faculty are named as individuals who have the potential to positively impact the success of minoritized Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students (Harris & Wood, 2016). Therefore, the SEO Model is a useful framework for identifying the domains in which community college faculty perceive their roles and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for minoritized students.

Research Methodology

This study will use a qualitative case study approach to examine community college faculty perceptions of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. A case study approach is appropriate for this study because the goal is to understand the perspectives and perceptions of individuals who have similar experiences within a specific context, specifically full-time teaching Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students and having participated in a Racial Equity Institute training at a community college that has invested time and resources in

achieving equitable outcomes for its students. This qualitative study assumes a social constructivism research paradigm and recognizes that reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed and that individuals—including the research participants in this study— have subjective understandings of their realities (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. This introductory chapter provided an overview of the perceived and real benefits of higher education; the equity gaps in graduation rates between Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, and White students; and the purpose of the study and research questions. It also included a thorough description of the theoretical framework that will be used in this study: the Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model (Harris & Wood, 2016). Chapter 2 synthesizes relevant scholarship on community colleges as a system and institution of higher education; the roles community college faculty play and their perceptions of those roles; an overview of professional development focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, including Racial Equity Institute training; and existing research on community college faculty perceptions. Chapter 2 also includes an analysis of the current equity work at community colleges, including an argument for equity-mindedness and the barriers that community college faculty can experience in developing equity-mindedness, and a detailed description of research that undergirds the four socio-ecological domains of the SEO Model. The third chapter describes the research methodology, including the social constructivist qualitative paradigm, case study research method, and research details such as participants, setting, and interview protocols. Chapter 4 describes the research participants in greater depth, the six research findings that emerged from the data analysis, and additional applications of the SEO Model. The final chapter concludes the dissertation with a review of the relevant details in

the case study context and discusses the four conclusions from this study. It also includes

recommendations for college leaders in supporting community college faculty and

recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to increase understanding of the perceptions community college faculty hold of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. The following literature review starts with a description of the community college, including the students who attend community colleges and the persistent equity gaps in the performance of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students, and the faculty who work at community colleges, including what is known about how they perceive their work. This chapter also includes a thorough description of the current work towards closing equity gaps, such as professional development on diversity, equity, and inclusion; a distinction between equity-mindedness and deficit-mindedness; barriers to equity-mindedness, like colorblindness and technicism; and proven teaching strategies that community college faculty can use to be inclusive of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. Finally, this chapter summarizes the scholarship that supports the four socio-ecological domains of the Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model.

The Community College

Community colleges are a relatively recent innovation in higher education with incredible growth from the first community college established in 1901 to over 1,100 community colleges in 2006 (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). The growth in number of community colleges and enrollment at community colleges can be attributed to the following factors: affordability, population growth, student diversity in terms of students who have not historically had access to higher education, open admissions policies as universities increased their admissions requirements, geographic proximity, and economic trends as students seek training that makes them more

marketable (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). As community colleges grew in number, so did the complexity and variety in their missions (Meier, 2018). Community colleges serve the community of people organized by geography, and community colleges have occasionally chosen to ignore their stated mission in response to a community need, new funding stream, external policy mandate from state or federal governments, or social change (Meier, 2018). One of the few consistencies across these diverse institutions is a commitment to access and the democratization of higher education (Meier, 2018). Community colleges provide overlapping curricular functions that serve the commitment to access and democratization, namely, developmental education, integrative or general education, transfer and liberal arts education, and career and technical education (Cohen et al., 2013).

Overall completion rates for community college students have increased over time; however, the gaps between the completion rates of White students and Black/African American students have been consistent for years (Juszkiewicz, 2020). Hispanic/Latinx student enrollment in higher education increased between 2010 and 2016, but completion rates of White students and Hispanic/Latinx students have been consistent, with White students continuing to graduate at higher rates than Hispanic/Latinx students (Excelencia in Education, 2018). These persistent equity gaps can be attributed to several factors, including the structural racism inherent in the funding that K12 public schools receive. Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students attend schools that are more segregated now than they were 20 years ago, and the schools they attend are under-resourced when compared with predominantly White schools (Roundtable on Community Change, 2004). "Nationwide, the school districts with the highest minority enrollment have, on average, $902 fewer dollars to spend per student than school districts with the lowest minority enrollment" (Roundtable on Community Change, 2004, p. 28). When

Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students matriculate from predominantly minority high schools to community colleges, they frequently enter colleges that receive as little as half as much funding per capita than predominantly White universities (Goldrick-Rab & Kinsey, 2013, as cited in Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). Also, public high schools in which White students are in the majority are twice as more likely to offer a high number of advanced placement (AP) classes than public high schools where Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students are in the majority (Roundtable on Community Change, 2004). The disparity in high school graduation rates and later college graduation rates can be attributed to the systemic racism that prevents Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students from having the same opportunity as White students. In their Community College Achievement Gap Model, Nevarez and Wood (2010) attribute the higher education equity gaps that Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students experience to differences in the quality of education these students receive in K12 schools, the lower education levels of the parents of these students, and their families' lower socioeconomic status. They write "…success disparities begin in the early grades (K6) and persist, usually widening, throughout the academic pipeline…as indicated by fewer and fewer individuals attaining degree-holder status" (Nevarez & Wood, 2010).

Community college faculty perceptions of their work with Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students are influenced by the faculty members' academic and institutional socialization. Academic socialization through solitary, research-based graduate school coursework prepares community college faculty for individual work; however, the diversity of disciplines and programs at community colleges, including career and technical education programs in which faculty come to be employed at community colleges from the workforce rather than graduate school programs, weakens the impact academic socialization has on

community college faculty overall (Levin, 2018). Institutional socialization has a stronger impact on how community college faculty perceive their roles. The messages community college faculty receive from the institution via the mission and values, policies and procedures, and faculty expectations support faculty identity as "relational-supportive" practitioners who value student success through relationships and interactive teaching and learning activities (Levin, 2018, p. 185). The culture and language of the institution matches and influences many community college faculty members' professional identities (Levin, 2018). As the system in which community college faculty work, the rewards and incentives of the community college influence what community college faculty do. This study includes a research question on the perception community college faculty have of their institution's role in closing equity gaps for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students because the strong relationship between the community college and community college faculty identity.

Community College Faculty

According to the National Center for Education Statistics in 2020, of the 727,352 "instructional staff" employed in higher education in the United States, 92,632 (13%) were employed as "instructional staff" at community colleges (IPEDS, 2020). Despite the large number of community college faculty, there is limited research on the impact community college faculty have on student outcomes (Bustillos et al., 2011) and the overall community college faculty professional experience (Levin, 2018; Townsend & Twombly, 2007), including community college faculty perceptions of their roles in closing equity gaps for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. Existing scholarship reveals several salient demographic characteristics and details related to the role and perceived role of community college faculty in the success of their students.

Demographics

Faculty at higher education institutions across the United States are mostly White; specifically, in 2017, 76% of all higher education faculty were White while 24% were non-White. However, only 55% of undergraduates in 2017 were White while 44% of undergraduates in 2017 were non-White (Davis & Fry, 2019). This trend is true for community colleges where community college faculty are considerably less diverse than the students they serve. While the number of non-White students enrolled in community colleges has exceeded the number of White students enrolled in community colleges, 75% of all faculty employed at community colleges in 2016 were White, with 77% of full-time faculty identifying as White and 74% of part-time faculty identifying as White (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). North Carolina community colleges employed 11,590 faculty in October 2021. Of those faculty, 9,369 (81%) were White, including 5,015 (83%) of all full-time faculty identifying as White and 4,354 (78%) part-time faculty identifying as White (North Carolina Community College System, 2022b). The lack of diversity among community college faculty has the potential to increase community college students' experiences with stereotype threat, increase their exposure to bias and discrimination, and limit their access to role models who come from the same racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Fairlie et al., 2014). When underrepresented minoritized community college faculty teach underrepresented minoritized community college students, the gaps in dropout rates and course performance among White and non-White students falls by 20% to 50% (Fairlie et al., 2014).

Faculty Identity

As stated in the previous section, the identity of the community college instructor is closely related to the identity of community colleges (Levin, 2018). Community college faculty

are often associated with teaching and classroom innovation because community colleges as institutions emphasize teaching over research (Outcalt, 2000; Townsend & Twombly, 2007). However, most community college faculty qualify for their positions simply by holding a master's degree in their subject area and sometimes because they have one or two years of teaching experience (Alexander et al., 2012). In fact, to achieve and maintain accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), community colleges in the southeastern United States are required to demonstrate that their faculty who teach transferable courses meet one of two possible graduate degree qualifications: a doctorate or master's degree in the discipline or a master's degree with a minimum of 18 graduate-level credit hours in the discipline (SACSCOC, 2018), which signals a priority for community college faculty education and training in their content areas, not their experience or demonstrated success in teaching. In the North Carolina Community College System, 59% of all full-time faculty in curriculum, for credit programs held a master's degree in October 2021 (North Carolina Community College System, 2022b). From the community college institutional perspective, requiring faculty to hold a master's degree instead of a doctorate yields a larger pool of candidates and suppresses salaries (Alexander et al., 2012). It also signals a preference for professionals who will prioritize teaching over research (Cohen et al., 2013). However, teaching at community colleges is recognizably more complex and potentially harder than teaching at most other institutions of higher education because of community colleges' open-door policy, mission-driven focus on access, and the diverse makeup of the student body (Grubb, 1999; Outcalt, 2000; Roueche et al., 2003; Townsend & Twombly, 2007).

The professional life of a community college faculty member can be isolated with few structured opportunities to share teaching methodologies or experiences with peers (Outcalt,

2000). Levin characterizes this isolation as "faculty in U.S. universities and colleges are a collection of individual laborers" (2018, p. 184). While community college faculty serve on committees both internal and external to the department and some of that committee work may be collaborative, the essential job duties of the community college faculty member are performed in isolation (Levin, 2018). As a result, there is limited knowledge on what community college faculty do day-to-day nor on their perceptions of their role in teaching and closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students.

Related, there is little research on the pedagogies and teaching methodologies community college faculty use (Mora & Rios-Aguilar, 2017), and many community college faculty teach based on minimal communication from supervisors, replicating the teaching strategies that they saw their own professors use, and trial and error in their own classrooms (Alexander et al, 2012; Mora & Rios-Aguilar, 2017). The growing literature on effective undergraduate teaching varies from empirical scholarship to more reflective practices. Among the most commonly used and commonly cited teaching methods are lecture, discussion, collaborative learning, and computer-enabled learning (Roueche et al., 2003). More research on community college faculty classroom practices is needed to complement existing research that frequently either uses a deficit-minded approach to focus on student characteristics that explain why some students are not successful or does not factor the classroom experiences of faculty and students into common models of student success (Mora & Rios-Aguilar, 2017).

Equity Work at Community Colleges

Efforts to close equity gaps for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students at community colleges are diverse in terms of scope and effectiveness. However, some key concepts can be applied to this work, including the potential for professional development in

diversity, equity, and inclusion; the difference between equity-mindedness and deficit-mindedness; challenges to developing equity-mindedness, such as colorblindness, technicism, and other individual and institutional barriers; and research-based teaching strategies that close equity gaps. These concepts are described more fully below.

Professional Development for Faculty

Despite the emphasis community colleges place on teaching (Outcalt, 2000; Townsend & Twombly, 2007), community college faculty can struggle to prioritize their own professional learning and development because of heavy teaching loads, demanding advising and service expectations, few incentives to participate in professional learning activities, a perceived lack of connection between professional learning activities and the mission of the college, and competing interests and levels of engagement, especially among adjunct faculty (Bickerstaff & Edgecombe, 2012; Lightner & Sipple, 2013). Faculty who participate in faculty development programs report high levels of satisfaction with the faculty development experience (Howard & Taber, 2010), and faculty development activities like Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and faculty learning communities can lead to learning experiences that result in changes and improvements to how faculty teach and how students learn (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). But most community faculty have received little training in teaching methodologies and pedagogy (Levin, 2018; Townsend & Twombly, 2007), and faculty development that supports community colleges' efforts to decrease equity gaps in student performance is in its infancy. Nonetheless, researcher Estela Mara Bensimon (2005) is optimistic: "I believe that organizational learning, at the local level, by individuals who are closest to the problem may have a greater impact in reversing inequality in higher education than the numerous diversity-oriented interventions developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s" (p. 110).

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are common contemporary topics in professional learning and development for community college faculty; further, faculty engagement in DEI training has led to changes in their perceptions of their students and their teaching practices (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). DEI training offers community college faculty opportunities to learn new ways to support students who may experience the world and the community college differently than the faculty (Castro, 2015). Although one-time professional development activities can be limited in their influence on community college faculty members' understanding of equity, they can "spark faculty reflection on the messages on equity…" (Ching, 2018, p. 4) and provide common language and frameworks for discussing DEI concepts. DEI training promotes individuals' diversity development, which deepens their understanding of themselves and their students by considering the complexities of identity and avoiding and essentialist approach to diversity while supporting change on cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels for the individuals (Guo & Jamal, 2007).

The Racial Equity Institute Phase 1 Workshop and Groundwater Presentation are specific examples of diversity, equity, and inclusion training that community college faculty in North Carolina may have experienced. The Racial Equity Institute, LLC in Greensboro, North Carolina provides a series of high quality, research-based DEI workshops to a variety of organizations, including community colleges and universities, community-based organizations, government agencies, healthcare institutions, civic organizations, and foundations, that focus on how racism is part of American history and embedded in structures, systems, and institutions (Services and Workshops, n.d.). The Racial Equity Phase 1 Workshop training is a two-day, interactive workshop that includes the following topics: identifying and minimizing implicit bias; the interactions between race, poverty, housing, and economic indicators; institutional power and

power brokers; and the history and legacy of race in American policy development and implementation (Services and Workshops, n.d.). The Racial Equity Institute Groundwater Presentation is a three-hour interactive presentation that introduces foundational topics in diversity, equity, and inclusion and emphasizes that racism is structural (Services and Workshops, n.d.). The participants in this research study have participated in Racial Equity Phase 1 Workshop training or the Groundwater Presentation facilitated by the Racial Equity Institute.

Equity-Mindedness and Deficit-Mindedness

According to Dowd and Bensimon (2015), equity-mindedness is a "language tool for questioning cultural assumptions" (p. 21). Equity-minded individuals take personal and institutional responsibility for the ways in which students of color access, experience, and succeed in higher education. On the other hand, deficit-minded individuals blame students of color for their real and perceived deficits (Bensimon, 2005; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). For example, when equity-minded practitioners encounter data that reveal that fewer Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students enroll in specific programs, they question what barriers the institution has put in place to suppress enrollment of students of color. When deficit-minded practitioners encounter the same data, they focus on possible student characteristics, like a lack of interest in or preparation for the specific programs. Further, equity-minded practitioners apply the following tenets to their thinking and actions: race consciousness is positive; race-neutral approaches disadvantage students of color; individual actions can contribute to the elimination of inequities; and even when they are not explicitly racist, policies and practices may perpetuate exclusionary practices based on students' racial/ethnic identities (Bensimon, 2012).

Equity activities that focus on changing students, for example, clubs for Black/African American males or tutoring for developmental education students, are deficit-minded and insufficient because they do not change the system in which Black/African American males, developmental education students, or other minoritized groups learn and navigate higher education (Castro, 2015). Equity-minded practitioners assert that students are not the problem; rather, how practitioners think about (or do not think about) equity and the institution's policies and procedures are the problem (Bensimon, 2007; Castro, 2015).

Colorblindness, Technicism, and Other Barriers to Equity-Mindedness

Community college practitioners sometimes cite their colorblindness as an indication of a rejection of stereotypes and support for students of color. However, colorblindness is at odds with equity-mindedness because colorblindness can lead practitioners to think that students of all races and ethnicities have the same opportunities to succeed and correspondingly have the same access to resources and should be treated the same way (Ching, 2018). Colorblindness perpetuates a belief that racism is limited to individual acts of prejudice and is not widespread through cultural and societal structures and norms (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). It can also make individuals who are not in the majority feel disfavored when their distinguishing characteristics are not recognized by individuals in the majority (Aragon et al., 2017). Colorblindness results in "racism without racists" (Viesca, 2014, as cited in Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). A specific component of the community college faculty experience that should avoid a colorblind approach is professional development and inquiry. Rather, professional development and inquiry should consider students' racial and ethnic background, and practitioners should "particularize" their practices for local settings and communities (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015, p. 139). Otherwise, colorblind professional development implies that effective teaching is possible regardless of the

students and their characteristics, communities, and experiences (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015).

Faculty who claim to be colorblind are also less likely to adopt inclusive teaching practices

(Aragon et al., 2017).

Colorblindness is a component of technicism in which teaching and educational reforms

are reduced to best practices as defined by the majority in which students are taught pieces of

information that are free from context, ideology, and the student perspective (Dowd &

Bensimon, 2015). In an effort to be apolitical and ahistoric, technicism, like colorblindness,

obscures and invalidates students' racial and ethnic heritages. Many community college faculty

define justice as fairness and prioritize technicism while being unwilling to consider programs,

policies, or practices that target certain student groups because it would be unfair to other student

groups, namely White students (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). Additionally, community college

faculty may subscribe to the national values of the United States that are assumed to be race-

neutral but, in fact, can contribute to the equity gaps experienced by Black/African American and

Hispanic/Latinx community college students by hiding the diversity of their experiences and

minimizing the perception that individual racial and ethnic groups are not experiencing a "level

playing field" (Roundtable on Community Change, 2004). Those national values are personal

responsibility and individualism, meritocracy, and equal opportunity (Roundtable on Community

Change, 2004). Indoctrination in mainstream ideologies, such as technicism, personal

responsibility and individualism, meritocracy, and equal opportunity may prevent community

college faculty from developing equity-mindedness.

Community college faculty may also find it difficult to engage in equity-minded practices

because the higher education context is a political and economic system that includes multiple

barriers to practicing equity and achieving equitable outcomes for all students; it is difficult for

individuals to see their own practices and the practices of their institution through an alternate

equity lens (Castro, 2015). Specifically, within the higher education context, diversity is a

frequently cited value (Ahmed, 2012), and higher education practitioners, like community

college faculty, may prioritize increasing access for students of color and incorporating diverse

authors in required readings, neither of which closes equity gaps for students (Bensimon, 2005).

The higher education context has also been influenced by theoretical frameworks that "focus[…]

largely on documenting the characteristics of 'successful' students (e.g., Pascarella & Terenzini,

1995, 2005), self-motivated, engaged, and committed individuals who enter college with clearly

defined academic, personal, and professional goals" (Ching, 2018, p. 3). Many of these

theoretical frameworks are focused on traditional college students (i.e., White, between the ages

of 18 and 22, enrolled full time) who attend universities. Black/African American and

Hispanic/Latinx community college students who are non-traditional in age and enrollment

status face significantly different and increased challenges than traditional college students

(Ching, 2018). And community college faculty who attempt to apply these theoretical

frameworks to their students might adopt a deficit-minded approach that explains equity gaps as

resulting from student weaknesses, such as lack of motivation, engagement, and commitment

(Bensimon, 2005). Community college faculty also face personal barriers and institutional

barriers to developing equity-minded practices. Personal barriers include the following: lack of

awareness of student performance data and alternative teaching methods, unwillingness to

change, fear, and a perceived lack of support for the work from colleagues (Addy, Reeves et al.,

2021). Institutional barriers include the following: inadequate resources and time to learn new

teaching strategies, a lack of incentives to make changes to classroom practices, and insufficient

professional development (Addy, Reeves et al., 2021).

Teaching Strategies to Close Equity Gaps

In direct contrast to colorblindness, multiculturalism ideologies recognize the differences between different groups of people, including differences based on race and ethnicity (Aragon et al., 2017). Multicultural education has the potential to transform both pedagogical practices, for example, teaching strategies and instructor expectations, and the also curriculum, for example, including multicultural and multiethnic knowledge and perspectives while minimizing Eurocentric content (Guo & Jamal, 2007). Faculty who hold multicultural ideologies are more likely to evaluate Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students more favorably, limit the bias that minoritized students perceive in the classroom and other learning environments, and support the ambition and success of minoritized students (Aragon et al., 2017). Perhaps most important for closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students, faculty who claim to be multiculturalist are more likely to adopt inclusive teaching practices than faculty who adhere to colorblind ideologies (Aragon et al., 2017). Inclusive teachers acknowledge and respond to the diverse needs of their students by creating a welcoming and positive classroom environment and modifying instruction as needed to help their students achieve academic success (Dewsbury & Brame, 2019).

In addition to using multicultural approaches in their teaching practices, inclusive instructors in higher education settings strive to close equity gaps for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students by demonstrating a willingness to make mistakes in front of their students, espousing a growth mindset, and employing a variety of student-centered teaching strategies (Addy, Dube et al., 2021). The student-centered teaching strategies include culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching and universal design for learning (UDL). Both culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching are frameworks that

prioritize and value students' cultures in the learning environment and learning process to support the learning and cultivate a sense of belonging among all students (Addy, Dube et al., 2021). Similarly, instructors who employ UDL consider the diversity of their students as they plan for and make explicit to students the "how," "what," and "why" of learning in an effort to make the learning experience inclusive of all students (Addy, Dube et al., 2021).

Socio-Ecological Outcomes Model

Harris and Wood's (2016) Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model provides a framework for considering multiple dimensions of the experiences that students of color, including Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students, have at community colleges. As was described in Chapter 1, the SEO Model organizes students' experiences into four socio-ecological domains: noncognitive domain, academic domain, environmental domain, and campus ethos domain, all of which contribute to students' outcomes or academic success as indicated by their persistence, credential attainment, transfer to senior institutions, goal attainment, and accomplishment of labor market outcomes (Harris & Wood, 2016). Existing scholarship on community college student experiences and faculty engagement within these four socio-ecological domains inform this study.

Noncognitive Domain

The noncognitive domain of the SEO Model addresses students' intrapersonal factors and emotional responses within the context of the institution and their identity as college students (Harris & Wood, 2016). The noncognitive domain includes the following components of the community college student experience: self-efficacy, locus of control, degree utility, and action control (Harris & Wood, 2016). Self-efficacy, or the strength of the belief that an individual can do the work it takes to succeed at their goals, has been theorized to play an important role in

student academic achievement (Wood et al., 2015). For example, researchers have found the math self-efficacy of first-year Black/African American students at a community college is a strong predictor of students' academic integration behaviors, such as meeting with faculty and advisors, that positively impact academic success (Wood et al., 2015). Degree utility as defined as a strong and positive connection between education and employment has been found to positively correlate to community college students' (regardless of race and ethnicity) intent to re-enroll in subsequent terms (Luke et al., 2014). Finally, in a study of Black/African American female community college students, community college students' locus of control and action control have been found to be positively influenced by racial affinity and sense of belonging (Grayson, 2020).

Academic Domain

The second socio-ecological domain of the SEO Model is the academic domain, which includes faculty-student interactions, student use of academic resources such as tutoring, and student commitment to course of study (Harris & Wood, 2016). In their research on faculty-student interactions that included an analysis according to students' race and ethnicity, Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) expanded on previous research by Kuh and Hu (2001) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) that focused on the experiences of White students and found that all students, regardless of race and ethnicity, reap academic benefit from interacting with faculty. In fact, for students of color, their relationships with faculty were stronger predictors of learning than their background characteristics (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Additional research indicates that for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx community college students, their relationships with their faculty are the most significant driver of their academic success (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). In addition to their interactions with faculty, Black/African American and

Hispanic/Latinx community college students benefit from academic resources, such as proactive advising, success coaching, and tutoring (Daniels et al., 2019). Finally, Hagedorn et al. (2001) identify a correlation between Black/African American male community college students' academic success and their commitment to their major and academic goals.

Environmental Domain

The environmental domain of the SEO Model highlights the impact external events and relationships can have on minoritized community college student success. These environmental events and relationships include external validating agents, commitments, and stressful life events (Harris & Wood, 2016). Research shows that while faculty may be reluctant to change their teaching practices based on their knowledge of students' environmental domain, faculty are knowledgeable of the multiple roles that non-traditional college students play as well as the external barriers and obstacles to their academic success (Zerquera et al., 2016). Students' social capital can be considered part of the environmental domain as well. Social capital includes students' social networks that help students prioritize their education and successfully navigate the institution (Yosso, 2005). Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx community college students' relationships with their faculty are the most important influence on their social capital (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). Student commitments within the environmental domain include working, commuting to college, and having family responsibilities, all which have been identified as both barriers to student engagement with faculty (Cotten & Wilson, 2006) and having a positive effect on student engagement with faculty (Wood & Ireland, 2014). External validating agents or "out-of-class validating agents" can include friends, significant others, parents, siblings, or other individuals who support students' interpersonal validation by affirming

their decision to attend college and encouraging them to work hard to achieve their academic goals (Rendón, 1994).

Campus Ethos Domain

The campus ethos domain of the SEO Model highlights the importance of a sense of belonging, connectedness, campus resources, and faculty as internal validating agents in the success of minoritized students at community colleges (Harris & Wood, 2016). Within the context of higher education, a sense of belonging refers to the degree to which students feel connected, valued, and supported by the members of the college community, including faculty, staff, and other students (Strayhorn, 2019). Sense of belonging is especially important in environments in which some individuals are likely to feel marginalized, for example, students of color in predominantly White institutions (Strayhorn, 2019). Additionally, it is possible for students to feel a sense of belonging at the institution while not in a specific class or vice versa (Strayhorn, 2019), so faculty have the opportunity to support students' sense of belonging at the micro, classroom level. Black/African American male community college students in particular have indicated that they are more willing to engage with faculty when they experience a strong sense of belonging (Jones, 2019). They praised faculty who demonstrated a passion for and understanding of their community, personalized instruction, appreciated student participation, provided support outside of the classroom, and set high expectations while providing support to students to be successful (Jones, 2019). Internal validating agents or "in-class validating agents" can be other students, counselors, and other college personnel but are most commonly faculty who demonstrate sincere care for students, create learning environments that support students' identities as learners, and treat students fairly (Rendón, 1994). Internal validating agents are especially important for community college students and non-traditional students (Rendón,

1994). Community college students' experiences with a sense of belonging, campus resources, and faculty willingness to serve as internal validating agents contribute to the campus climate. Martin et al. (2017) examined the equity gaps in GPA between Black/African American and White students and between Hispanic/Latinx and White students in a longitudinal study and found that campus climate, specifically the inclusivity of the culture and choice of major accounted for half of the achievement gap while the other half was attributed to family background and previous academic experiences.

Summary

The literature review for this study of community college faculty members' perceptions of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students started with an overview of the community college, its students, and its faculty. This chapter also addressed the relevant themes in equity work at community colleges, including professional development in diversity, equity, and inclusion concepts and equity-mindedness, a conceptual frame for questioning assumptions about why some students experience differing rates of access and success in higher education. It described colorblindness, technicism, and other barriers to equity-mindedness, such as individual and institutional limitations. This section of Chapter 2 also identified several evidence-based teaching strategies that faculty can use to close equity gaps for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. Finally, Chapter 2 concluded with a thorough discussion of the Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model and the existing scholarship that supports the four socio-ecological domains: noncognitive domain, academic domain, environmental domain, and campus ethos domain. The SEO Model serves as the theoretical framework for this research

study and is applied further in the research methodology as described in Chapter 3, the data

analysis and research findings described in Chapter 4, and conclusion discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to increase understanding of the perceptions community college faculty hold of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. A case study approach is appropriate for this study because the goal is to understand the perspectives and perceptions of individuals who have similar experiences within a specific context, specifically teaching Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students and having participated in a Racial Equity Institute training at a community college that has invested time and resources in achieving equitable outcomes for its students. Qualitative research uses methods of inquiry that take into consideration the context of the research participants and the prior knowledge of the researcher (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2010). This qualitative study assumes a social constructivism research paradigm in an effort to thoroughly describe and consider the conditions under which the research participants work and live, in order to understand and make meaning of their experiences (Creswell, 2014). Specifically, this qualitative study will address the following research questions:

1. What do community college faculty perceive as their role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students?

2. What do community college faculty perceive as their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students?

This chapter begins with a description and rationale for the use of a qualitative approach and the researcher's positionality and reflexivity. It also describes the processes the researcher used in identifying the participants and research setting and data collection, analysis and

synthesis. The chapter concludes with a discussion on limitations and delimitations, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

This study is situated in a social constructivist research paradigm in which the purpose of the research is to understand and describe faculty perceptions of their roles, perceptions that are based on their engagement with the students they teach and the institutions in which they work. Social constructivism recognizes that reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed, and that individuals have subjective understandings of their realities (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), so the context in which the faculty work is important and will be described fully. Further, how practitioners act depends on their perceptions of equity, and considerations of equity are dependent upon context, including what individuals choose to look at and see (Castro, 2015). The researcher's role is to investigate and make meaning of the participants' understandings, and the researcher's background and understanding of the world at large and the specific research context shapes their understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, the researcher's positionality and reflexivity are addressed in detail below.

A qualitative research design is appropriate in the social constructivist paradigm because this study strives to understand and describe, not explain or critique, the research participants' perceptions (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Qualitative research as a field of inquiry employs a wide variety of data collection and analysis methods with the intention of "better understanding of the subject matter at hand" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 4). This study examines the perceptions of community college faculty within the contexts they have socially constructed for themselves and based on their individual and collective experiences. Further, this study is organized as a case study as it focuses on a "contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context" and

acknowledges that distinct boundaries between the phenomenon under study and the context in which the phenomenon occurs are not always clear (Yin, 2009, p. 18). The context in which the case study occurs is described in detail in Participant Selection below. This study can be characterized as a single-case design because the study applies a clearly articulated theoretical framework (the SEO Model) to the context and the case is unique in that few community colleges have dedicated comparable resources to achieving equitable outcomes for all students (Yin, 2009).

This study will contribute to the limited research on the overall community college faculty experience (Levin, 2018; Townsend & Twombly, 2007), by collecting data from faculty within their socially, culturally, and historically created contexts to identify community college faculty perceptions of their roles in student learning and in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for minoritized students. The research will utilize the socio-ecological domains within the Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model, which organizes factors that contribute positively to the success of community college students of color into four domains: noncognitive, academic, environmental, and campus ethos (Harris & Wood, 2016). Faculty perceptions will be considered in terms of the four socio-ecological domains.

Role of the Researcher

The constructivist paradigm acknowledges the primary role of the researcher in interpreting the data provided by the participants and the context in which the participants and data exist (Creswell, 2014). This study of community college faculty members' perceptions of their roles and their institution's roles will use inductive processes in which the researcher generates meaning within a specific social, historical, and cultural context (Creswell, 2014). In constructivist qualitative research, many truths are possible, and the researcher is a primary

research instrument through which those truths are identified (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Therefore, the researcher's positionality is always relevant, and especially so in this study in

which the researcher has almost 20 years of professional experience within the social, historical,

and cultural context of the study. In those 20 years, the researcher has worked at community

colleges as an adjunct faculty member, full-time faculty member, program coordinator, discipline

chair, assistant dean, dean, and assistant vice president. In addition to years of experience as a

faculty member and academic leader, the researcher served as a director for a Teaching-Learning

Center for ten years and participated in and presented equity workshops and professional

learning experiences for faculty. The researcher had a good rapport with the faculty at the

research setting based on her years of experience at the institution and history of advocacy on

behalf of full-time and part-time faculty. As a former community college faculty member and

current academic leader at a community college, the researcher had an emic perspective that

supported the researcher's understanding of the participants' perspectives, language, and

behavior (Holmes, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, the researcher was a White,

cisgender, queer woman who had benefitted from the personal and professional privilege that

comes from being White and cisgender and experienced the personal and professional biases and

challenges that come from being a woman and queer.

The researcher's positionality is influenced by reflexivity (Holmes, 2020). There are

power dynamics in all research, especially qualitative research where the researcher's ontology

shapes the research design, selection of participants, and interpretation of the data. Reflexivity is

the dual awareness the researcher has of her influence on the study and the influence the study

has on the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and in practice is less concerned with a set of

actions than the researcher's consciousness and approach to the research (Probst & Berenson,

2014). While the researcher did not directly supervise the community college faculty who were invited to participate in the study, the researcher was a senior level academic administrator, and research participants might have felt pressure to participate or avoid speaking negatively about their experiences. Every effort was made to not only protect the participants' confidentiality but also reassure them that their participation in the research was voluntary and their comments would be kept confidential. Similarly, the researcher's prior experience as a faculty member and current experience as an academic leader shaped the analysis and interpretation of the data. Further, the research had the potential to influence the researcher's actions in her role as an academic administrator who supported faculty and shaped faculty development opportunities at the institution. The researcher held both insider status as a fellow employee of the community college research setting and outsider status as not a member of the faculty.

To address positionality, reflexivity, and the influences they can potentially have on the study, the researcher used logs and memos to track her own reactions to the data as it was collected and analyzed. Additionally, the researcher had a network of colleagues, including individuals with expertise in equity-minded practices in higher education, community college faculty, and qualitative research. Through informal conversation with these colleagues, the researcher could identify her blind spots and the potential for her own experiences to influence the analysis of the data (Probst & Berenson, 2014). The use of bracketing, epoche, and member checks discussed below also supported the researcher's efforts to maintain awareness of her positionality and reflexivity.

Participant Selection

The researcher used purposive sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to select the participants who are most likely to be able to respond to the research questions and provide

insight to the phenomenon under study. Since the goal of this case study was to describe in depth community college faculty perceptions within a particular context, the researcher selected a typical sample to include participants who met predetermined criteria. Specifically, the participants were currently employed as full-time community college faculty for at least three years, so they were knowledgeable of the social, cultural, and historical context of community college teaching as well as familiar with the unique characteristics and needs of community college students. Additionally, the participants had participated in Racial Equity Phase 1 Workshop training or Groundwater Presentation facilitated by the Racial Equity Institute in which training participants learn about the history and legacy of race in the United States, implicit biases of individuals, structural racism purposefully created and perpetuated by institutions and policy, and a shared language around diversity, equity, and inclusion (Services and Workshops, n.d.). Inclusion of their participation in the Racial Equity Institute training activities as a criterion for participation in this research study was intended to provide the research participants with a common baseline understanding of relevant and timely diversity, equity, and inclusion topics. Research participants may have participated in other equity training or may have only reluctantly participated in Racial Equity Institute training activities. This criterion for purposive sampling does not indicate that the research study evaluated the Racial Equity Institute training activities; rather, this is another common experience of the participants and part of the definition of their shared experiences within the research context.

At Keystone Technical Community College (a pseudonym) where this study was situated, 134 full-time faculty were employed in Fall 2021 (North Carolina Community College System, 2022c). Of those 134 full-time faculty members, 72 had participated in Racial Equity Institute Phase 1 training or Groundwater Presentation as of the start of the Fall 2022 semester.

The researcher's intention was to invite the 72 faculty members who have participated in Racial Equity Institute Phase 1 training or Groundwater Presentation to participate in the study. The researcher's goal was to interview 15-20 of the 72 qualifying faculty members. The researcher interviewed the research participants and conducted a preliminary analysis by coding and theming the interviews. The researcher sought additional participants based on the initial findings. These research participants had similar exposure to a high-quality diversity, equity, and inclusion training and common diversity, equity, and inclusion concepts through Racial Equity Institution training. The researcher completed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) processes at North Carolina State University and Keystone Technical Community College.

The research site Keystone Technical Community College (pseudonym) is one of the larger community colleges in North Carolina with an enrollment of approximately 9,000 total students in 2021-2022. The community college offers the full complement of associate degrees offered in North Carolina, including Associate in Applied Science, Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, Associate in Fine Arts, Associate in Engineering, Associate in General Education, Associate in Arts for Teacher Preparation, and Associate in Science for Teacher Preparation. The college also offers diplomas and certificates in a variety of health technology and career and technical education programs. In Fall 2021, 34% of all students enrolled at the community college were White; 30% were Black/African American; and 17% were Hispanic/Latinx. In 2020, the college published an equity action plan that included increasing employee salaries to a living wage as needed, revising the curriculum in the Public Safety Administration Associate in Applied Science degree program to include student learning outcomes related to racial equity, revising interview committee protocols to include implicit bias training for all committee members, and expanding availability to Racial Equity Institute training to all employees. Senior

leaders, especially the college president, frequently speak at internal employee meetings and external community meetings about the role Keystone Tech plays in supporting equitable outcomes for all students regardless of race and ethnicity, the institution's primary responsibility in supporting students' access to family sustaining wages, and the college's goal to be an anti-racist institution. Also, the community college's current strategic plan includes a vision statement that refers to providing equitable access to education, employment, and opportunity; a core value of being a champion for equity; and a strategic goal to increase graduation rates while closing equity gaps. Finally, the community college was the first in the state of North Carolina to create and staff an Office of Equity and Inclusion. The research site has invested time and resources in achieving equitable outcomes for its students.

Data Collection Methods

The purpose of case study research is to provide a detailed description of a particular group of people within a particular setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007); therefore, individual interviews with the research participants in the natural setting (Creswell, 2014) were the primary means of data collection. The interviews were conducted over Zoom to not only safeguard against unknown COVID-19 risks at the time at which the interviews were planned but also to allow the researcher to record the interviews for ease of transcription later. Synchronous interviews via an online platform challenge the researcher and participant to read one another's nonverbal messages and establish rapport as easily as is possible in face-to-face interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000), so the researcher spent ample time establishing rapport and expressing gratitude and respect for the participant at the beginning of each interview. The interviews asked questions about the participants' lived experiences with the assumption that these experiences shape the participants' understanding of the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and more

specifically, their perceptions of their roles as community college faculty. The interview questions were informed by what is known about community college faculty perceptions (Andrews, 2022; Bensimon, 2005; Bustillos et al., 2011; Levin, 2018; Townsend & Twombly, 2007; Whitham et al., 2015) and the gaps in that scholarship. Specifically, the interview questions focused on faculty perceptions of their role and their institution's role within the four socio-ecological domains of the SEO Model (Harris & Wood, 2016).

Interviews were appropriate for this qualitative study on participants' perceptions because perceptions cannot be easily observed through other research means and are best articulated by the individuals themselves. While interviews provide indirect information based on what the participants choose to share or withhold (Creswell, 2014), interviews are foundational to all qualitative research, especially qualitative research that is grounded in a social constructivist paradigm and uses a case study approach. The interview protocol appears in Appendix A: Participant Interview Questions. Basic demographic information will be collected from the participants using the survey in Appendix B: Demographic Survey. Participant confidentiality was maintained throughout the study by use of pseudonyms for the research participants, the research site, and other identifying characteristics.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The data collected by the interviews described above was organized and analyzed in the sociological tradition, which considers text "as a window into human experience" (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 769) and is consistent with the goals of case study research to study the experiences of a group of individuals within a specific setting as described by the individuals (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher used a combination of deductive and inductive analysis. That is, the initial framework for understanding was deductive

and based on the literature review, the theoretical framework Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model (Harris & Wood, 2016), and the researcher's 20 years of experience working in community colleges. The researcher first applied a preliminary set of codes or a priori codes organized into the four socio-ecological domains of the (SEO) Model (i.e., noncognitive domain, academic domain, environmental domain, and campus ethos domain) (Harris & Wood, 2016). As the analysis continued, the researcher re-coded the data within the context of the interview and the other interviews to expand the opportunities to interpret the data more broadly. This phase of analysis was more inductive as the researcher identified patterns in the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The analysis occurred at two levels: key words and large blocks of text.

At the word level, the researcher conducted a word count to look for patterns in participants' responses to select interview questions to identify themes across multiple interview transcripts (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). This simple numerical analysis can reveal commonalities and differences in the perspectives of the research participants. Word counts are a useful first analysis, but removing the words from their full context limits the depth of possible analysis. Therefore, the researcher also used coding to manage and conduct whole-text analysis, including finding themes based on the researcher's literature review and repeated ideas from the interview transcripts and developing a codebook that incorporates codes as tags and codes as values (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Coding was done with the Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) Atlas.ti. The researcher used an open coding strategy to generate as many new ideas as possible and then organized the open codes via axial coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Through the data collection and analysis stages, the researcher performed a variety of concurrent tasks that aided in data organization and analysis. First, the researcher logged

observer's comments and memos to record the thought process and promote new ways of considering the data. The observer's comments and memos also documented all data collection steps and any modifications along the way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher also created an inventory of the entire data set to allow for ease in finding key pieces of information during the analysis stage. The preliminary organization of the inventory occurred in Atlas.ti with codes that corresponded with the four socio-ecological domains in the SEO Model (Harris & Wood, 2016). As the analysis continued, the researcher revised the inventory to add new themes that occurred outside of the SEO model or identified new subthemes that can be organized into the existing socio-ecological domains in the SEO Model. Finally, the researcher maintained a record of how codes were identified and applied to the transcripts, as well as how they changed over time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The analysis considered the data to determine how the findings related to the literature review and compared with the researcher's assumptions all in an effort to answer the research questions.

Limitations and Delimitations

Like most qualitative research, this study did not aim to yield objective, positivist results or theories that are generalizable across all faculty groups or community college contexts. The relatively small number of research participants indicated a prioritization for depth over breadth in studying the participants' perceptions of their roles and their institution's role. Also, the study took place over a short period of time providing a snapshot in time rather than a longitudinal scope. A deep understanding of community college faculty perceptions at this point in the history of community colleges was valuable given the current attention to the equity gaps students of color experience at community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012; North Carolina Community College System, 2019). Further, this study acknowledged that reality

is socially constructed, and the researcher plays a significant role in the social construction (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The findings were likely strongly influenced by the researcher's positionality and reflexivity, which were fully documented to support the transferability of the findings.

The researcher applied several delimitations to clearly define the boundaries of the study, including delimitations on the target population, research questions, and data collection techniques. The target population for this study was community college faculty because so many students of color attend community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018), and the graduation rates for Black/African American students and Hispanic/Latinx students consider to lag the graduation rates for White students even as all students graduate at higher rates over time (CCRC, 2021). The research setting was a large, diverse, urban community college with a strong stated commitment to racial equity, characteristics of a workplace that likely influence the research participants' experiences and perceptions. Additionally, the research questions focused on community college faculty perceptions and invited little observation or evaluation of what community college faculty do in the classroom or in other interactions with Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. Finally, the sole source of data for this study came from interviews with the research participants "to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 103).

Issues of Trustworthiness

The qualitative researcher applies specific strategies to make visible the phenomenon under consideration while acknowledging the role of the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Further, interviews as a research method require the active participation of both interviewer and

interviewee, and information gathered as a result of interviews cannot be presented as value-less data outside of the specific context in which the interviews occur (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Since this study was situated in the constructivist paradigm and used one-on-one interviews as its primary method of data collection, the researcher used criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to demonstrate trustworthiness of the research.

In qualitative research, credibility (sometimes referred to as internal validity) is concerned with how closely the research findings correspond with or represent reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To support the credibility of the research findings in this study, the researcher used multiple techniques, including triangulation, member checks, and researcher reflexivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher triangulated multiple sources of data from multiple research participants to collect data from a variety of viewpoints and perspectives on the social, cultural, and historical context the research participants experience. The researcher also used member checks during the iterative processes of data collection and analysis to confirm that the interpretation of the research participants' experiences matches their perspectives. The researcher shared themes with select research participants to check whether the interpretation "rings true" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). The themes were unsurprising and consistent with existing scholarship as discovered in the literature review and the SEO Model, so the researcher shared the themes with select research participants and invited them to confirm or clarify the findings. The researcher had developed a plan to invite the participants to an additional one-on-one meeting to discuss the themes and confirm the findings if she suspected that the interpretation would be surprising to faculty or potentially contentious; however, that plan was not necessary. The previous discussion of reflexivity also supports the trustworthiness of the researcher (Probst

& Berenson, 2014). The researcher was aware of not only the external processes of data collection but also the internal processes in which she considers her own lived experiences as the emic lens through which she analyzed the data, "like an arrow pointed at both ends" (Probst & Berenson, 2014, p. 815).

In addition to credibility, dependability and transferability are important considerations in the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Dependability refers to whether the results of the study are consistent with the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The techniques of triangulation and researcher positionality discussed above support the dependability of the research. Additionally, the researcher used an audit trail to track the research process in real time, including how the data were collected, the researcher's first impressions of the data, the researcher's questions, and decisions made to address any problems or questions that arise (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transferability, on the other hand, describes the relationship between the research and other people and settings outside of the study, whether the findings are transferable to other people and settings (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher used rich, thick description of the participants, context, and data, including quotes from the participants to support the reader's ability to determine whether the participants and context are familiar enough to them to transfer the findings of the study to other people and settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Confirmability is the final consideration of the trustworthiness of this qualitative case study research. Confirmability refers to the degree to which another researcher with the same data, positionality, and reflexivity would come to the same findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The previously discussed audit trail supported not only the dependability of the research, but also the confirmability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, prior to interviewing the research

participants, the researcher used bracketing to write about her experiences with the phenomenon and epoche to highlight her own biases and assumptions in order to set them aside during as much as possible during data collection and analysis and focus on the experiences and perceptions of the research participants as they revealed them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative research further requires that the researcher conduct the study in an ethical manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the start of the study, the researcher secured permission to conduct the research from Institutional Review Boards (IRB) from both North Carolina State University and the research site. The researcher completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) extensive training course and operationalized the strategies and requirements that are relevant to this study, including obtaining informed consent from research participants (see Appendix D) and planning for confidentiality in data collection. The previous statements on positionality and reflexivity further contribute to the researcher's efforts to conduct ethical researcher (Holmes, 2020).

Interviews can have both negative and positive impacts on the interviewee (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, the interviewee might be embarrassed to respond to a question or might decide because of an interview question that there is something wrong with their thinking or practice. Alternatively, an interviewee might be proud to answer a question or might have an insight or develop a new way of thinking that excites them. Interviews require additional care and attention to ethics from the researcher to reassure the interviewees of their confidentiality with the use of password protected record keeping practices and pseudonyms in data collection and reporting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Summary

This qualitative case study examined community college faculty perceptions of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. This chapter described the study's situation within the social constructivist paradigm and the researcher's role as primary instrument for data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It also described the researcher's plans for selecting participants and the research setting; data collection, analysis, and synthesis; and research limitations and delimitations. The chapter concluded with a discussion on issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations relevant to qualitative research in general and this research study in particular.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to increase understanding of the perceptions community college faculty hold of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for minoritized students. Data were collected from the research subjects during individual interviews to address the following research questions:

1. What do community college faculty perceive as their role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students?

2. What do community college faculty perceive as their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students?

This chapter describes the research participants, including their demographics and how those demographics compare with the total full-time faculty employed at the research setting and all of the full-time community college faculty employed in North Carolina. This chapter also includes a description of the findings organized as the major themes that emerged during the data analysis stage of this study within the frameworks of the research questions and the Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model (Harris & Wood, 2016). The six major themes from this research include the following: (a) the importance of the community college faculty role in student success, (b) the dynamism of the community college faculty role, (c) the limitations of the community college faculty role in closing equity gaps, (d) the emphasis community college faculty put on good teaching practices to close equity gaps, (e) the value of community college faculty-student interactions, and (f) the role of community college faculty as internal validating agents. Finally, this chapter features an additional analysis of the SEO Model and how the data collected in this research study aligned with Harris and Wood's four socio-ecological domains.

Research Participants

The research participants had been employed as full-time faculty for a minimum of three

years at the pseudonymous research site Keystone Technical Community College and had

participated in a Racial Equity Institute training. While 72 participants in Racial Equity Institute

training at Keystone Technical Community College had faculty status, 45 were eliminated from

consideration because they met one or more of the following criteria: they had since resigned or

retired from the college, they were part-time faculty, or their primary job duties were in

leadership roles (deans and assistant deans). Of the 27 eligible research participants, 11 agreed to

be interviewed. The research participants were more likely to be female (64%) and White (64%).

The research participants were also very experienced in their roles as full-time community

college faculty and within the research setting, averaging nine years of full-time teaching at

Keystone Tech and averaging 14 years of full-time teaching in community colleges. The research

participants' pseudonyms and demographic information are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Research participants: demographic data

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Years of full-time community college teaching	Years of full-time teaching at Keystone Tech
Paige	Female	Black/AA	50-59	6-10	6-10
Summer	Female	Black/AA	40-49	11-15	3-5
Joyce	Female	White	50-59	16+	16+
Jenny	Female	White	50-59	16+	6-10
Millie	Female	White	40-49	11-15	11-15
Mora	Female	White	40-49	16+	3-5
Jackie	Female	White	40-49	3-5	3-5
Julio	Male	Hispanic/Latinx	40-49	6-10	6-10
Geoff	Male	Multi-Racial	40-49	6-10	6-10
Owen	Male	White	40-49	11-15	11-15
George	Male	White	40-49	11-15	11-15

The 11 research participants were fairly representative of the 27 eligible individuals who qualified for consideration, the total population of full-time faculty employed at Keystone Technical Community College, and the total population of full-time faculty employed in the North Carolina Community College System. The proportion of Black/African American participants in the research study (19%) was slightly smaller than the proportion of Black/African American faculty who met the eligibility criteria (26%) and the proportion of Black/African American faculty employed at the research site (26%) but higher than the proportion of Black/African American full-time faculty employed in the North Carolina Community College System (10%) (North Carolina Community College System, 2022c). The proportion of Hispanic/Latinx full-time faculty participants (9%) was higher than the of Hispanic/Latinx full-time faculty who met the eligibility criteria (4%) even though it is the same number of people, the research site (5%), and in the North Carolina Community College System (2%) (North Carolina Community College System, 2022c). The proportion of female research participants (64%) is similar to the proportion of full-time female faculty who were invited to participate in the study (66%) and employed at Keystone Tech (63%) and slightly higher than the proportion of full-time female faculty employed in the North Carolina Community College System (59%) (North Carolina Community College System, 2022c). Table 2 below summarizes these comparative demographic data points.

Table 2

Research participants: comparative demographic data

Characteristic	Research participants (n=11)		Faculty invited to participate (n=27)		FT faculty at Keystone Tech (n=134)		FT faculty in NCCCS (n=6,027)	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
White	7	64	18	67	90	56	5,015	83
Black/AA	2	19	7	26	29	22	600	10
Hispanic/Latinx	1	9	1	4	7	5	122	2
Multi-Racial	1	9	1	4	1	0	13	0
Female	7	64	18	66	89	63	3,545	59
Male	4	36	9	34	45	37	2,482	41

Research Findings

During the interviews, participants were asked questions regarding their perceptions of their roles and their institution's role in supporting students across the four socio-ecological domains of the Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model, specifically, the noncognitive domain, the academic domain, the environmental domain, and the campus ethos domain. Qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts, including multiple rounds of open and a priori coding, revealed six findings presented here as major themes: (a) the importance of the community college faculty role in student success, (b) the dynamism of the community college faculty role, (c) the limitations of the community college faculty role in closing equity gaps, (d) the priority community college faculty put on good teaching practices to close equity gaps, (e) the value of community college faculty-student interactions, and (f) the role of community college faculty as internal validating agents.

The Importance the Community College Faculty Role in Student Success

The first finding is relevant to both of the research questions of this study; specifically, community college faculty play an important role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students (Research Question 1) and in the role that the institution plays in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students (Research Question 2). All 11 research participants cited the important role that community college faculty play in the success of their students and specifically Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx community college students. The research participants indicated that the importance of the community college faculty role is based on the frequency with which students interact with faculty, the perception of the research participants that many Keystone Tech students do not frequently use campus resources or regularly participate in student activities, and the potential for meaningful relationships between students and faculty. Several research participants also commented that institution-wide efforts to close equity gaps for minoritized students must include the faculty perspective because of the important role faculty play in student success.

According to Jackie, "I think faculty are incredibly important in how students feel about the college, how they interact with the college. We are the people around which their experience rotates. If we are not supporting them, they leave...We are pivotal." Geoff also described the faculty role as representative as the college as an institution: "First, because we are that primary point of contact for so many students, how welcoming and inclusive we are really to them is gonna be how welcoming and inclusive the institution is in many respects." Jenny described faculty as having "the direct connection to students." And Julio compared his experience

working as a faculty member at a community college with his previous work experience as a faculty member at a private university when he stated the following:

> Community college instructors are more to the ground. We understand the students way more than an instructor in a private university…I didn't hear much of issues [at a private university] like we hear here [at a community college], like family, children, work, or something.

Finally, Jenny observed that the role of community college faculty is particularly important because of the previous educational experiences community college students may have had:

> [Faculty are] integral in supporting Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students because of those inequities that are present in society, and because all of our students have not had the same type of education. And you can really see that in a classroom.

All of the research participants described the role of community college faculty as foundational to the success of students, especially Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. According to Joyce, this role is obvious. She stated, "if we're not there to help them, and if we're not there to make sure they're learning it, who is? Who's gonna do it? So yeah, I mean it's on us... It is our role."

Several participants prioritized the faculty role because of how much more regularly students interact with faculty compared with other college personnel. For example, Mora stated that the community college faculty are the primary contributors to whether students feel a sense of belonging at the institution:

> I think faculty more than, I mean once students are enrolled in and taking classes, I think faculty are the primary people who can make them feel like they belong. Maybe the

welcome desk and the process of application, and all of that, initially. But that very quickly gets, you know, completed and then where they're spending the majority of their time on campuses in the classroom. And so faculty can play a huge role in helping them feel like they belong. … I think, too, a lot of our students come to campus really just for class, and then leave and go home and take care of their families or go to work. So they aren't necessarily spending a lot of time in the library or other places, and some of them do obviously, some. But I think classroom time is huge in terms of what they're doing on campus. So that sense of belonging really can be built in the classroom setting.

Jenny, Geoff, and George also observed that community college faculty are the primary contributors to students' sense of belonging at the institution because community college students are unlikely to interact with other college personnel with the same regularity. Jenny commented that most of her students attend classes in the evenings or online, so for those students especially, faculty are "the only connection or the main connection or the most consistent connection they [students] have to an institution." The research participants further indicated that community college faculty play an important role in student success because they have the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with their students.

Multiple faculty indicated that community college faculty are especially important in closing equity gaps for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students because faculty can have the strongest relationships with students and have the responsibility to take action when students need additional supports. This perception of the faculty role is further strengthened in the sixth theme of the role of community college faculty as internal validating agents discussed below. Both Summer and Joyce emphasized how important it is for community college faculty to take responsibility for supporting their students and not rely on another college employee, such

as a success coach, advisor, or counselor, to support student learning. Millie who has worked as both staff and faculty at Keystone Tech made the following observation:

> I feel like the faculty are number one in making those connections because they know students so well. They see them so often. They're the ones who have the relationships with students, like I said, they're the ones monitoring them and understanding, you know, it's not like her to not turn in that quiz, or it's not like her to…what's going on here, so they can have conversations that can open up the door to make these connections … I feel like faculty are key to making those connections because…faculty are the people that students are connected to regularly, day in and day out.

The research participants frequently noted the primacy of community college faculty in the students' experience of the college in their reflections on their work with students and their place within the institution. Further, Jenny perceives the role of community college faculty to have significance and power beyond the classroom: "We have the opportunity to break cycles. If we can provide our students with the access and the experiences that they need, that can really change the outcomes for that person, that family, maybe even that community."

Several research participants also observed that faculty play an important role in institution-wide changes to close equity gaps for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. Jenny stated this perspective clearly:

> Faculty need to be involved in the conversations, the hard conversations. And faculty need to be given the time to be involved in the conversations. Faculty are the direct connection to students. If students are going to be doing well, faculty have a huge role into that. And so if the institutional culture is going to change or shift or be inclusive, you got to have faculty involved in that, and a lot of faculty don't feel like they have any extra

time to do anything else, and we have so many part-time faculty, and they're not paid to
do anything but the hours for class. And so it's really critical that an institution figures
out ways to allow faculty to be involved in the conversations and the decision making
and all of the things that have to go on to make the culture be what it is at an institution.
And that's hard to do with state budget and state funds, and there is no extra money to do
anything. If the culture is gonna shift, faculty have got to be included.

Mora commented on the role faculty could and should play in changing the culture of the
institution to better support the academic success of Black/African American and
Hispanic/Latinx students:

But nor is changing an institution's culture around learning for African American and
Hispanic students a quick problem to solve. It's a complex, multi-layered, hundreds of
years, like it's been a long time in the making, it's not gonna be an easy fix. And I think it
requires critical thinking and nuance and multiple perspectives and time… I don't think
it's something that's gonna happen instantly. …If faculty is going to have any input, I
think they would need to welcome the way faculty approaches things, which is to be
thoughtful, and I mean just by nature of being scholars, faculty tend to want to consider
things from lots of viewpoints. And this is such a sensitive topic for some people that I
think that can be perceived as an unwillingness. When I think it's actually the opposite:
it's a desire.

Millie, George, and Geoff reflected that college administrators must include community college
faculty in institution-wide efforts to close equity gaps or else risk alienating the faculty. They
agreed that community college faculty play an important role in influencing college-wide
decisions. Millie observed that the creation of an Office of Equity and Inclusion at Keystone

Tech constrained the freedom some faculty felt in trying new strategies to improve outcomes for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. She went on to say the following:

> I feel like if faculty, if it could be known that faculty can have a leadership role in doing this on their own and it's not up to the DEI offices, that we don't have to have their blessing to take on an initiative or that we're not stepping on toes or doing something inappropriate or not in our lane by taking on some leadership roles, I feel like maybe more folks would. I wish then we could see that as something we don't have to be reacting to that could be proactive.

Additionally, George expressed annoyance with previous efforts by college leaders to communicate the importance of closing equity gaps without taking into consideration faculty perspectives or expertise:

> One of the things that sometimes frustrates me with rhetoric that we hear from our administration is it's often divorced from like my teaching experience. It doesn't seem like they understand my teaching experience…[I want] a recognition of those realities, and maybe a discussion of, you know, what's getting in your way. A question and listening to us rather than, you know, just telling us what the mandates are.

Geoff described a need for community college faculty to be included in collaborative efforts among other college personnel and administrators in order to close equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students:

> So I think we have to talk maybe a little bit more openly about how we work together, and I think we have to look at the things that don't work as learning experiences, and not just as problems that somebody is at fault for. And I do think you can get a bit of a blame game inside an institution. So I think one of the roles we have to play is, we have to

internally model whatever everybody across institutions or society has to do. We have to model a kind of generous collaboration and a kind of willingness, not just the willingness to learn from our mistakes but to say that making mistakes is part of the process of learning. And we say it to our students, we need to do it ourselves too.

The concerns the research participants shared regarding whether faculty were invited to participate or shape institutional efforts to close equity gaps for minoritized students were based on their perceptions that community college faculty play an important role in student learning and in closing equity gaps.

The Dynamism of the Community College Faculty Role

Another theme that emerged from the data analysis are the ways that the faculty participants have changed in the past and support change in the future. This theme is relevant to Research Question 1 regarding the role community college faculty play in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. The role of community college faculty is a dynamic one. Several faculty participants described experiences with changes in their approach to students and teaching strategies over the course of their careers. Overall, the changes were from an inflexible and distant approach to working with students that Geoff described as a "graduate school mindset," Millie said was "more punitive," Mora described as "elitist," and Owen said was "my way or the highway" to an approach that was more flexible and caring. Owen described it as a departure from his training in his Ph.D. program:

My style has changed, and it's not set in stone. And as I'm getting older…now I'm like the age, I can be the age of some the parents, which is ridiculous, but I'm not the same. I'm not fresh out of graduate school. Now I've got my own kids. All of these things have

affected things on my end as well, in terms of…and it's kind of not right that it has. It's sort of like not funding cancer research until somebody in your family gets cancer, and then all of a sudden, you care about it, right? But again, if you're trained: you must be there, and you gotta be there on time, and you get the deadline, and there are no extensions and no extra credit, and this is the hard…, and then you get there and all of a sudden you start you realizing that there are a lot of other needs that your students are gonna need. You start bending, and you go well, at what point am I no longer this hard and fast instructor that I was trained to be?

Joyce has similarly changed over time from using a "tough love" approach to being more of a "cheerleader" for her students: "Now I'm a little bit more encouraging, really encouraging. Come on. Come on, you can do it. You know, don't go away on me. Don't go disappear on me, don't not do it … kind of approach."

Jackie, George, and Jenny also described how their approach to working with Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students has changed more recently. Culinary arts instructor Jackie noted that early in her career, she did not consider the race, ethnicity, or gender of the chefs she taught her students about; however, she changed her approach as a result of her participation in the Racial Equity Institute Phase 1 training:

So I would say that especially since doing some racial equity training, I've been like okay you still need to know who Escoffier is, and, you know, there's some big names there that you just need to know, but let's talk about what's happening in the U.S. with these non-White chefs. And let's talk about what's happening in Latin American cuisine. Let's talk about what's happening in African cuisine. And I've really been trying to bring in other experiences and points of view in class, and more female chefs, so that the students

are kind of like, hey, this person looks like me or this person had a similar background

that I have, and they're super successful, so that is something that I can see to be like a

guiding star or … inspiration, I guess to push them a little bit more.

George was similarly influenced by the diversity, equity, and inclusion professional development

activities he participated in at Keystone Tech beginning in the Summer 2020 term after the

murder of George Floyd and the associated racial unrest in the United States. George stated that

his reaction to the racial unrest and participation in the training encouraged him to make changes

to his approach to working with his students. George describes the change this way:

I care about [students]. I try to care about individual students. But this is what the class is.

I'm doing what best practices are. And based on my understanding for teaching a college

class. And so it wasn't until I guess 2020 when we started thinking about addressing, you

know, African American male students in particular. And finding specific strategies that

help with that.

Jenny also cited the murder of George Floyd as a catalyst for change among the early childhood

education faculty members at Keystone Tech:

So in our program, we've been really focused in the past 2 years, 3 years especially to

really figure out what are we doing to support, especially Black/African American and

Hispanic/Latinx students because…we just have been since the murder of George Floyd

really concerned about the inequities our students have experienced in their lives and then

how is that impacting them currently but also how is that impacting their work: children.

Moreover, the research participants indicated a willingness and an imperative to change as a

primary characteristic of community college faculty.

The dynamism of the community college faculty role was apparent throughout the interviews, but especially in response to the interview question "What role, if any, do community college faculty play in supporting the academic success of students, especially Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students?" Faculty participants most frequently answered that question by stating that they should be willing to learn about their students and evidence-based teaching practices that support the success of minoritized students. Summer and Millie emphasized using data as part of a reflective practice that can result in change. Summer stated that faculty need "to educate ourselves about the needs of those students, and then, once we once we do that, and then we start to look at the data" to make the necessary changes. Millie described a metacognitive approach to making changes:

> I think there are a couple of different layers of the role that community college faculty play. One is kind of at a metacognitive level, I guess, in terms of being looking at the research, thinking about how you teach, thinking about your approach to teaching, looking at your data to see what are the rates of success for students in your classes. And so it seems like it's more like doing that thought process in checking in and monitoring things.

Mora and George indicated that because they do not identify as Black/African American or Hispanic/Latinx, they must make an extra effort to learn about their students. According to Mora, "my approach is to educate myself as much as possible about the challenges that are unique to those populations, which obviously are different from me. … I don't have the personal experience that many of those students have had." George similarly reflected that he has not had the same experiences his Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students have had: "…especially as a as a White man, I know there are lots of experiences that I continue to learn

about that I'd never thought about before. … many of us have the experience of learning about

recent history that we haven't been taught." Summer, who is Black/African American, agreed

that learning about students is critical to closing equity gaps and improving faculty practices

when she stated the following:

> It really behooves, us to make sure that…if we don't know about their culture, that we
>
> learn, that we would take the opportunity to learn. And that we're active about it, and
>
> we're not passively doing it. That we're seeking opportunities to learn, and then when the
>
> opportunity comes for us to develop strategies, that we're very vocal about it and active
>
> and thinking about it—like not just institution-wide but also thinking about it in the
>
> perspective of how we teach as well, and what we do in our own class, what we do in our
>
> curriculum, even to the examples that we use.

Mora, George, and Summer agreed that what they learn about Black/African American and

Hispanic/Latinx students and their experiences informs the changes they make to their teaching

practices and how they interact with students.

Julio, George, and Geoff identified making changes to teaching practices as one of the

most important components in the role community college faculty play in closing equity gaps in

graduation rates for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. Julio identified the

need to tailor instruction to different groups of students when he said, "[I] really have to adjust

how, how I tackle things, how I work with the students, and that is always like a battle of

adjusting things." Similarly, George recognized the scale of the problem of equity gaps and the

imperative that faculty respond to the equity gaps when he said, "Because we really do need to

take a role in changing or addressing the equity gaps. Even though it is a huge problem, that

doesn't mean that we don't have a responsibility for it." Finally, Geoff positioned the need for

faculty to innovate and make regular changes to their teaching practices as a primary responsibility of community college faculty:

> …in our direct instruction, our role is to learn pedagogical, andragogical techniques that have a track record of closing equity gaps or to kind of innovate based on what we feel like we're seeing in our classrooms and see what works and what doesn't. So one role we have is to…sort of our classrooms are, and I hate to phrase it this way, but I don't have a better phrase. Our classrooms have to be little laboratories sometimes where we're either repeating what somebody else has done or adapting it or saying this has happened in past semesters.

> Several faculty research participants indicated interest in doing more to better support the academic success of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students and to contribute to the culture of the institution so that it better supports the academic success of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. However, they stated that they needed training to do so effectively, indicating a willingness to continue to evolve in a dynamic faculty role. According to Millie, community college faculty would benefit from faculty development opportunities on how to support students' sense of belonging at the institution:

> If faculty knew how important this was and received more training and information on it from peers, in particular, and ideas about how they do this in the classroom, I think that would go pretty far in helping faculty understand ways that they can contribute to students of belonging at a college.

At a different point in the interview, Millie stated that community college faculty would benefit from professional development focused on the faculty experience of teaching and interacting with students and provided by faculty for faculty:

It's not general awareness that you should not feel that you're color blind, like that is not

helpful, you know, it's not those kinds of just basic awareness of DEI kind of principles.

It's more what examples of what other people have done and found successful, and what

does the research say, and how we implemented that in the class.

According to multiple research participants, community college faculty are interested in learning

more and making changes to their teaching strategies and approaches to working with students.

Community college faculty recognize the dynamism of their role, especially as they consider

new ways to support the academic success of Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx

students.

The Limitations of the Community College Faculty Role in Closing Equity Gaps

The faculty research participants were not only unanimous in their evaluation of the

community college faculty role as vital to the success of students and dynamic in nature but also

in their assessment that there are limitations to the role. These perspectives help address

Research Question 1 regarding the perceptions community college faculty hold of their role in

closing equity gaps in graduation rates for students of color. The limitations of the community

college faculty role that the research participants identified can be organized into the following

categories: the power dynamics inherent in every classroom and learning environment, the

increasing needs of their students outpacing faculty capacity and training, and the gap in faculty

access to and understanding of data on student performance in their classes.

The power dynamics between community college faculty and students is related to the

responsibility faculty have in assessing student learning. According to Geoff, because

community college faculty evaluate student work and assign final grades, faculty are limited in

their ability to support students' emotional and affective experiences in college:

I think that we play a role that is always going to be a little limited because we have this assessment model, because we have these learning outcomes we're trying to help everybody reach…and in the end, I'm gonna be putting a grade into the gradebook, and that never 100% goes away.

Geoff went on to say later, "… we are not necessarily expert in helping students resolve [stressful life events]. We are not necessarily the most comfortable person for a student to talk to because there is a power dynamic that's inherent in the classroom." Owen also cited the power dynamics between community college faculty and students in his reflections on how grades can contribute to whether students experience a sense of welcoming:

And [students] might, they might certainly get the message that if … they find out that somebody sitting next to them got a B, and they got a C, that they don't feel welcome. I mean it's possible they could take that message that you got a lower grade than somebody else is assigned that you are not welcome here, as opposed to what some students might say is okay, how do I get the B? What do I need to do? But whether it's because they've had past experiences with bad professors, or they have learned that there's nothing I can do, they might see from the very beginning of a class that I'm getting lower grades, or, you know, here we go again with in this case a white professor who's telling me I'm a C student. So we're in a tough situation of grading people on their work, and their work is part of their identity, and they're creating things, art, papers, doing things that are not necessarily true or false like math things; there are different issues there. But when you're grading papers and speeches and things where people are putting their voice into stuff, and you hand them back a C. Oh, I mean it's quite reasonable for them to come away with the perception that this isn't for me.

Because faculty are the final arbiters in the evaluation of student learning and responsible for assigning grades, they may be challenged to sufficiently encourage students to confide in them regarding their stressful life events and to establish a welcoming learning environment to students who earn low grades.

The most identified limitation to the faculty role can be described as the needs of the students outpacing the capacity and training of the faculty. When considering how to help students with their external commitments and stressful life events, Mora, Paige, Julio, George, and Jackie agreed that there are substantial limits to the degree to which they can support students. Mora stated, "I also don't feel equipped to handle counseling students who have gone through death or divorce. Like I'm not a counselor, so I would want to be careful not to overstep what's not my role." Similarly, Paige stated, "We are not psychologists," and Julio said, "I'm not psychologist, I am not a success coach kind of person, and I'm not perfect whatsoever, in any way." George commented that one lesson he learned from Racial Equity Institute Phase 1 training is that students' "problems are bigger than us." George shared later his reluctance to do more than is traditionally expected of community college faculty to support students: "I have to help myself draw the line between, you know, taking on a responsibility that's not really mine, and it might hurt me and the rest of the class." And Jackie recognized the need to prioritize her own well-being when she said, "I can extend due dates or accept written work and things like that. But I also need to take care of my own mental health and make sure that I am not trying to…like feed someone from an empty cup."

Geoff stated that while individual community college faculty members are limited in how they can support students with their external commitments and stressful life events, the community college as an institution should provide these resources, especially since

Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx community college students are more likely to

experience food insecurity, housing insecurity, and other stressful life events:

> I feel that the reality on the ground is that we're asking students for a big-time
>
> commitment…we don't cost what a four-year costs, which is one of the great benefits
>
> that we offer to a community, but even so, we're still asking students to take on a
>
> financial burden. And so we can't say, oh, also go spend a bunch of time, and potentially
>
> money, seeking these other services out. [Community colleges] are gonna have to be the
>
> portal to a lot of that. And I think that plays an absolutely crucial role in closing equity
>
> gaps…We have to be more radical, more restorative, and more collaborative in our
>
> approach.

Community college faculty are also aware that they are not sufficiently trained to support

students with stressful life events or to make changes to their professional practice that would

close the equity gaps for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. Specifically,

Millie commented, "I mean not everyone is incredibly skilled or is trained in having these kinds

of conversations around how to support folks who are under-resourced or experiencing major life

stress. And so I can understand some of their hesitation." Similarly, George stated, "I wasn't

really surprised by the equity gap numbers that we started talking about explicitly. But you know

I think a lot of us, myself included, that we didn't know what to do to address them." In Jenny's

assessment, early childhood education faculty are trained to support students holistically, "but I

don't think all faculty are equipped with what to do in that [supporting students' emotional and

affective experiences in college]." And Geoff enthusiastically agreed that community college

faculty should take action to support Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students

specifically with their emotional and affective experiences; however, according to Geoff, "but I

wouldn't say that I 100% know how to do that well." Finally, Jenny commented on the potential that faculty have to improve students' lives when provided with adequate training, "We have such opportunity to really just change the outcomes of a whole community. But in order to do that, faculty actually need to know how to do it, and I think that's a gap we have."

Several research participants expressed a desire for more data about their students, including the equity gaps in grade distributions and success rates that exist in the classes they teach. Without more data, they expressed limitations in what they could do to improve equity gaps. For example, Owen is reluctant to take full responsibility for the equity gaps that may exist in his public speaking classes without knowing more about students' experiences inside and outside of his class:

> But the 5 to 10%, or whatever the equity gap is, I take responsibility for some of it, and
> that's why I'm invested in making changes, but I do not know, and maybe because I
> haven't done surveys of these students and found out what else is going on with them,
> why it is they drop my class. Why it is they get a D or an F or withdraw my class. I don't
> know. And that's a gap for me. So were it to be clear to me that something about the way
> I interact with them or how much or little I support them or the content is off putting or
> aggressive or too difficult, then I would make a change, and I would see that. But if it just
> happens to be that because Black or Latinx students work more jobs and have more to do
> at home, and they are unable to make the types of commitment to a full-time schedule,
> and that it's not my content, it's not my structure, I'm being as flexible as I can, then
> again, I take ownership of what I can take ownership of. But I'm not going to go "that's
> my fault" full stop that this group of people is graduating [at lower rates] or getting fewer
> A's or whatever.

Additionally, Mora expressed an interest in learning more about the college's data on equity gaps and collaborating with colleagues on how to minimize those gaps: "… I was very curious about that data as it relates to the institution as a whole, and I really was hoping there would be some conversations around that—if they're happening, I've not known about them or been part of." Millie cited the same college data set that Mora commented on when she said the following: "… one of the things that I really wish we did more as a college was … got data on students." Like Owen, Mora, and Millie, Summer voiced a desire to learn more about student data disaggregated by race and ethnicity, "And so to me, once you get that data broadly, now let's drill down, what do our African Americans need? What do our Latinx need?" The research participants described the power dynamics inherent in every classroom and learning environment, their experiences with the needs of their students outpacing the capacity and training of the faculty, and their desire for more data on student performance and equity gaps as limitations in their role as community college faculty.

Emphasis on Good Teaching Practices to Close Equity Gaps

The fourth major theme to emerge from this study is the emphasis the faculty research participants put on good teaching strategies as a primary role community college faculty play in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students, a substantial part of the answer to Research Question 1. Almost every participant identified a student-centered teaching strategy they have tried in an effort to close equity gaps and improve the course success rates for their Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students, including blind grading (George), tailoring instruction to different learners (Julio, Millie, and Jenny), using representative materials and examples (Summer, George, Geoff, and Paige), applying classroom learning to real-world situations (Julio and Summer), creating

engaging assignments and activities (Julio, Jackie, and Jenny), providing timely and meaningful feedback (Millie, Julio, and Geoff), encouraging active participation from students (Mora, Julio, and Summer), and reflecting on the efficacy of their teaching strategies and making changes as needed (Millie, George, and Owen).

Most of the research participants also described ways in which they encouraged students to be successful in their classes or attempted to create a classroom environment that encourages students. For example, Jenny stated that her approach to working with her students, most of whom are Black/African American or Hispanic/Latinx is "just a lot of individualized, relationship based [strategies], really just trying to just see what that student needs to be successful." Also, George reflected on how he encourages his students as part of a welcoming classroom environment:

> I think I would say that as faculty, we have a very strong and important role in our classroom to create a classroom environment that is welcoming to everybody and that we should explicitly think about Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students when we're doing that … in ways that maybe we haven't before.

Millie also stated that the faculty role is more than presenting content; rather, the degree to which faculty create supportive learning environments affects whether students are successful:

> But I think that those kinds of supports are just as equally as important as giving them the content because you give people content all day, but if they don't think that they can do it or they don't think that they belong there, there's no point really.

Finally, Summer reflected that minoritized community college students are more likely to feel encouraged in a classroom in which the instructor does not lecture exclusively, and she described her efforts to engage students via her approach to classroom management:

With my in-person classes, I try to get to know the students, and I make opportunity for

them to really share themselves. So, the way I have my class set up is almost more or less

like we're having conversations as opposed to me just solely lecturing.

Many community college faculty who participated in the study posited that their student-centered

teaching strategies in combination with the encouraging environments they create for their

students can support the academic success of Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx

community college students.

Throughout the interviews, the research participants identified faculty development

workshops, trainings, and other experiences they had benefitted from. Several participants stated

that the best professional learning activities were those focused on specific teaching strategies for

closing equity gaps for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. Millie

identified a presentation made by a colleague on grading strategies that support equity in the

community college classroom:

I really liked the grading for equity presentation that one of our colleagues did during

some faculty workdays. That was one of the best presentations about equity I've ever

been to as a faculty member. It gave very concrete things to do, steps to take, and so I've

taken some of those just based on the data they shared and what our college goals are and

what the research says it can do for students.

Similarly, George both praised faculty development activities that focused on specific teaching

strategies and warned against faculty development that provides directives without

implementation strategies:

And so that's why I think specific guidelines and specific strategies are so important. So

just like broad statements about being welcoming, and we need to help our students, or

we need to you know, reach out to Black or Latinx students without any kind of specific

strategies to help with that are not as helpful, and they can actually feel … I think they

can feel discouraging.

Geoff, Summer, and Jenny described valuable professional development activities within their

department or program in which they discussed teaching strategies with faculty colleagues who

teach the same or similar subjects. According to Geoff, this kind of department-specific approach

"…was really exciting, because it kind of made a connection there, and then to see all of it

shared out, and participating in sharing it out really felt so worthwhile and kind of hopeful, and I

think concrete." This preference for teaching-focused professional learning activities synthesizes

the dynamism of the faculty role and the emphasis community college faculty put on their

teaching practices to close equity gaps for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx

students.

The Value of Community College Faculty-Student Interactions

The component of the Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model that the researcher

identified most frequently in the interview transcripts is faculty-student interactions, which are

organized into the SEO Model's academic domain. This theme is another important component

of the answer to this case study's first research question regarding the role community college

faculty play in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or

Hispanic/Latinx students. The faculty participants indicated that their role includes meaningful

interactions with students both in the classroom and outside of the learning environment. All the

participants described multiple strategies for inviting meaningful interactions with students,

including through encouraging student use of virtual and in-person office hours (Julio, Summer,

Millie, and Geoff), emailing students and replying promptly to student emails (Owen, Paige,

Jackie, and Millie), strategically interacting with certain students during class time (Geoff and Millie), and communicating with students via texting and apps (Summer). The faculty participants described fully the ways in which they interact with students and stated that those interactions were critical to their role as community college faculty and to the success of their students. Julio described his efforts to talk with students "like I was talking to my nieces or my nephews like trying to be super nice and everything" while Paige and Joyce stated that their focus during interactions with students is to always treat them with fairly and respectfully. And Jenny valued authenticity and trust in her interactions with students:

> I am my goofy self in the classroom, I mean I'm just whatever, and I tell them … here are the things I'm good at; here are the things I'm not good at. Writing on a board and spelling things correctly, never going to be good at that. And that's just who I am. And so I think if I am just me that really helps students to also just themselves, and to know that they don't have to be perfect in the classroom. And that they're learning and they're growing. And they're gonna make mistakes, and that's totally fine…. I feel like if students can trust their instructors, then they're gonna be more successful. So I work really hard to get to know every student and to understand that some students aren't gonna trust me as easily as they would other instructors because I'm a White female. I'm a White middle-aged female, right? And so how do I just be my authentic self in a way that creates an opportunity for relationships with my students.

Millie emphasized the importance of faculty consistently demonstrating care in faculty-student interactions in the following observation:

> And then I think that there is that interpersonal interaction role, where you have the relationships with the students. I think the relationships with the students are what's—to

be honest—a lot of times most important. You want to convey care at all times, like you

care about them as learners, you care about them as college students, you care about them

as human beings.

Millie later went on to say that the relationships that faculty develop with their students allow the

faculty to support student learning more effectively:

It's the relationships because they have those ongoing continual relationships with faculty

who can monitor their progress, see patterns, and kind of establish those relationships,

and I think it's important for us as faculty to indicate that we care about students as more

than—it's not just their brains that walk in the door, I say, it's their whole lives in there

that bring them to that moment, and I think that [we should] have an appreciation for

what it took for the students to get into that classroom to learn that subject matter that we

love.

Community college faculty are strategic in how they interact with students in order to

demonstrate care and invite trust, which benefits student learning, successful course completion,

and graduation rates. In the data analysis, it was clear that during the one-on-one interviews, the

faculty research participants had the most to say about (a) the importance of their teaching

strategies in closing equity gaps for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students

and (b) the importance of their interactions with students in supporting the learning process for

all students, including students of color.

Many faculty participants made a connection between the community college faculty-

student interactions in the SEO Model's academic domain and the development of students' self-

efficacy as organized in the SEO Model's noncognitive domain. For example, Joyce described

the importance of students understanding that their faculty may have struggled in college and in

life, that "it wasn't always smooth sailing" for the faculty to help students combat any feelings of imposter syndrome. Also, Summer's mother was a first-generation college student when she became pregnant with Summer, and her college faculty and advisors played a pivotal role in encouraging Summer's mother to graduate after having her baby. Her mother's experience inspired her career choice:

> So I always wanted … to give back to students, and kind of be that hand for these groups [Black/African American students and first generation students], in particular, because I understand on a personal level what it's like to have all of the different stressors and all of the different obstacles … that prevent you from really being successful.

Jenny observed that her students frequently struggled to succeed on traditional tests and oral presentations, so she encouraged students' self-efficacy by creating opportunities for them to demonstrate their learning in different ways:

> For our students, if you give them a test, they just flip out. They cannot do a test, they shut down and can't do well. And so okay, what are other ways they can demonstrate that? Let's create a portfolio, let's act out something, go find a group of children, create some activities, do the activities with children. Record yourself doing it, write it up, reflect on that. We can think about what academic success is and how we measure that.

Finally, Owen emphasized the need for faculty to establish expectations and confidence in their students by regularly and clearly communicating to them, "You're here because you've qualified. You here because you've met the prerequisites. Or you're here because this is the next step in your career, or your phase of life." Through their interactions with students, the community college faculty learned what challenges exist for their students and developed strategies for encouraging the development of students' self-efficacy.

The Role of Community College Faculty as Internal Validating Agents

The final finding of this study is that community college faculty perceive their role as internal validating agents to be a critical component of their role as faculty (Research Question 1) and their institution's role (Research Question 2) in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. This theme aligns with the campus ethos domain of the SEO Model. Harris and Wood (2016) distinguish between internal validating agents who work at the community college and external validating agents who may be the students' spouse, family members, or friends. The research participants communicated their willingness and capacity to serve as internal validating agents for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students to support the closure of equity gaps in the minoritized students' graduation rates.

Several research participants articulated the work of serving as students' internal validating agents as a two-step process in which the first step is informing students about campus resources and college processes, and the second step is helping students navigate those resources and processes. Mora identified being approachable to students as a key strategy she used in supporting the academic success of Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students:

So I see my role as helping them get access to what is available at the college, helping them learn, like I mentioned before, how to navigate those processes that are in place, and self-advocate where appropriate. Kind of be somebody who will walk with them through that process, because that's I feel like often what they really need is somebody who's gonna take that extra step and follow up.

Geoff and Jenny described how important it is for faculty to notice student behavior and respond accordingly. According to Geoff, faculty can observe students and look for changes in student behavior in the learning environment:

> But in the classroom, it's very much, you're seeing folks multiple times a week. You're here with them multiple times a week. Where students are feeling maybe excluded, where students are stressed, where there's something going on that's provoking anxiety, whether it's in the institution, in the classroom, or external to it. You're really the person that is gonna find out about it quickly if you're paying attention at all, which I think is the core part of the role is probably just paying attention and looking at what's going and being there to hear what people were trying to tell you and noticing when maybe somebody's not coming out saying something, but noticing what a student seems to be… You get the sense they're dealing with something and get the sense something isn't working. You get the sense that that a minoritized student is maybe not feeling included in your class. And so you kind of have to pay attention to that, and then it gives you these opportunities to try to create a one-on-one conversation.

Jenny goes further to say that responding to student behavior is a critical role for faculty:

> If we don't acknowledge especially the challenges that our students are experiencing emotionally, if we're not aware however the students want us to be aware, like if we don't clue in as to why we've haven't seen this student in two weeks, or why this student is just halfway doing his or her work. [If] we don't reach out, then we're missing opportunities and we're not meeting the needs of the students. Faculty are critical in that role.

In her developmental English classes, Joyce encounters students who are facing substantial challenges in their personal lives that can impact their academic success:

> So many students are not coming when things are going great for them, and everything is nailed down in their lives, and they're totally prepared to be there and ready. And we have so many that are coming in just the opposite kind of position that that we end up really having to help them problem solve and troubleshoot so many things in their personal lives that are affecting them emotionally. So you know, a lot of what we do is try to help them come out of the chaos that they're living in some ways. So that they can still get their education and support their families, and so forth.

Joyce, Julio, Owen, and Jackie all described the importance of faculty in referring students to the many campus resources, success coaches, and basic needs supports available to Keystone Tech students and in following up with the student and the college resource provider to be sure the connection is made. Multiple faculty participants emphasized the importance of giving students a "warm handoff" to the college resource provider.

In addition to accessing campus resources, community college students must understand the hidden rules of college. Jenny states that faculty are incredibly important in helping students identify and play by the hidden rules:

> And so how do we support our students to navigate the system that it is because our system is what it is. How do you navigate that? How do you figure out what are the rules that exist that aren't written anywhere that you have to play by in order to be successful?

Additionally, faculty can play an important role in students' extracurricular and cocurricular experiences. The following quote from Millie highlights those roles and the benefits that those roles provide to students:

I think about lots of different roles that faculty have in shaping [students' experiences of an institutional culture], and they have it through their role as a faculty in terms of their teaching, but I think of all that the faculty who do things like sponsor clubs or activities or help students with things outside of the classroom, like connecting them to research or other opportunities or scholarships and different things like that. I think those happen here and there in pockets, and I think that does contribute to a culture for some students, especially high achieving students, for those who are Black and Hispanic, too, to really learn and learn well and be open to a lot of different opportunities.

Community college faculty play a vital role in connecting students to campus resources and processes, supporting students as they navigate the sometimes hidden resources and processes, and supporting students' self-efficacy as community college students. The role community college faculty play as internal validating agents also supports the development of students' sense of belonging, a previously identified priority of community college faculty in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students.

Additional Applications of the SEO Model

In one round of data analysis, the researcher used a priori codes to analyze the data using the four socio-ecological domains and associated themes within the SEO Model to answer the research questions regarding community college faculty members' perceptions of their roles and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. Table 3 lists SEO Model domains, their associated themes, and the number of quotations affiliated with each theme or code. More data from the study aligned with the campus ethos domain and the associated themes of "internal validating agents," "sense of belonging," and "campus resources" than the three other domains in the SEO Model. The

second socio-ecological domain with strong representation in the data is the academic domain, with "faculty-student interactions" being the most frequently used code in this stage of data analysis. While many faculty participants described the importance of campus resources, few discussed students "use of academic services," such as tutoring, coaching, and academic advising. And only one faculty participant addressed students' "commitment to course of study" in a comment about his interactions with advisees and his efforts to establish a good rapport with advisees to help students identify realistic academic goals. The data coded within the campus ethos domain and the "faculty-student interactions" code within the academic domain contributed substantially to the development of the six major themes described above.

Table 3

Application of the SEO Model in data analysis

SEO Model Domain	Code	Number of Quotations Affiliated with this Code
Noncognitive Domain	Self-efficacy	23
	Locus of control	4
	Action control	8
Academic Domain	Faculty-student interactions	50
	Use of academic services	3
	Commitment to course of study	1
Environmental Domain	External Validating Agents	0
	Student Commitments	11
	Student Stressful Life Events	16
Campus Ethos Domain	Internal Validating Agents	42
	Sense of Belonging	26
	Campus Resources	20

The data analysis also included an attempt to identify how faculty perceive their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American

and/or Hispanic/Latinx students in terms of students' environmental domain as described by the SEO Model and including codes for "external validating agents," "student commitments," and "student stressful life events." Specifically, none of the research participants addressed the role of "external validating agents" as defined by Harris and Wood as individuals in minoritized community college students' lives, such as significant others, family members, friends, and other individuals in the students' lives outside their academic experiences (Harris & Wood, 2016; Rendón, 1994). And most of the data related to "student commitments" and "stressful life events" focused on the limitations faculty experienced in supporting students with their commitments and stressors. The SEO Model does not include community college faculty pedagogy or teaching strategies as part of the socio-ecological domains that contribute to the successful outcomes of minoritized students; however, in this study, the code "teaching strategies" was applied 31 times to the data set, more frequently than most of the codes affiliated with the SEO Model.

Summary

This research study used interviews within a qualitative case study approach to investigate community college faculty members' perceptions of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. Eleven full-time faculty who had worked at the research site for at least three years and who had participated in Racial Equity Institute training were interviewed. The data analysis procedures included transcription of the interviews and multiple rounds of open and a priori coding. Six major themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) the importance of the community college faculty role in student success, (b) the dynamism of the community college faculty role, (c) the limitations of the community college faculty role in closing equity

gaps, (d) the emphasis community college faculty put on good teaching practices to close equity gaps, (e) the value of community college faculty-student interactions, and (f) the role of community college faculty as internal validating agents. The Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model served as the theoretical framework for the study, but some of the SEO Model domains and codes were underrepresented in the data analysis. The following chapter provides an interpretation of the findings described in this chapter along with several recommendations for future research and practical application.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to increase understanding of the perceptions community college faculty hold of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for minoritized students. The perceptions of community college faculty are important because community college faculty make invaluable contributions to student learning, the degree to which a community college fulfills its mission, the reputation of the institution, and the durability of institutional memory and culture (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Additionally, many community college faculty are future college leaders; in fact, 84% of community college presidents have taught full-time or part-time prior to becoming presidents (Duree, 2007, as cited in Nevarez & Wood, 2010). A clearer understanding of the most salient parts of faculty perspectives of their role can also be used to frame future meaningful equity-minded faculty development and professional learning opportunities. Most importantly, the results of this study can be leveraged to improve the success rates of Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students who attend community colleges. Data were collected from 11 full-time faculty who had been employed for a minimum of three years at Keystone Technical Community College (pseudonym) and had participated in at least one Racial Equity Institute training. The researcher conducted individual interviews with the research participants to address the following research questions:

1. What do community college faculty perceive as their role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students?

2. What do community college faculty perceive as their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students?

This chapter considers the key findings from the research study as identified in Chapter 4 within the context of the case study analysis and existing literature. As a result of this analysis, the researcher identified the following four conclusions:

1. The community college faculty in this study perceive their role to be critical to the success of their Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students.

2. The community college faculty in this study are ready for and already engaged in equity-minded work.

3. The community college faculty in this study want to make changes to their teaching and other professional practices.

4. The community college faculty in this study perceive the role of the community college to include providing resources that support the success of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students.

This chapter provides an analysis of these conclusions within the context of current relevant literature and the Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model (Harris & Wood, 2016). The chapter concludes with relevant recommendations for practice and recommendations for future research.

Case Study Context

The goal of this case study research was to understand the perspectives and perceptions of individuals who have similar experiences within a specific context, specifically full-time teaching Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students and having participated in a Racial Equity Institute training at a community college that has invested considerable time and resources in achieving equitable outcomes for its students. The research participants in this study were employed full time at Keystone Technical Community College (pseudonym), one of the larger community colleges in North Carolina with an enrollment of approximately 9,000 total

students in 2021-2022. In Fall 2021, 34% of all students enrolled at the community college were White; 30% were Black/African American; and 17% were Hispanic/Latinx. In 2020, the college published an equity action plan that included increasing employee salaries to a living wage as needed, revising the curriculum in the Public Safety Administration Associate in Applied Science degree program to include student learning outcomes related to racial equity, revising interview committee protocols to include implicit bias training for all committee members, and expanding access to Racial Equity Institute training to all employees. Also, the community college's current strategic plan includes a vision statement that includes providing equitable access to education, employment, and opportunity; a core value of being a champion for equity; and a strategic goal to increase overall graduation rates while closing equity gaps for students of color. Finally, the community college was the first in the state of North Carolina to create and staff an Office of Equity and Inclusion and has published its goals in becoming an anti-racist institution. Keystone Technical Community College has invested time and resources in achieving equitable outcomes for its students, time and resources that have the potential to influence the ways in which the faculty perceive their roles in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. This context is important for the discussion of the conclusions in the next sections.

The Community College Faculty in this Study Perceive Their Role to be Critical to the Success of their Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx Students

The first conclusion from this study was unanimously supported by the 11 research participants in this study in their assessment that community college faculty play an important role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students and in the role that the institution plays in closing equity gaps in

graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. The importance of the community college faculty role is based on the frequency with which students interact with faculty, the perception of the research participants that many students do not regularly use campus resources or participate in student activities, and the potential for meaningful relationships between students and faculty. Several research participants also commented that institution-wide efforts to close equity gaps for minoritized students must include the faculty perspective because of the unrivaled role faculty play in student success. Geoff described how students interact with faculty is how they interact with the college: "…how welcoming and inclusive we [faculty] are really to them is gonna be how welcoming and inclusive the institution is in many respects." Throughout the interview questions, the research participants indicated that their role was critical to the success of their Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students.

The perspectives of the research participants in this case study are consistent with the limited existing literature that describes the role faculty play in student outcomes and the theories underpinning the Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model. Despite the large number of community college faculty employed in higher education in the United States, there is limited research on the impact community college faculty have on the overall community college faculty professional experience (Levin, 2018; Townsend & Twombly, 2007), including community college faculty perceptions of their roles in closing equity gaps for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. This study helps fill this gap in the literature. A recent publication that has underscored the importance of community college faculty in student success in closing equity gaps is Karen Stout's 2018 Dallas Herring Lecture. Stout (2018) described years of community college reforms supported by Achieving the Dream that focused on programs and

supports that exist outside the classroom. These out-of-class reforms have not accomplished much in the effort to close equity gaps in graduation rates for minoritized community college students. Her lecture was a call to action to situate community college faculty, who have the most frequent point of contact with students, at the center of future community college reforms. According to Stout, greater attention is needed on what happens in the classroom if colleges are going to increase rates of success for all students (Stout, 2018).

Unlike the dominant paradigms of student success in higher education that focus on students' behaviors, characteristics, and prior preparation (Kuh et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), Harris and Wood's (2016) Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model incorporates students' interactions with faculty in all four socio-ecological domains. For example, Harris and Wood cite the influence faculty-student interactions have on the success of minoritized community college students and identify these interactions as a key component of the academic domain. The emphasis that the faculty research participants put on their interactions with their students as a strategy to close equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students is consistent with research that concludes that these interactions positively benefit students of color. For example, Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) found that for students of color, their relationships with faculty were stronger predictors of learning than their background characteristics. Similarly, ten years later, Sandoval-Lucero et al. (2014) concluded that for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx community college students, their relationships with their faculty are the most significant driver of their academic success. The faculty in this study made a connection between their interactions with students and their ability to support students' self-efficacy, which has been theorized to play an important role in student academic achievement (Wood et al., 2015). The role of community

college faculty in closing equity gaps for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students includes strategic and meaningful interactions with students.

The important role of faculty is also relevant in the campus ethos domain of the SEO Model (Harris & Wood, 2016) in which faculty are identified as potential internal validating agents for students of color at community colleges. This finding that community college faculty perceive their role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for minoritized students to include serving as internal validating agents for their students aligns with the SEO Model and existing research on the value of validating agents and students' sense of belonging. According to Rendón (1994), internal validating agents are most commonly faculty who demonstrate sincere care for students, create learning environments that support students' identities as learners, and treat students fairly. Internal validating agents are especially important for community college students and non-traditional students (Rendón, 1994). The community college faculty in this study described their efforts to show their care for students, create supportive learning environments, and treat students fairly. Several of the research participants situated these efforts within the context of their work to close equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. Additionally, the faculty research participants indicated that part of their role in closing equity gaps included fostering their students' sense of belonging. Black/African American male community college students in particular have indicated that they are more willing to engage with faculty when they experience a strong sense of belonging (Jones, 2019). When faculty take on the role of internal validating agents for students of color, they recognize the societal disparities and racism that negatively affect their minoritized students. However, this is only one aspect of validation and faculty-student relationships. Rendón Linares and Muñoz (2011) describe faculty-student validating

relationships as "intended to be empowering for faculty and students and to produce collective agency for the social change needed to create a just society" (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015, p. 12). Community college students' experiences with a sense of belonging and faculty willingness to serve as internal validating agents contribute positively to the campus climate and support the closing of equity gaps in graduation rates for minoritized students. All of the research participants in this study described the role of faculty as important in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students, a view consistent with existing literature and the SEO Model (Harris & Wood, 2016).

This study included a research question on the perception community college faculty have of their institution's role in closing equity gaps for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students because the strong relationship between the community college and community college faculty identity. Institutional socialization has a stronger impact on how community college faculty perceive their roles than the faculty members' experiences in graduate school or in the workforce prior to their employment at community colleges. The messages community college faculty receive from the institution via the mission and values, policies and procedures, and faculty expectations support faculty identity as "relational-supportive" practitioners who value student success through relationships and interactive teaching and learning activities (Levin, 2018, p. 185). Most of the research participants in this study can be described as "relational-supportive" practitioners who seek not only relationships with their students but also with their colleagues to influence the institution's culture and role in closing equity gaps for minoritized students. Additionally, most of the research participants described a desire to be more involved in institution-wide efforts to change the culture to be more equity-minded and to close equity gaps for minoritized students. In fact, Millie, George,

and Geoff reflected that college administrators should invite community college faculty into institution-wide efforts to close equity gaps or else risk alienating the faculty. Several of the research participants expressed concern that faculty at Keystone Tech were insufficiently invited to participate in institutional efforts to close equity gaps for minoritized students based on their perceptions that community college faculty play an important role in student learning and in closing equity gaps. The first finding from this study is supported from both the data collected from the research participants and the existing literature on the role community college faculty plan in supporting the success of their Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students.

The Community College Faculty in this Study are Ready for and Already Engaged in Equity-Minded Work

According to Outcalt (2002), the professional life of a community college faculty member can be isolated with few structured opportunities to share teaching methodologies or experiences with peers. Levin (2018) characterizes this phenomenon as "faculty in U.S. universities and colleges are a collection of individual laborers" (p. 184). As a result of this professional isolation, there is limited knowledge on what community college faculty do day-to-day and on their perceptions of their role in closing equity gaps. Similarly, there is little scholarship on the pedagogies and teaching methodologies community college faculty use (Mora & Rios-Aguilar, 2017) The finding in this study that community college faculty emphasize good teaching practices as their primary role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students helps fill a gap in the literature on community college faculty and their pedagogies. Additionally, the teaching strategies and approaches to teaching that the research participants in this study highlighted are useful additions to the list of most cited teaching methods Roueche et al. named in 2003: lecture, discussion,

collaborative learning, and computer-enabled learning. The research participants described their experiences with minimizing their use of lecture, blind grading, tailoring instruction to different learners, using representative materials and examples, applying classroom learning to real-world situations, creating engaging assignments and activities, providing timely and meaningful feedback, encouraging active participation from students, and reflecting on the efficacy of their teaching strategies and making changes as needed. Most of the research participants connected their use of these pedagogies as purposeful strategies they employ to better support the academic success of their minoritized students.

This study contributes to the field of research on faculty deficit-mindedness and equity-mindedness, a distinction described by Dowd and Bensimon (2015) as a language tool to identify why equity gaps exist for minoritized students. The community college faculty research participants from Keystone Technical Community College did not exhibit the personal barriers to developing equity-minded teaching practices that Addy, Reeves et al. (2021) identified, specifically, lack of awareness of student performance data and alternative teaching methods, unwillingness to change, fear, and a perceived lack of support for the work from colleagues. In fact, several faculty participants expressed a desire for more student performance data and indicated that a willingness to change is a foundational attribute of community college faculty. While the research participants did not describe personal barriers, they did identify some of the institutional barriers to developing equity-minded practices as identified by Addy, Reeves et al. (2021). In their assessments of the limitations of community college faculty in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students, several faculty research participants described the tension between the need for additional faculty development on inclusive, student-centered, equity-minded teaching strategies and the lack of

time in their very busy workdays to participate in any activities other than teaching. According to Jenny, "a lot of faculty don't feel like they have any extra time to do anything else...And with state budget and state funds, and there is no extra money to do anything" to support faculty involvement in both institutional efforts to close equity gaps and their own professional development. According to the participants in this study, the barriers to improving their equity-minded practices were institutional, not personal.

Finally, this case study provides an alternative assessment of community college faculty in North Carolina and their deficit-mindedness and equity-mindedness. In her study of community college faculty members' understanding of the reasons for the equity gaps in first-year student progress between Black/African American students and all other students, Andrews (2022) found that faculty at another community college in North Carolina demonstrated the characteristics of deficit-mindedness as their "governing cognitive frame" (p. 131) although, during the guided interview process, several began using an equity-minded framework. The faculty research participants in this study, on the other hand, did not demonstrate deficit-mindedness in their descriptions of their approaches to working with Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx community college students. The faculty in this study stated explicitly a willingness to take responsibility for the success of their students and make changes as needed as well as a desire to know more about their students' performance data to inform future changes they are willing to make to their teaching practices. Further, the faculty in this study did not attribute the equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students to deficiencies in the students themselves. Rather, Mora described the challenges minoritized face in higher education as "… complex, multi-layered, hundreds of years, like it's been a long time in the making." Also, George recognized the scale of the problem of equity

gaps and the imperative that faculty respond to the equity gaps when he said, "Because we really do need to take a role in changing or addressing the equity gaps. Even though it is a huge problem, that doesn't mean that we don't have a responsibility for it." The faculty participants described structural and institutional racism as factors that contribute to the success of their minoritized students, not the inability of the students themselves. Further, the faculty participants indicated a willingness to make changes to their teaching and other professional practices to better support the closing of equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students.

The Community College Faculty in this Study Want to Make Changes to Their Teaching and Other Professional Practices

This study reveals that the community college faculty professional experience is a dynamic one in which community college faculty teaching practices and ways of interacting with students evolve as a result of their experiences with students over time and their experiences in meaningful faculty development activities, including professional development on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Most of the research participants in this study have been employed as community college faculty members for more than ten years, and several research participants described how their work as community college faculty had changed over the course of their careers and more recently as a result of diversity, equity, and inclusion professional development they had participated in; further, many community college faculty research participants indicated a willingness and an imperative to change as a primary characteristic of community college faculty. Several faculty participants described how their approach to students and teaching strategies have changed over the course of their careers from an inflexible and distant approach to working with students that Geoff described as a "graduate school mindset," Millie said was

"more punitive," Mora described as "elitist," and Owen said was "my way or the highway" to an approach that was more flexible and caring. Additionally, most of the faculty participants identified meaningful faculty development and professional learning opportunities that have influenced how they approach their work, including how they interact with and teach students in a way that supports the academic success of Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students specifically. And most of the faculty participants indicated that they wanted to participate in future equity-minded professional development to help them continue to improve their teaching practices.

Several faculty in this study stated that their experiences in the Racial Equity Institute trainings provided by Keystone Tech that they all had in common served as catalysts for change. This finding provides further support for Levin's (2018) assessment that the messages community college faculty receive from the institution via the mission and values, policies and procedures, and faculty expectations contribute to institutional socialization and affect community college faculty members' perceptions of their role. It also supports Dowd and Bensimon's (2015) finding that faculty make changes to their professional practices as a result of meaningful faculty development on diversity, equity, and inclusion topics. When community colleges provide their faculty with meaningful, high quality professional development, the faculty experience institutional socialization and are motivated to make changes to their professional practices. There is limited research on the overall community college faculty professional experience (Levin, 2018; Townsend & Twombly, 2007), including community college faculty perceptions of their roles in closing equity gaps for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. This conclusion fills a gap in the literature regarding how community college faculty approach their professions and learn to be community college faculty.

The Community College Faculty in this Study Perceive the Role of the Community College to Include Providing Resources that Support the Success of Black/African American And Hispanic/Latinx Students

Previous research shows that faculty are knowledgeable of the multiple responsibilities that non-traditional college students have as well as the external barriers and obstacles to their academic success (Zerquera et al., 2016). The findings in this case study are aligned with this previous research. The community college faculty participants recognized that community college students face multiple external commitments, and several told stories during the interviews of students who had lost loved ones (Joyce and Summer), experienced fights and disagreements with family members (Jackie), had to care for sick children who had been hospitalized (Mora), asked them for money after class (George), and experienced job loss during the COVID pandemic (Jenny). The faculty participants in this study are knowledgeable of the external barriers and obstacles their students face. In addition, the faculty participants indicated that an important role that the community college as an institution plays in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for minoritized students is to provide comprehensive, student-centered campus resources. This conclusion is strengthened by the findings that the research participants were interested in serving as internal validating agents for their students while simultaneously perceiving several limitations to their role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for minoritized students.

The significance of internal validating agents is in alignment with the campus ethos domain of the SEO Model (Harris & Wood, 2016) and literature on how validating agents support community college students' academic success. Several research participants described their roles as students' internal validating agents as a two-step process in which the first step is

informing students about campus resources and college processes, and the second step is helping students navigate those resources and processes. The research participants identified the following campus resources at Keystone Tech as supportive of the needs of students, including Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students: tutoring, advising, food pantry, basic needs supports, counseling, and success coaching. As students who attend community colleges are more likely than students who attend four-year institutions to report experiencing food and housing insecurities (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018), the research participants in this study serve an important role in connecting students to campus resources. Faculty perceptions of the role of the community college in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for minoritized students were also revealed when the faculty participants discussed the limitations of their individual role. For example, Geoff stated that while individual community college faculty members are limited in how they can support students with their external commitments and stressful life events, the community college as an institution should provide these resources, especially since Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx community college students are more likely to experience food insecurity, housing insecurity, and other stressful life events. The community college faculty participants in this study, like Harris and Wood (2016) in their SEO Model's campus ethos domain, prioritized a college's campus resources as an important component of whether minoritized community college students experience academic success.

Recommendations for Practice

This study contributes to the understanding of the perceptions that community college faculty hold of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. The results of this case study as considered within the framework of the SEO Model (Harris & Wood, 2016) and the existing

literature led to the development of five recommendations for practice for community college leaders. All five recommendations for practice focus on the faculty experience and have the potential to support faculty in their work to close equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. The recommendations for practice are described in detail below.

Center Equity-Mindedness in the College Culture

The research setting for this study was a community college that has made multiple, strategic efforts to address the equity gaps in graduation rates for its Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students, including establishing an Office of Equity and Inclusion, publishing an Equity Action Plan, and making high-quality diversity, equity, and inclusion training from the Racial Equity Institute available to its employees. These actions contribute to a culture of equity-mindedness and the process of "institutional socialization" that matches and influences many community college faculty members' professional identities (Levin, 2018, p. 185). Within this context, the faculty research participants in this study demonstrated several of the hallmarks of equity-mindedness. For example, the research participants were knowledgeable that the equity gaps for minoritized students existed at their college. They were knowledgeable about the college's resources and processes to support student success, and they described one of their primary roles as connecting students to the college resources and processes. They also named several inclusive, student-centered teaching strategies that they use to support the academic success of their minoritized students. They did not demonstrate indicators of deficit-mindedness, such as defensiveness or blaming Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students' upbringing or lack of aspirations for equity gaps in graduation rates. The faculty research participants who work at this community college that has made several efforts to be equity-

minded perceive their role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students to be vital to the success of their students. Leaders at other community colleges who want to support the development of equity-mindedness among their faculty should consider how they can center equity-mindedness in the college culture.

Include Faculty in Institutional Efforts to Close Equity Gaps

As college leaders work to establish an equity-minded culture, they should also strategically and purposefully include faculty in institutional efforts to close equity gaps. Stout (2018) and Dowd and Bensimon (2015) agree that faculty and teaching should be at the center of community college reforms that aim to close equity gaps for minoritized students. Focusing institutional efforts on improved teaching and learning practices requires that faculty be involved in the development and review of all college policies, procedures, resources, and texts that pertain to teaching. Community college faculty interact with students more frequently than any other college personnel and have the opportunity to develop meaningful, validating relationships with their students. The community college faculty participants in this study would agree with the assessment that they play an unrivaled role in closing equity gaps for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. And many of them want to do more. Jenny identified the need for release time for faculty to have the time to consider new teaching pedagogies and contribute to institutional change. Millie cited a need for clarification on to what degree community college faculty can change their teaching approach to working with students, especially at an institution with a strong Office for Equity and Inclusion that seemed to sanction certain, but not all, faculty efforts. According to Dowd and Bensimon (2015), "…our theory of change…relies on changes in faculty members' beliefs and attitudes to bring about broader

organizational change" (p. 75). Institution efforts to close equity gaps in graduation rates for minoritized students will be limited without the inclusion of faculty.

Provide Strong Orientation Experiences and Support for New Faculty

A third recommendation to come from this study on faculty perceptions of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for minoritized students is that community colleges should provide new faculty with strong orientation experiences and supports, such as mentoring and training on how to understand student performance data. Orientation and supports provide new community college faculty with the following opportunities: (a) to learn about the culture and priorities of the institution, which influence the work of faculty, (b) to set the tone that faculty are valuable members of the culture, and (c) to provide information about the specific students who attend the college. New faculty orientation also supports the "institutional socialization" (Levin, 2018, p. 185) that shapes how faculty understand their role. Institution-specific orientation also aligns with Dowd and Bensimon's (2015) recommendation that professional development should avoid color-blind and technicism approaches and instead be tailored to consider the students' "communities, cultures, or lived experiences" (p. 139). This approach is especially relevant for community college faculty since students of color attend community colleges at high rates. Specifically, nationwide, in 2018, 55% of Hispanic/Latinx undergraduates, 44% of Black/African American undergraduates, 45% of Asian undergraduates, and 41% of White undergraduates attended community college (CCRC, 2021). Several faculty participants in this study expressed an interest in learning more about "our" students. Some faculty defined "our" students by racial and ethnic groups; some faculty specified that they wanted to learn more about the history of the Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students in the college's service area. Finally, several community college faculty

participants in this study described how they changed their teaching practices and approaches to working with students over time. After they gained experience teaching at a community college, they moved away from their graduate school training that led them to be inflexible and set rigid expectations with students to instead being more flexible and accommodating to student needs. New faculty orientation could help new faculty discern more quickly whether their graduate school training is a good match for the realities they will face in the community college classroom. The finding from this study that the community college faculty role is dynamic in nature supports this recommendation for strong orientation activities for new community college faculty.

Prioritize Faculty Development Opportunities on Inclusive Teaching for Faculty

The fourth recommendation for practice is for college leaders to prioritize training on inclusive teaching strategies for community college faculty. This recommendation is based on both a strength and a limitation that faculty participants in this study identified. A major finding from this study is the emphasis the community college faculty put on good teaching strategies as a primary role they play in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. Almost every participant in the study identified a student-centered teaching strategy they have used to close equity gaps and improve the course success rates for their minoritized students. However, none of the faculty described an experience using culturally relevant pedagogy or universal design for learning, two of the most powerful inclusive teaching practices according to Addy, Dube et al. (2021). Equity-minded community college faculty who are experienced with other inclusive teaching practices (for example, being willing to make mistakes in front of students and demonstrating a commitment to a growth mindset) could be trained to use culturally relevant pedagogy or universal design for learning strategies

and potentially see significant changes in the success rates of their minoritized students. This recommendation is also based on the finding that community college faculty perceive real limits to their role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. Several faculty indicated that they would be interested in learning strategies to support minoritized students who experience external commitments and stressful life events that impede their academic success. According to both this study and research by Dowd and Bensimon (2015), community college faculty make changes to their professional and teaching practices and are willing to change as a result of what they learn in meaningful faculty development and professional learning activities.

Create Structures for Faculty to Receive Disaggregated Data on Their Students

The final recommendation from this study is for college leaders to provide disaggregated student data and structures for faculty to understand and discuss their data. This recommendation is consistent with a recommendation that Andrews (2022) made as a result of her study on community college faculty member's perceptions of equity gaps in first-year student progression for Black/African American students. The faculty participants in this study indicated an appetite for learning more about their students and the grade distributions in their classes disaggregated by race and ethnicity. Regular access to student data could also persuade community college faculty who are reluctant to make changes to their teaching practices to do just that. Owen demonstrated some reticence to take full responsibility for any equity gaps in his classes without knowing more about students' experiences inside and outside of his class:

> So were it to be clear to me that something about the way I interact with them or how much or little I support them or the content is off putting or aggressive or too difficult, then I would make a change, and I would see that. But if…it's not my content, it's not my

structure, I'm being as flexible as I can, then again, I take ownership of what I can take

ownership of. But I'm not going to go "that's my fault" full stop that this group of people

is graduating [at lower rates] or getting fewer A's or whatever.

According to Dowd and Bensimon (2015), "Faculty must be willing to look at how their

practices, language, and disciplinary cultures contribute to the problem of low and inequitable

student success rates" (p. 157). The community college faculty in this study demonstrated the

willingness; now they need the disaggregated data to track how their changes to their teaching

practices are contributing to their efforts to close equity gaps in graduation rates for

Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to increase understanding of the

perceptions community college faculty hold of their role and their institution's role in closing

equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students.

As a case study, this research provides a detailed description of a particular group of people

within a particular setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), specifically the perception of full-time

faculty at Keystone Technical Community College who have taught for at least three years and

participated in a Racial Equity Institute training. The six findings and associated

recommendations for practice are grounded in the parameters this study; however, there are

opportunities for future research based on considerations for the research setting and participants

as well as opportunities to build upon the research described in this study.

This study was purposefully situated at a community college that had spent considerable

time and resources to closing equity gaps for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx

students, including creating and staffing an Office of Equity and Inclusion, publishing an Equity

Action Plan, and establishing goals in becoming an anti-racist institution. The faculty in this study contribute to and are influenced by the culture of the institution (Levin, 2018); their perceptions of their role in closing equity gaps for students of color may reflect that culture. There is an opportunity to expand the inquiry of this study at a community college that has not made as much progress in establishing an institutional culture that values closing equity gaps for students of color to consider how the institutional context affects faculty perceptions of their role. Additionally, future researchers might replicate the study at a community college with different characteristics, such as a predominantly White institution or a considerably larger community college, to study how the research setting relates to faculty perceptions.

Similarly, research participants with different characteristics might provide different perspectives on their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps. For example, this study prioritized faculty who have participated in a Racial Equity Institute training so that the faculty had a common baseline understanding of relevant and timely diversity, equity, and inclusion topics. Community college faculty who have not participated in Racial Equity Institute training might have different viewpoints on their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. Also, coincidentally, most of the faculty who qualified for participation teach general education classes. There is an opportunity to investigate whether faculty in career and technical education programs share the same assessment of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates. Finally, all the faculty participants in this study were employed full-time at the research site for at least three years whereas almost half (48%) of the faculty working at a North Carolina community college are adjuncts or part-time employees (North Carolina Community College System, 2022c). Notably, at Keystone Technical Community College, 62%

of faculty were employed part-time in October 2021 (North Carolina Community College System, 2022c). The perceptions of these faculty on their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students are just as valuable as the perceptions of full-time faculty and might reveal important differences or similarities in thought.

In addition to considering similar research questions within a different setting or from different community college faculty perspectives, there are two key opportunities to build upon the research in this study. First, at different points in the individual interviews, the faculty participants indicated that their race and ethnicity influenced their perceptions of their role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates. For example, two of the White faculty members described being very intentional about learning about their Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students since they did not share the same background. And two of the Black/African American faculty members described their role as supporting students from their same racial group. While beyond the scope of this research, there is an opportunity to design a study that compares the perceptions of White community college faculty with Black/African American community college faculty and Hispanic/Latinx community college faculty to investigate whether and how the race and ethnicity of the faculty member relates to the faculty member's perceptions of their role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates. The second opportunity to build on this research is to consider how the perceptions of community college faculty on their role in closing equity gaps would change if the limitations the faculty in this study identified were addressed. For example, if the research participants received additional training on inclusive teaching practices and supporting students with their external commitments and stressful life events, would their perceptions of their role in closing equity gaps change?

Likewise, if they could see the disaggregated data they desired on their students, how would their perceptions of their role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for students of color be affected? While this study contributes to the limited research on the community college faculty professional experience (Levin, 2018; Townsend & Twombly, 2007), there is still a lot to be uncovered on the community college faculty professional experience, including community college faculty perceptions of their roles in closing equity gaps for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students.

Summary

This study focused on the experiences of 11 full-time faculty members at a large community college in North Carolina in an effort to answer research questions regarding community college faculty members perceptions of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. Faculty perceptions on these topics are important because community college faculty have the most frequent contact with students (Zerquera et al., 2016); relatively little is known about their professional role (Levin, 2018; Townsend & Twombly, 2007); and recent calls for community college reform focus on faculty and their interactions with students (Stout, 2018). Most importantly, the results of this study can be leveraged to improve the success rates of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students who attend community colleges, which is necessary if minoritized students are going to graduate at rates comparable to White students and enjoy the benefits of a post-secondary credential. Higher education is critical to the earnings potential and other outcomes for Black/African Americans and Hispanic/Latinx Americans (Carnavale & Strohl, 2013) who attend community college at higher rates than any other type of institution of higher education (CCRC, 2021). The analysis of the data collected in this study and

the related research within the framework of the SEO Model (Harris & Wood, 2016) led the researcher to identify the following four conclusions:

1. The community college faculty in this study perceive their role to be critical to the success of their Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students.

2. The community college faculty in this study are ready for and already engaged in equity-minded work.

3. The community college faculty in this study want to make changes to their teaching and other professional practices.

4. The community college faculty in this study perceive the role of the community college to include providing resources that support the success of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students.

The community college faculty research participants in this study agreed unanimously that community college faculty play an important role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. This role includes using equity-minded teaching practices to close equity gaps and making changes to their teaching and professional practices as needed to improve the academic success outcomes of their students of color. The community college faculty in this study also identified serving as internal validating agents as an important part of their role in closing equity gaps and named several limitations to their role based on the power dynamics inherent in the classroom and their lack of training to support students with their commitments and stressful life events. Therefore, they looked to the community college as an institution to provide the campus resources that students need to support their academic success, a key role they perceive that their institution plays in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students.

These insights into community college faculty members' perceptions of their role led to the identification of several recommendations for practice that focus on leveraging the high esteem community college faculty put on their role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx students. Knowledge of community college faculty perceptions can inform their engagement in powerful cycles of inquiry and eventually lead to changes in policies, practices, and culture, and then—most importantly—in student outcomes (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). This study provides new insights into those valuable faculty perceptions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant Interview Questions

Interview Protocol

Date of Interview:

Time:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Instructions for interviewer:

- gain permission to record interview

- turn on recording

- introduce self and research

- remind interviewee about the length of the interview and their opportunity to see the results of the interviews

Interview Questions

Introduction

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your general experiences working as a community college faculty member?

Faculty Experiences

2. How would you summarize your approach to supporting the academic success of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students?

3. What professional development have you participated in or other experiences have you had that has influenced your thinking about how to support the academic success of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students?

Noncognitive Domain

4. What role, if any, do community college faculty play in supporting students' emotional and affective experiences in college?

5. Should community college faculty take action to support Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students specifically with their emotional and affective experiences? Why or why not?

Academic Domain

6. How do you interact with students in the classroom or learning environment?

7. How do you interact with students outside of the classroom or learning environment?

8. What role, if any, do community college faculty play in supporting the academic success of students, especially Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students?

Environmental Domain

9. What role, if any, do community college faculty play in supporting students with their external commitments and responsibilities, such as employment and family life, and stressful life events like divorce, death of a loved one, and eviction or homelessness?

Campus Ethos Domain

10. How do community college faculty contribute to the degree to which students feel like they belong at an institution?

11. What role if any do community college faculty play in the development of an institutional culture that is conducive to learning for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students?

Conclusion

12. What else, if anything, would you like to share about the role community colleges and community college faculty play in closing equity gaps for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students?

Instructions for interviewer:

- thank participant

- confirm receipt of demographic survey

- offer to answer any of the interviewee's questions about logistics or the research study

- turn off recording

Appendix B: Demographic Survey

Gender

Male

Female

Non-binary

Race and ethnicity

American Indian or Alaskan Native

Asian

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latinx

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

White

Multi-Racial

Age Range

20-29

30-39

40-49

50-59

60+

Total years of teaching experience

Less than 3 years

3-5 years

6-10 years

11-15 years

16+ years

Total years of teaching experience at the institution

Less than 3 years

3-5 years

6-10 years

11-15 years

16+ years

Time of experience with Racial Equity Institute Phase 1 or Groundwater Training

Prior to Fall 2020

Fall 2020

Spring 2021

Summer 2021

Fall 2021

Spring 2022

Summer 2022

Fall 2022

Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Dear faculty,

My name is Gabby McCutchen, and I am a Doctoral student in the College Education at North Carolina State University. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about community college faculty perceptions of their role and their institution's role in closing equity gaps in graduation rates for Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. You are eligible to participate in this study because you have been employed at the research site for at least three years and you have participated in a Racial Equity Institute workshop.

If you decide to participate in this study, I will contact you again via email to schedule an appointment for a 60- to 90-minute one-on-one Zoom interview. I plan to audio and video record all interviews. I will use the data I collect in the interviews as part of my dissertation research.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you would like to participate or have any questions about this research study, please email me gmccutc@ncsu.edu as well as complete and return the attached consent form.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Gabby McCutchen
Doctoral Student – Adult & Community College Education
Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development Program
North Carolina State University

Appendix D: Informed Consent

North Carolina State University
Informed Consent for Participation in Research

Title of Study: Community College Faculty Perceptions of their Roles in Closing Equity Gaps in Graduation Rates (eIRB # 25532)
Principal Investigator(s): Gabrielle McCutchen, gmccutc@ncsu.edu, and 919-414-6298
Funding Source: None
NC State Faculty Point of Contact: Chad Hoggan, cdhoggan@ncsu.edu, and 919-515-6290

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are invited to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, and to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of community college faculty perceptions of their roles in closing equity gaps in graduation rates. We will do this through asking you questions about your perceptions in a 60 to 90-minute virtual interview.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies also may pose risks to those who participate. You may want to participate in this research because you want to share your perspectives on your profession. You may not want to participate in this research because you may be reluctant to speak negatively about your profession.

Specific details about the research in which you are invited to participate are contained below. If you do not understand something in this form, please ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If, at any time, you have questions about your participation in this research, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office. The IRB office's contact information is listed in the *What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?* section of this form.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of the study is to describe the perceptions community college faculty have of their roles in closing equity gaps in graduation rates within the context of a community college that has an equity plan, and office of equity and inclusion, stated goals to close equity gaps, and structures focused on closing equity gaps.

How many people will be in the study?
There will be approximately 15-20 participants in this study.

Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?
In order to be a participant in this study, you must agree to be in the study and have been employed as a community college faculty member for a minimum of three years and have participated in Racial Equity Institute Workshop.

You cannot participate in this study if you do not meet the inclusion criteria or are no longer employed at a community college.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do all of the following:
1. Take an online survey that asks basic demographic information (5 minutes)
2. Participate in a virtual interview (60-90 minutes)
3. Provide feedback on the preliminary findings of study (15-25 minutes)

The total amount of time that you will be participating in this study is approximately two hours.

Recording and images
If you want to participate in this research, you must agree to be audio recorded and video recorded. If you do not agree to be audio recorded and video recorded, you cannot participate in this research.

Risks and benefits
There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. The risks to you as a result of this research include a potential sense of discomfort in describing your perceptions of Black/African American and/or Hispanic students and your perceptions of your role in supporting Black/African American and/or Hispanic students.

There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are contributing to research on community college faculty experiences and perceptions.

Right to withdraw your participation
You can stop participating in this study at any time for any reason. To do so, just stop any research activity that you are doing or contact the student researcher, Gabrielle McCutchen at gmccutc@ncsu.edu and 919-414-6298. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Chad Hoggan at cdhoggan@ncsu.edu and 919-515-6290. If you choose to withdraw your consent and to stop participating in this research, you can expect that the researcher(s) will redact your data from their data set, securely destroy your data, and prevent future uses of your data for research purposes wherever possible. This is possible in some, but not all, cases.

Confidentiality, personal privacy, and data management
Trust is the foundation of the participant/researcher relationship. Much of that principle of trust is tied to keeping your information private and in the manner that I have described to you in this form. The information that you share with me will be held in confidence to the fullest extent allowed by law.

Protecting your privacy as related to this research is of utmost importance to me. There are very rare circumstances related to confidentiality where I may have to share information about you. Your information collected in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies (for example, the FDA) for purposes such as quality control or safety. In other cases, I must report instances in which imminent harm could come to you or others.

How I manage, protect, and share your data are the principal ways that I protect your personal privacy. Data that will be shared with others about you will be re-identifiable.

> **Re-identifiable**. Re-identifiable data is information that I can identify you indirectly because of my access to information, role, skills, combination of information, and/or use of technology. This may also mean that in published reports others could identify you from what is reported, for example, if a story you tell us is very specific. If your data is re-identifiable, I will report it in such a way that you are not directly identified in reports. Based on how I need to share the data I cannot remove details from the report that would protect your identity from ever being figured out. This means that others may be able to re-identify from the information reported from this research.

Future use of your research data
Your information, even with identifiers removed, will not be stored or distributed for future research studies.

Compensation
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Emergency medical treatment
If you are hurt or injured during the study session(s), the researcher will call 911 for necessary care. There is no provision for compensation or free medical care for you if you are injured as a result of this study.

What if you are an employee?
Your participation in this study is not a requirement of your employment, and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your job.

What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the student researcher, Gabrielle McCutchen at gmccutc@ncsu.edu and 919-414-6298. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Chad Hoggan at cdhoggan@ncsu.edu and 919-515-6290.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB (Institutional Review Board) office. An IRB office helps participants if they have any issues regarding research activities. You can contact the NC State University IRB office at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu, 919-515-8754, or fill out a confidential form online at https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/

Consent to participate
By signing this consent form, I am affirming that I have read and understand the above information. All of the questions that I had about this research have been answered. I have chosen to participate in this study with the understanding that I may stop participating at any

time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I am aware that I may revoke my consent at any time.

☐   **Yes, I want to be in this research study.**

     Name_____

     Today's Date _____

☐   **No, I do not want to be in this research study.**

     Thank you for your consideration.