UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-LA CROSSE
Graduate Studies

EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS OF COLOR REGARDING SERVICES AND FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THEIR SUCCESS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS STUDY

A Chapter Style Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters in Public Health in Community Health Education

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August, 2019
EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS OF COLOR REGARDING SERVICES AND FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THEIR SUCCESS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Yang, J. Exploring the perceptions of students of color regarding the services and factors contributing to their success: A phenomenological hermeneutics study. Masters in Public Health, August 2019, 137 pp. (E. Whitney)

Purpose: To explore the perceptions of students of color regarding the services and factors that contribute to their academic success. Theoretical framework: The socioecological model was utilized to develop focus group questions, identify codes, and sort codes into pre-determined categories. Methodology: Prospective qualitative phenomenological hermeneutics was utilized to gather the lived experiences and perceptions from students. Structural and axial coding techniques were used to identify codes and sort them into emerging themes. Findings: Many themes emerged regarding what students perceived as supports to their success in higher education. Students identified barriers and issues they faced while being students of color at a predominantly White institution, while also discussing how they were building resilience and succeeding despite those issues. Students also provided recommendations on how to improve the retention and success of students of color. Implications for practice and recommendations to further this research are provided. Conclusion: Students of color continue to succeed in higher education despite well researched factors that impede their success. Support across all levels of the socioecological model are still needed to continue supporting the success of students of color.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my Thesis Chair, Dr. Emily Whitney, for your guidance and support with my research. Your guidance pointed me in this direction which eventually led to this wonderful research where I have a lot of passion. I appreciated your expertise when we discussed different research methodologies to utilize and allowing me to steer my thesis. Your goals for me were realistic, they kept me on track during my research because we both know I can get a little distracted, and helped validate my thoughts and feelings as I conducted my research. Thank you to Dr. Cedergren for your thorough and extensive review of my thesis. Your suggestions and recommendations helped made my thesis stronger and more comprehensive since I was able to fill in gaps I missed. It also helped me gain a better understanding of the level of intellect required when I pursue my Ph.D. in the future. Thank you to Richard Sims for your kind words of encouragement and providing insights on how to connect with younger students of color. I appreciated your willingness to meet and process with me on how to complete this thesis so that it can benefit other students of color.

Thank you to the Office of Multicultural Student Services (OMSS) and the Multicultural Student Organizations (MSO) who played an instrumental part in this research! I couldn’t have completed this thesis without your support and participation. Thank you to the staff members in OMSS for supporting me through my program and listening to me process through my thoughts every time I passed through the office. Thank you to the wonderful students from the MSOs who were willing to
participate in my focus groups. Your perspectives and experiences will help guide other students of color so that they can be successful just like you all.

Special shout out to my research assistant and longtime friend Mai Nue Lor for your assistance in my research. Your experience in qualitative studies was definitely helpful when we were conducting the focus groups, transcribing them, and coding for themes. Thank you for coming to all the short notice meetings and answering random questions that popped up throughout this entire research process. I’m excited to see how you will overcome new and stimulating challenges as you complete your program! Stay motivated and continue excelling and I wish you the best as you complete your graduate program!

I would also like to acknowledge all people who supported me while I completed my graduate program. Thank you to Jessica Thill and Dr. Haro for letting me be a graduate assistant in the McNair Scholars’ Office! This experience has definitely reassured me that I’m going into the correct field and gave me the chance to really utilize and explore my skill sets. Thank you to my other faculty members who helped shaped my professional identity through the courses you taught and the advice you gave me so that I can continue growing as a scholar. Thank you to my extensive La Crosse family for keeping me motivated with your questions and interest in my research. I would also like to thank my cohort for helping me keep my head on straight and reminding me about deadlines because we all know I can get a little lost a lot of the time!

Most importantly, I would like to thank my wonderful parents and siblings. Ua tsaug rau nej txoj kev hlub thiab ntxhawb nqa niaj hnub niam no. Yog hais
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF APPENDIXES</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Problem</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for the Study</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations, Limitations, Assumptions</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioecological Model</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intraperonal Level</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interperonal Level</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Level</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society and Policy Level</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Success and the Socioecological Model</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intraperonal: Skills, Knowledge, Attitude, &amp; Academic Success</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interperonal: Social Relationships &amp; Academic Success</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and Policy Level: Sense of Belonging and Academic Success</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III: METHODS &amp; PROCEDURES</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenology and Bracketing</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bracketing to Increase Trustworthiness</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermeneutics and Reflexivity</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexivity to Increase Trustworthiness</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenological Hermeneutics</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in Bracketing and Reflexivity</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting a Research Assistant</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Setting</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Multicultural Student Services</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatekeepers in OMSS</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting and Recruiting Participants</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Guide</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioecological Model</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recording and Transcribing the Focus Groups</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting the Focus Groups</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Cycle Coding</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural Coding</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Cycle Coding</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axial Coding</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality in Qualitative Research</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigor</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trustworthiness………………………………………………………………41
Credibility…………………………………………………………………41
Dependability………………………………………………………………42
Transferability………………………………………………………………42
Confirmability………………………………………………………………43

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS…………………………………………………………44

Participant Demographics……………………………………………………44
Facilitators, Barriers, and Supports for Academic Success………………45

Intrapersonal Level: Facilitators……………………………………………45
Self-Identity…………………………………………………………………46
Involvement………………………………………………………………47
Adaptive Learning Style………………………………………………48
Navigating Academia…………………………………………………48
Health……………………………………………………………………49

Intrapersonal Level: Barriers………………………………………………49
Struggles with Skill Building…………………………………………50
Feeling Overwhelmed……………………………………………………51

Intrapersonal Level: Supports………………………………………………51
Learning and Adapting with a Growth Mindset…………………………52
Academic Resilience……………………………………………………53
Identity Development and Resilience…………………………………54
Health, Wellness, and Resilience………………………………………54
Involvement On-Campus and Resilience………………………………55
Interpersonal Level: Facilitators..........................................................56
  Students of Color, Friends, and Social Support......................56
  Academic Staff and Faculty Support..................................57
  Family Support.................................................................58
  Having a Mentor and Being a Mentor...............................59
Interpersonal Level: Barriers..........................................................59
  Microaggressions...............................................................60
  Issues with Faculty Members...........................................61
  Issues with Peers and Roommates...................................61
Interpersonal Level: Supports......................................................62
  Social Life and Resilience..................................................63
  Family and Resilience.......................................................63
  Self-Advocacy and Resilience...........................................64
Community Level: Facilitators.......................................................65
  Office of Multicultural Student Services........................65
    OMSS Staff Members.....................................................65
    Academic Support..........................................................66
    Leadership Development and involvement......................67
  Student Support Services................................................68
    SSS Academic Advisors...............................................68
    SSS Peer Mentors..........................................................68
    Academic Support..........................................................69
  Campus Climate...............................................................69
Projection versus Reflection…………………………………………………86

Recommendations for Practice…………………………………………………..88

Engaged Learning and Academic Determination Through
Emotional Intelligence………………………………………………………….89
Importance of Faculty and Staff of Color in Higher Education………………89
Creating Diverse Citizenship in White Students……………………………90
Establish Sustainable and Equitable Partnerships…………………………91
Address Inclusive Negligence……………………………………………….92
Increase Student Recruitment Efforts in Diverse Communities……………93
Additional Funding for Academic Success…………………………………94

Recommendations for Student Success and Future Research……………94

REFERENCES.........................................................................................96

APPENDICES.........................................................................................104
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 | Student demographics ................................................................. 44

Table 2 | Student majors and minors .......................................................... 44
LIST OF APPENDIXES

Appendix A | Socioecological Model.................................................................104
Appendix B | Interview Guide .................................................................106
Appendix C | Focus Group Questions.............................................................109
Appendix D | Informed Consent Document....................................................111
Appendix E | Helms’ White Racial Identity Model........................................114
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Defining academic success has been a perplexing issue due to a multitude of factors. Some scholars try to quantify success by measuring cognitive variables, such as test scores, grades, and standardized tests. Others study and try to understand success through non-cognitive variables, such as developing leadership skills, managing interpersonal relationships, or becoming more aware of social injustices (Carter-Francique, Hart, & Steward, 2013). In addition to trying to understand cognitive and non-cognitive factors of academic success, there are also differences in perceptions of success between constituents found within a university; faculty members may view passing a course or enrolling in graduate school as success, while administrators see success as securing employment after graduation (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). Definitions of success can also come from external organizations that are associated with universities. For example, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (as cited in Carter-Francique et al., 2013, p. 232) defines academic success as:

a. Passing academic courses to demonstrate progress towards graduation
b. Meeting required grade point average
c. Graduation

To better understand how to describe academic success is all its ambiguity, Kuh and colleagues (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of the literature to amalgamate different definitions. They developed a guiding framework that showed a more realistic portrayal of college student’s successes, to include pre-college and post-college experiences, and moved away from a “pipeline analogy” (p. 7) that only viewed success during college.
For example, pre-college experiences included college preparation from kindergarten to high school, family structure, choosing a university for enrollment, financial aid support, to include policies that could affect their success. The authors stated that students who completed at least four years of mathematics, science, and English in high school were more likely to graduate from college compared to students who did not. Although these courses can serve as strong predictors for college graduation, access to these courses are not equally distributed because schools may not offer higher level math courses, such as calculus or trigonometry. Results from the meta-analysis showed that students of color (SoC) and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were mostly enrolled in algebra II or lower while most White students were enrolled in algebra II and trigonometry. In addition to college preparedness in high school, Kuh and colleagues (2006) also stated that fathers who had a bachelor’s degree were three times more likely to have children who indicated wanting to attend college while mothers with a bachelor’s degree had children who were two times more likely to attend college (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006).

The guiding framework by Kuh and colleagues (2006) then explained the college experience itself, which is broken into “student behaviors” and “institutional conditions” (p. 8) that can influence student engagement while in college, which also included campus environment, student organizations, and experiences with a diverse group of people. The authors stressed the importance of communicating college-level expectations, such as investing more time into studying, with students because many, particularly first-generation and non-traditional students, have less knowledge of how succeed in college. They are more likely to utilize ineffective studying habits from high
school and may expect to receive a similar grade in college. Additionally, they summarized that sharing expectations early on in college can help shape students’ behaviors and can help students determine which activities are appropriate and meaningful to their experiences. Students who had positive expectations, such as expecting to participate in a range of “intellectual, social, and cultural activities” (p. 33) were more likely to stay enrolled and graduate from college, compared to students who did not have such expectations.

In addition to expectations, Kuh and colleagues (2006) described the importance of positive student-faculty interactions and peer-to-peer interactions. Students who have faculty members that can serve as mentors, both inside and outside the classroom, are more likely to be successful in college compared to students who do not. Although the reasons aren’t clear, these interactions may make students feel more connected to the university, therefore, be more willing to explore career and educational goals with faculty.

Kuh and colleagues (2006) completed their framework with “outcomes and post-college indicators” (p. 9) that can contribute to graduation and success after graduation, such as employment or enrolling in postsecondary education. Pascarella and Terenzini (as cited in Kuh et al., 2006, p. 75), concluded that college grades, especially during the first year, were the best predictors of students graduating in a timely manner and graduates tend to have a better quality of life due to a multitude of factors. For instance, graduates have improved cognitive skills that contribute to more critical and reflective thinking, therefore, better problem solvers. They also have an increased sense of humanitarianism and are also more likely to carry their behaviors in college, such as
volunteering, into their communities once they graduated. For instance, graduates have an increased understanding of gender equality, therefore, offer greater support for gender equality policies and initiatives. Due to the rigorous demands of higher education, graduates are also more likely to have well-developed intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and they tend to be better at the application of certain practical skillsets, such as time and money management.

**Background of the Problem**

While the definition of academic success is important, the rate of academic success in SoC also requires a similar amount of attention. Boatman and Long (2016) stated that only 36% of low-income students completed their bachelor’s degree compared to 81% of high-income students. Knapp and colleagues (2012) conducted a longitudinal 2005 cohort study of first-time freshman students at public four-year universities and found that American Indian, Black, and Hispanic students graduated at a much lower rate, 38%, 39% and 49%, respectively, when compared to Asian and White students at 68% and 60%, respectively. In the same 2005 cohort study, but looking at graduation rates in private universities, the trend continues with American Indian, Black, and Hispanic students graduating at lower rates 39%, 34% and 37%, when compared to Asian and White students at 51% and 46% (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, Ginder, 2012). While the enrollment of SoC into higher education has steadily increased over the last 30 years, academic success for SoC, excluding Asian students, has remained relatively low (Fischer, 2007; Boatman & Long, 2016).

Researchers have started looking at factors that are affecting academic success to gain a better understanding of why some students aren’t as successful as other students.
For example, Fischer (2007) conducted a study to explore “racial and ethnic differences in adjusting to college and the consequences different adjustment strategies have on college outcomes,” (p. 126). The author concluded that there were various interconnecting factors affecting student adjustment strategies, ranging from socioeconomic status to social adjustment, which impacted academic outcomes. For example, students who had to work to pay for college were more likely to be financially strained and were less likely to participate fully in college activities compared to students who had their expenses paid for by their parents. In terms of social adjustment, students who had a harder time participating in college activities, such as joining a student organization, were less likely to feel attached to the university, had a decreased overall satisfaction with the university, and were more likely to drop out after their second year of college compared to students who participated in college activities.

Boatman and Long (2016) wanted to gain a better understanding of whether or not financial aid had a substantial impact on college engagement and explored “the effects of a generous financial aid award on student engagement for a group of low-income, high achieving, students of color” (p. 655). They investigated students who received the Gates Millennium Scholarship (GMS), a renewable grant for students of color with financial needs. They concluded that students receiving the GMS was positively associated with enrolling in a four-year university or a private college compared to students who didn’t receive the GMS. Students who received the GMS were also more selective of their institution, choosing more highly competitive doctoral institutions than their counterparts. GMS recipients also appeared to interact and engage
academically with their peers more than students who didn’t receive the GMS, which could benefit their academic success.

Museus and Liverman (2010) conducted a qualitative study to explore which institutional factors contribute to the retention of SoC and how those factors impact academic success. Findings from their study indicate that elements of a universities culture, such as having strong networking values and having a humanizing educational system, helped students be successful. Secondly, having a holistic and integrated support systems positively impacted student success. For example, having cultural centers, mentoring programs, transition programs, and academic support programs make a university more holistic and can offer better support for SoC success. A third finding from their study indicated that being engaged in educationally purposeful activities contributed to SoC’s academic success. Some educationally purposeful activities included collaborative learning, enriching educational experiences, and student-faculty interactions. Lastly, they concluded that having a sense of belonging on campus and being connected to communities on campus contributes to academic success in SoC (Museus and Liverman, 2010).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students of color regarding institutional services and any additional factors contributing to their academic success. Additionally, this study sought to compare perceptions regarding institutional services and any additional factors contributing to academic success based on class standing/year in school for students of color.
Need for the Study

The Office of Multicultural Student Services (OMSS) at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UWL) expressed a need to explore perceptions of success in SoC to gain a better understanding of student needs. This need arose from an unpublished pilot study that was completed in the Spring of 2018 looking at the relationship between resilience and retention in SoC at UWL. A resiliency framework was utilized to develop the tool and results indicated that students had high levels of resilience, but showed a need in developing more effective coping mechanisms (Boardman, Strelow, Yang, 2018). Once the pilot study was concluded, results were shared with OMSS staff members and this led to discussions about exploring perceptions of SoC regarding institutional services and additional factors contributing to their academic success.

OMSS staff members can use findings from this study to create new programs or adapt existing programs to provide improved support for SoC. Findings from this study may be beneficial for other offices or services in similar ways because they can provide additional support for SoC and their academic success. For example, other offices and services can build partnerships with OMSS or applying recommendations provided by students. The university can use recommendations from students who participated in this study to provide institutional to better support student success while they are enrolled and beyond graduation.

Research Questions

1. What institutional services contribute to the academic success of students of color?
2. What additional factors outside of institutional services contribute to the academic success of students of color?

3. How do perceptions of academic success differ based on class standing/year in school for students of color?

**Delimitations**

- Only SoC were recruited to participate in the research, therefore, results can’t be generalized to the entire student population.
- Purposive sampling was used to specifically select SoC and convenient sampling by selecting students who are members of multicultural student organizations.
- The time constraint with student schedules, so focus groups and key informant interviews were conducted within a one-month time period after approval was granted in the spring semester of the 2019 academic year.

**Limitations**

- Students who participated in the study were all recruited from student organizations so results may have some selection bias.
- Due to the nature of qualitative studies and conducting focus groups, there was a small sample size to collect data.
- Since findings were based on self-reported perceptions during focus groups, there may be some perceived biases.

**Assumptions**

- It was assumed that all students who participated in the focus groups answered the questions honestly, openly, and to the extent that they were comfortable sharing.
It’s assumed that students understood the purpose of the study and understood the questions they were asked.

**Definition of Terms**

**Academic Success/Achievement**: Academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of education objectives, and post college performance (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 7).

**Academic Resilience**: the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful, despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding,” (Morales & Trotman, 2004, p. 8)

**Cultural Humility**: Ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the client (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013).

**Emotional Intelligence**: the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions to assist thought, to understand emotions, and to effectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Mayer and Salovey, 1997).

**High-Impact Curriculum**: Active learning experiences connecting student persistence and learning gains (Schreiner, 2018).

**Implicit Bias**: The attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner; implicit bias is activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control (Kirwan Institute, 2015).
**Microaggression**: Every day subtle or ambiguous related insults, slights, mistreatments, or invalidations (Torres-Harding & Turner, 2015).

**Non-traditional Student**: Students who delay enrollment in postsecondary education by a year or more after high school, or students who attended part time, or any student over 23 when enrolled in college for the first time (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

**Persistence**: Continued enrollment at any higher education institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015).

**Resilience**: The ability to deal with and adjust to adversity,” (Rook et al., 2018).

**Rigor**: Employing a systematic approach to research design, careful data collection and analysis, and effective communication,” (Cottrell & McKenzie, 2005).

**Triangulation**: Employing multiple data sources in an investigation to produce understanding (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

**Trustworthiness**: Process of establishing the validity and reliability of qualitative research (Curtin & Fossey, 2007).
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Socioecological Model

The SEM (See Appendix A) is a model that takes into account the complex and dialectical interaction between an individual, their relationship with social groups around them, the community they are in, to include societal and political factors that can influence their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Each level interacts with the others which may create barriers or supports for various actions such as implementing a new health behavior or being successful in a college settings. The SEM was used to locate and identify previous research on student academic success. This chapter is organized into three main sections looking at academic success at the intrapersonal level, interpersonal level, and on a community level. The following sections provides a general overview of each level of the SEM.

Intrapersonal Level

The intrapersonal level is the first level and identifies personal knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and skills that can influence a person’s choices (Sexual Harassment Prevention Workshop, 2019). This first level can also include gender and sexual orientation, religious identity, age, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity (Healthy Campus 2020, 2020). This level looks at how all these individual factors can influence the decisions a person makes.
Interpersonal Level

The interpersonal level is the second level and has to do with relationships, both formal and informal, that surrounds an individual; which can include family, friends, peers, co-workers, neighbors, rituals and customs, and other support systems (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019; Healthy Campus 2020, 2020). This level looks at how these relationships influences a person’s decision.

Community Level

The community level consists of interactions between organizations, social structures, institutional (i.e. universities, churches, community centers, schools, government agencies) characteristics along with the rules and regulations required for them to function. Within this level, factors such as campus climate, community lounges, safe spaces, and availability of study spaces can be included. This level can also be used to identify where social relationships occur between an individual, the social groups around them, and the services they utilize (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019; Healthy Campus 2020, 2020).

Society and Policy Level

This level looks at the broader factors that surrounds a community, such as social and cultural norms that can either support or serve as a barrier to behavior change. Included in this level are health, financial, educational, and societal polices from the university level up to the federal level that either supports or deters behavior change (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019; Healthy Campus 2020, 2020).
The definition of academic success has been perplexing and difficult to explain because it can be defined from an institutional perspective or from a personal perspective. From an institutional perspective, academic success can be defined as “being able to meet an institution’s expectations,” (Academic Success Advice, 2018, para. 2). On a personal level, people can define academic success on their own terms, whether it be keeping their Grade Point Average (GPA) above a certain threshold, being admitted to a program of their choice, or completing academic goals that will prepare them to be working professionals in their field (Academic Success Advice, 2018). Many researchers have studied factors that affect academic success to better equip and support students as they enroll in college. For the purpose of this study, the definition from Kuh and colleagues (2006) will be used to define academic success for its comprehensiveness:

- academic achievement,
- engagement in educationally purposeful activities,
- satisfaction,
- acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies,
- persistence,
- attainment of education objectives,
- and post college performance (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 7).

**Intrapersonal Level: Skills, Knowledge, Attitude, and Academic Success**

For students to succeed in college, they will require adequate preparation and need to obtain numerous skills to navigate the college environment efficiently and effectively. In one study, Marguerite Bonous-Hammarth assessed the flow of African American, American Indian, and Chicano/Latino undergraduate students in and out of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Results from her study showed that African American, American Indian, and Chicano/Latino undergraduate students exited the STEM field in larger quantities than entering the STEM field. She mentioned those who remained in the STEM fields had high academic
achievements prior to enrolling in college and expressed interests in the STEM fields where mathematical and analytical skills are required. She also stated the importance of self-efficacy, or the confidence in performing an action or behavior, playing a crucial role in students' ability to make decisions and learn (Bonous-Hammarth, 2000).

In a similar research conducted by Hurtado et al. (2007) trying to predict the transition and adjustment to college for first year SoC, they noted the “demand for scientists already outweighs the supply” (p. 841) because less and less minority students were pursuing a career in the STEM fields. They shared that SoC switched out of STEM fields if they felt isolated due to racism and if they perceived different ethnic and racial values. Results from their study indicated that students who were more confident in themselves, better at communicating, and who were better at managing their time were more likely to succeed academically. Having these skills can help students utilize services, programs, and gain access to academic staff that would otherwise be unknown to students. They also indicated that academic satisfaction with the courses and application of the knowledge to real-life experiences was beneficial in assisting students adjust psychologically to college.

Resilience has numerous definitions, but can be generally defined as “the ability to deal with and adjust to adversity,” (Rook et al., 2018, p. 332). For example, Morales conducted a qualitative study researching the academic resilience of women of color in higher education. He provided rich descriptions of how each female student developed their academic resilience. He indicated that the women built resilience by overcoming unique barriers and resistance they faced in pursuing their education. Barriers and resistance ranged from conflicts with traditional gender roles, little support for career
aspirations, to subtle forms of opposition from family members. For example, the grandmother of one of the participants said “Why are you still in school then, you already have a man…you need to be around, make sure you keep him happy,” (p. 203). He also mentioned the women in the study were much more goal-oriented and motivated by a professional career than their male counterparts. This may be due to African American and Hispanic women being more likely to serve as the head of their households and by having more people rely on them, and may play a role in helping them focusing on their professional goals. He concluded that assisting women of color to develop resilience can play an important role in their academic success (Morales, 2008).

Allan, McKenna, and Dominey (2013) also conducted research on resilience, but specifically focused on psychological resilience and academic success between women and men. They defined psychological resilience as “a process, capacity, or outcome of successful adaptation during and following risk exposure,” (p. 10). They noted how psychological resilience changed the study focus from a deficit-based model towards a strength-based model by focusing on developing resources and programs surrounding the individual. Results from their study indicated a positive relationship between higher resilience and academic success in women, but a negative relationship for men, meaning men with higher resilience tended to have lower academic success. A closer examination of their data suggested that gender-based resilience may have contributed to academic success in women, while men who were overly confident and over-estimate their capability may "need to re-align their self-rated strengths to develop a more balanced and context-specific appreciation of their capabilities,” (Allan, McKenna, & Dominey, 2013, p. 21).
To continue to build on factors contributing to the success for students of color, Schwartz (2012) conducted focus groups and personal interviews to explore how undergraduate research (UR) contributed to the success of SoC in science courses. She indicated that UR assisted in bridging classroom content with application of knowledge and improved the understanding of course materials. UR builds on information learned in the classroom to include better understanding of research methodologies, improves instrumentation and technical skills, and improves their analytical thinking skills. Unlike coursework, where outcome is assessed via grades, UR doesn’t have that same pressure and allows room for students to make mistakes while researching under a mentor. Palmer and colleagues (2011) also echoed that UR was an important factor in retaining SoC in the STEM fields. They stated that UR enhanced learning the content, but also helped facilitate self-efficacy, provided a depth of knowledge compared to lectures, and can help students determine a career.

Additionally, there are factors that can create barriers for each student. For instance, many predominantly White universities continue to practice and perpetuate “race neutral ideologies,” and this can lead to the development and acceptance of policies that don’t address the unequal distribution of power in universities and society (Jones & Reddick, 2017, p. 204). An example of race neutral ideology is accepting diversity and social differences without acknowledging the “presence of privileges benefiting the White norm (Jones, 2019, p. 1). Jones and Reddick (2017) conducted a single site instrumental case study and completed semi-structured interviews with 10 student leaders to learn how Black student leaders played a role in challenging inequitable policies and practices. Results from their study indicated students valued their leadership
experiences in leading Black student organizations, but also acknowledged how there was an unjust power dynamic in predominantly White organizations. For example, Student Senate, a predominantly White student organization, receives administrative support because it exists to represent its constituents, but a Black student organization who has a similar structure doesn’t have this same support. Students also shared that administrators provided financial support and encouragement, but these lacked any means to change the internal structure of the university to create a more equal power dynamic between the all student groups. In addition to managing their school work and stress caused by academia, Black student leaders were also overwhelmed by their involvement in trying to support their community (Jones & Reddick, 2017).

There is limited, but increasing research exploring how being emotional intelligent (EI) can help students strive to be academically successful. EI can be defined as the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions to assist thought, to understand emotions, and to effectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Mayer and Salovey, 1997). For instance, Jaeger and Caison (2006) assessed if Resident Assistants (RA) with a high EI score were more likely to be nominated as an outstanding RA because of their ability to help residents be successful. Results from their study indicated that RA’s with high EI were 11 times more likely to be nominated as an outstanding RA because they were adaptable and were more likely to be better at generating solutions to emotionally stressful situations. Thus, we can get a glimpse of how complex and dynamic the intrapersonal factors are that impact success for students of color. These types multifaceted issues can also be seen at the interpersonal level of the SEM.
Interpersonal Level: Social Relationships and Academic Success

Focusing on skills, attitudes, knowledge, and resilience aren’t the only factors contributing to academic success in SoC. Another important factor contributing to academic success is having a strong social support group, such as faculty of color, that SoC can relate to and can represent them in higher education. Umbach (2006) explored the impact faculty of color have on undergraduate student engagement in higher education. His research indicated that having a diverse faculty improved the learning environment and encouraged a broader range of teaching pedagogies. Faculty of color were more likely to engage with students compared to White faculty and utilized “higher-order thinking activities” (p. 337) more consistently with diversity-related discussions. Faculty of color were also more likely to utilize interactive and collaborative learning with their students. This helped encourage students with different racial and ethnic backgrounds to interact and learn from each other. His research also indicated that having a diverse faculty creates a “symbol” (p. 321) to commit to diversity and creates an academic culture supporting academic excellence (Umbach, 2006).

Faculty members play an important role in mentoring students and faculty of color can provide mentoring opportunities beneficial in success for SoC in higher education. Morales (2008) investigated academic resilience in women of color, also identified mentors who served as role models, contributed to SoC’s academic success. Women in this study put much more emphasis on the quality of the relationship with their mentor rather than their mentors’ gender, whereas the men in the study put much more emphasis on having mentors who also identified as men (Morales, 2008). In addition to finding mentors who can develop high quality relationship with students,
Schwartz (2012) also echoed that undergraduate research (UR) faculty mentors played a critical role in helping SoC succeed. Undergraduate research faculty mentors can serve as “door openers” (p. 43) for SoC and can direct students to career opportunities, possibilities for graduate or professional school, and helping students understand academia. Schwartz noted how UR faculty mentors can play a role in helping SoC develop their ethnic identity along with their identity as a scientist by helping students navigate their multiple identities (Schwartz, 2012).

Morales (2014) also explored how faculty members can contribute to the academic success of students of color. For example, he conducted semi-structured interviews with 50 academically resilient SoC. Results from his interviews indicated several things faculty members can do to help SoC build resilience and succeed in college. First, constantly work to build student’s self-efficacy by having a clear syllabus stating objectives and with assignments on a gradient, from simple assignments needing “ample effort” (p. 96) to assignments needing more effort. This will help students build confidence early in the class and increase the degree of success in the class. Secondly, assist students in realistically evaluating their strengths and weaknesses by providing ungraded pre-tests or having one-on-one meetings. These discussions can help students identify areas where they can improve their academic performances. Thirdly, encourage students to seek help by referring them to writing centers, academic tutors, and other services provided by the university. Faculty members can also assist students of color to succeed by bridging academic success to future “economic security” meaning faculty members can serve as someone who can provide students with job opportunities (Morales, 2014, p. 99).
One systematic review of the literature looked at “the conceptualization, application, and measurement of resilience in American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) health promotion,” (p. 274). Tuefel-Shone and colleagues (2018) stated AIAN communities are some of the most resilient communities in the United States after having gone through sociopolitical oppression and other forms of injustices. AIAN communities have been subjugated to unjust executions, treaties that forced tribes to either relocate to small fractions of their traditional homeland or leave altogether, assimilation via the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools, and loss of entire value systems. Despite having to face all the injustices for the past 200 years, AIAN communities continue to persist and be resilient. After conducting the systematic review, they identified two attributes that contributed to AIAN resilience. Social support was identified as the first attribute and cultural engagement was the second attribute contributing to AIAN resilience. Social support varied across the lifespan from adolescents to elders, but college students identified family and community support, specifically encouragement from elders, as prominent factors contributing to their resilience while enrolled in college. AIAN college students perceived having a strong cultural identity helped them succeed in an academic setting. As quoted, AIAN college students saw “education as part of the journey of life and knowing and remembering one’s Indianness through this journey is important to coming back to work with your own people,” (Teufel-Shone, Tippens, McCrary, Ehiri, Sanderson, 2018, p. 278).

Gloria and Robinson Kurpius (2001), utilized various tools to assess how self-belief, social support, and comfort with the university campus climate influenced Native American students’ decision to either drop-out or persist at the university. Their results
indicated social support was the most influential factor contributing to retention of Native American undergraduate students, specifically support from faculty members, since interactions that were more informal led to a higher chance of having a positive impact. The second major finding was that students who felt more comfortable with the university campus climate were more likely to persist and less likely to drop-out. Feelings of comfort may have been influenced by “cultural congruity” (p. 90), defined as the perception of personal behaviors being reflected by the larger university campus climate (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001).

Palmer and colleagues (2011) conducted in-depth interviews with a group of students to explore academic and social factors contributing to academic success in the STEM field. Results from their interviews indicated that having a peer group to study with and connect to was the driving factor in academic success for these STEM students, followed by being involved with STEM-related programs, and being prepared in high school. Students indicated that studying in groups helped them retain information better and helped to “alleviate the pressure because it gave students confidence in taking exams,” (p. 496). In addition, being involved in STEM-related activities and programs was similar to UR where students had the opportunity to apply knowledge from class to real life experiences. In these activities, students not only learned, but also served as mentors and taught others about the STEM fields. For some of the students, studying with other SoC helped to create unity in a classroom full predominantly with White students and by studying together, created a family outside of class for social support (Palmer, Maramba, & Elon Dancy, 2011).
Community Level: Sense of Belonging and Academic Success

Community level factors also influence the success of students of color. For instance, Allen (1992) assessed individual and institutional characteristics to evaluate which factors encouraged or discouraged academic achievement in Black students enrolled in historically Black institutions compared to Black students enrolled in predominantly White institutions. To achieve this, he used a multivariate approach and utilized a questionnaire over a two-year period to measure three student-based outcomes, which were academic achievement, social involvement, and occupational aspirations. Results from his study indicated “campus racial composition” was the strongest indicator predicting successful student outcomes. Having a more diverse student population was associated with increased social engagement because less students reported feeling socially isolated. He also stated a “positive relationship exists between occupational aspirations and educational aspirations,” (p. 35) in Black students enrolled in historically Black institutions compared to Black students enrolled in predominantly White institutions (Allen, 1992). This could have been influenced by building strong relationship with faculty who were more engaging and providing opportunities for growth compared to students enrolled in predominantly White institutions (Allen, 1992; Harper, 2012).

Bonous-Hammarth (2000), who explored the flow of African American, American Indian, and Chicano/Latino undergraduate students in and out of STEM fields, also noted how institutional selectivity negatively affected students of color (Bonous-Hammart, 2000; Kuh & Pascarella, 2004). Institutional selectivity is a measure used to gauge the SAT scores of incoming first year students and these scores are used to accept
or decline students (Elliott, 2016). Kuh and Pascarella (2004) noted how institutional selectivity is “a weak indicator of student exposure to good practices in undergraduate education,” (p.56) and should instead invest in practices that keep students engaged in coursework and seek academic opportunities, such as creating a supportive campus environment and quality teaching (Kuh & Pascarella, 2004).

Kim and Hargrove (2013) conducted a critical systematic review of the literature to amalgamate “Black male academic success and persistence in higher education,” (p. 300) to find themes showcasing Black male resiliency in historically Black institutions (HBI) and predominantly White institutions (PWI). They summarized HBI created a supportive and collectivistic school environment, which encouraged shared values and maintaining cultural integrity. When it came to developing skills and self-efficacy, students in HBI and PWI were similar in development, but when it comes to racial fatigue due to combating racism, students in in HBI had no fatigue compared to high levels of fatigue in PWI. Since HBI have a shared sense of cultural and ethnic values, many students felt they didn’t have to “force” (p. 304) a relationship with faculty members because faculty members initiated contact first. Prayer was also mentioned as a coping mechanism, but prayers were different for students attending HBI and PWI. Black students who attended HBI used prayer as guidance to manage daily college stressors whereas Black students at PWI used prayer as a coping mechanism to cope with racism and to cope with daily college stressors.

Johnson and colleagues (2014) examined the effects of stress and campus climate on the persistence of SoC and White students by applying Bean and Eaton’s Psychological Model of Retention. Results from their analysis showed that both SoC and
White students “feelings about the campus environment were directly affected by having comfortable academic interactions and feeling prepared for the social environment of college,” (p. 92). When analyzed further, SoC’s feelings about the university campus climate was affected by racial discrimination, prejudices, and negative stereotypes which caused some students to perceive the university campus climate as negative and harmful. For White students, opportunities to interact with students of color positively influenced their feelings towards university campus climate, further supporting the importance of diversity in higher education (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, and Yonai, 2014).

Ranking and Reason (2005) conducted a study with ten universities to explore different racial groups’ perceptions and experiences about campus climate. They explored personal campus experiences, perceptions of the campus climate, and perceptions of institutional actions. When personal experiences were reviewed, SoC reported experiencing more harassment than White students. At the intersection of race and gender, female-identifying SoC reported more harassment than female-identifying White students. Male-identifying SoC also reported experiencing more harassment than male-identifying White students. When perceptions of the campus climate were reviewed, a significant portion of SoC viewed their campus as “racist,” “hostile,” and “disrespectful,” (p. 52) whereas White students viewed their campus as “nonracist,” “friendly,” and “respectful.” (p. 523). Students were also asked if they felt their campus climate was improving or worsening and White students indicated that their campus climate was improving while SoC indicated that it was getting worse. Researchers also reviewed student perceptions of institutional actions and strategies to improve campus
climate. All students advocated for more attention to racial issues, but SoC were “more likely to advocate workshops, required courses for students, and required training sessions for staff,” (p. 56). SoC also perceived that these types of educational workshops would improve campus climate at a greater rate than White students, who perceived these classes would make the climate worse.

The current and growing body of literature regarding academic success for SoC indicates a vast area of factors that may improve or impede the academic success. It is important to understand that academic success is affected by intrapersonal factors, such as knowledge and skills acquired in college, and interpersonal factors, such as having a diverse faculty who can relate to SoC. Community level factors, such as having a sense of belonging, is also important to the success of SoC because students who feel connected and a part of the campus community are more likely to succeed. Giving students of color a voice at their academic institution is crucial. Therefore, it is vital that universities ask their students what will help them to be successful as it will shed light on skills and resources that are wanted and needed as well as issues that may need to be addressed at an institutional level.
CHAPTER III
METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students of color (SoC) regarding institutional services and any additional factors contributing to their academic success. Additionally, this study sought to compare perceptions regarding institutional services and any additional factors contributing to academic success based on class standing/year in school. This chapter describes the qualitative research methodology applied in this study along with methods used for data collection. This chapter also describes the data analysis techniques used to identify codes and find emerging themes. Additional information is provided to ensure for rigor and trustworthiness of this type of qualitative study. Furthermore, characteristics and traits of the population sample intended for the study and the setting in which the study took place are discussed.

Research Design

Phenomenology and Bracketing

Phenomenology was first developed by German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) as a philosophy and as a scientific method and is the study of peoples lived experiences, in all of its “ambiguity, urgency, and immediacy,” (Finlay, 2009, p. 475). Kakkori also described it as “studying the essence” (p. 19) of a phenomenon and it has since been adopted into different sectors and many forms of phenomenology have emerged (Kakkori, 2009). Phenomenology explores the subjective aspects of people’s
lived experiences and brings to life feelings and experiences that would otherwise remain hidden and unexplored (Vivilaki, 2008).

**Bracketing to increase trustworthiness.** In phenomenological qualitative research, bracketing increases trustworthiness while decreasing bias (Finlay, 2009; Vivilaki, 2008; Kakkori, 2009). Bracketing is “the deliberate examination by researchers of their own beliefs about the phenomenon and the temporary suspensions of these,” (Vivilaki, 2008, p. 89). Bracketing is used by researchers in an attempt to identify their own preconceived notions, knowledge, experiences, and prejudices of a phenomenon to increase trustworthiness when collection and interpreting data. This also decreases bias because researchers can explore a phenomenon of an individual or groups of people through their lived experiences and not the researchers own experiences. Bracketing isn’t to acknowledge one's level of knowledge, but can be used as a tool and means to challenge the researcher's perspective and point of view on a phenomenon (Vivilaki, 2008).

**Hermeneutics and Reflexivity**

Kakkori (2009) explains hermeneutics as the “art of interpretation,” or “studying the process of interpretation” (p. 22). There are many forms of hermeneutics, but the most general form is to understand the cognitive process or “true meaning” (p. 23) of an individual or group of people. Fischer (2009) also notes that in hermeneutic type studies, researchers are reflexive, or constantly self-reflecting, to ensure they aren't projecting their own meanings and assumptions onto the data being collected. Being reflexive can help researchers identify their assumptions or knowledge during the data collection
stage. This builds trustworthiness because the researcher can ensure the emerging themes are from the data and not their own assumptions.

**Reflexivity to increase trustworthiness.** Being reflexive is a similar process to bracketing, where the researcher is constantly being self-reflective of his or her own knowledge, biases, and experiences throughout the data collection and data analysis phase. The difference between bracketing and reflexivity is when the documentation occurs. In qualitative research, bracketing occurs before data collection, whereas reflexivity occurs during the data collection and during the data analysis phase. While the data collection is occurring, the researcher constantly engages in reflexivity to ensure their knowledge and assumptions aren’t skewing how they perceive the lived experiences of the focus group participants (Finlay, 2009; Todres & Wheeler, 2000; Kakkori, 2009).

**Phenomenological Hermeneutics**

Phenomenological hermeneutics is the combination of both phenomenology and hermeneutics. This methodology explores a person or group of individuals lived experiences while allowing room to interpret those experiences (Finlay, 2009; Fischer, 2009; Kakkori, 2009; Todres & Wheeler, 2000). Unlike other forms of phenomenology, which only seeks to describe a phenomenon, phenomenological hermeneutics allows room for the researcher to draw from their own knowledge and experiences to provide recommendations that could prove useful to the success of the participants. By engaging in two these two techniques, the researcher can decrease bias while increasing trustworthiness.

**Engaging in bracketing and reflexivity.** Typically, in Phenomenological Hermeneutics studies, researchers only engage in reflexivity, but because the primary
researcher (PR) and the research assistant (RA) have similar lived experiences to the participants, they also took an innovative approach to include bracketing. Prior to conducting the research, the PR and RA bracketed their experiences, knowledge, and biases regarding the topic of academic success for SoC in an attempt to accurately hear students' lived experiences. Bracketing decreases the likelihood of perceiving students' lives experiences through their own perspectives and helps to limit bias to the extent possible. Some of the experiences bracketed included being alumni of the university, being student of color themselves, being previous members to various student organizations, and experiencing racism and discrimination. Some of the knowledge bracketed included understanding systems of power and oppression, being trained in public health and student affairs, and being bi-cultural as Hmong-Americans. Biases bracketed ranged from values and belief systems, such as valuing family over individuality, to understanding the intersectionality of privilege and oppression.

Throughout the data collection and data analysis phases both the PR nd RA engaged in reflexivity. Before each focus group and key informant interview, they met briefly to remind themselves of their bracketed experiences, knowledge, and biases. During the focus groups and key informant interview, whenever any of the participants mentioned something that aligned with their bracketed experiences, knowledge, or bias, they wrote down a reflexive note to themselves so that they would stay mentally engaged with students. This was an attempt to ensure that they were accurately hearing the lived experiences of the participants and asked follow-up questions based off what students were mentioning. After the focus groups and key informant interviews, they met briefly
to compare their notes, discussed any observations they noticed, and discussed about their reflexivity.

**Recruiting a Research Assistant**

The primary researcher (PR) recruited a research assistant (RA) because the study seeks to explore perceptions of SoC regarding institutional services and factors contributing to SoC academic success based on class standing/year in school. The RA has experience with conducting qualitative research as a Ronald E. McNair scholars during her undergraduate degree. The RA’s role was to conduct the focus groups with first and second year undergraduate students while the PR conducted focus groups with the older students (i.e., third year, fourth year, fifth year, and sixth year students). The RA was recruited through word of mouth at UWL.

**Research Setting**

The study took place at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UWL). The city of La Crosse has a population of approximately 51,834 people. In terms of racial and ethnic demographics, 1.8% identified as Black/African American, .4% identified as Native American, 4.7% identified as Asian, 2.4% identified as Latino/a/Hispanic, 2.3% identified as mixed race, and 88.6% identified as White. When segmenting the population by age, 4.9% were under the age of five, 14.9% were under the age of eighteen, 66.7% were between the ages of 19 and 64, and 13.5% were 65 years of age or older. The median value of an owner-occupied housing unit from 2013-2017 was $132,200. In terms of education for individuals 25 years of age or older, 92.8% have obtained their high school degree or higher and of that percentage, 32.8% have obtained at least a
bachelor’s degree or higher. The median household income in 2017 was $42,243 (United States Census Bureau, 2018).

As of 2018, there were 10,569 students enrolled at UWL; of those students, 9,702 were enrolled as undergraduate students and 867 were graduate students. Looking at the student population by race and ethnicity, 2.3% identified as Asian & Southeast Asian, 0.8% identified as Black/African American, 3.1% identified as Hispanic, 0.1% identified as Native American, 3.2% identified as being two or more races, and 89% identified as White. In regards to gender identity, there were only two options and 57% of students identified as being female and 42% identified as male (Institutional Research, Assessment, and Planning, 2018).

The Office of Multicultural Student Services

The Office of Multicultural Student Services (OMSS) expressed a need to explore the perceptions of SoC regarding institutional services and any additional factors contributing to their academic success. Additionally, this study sought to compare perceptions regarding institutional services and any additional factors contributing to academic success based on class standing/year in school for SoC. OMSS provides a variety of services for students, such as academic advising, individualized tutoring, opportunities for leadership development, helping students plan and host cultural events, and pre-college mentoring programs for kindergarten to high school students (Office of Multicultural Student Services [OMSS], 2018).

**Gatekeepers in OMSS.** Staff members in OMSS have many roles, both in the office and across the university. In addition to providing academic support and programming for students, some also serve as staff advisers for different MSOs. As staff
advisers for MSOs their responsibilities vary from logistical support during events to financial oversight to ensure spending is within limits. The MSOs are also housed under OMSS and because of this established relationship, OMSS staff members are important gatekeepers to access minority students in different MSOs. Some gatekeepers in OMSS include:

1. Director of OMSS
2. Assistant Director of Retention in OMSS
3. Assistant Director of Leadership and Involvement in OMSS

The researcher has an existing relationship with OMSS and this study is a part of a committee in OMSS to help SoC be academically successful. The committee will use findings from this study to help SoC be more successful by developing more programs and evaluating to what extent policies at this institution are more supportive of SoC.

Selecting and Recruiting Participants

In addition to resources mentioned above, OMSS also houses nine Multicultural Student Organizations (MSO) for specific racial and ethnic groups. These student organizations are open to all students at the university, but the purpose of each group is to create a safe space for students who identify as part of that specific racial or ethnic group. MSOs provide opportunities for students to build their leadership skills and offer a space where students can engage in culturally relevant activities. Each MSO has their own executive team, one or more advisors that is either a staff member or faculty, and a budget to develop their cultural programs. MSOs are responsible for recruiting and retaining members and organizing cultural events. These cultural events are intended to educate students, staff, and faculty about various issues that SoC face and help create an
inclusive environment (OMSS, 2018). Each MSO meets weekly throughout the Fall and Spring semester on different days and times allowing the MSOs to support each other’s events.

Due to the unique need to explore the perceptions of success in SoC, purposive sampling was used to recruit SoC from MSOs. Additionally, convenience sampling was used because MSOs are established student groups that are geared towards addressing the needs of SoC at this institution. There are currently nine MSOs at this institution, however, some MSOs aren’t active, meaning they don’t have enough members or an executive team to be considered active student group. Thus, students were recruited from four of the most active MSOs. Students recruited were from an Asian student organization, a Black student organization, a Hmong student organization, and a Latin student organization.

Prior to data collection, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the university. One of the gatekeepers from OMSS suggested reaching out to the executive team of the most active MSOs to establish trust and ask for consent to recruit from their respective student organization. The gatekeeper also warned that student researchers in the past who didn’t formally introduce themselves or ask for consent from the executive teams and simply showed up during their general meetings, caused many students to feel uncomfortable in their own space (R. Sims. Personal communication, February 12, 2019). Following this advice, the PR located the names of the student leaders for each MSO and contacted them via email. When the PR and RA met with the executive team of each MSO, they introduced themselves, the purpose of the study was discussed, the collaboration with OMSS was highlighted, and the possible findings were
explained as far as how they may be utilized to increase the academic success of SoC. Once they answered questions from the student leaders, the PR asked if they could have some time during their MSO general meeting to recruit students for this study. All executive team from each MSO were excited to hear about the project and gave their consent.

**Data Collection**

This study aimed to collect narratives of students lived experiences and perceptions of academic success, thus focus groups were the ideal data collection method. As such, focus groups allow researchers to gain a better understanding of how “people feel or think about an issue or idea,” (Krueger, 2015, p. 4.). Focus groups are carefully and strategically planned out to allow participants to share their experiences in a comfortable and non-hostile environment. Conducting focus groups are advantageous because they bring together participants with similar characteristics to collect the information needed, in this case, SoC and perceptions of academic success. Focus group questions are also carefully chosen and strategically placed to collect information in a logical manner that is comfortable to the participants. Data from focus groups have many uses, such as guiding the development of programs, evaluation of a policy, or providing insight on behaviors (Krueger, 2015).

It's best practice to initially conduct three to four focus groups. Once this first round of focus groups has been completed, the next step is to determine if there is a saturation of themes. To reach saturation means to reach a “point where you have heard the range of ideas and aren’t getting new information,” (Krueger, 2015 p. 23). If the focus groups have reached a point of saturation, then no additional data collection is
required. If the focus groups are still bringing in new ideas or information, then additional focus groups have to be conducted to reach saturation. An appropriate size for focus groups ranges from five to eight participants because a smaller group gives time for all participants to share. Having a smaller group is also beneficial because it’s easier to facilitate the flow of conversation and participants feel more comfortable (Krueger, 2015).

**Interview Guide**

Krueger (2015) suggests using an interview guide to help arrange questions in a logical and strategic sequence. The questions start out general to encourage participants to speak and be comfortable with one another. As the conversations continue, the questions get more specific to allow the researcher to identify behaviors and motivators. The interview guide for this study helped guide the focus groups discussions and outlined how to transition from one question to the next (See Appendix B). It also included room for the researcher and assistant to take notes of responses they noticed.

**Socioecological Model**

The Socioecological Model (SEM) was used to generate focus group questions for the interview guide used in this study (See Appendix C). The SEM allowed the researcher to generate focus group questions on an intrapersonal level regarding students’ skills and knowledge that contributes to their success. The interpersonal level questions explored how social relationships contribute to students’ academic success. For the community level, questions explored different services, offices, or resources being utilized at the university. For the purpose of this study, the institutional level and community level were combined because UWL is seen
as a community and offices and services are a part of the UWL community. Lastly, the society and policy questions asked students about UWL policies that influence their academic success.

**Recording and Transcribing the Focus Groups**

Recording the focus group is one strategy to collect accurate information; other strategies include videotaping the focus group, asking participants to draw a picture, or take a picture (Whitney, 2010; Krueger, 2015, Carey, 2015). For this study, recording the focus groups captured the exact words of the participants and assisted in transcribing the focus groups verbatim. The other strategies weren’t included due to the time constraint of the thesis. Each focus group was transcribed within 24 hours using an online tool (i.e., Trint) and reviewed to ensure the transcripts were accurate.

**Conducting the Focus Groups**

The PR and RA attended each MSO general meeting and introduced themselves in a similar manner. After they were done explaining the purpose of the study they passed around a sign-up sheet with two different dates and times from which students could select. Once the participants signed up for the date and time that worked for them, if they chose to do so, we quietly sat through the general meetings instead of leaving immediately. Since these students were going to potentially participate in our focus groups, we wanted them to recognize us and trust us.

When the PR and RA conducted the focus groups, students were first thanked for their participants and the informed consent document (ICD) was discussed (See Appendix D). The ICD also collected demographic data on students age, major/minor, year in school, gender identity, and ethnicity. The ICD contained the purpose of the
research and stated participation was voluntary. Confidentiality was also discussed and communicated that participants’ names would never be revealed through dissemination of study findings. Students were given one copy of the ICD to sign, which the researchers kept, and another copy for them to keep for their records. Once the focus group was done, participants were thanked them for their time and asked for any last remarks or questions.

There were three focus groups conducted for this study in addition to three key informant interviews. One of the key informant interviews was conducted because the student wanted to share their experiences and perspective, but due to scheduling conflicts, couldn’t attend the designated time and date for the focus groups. Two additional key informant interviews were conducted because they were the only students who showed up for a designated focus group. When asked if they would prefer to be together or separated for their respective interviews, they preferred to participate in the study together and remained in the same room to answer the focus group questions. For the key informant interviews, the same focus group questions were used to ensure similar lived experiences were being collected and to prevent skewing of the data. To ensure students felt included and represented in this study, the PR decided that their narratives would be included in this study. All the focus groups and key informant interviews were conducted at UWL so that students didn’t have to travel, making access easier for students. This also ensured students were in an environment they were familiar and comfortable with.
Data Analysis

For qualitative research, there are many different methods to code the data. Coding can be described as “a word or short phrases that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, and essence-capturing attribute for a language-based or visual data,” (p. 4). Once codes have been identified, they were then arranged based on patterns that emerged from the data to find themes. In qualitative studies, identifying patterns in the data builds trustworthiness by confirming routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships in individuals or groups of people, which contribute to their lived experiences (Saldaña, 2016). Once the emerging themes were identified, they were placed into the SEM to provide a better visual and understanding of academic success in SoC. For this study, coding the data occurred in two stages, first cycle coding with structural coding and second cycle coding with axial coding.

First Cycle Coding

There are seven coding categories that can be used for first cycle coding to code for themes and they are Grammatical, Elemental, Affective, Literary and Language, Exploratory, Procedural, and Themeing the Data (Saldaña, 2016). Each category has its own unique coding characteristics and have their own coding methods, but for the purpose of this research the elemental category was selected. The rationale for choosing the elemental category was that it provides a basic, but focused lens that can identify and order codes into patterns. The elemental category is also used as a first approach to qualitative data analysis and because it provides a “foundation for future coding cycles,” (p. 97). In doing so, future coding cycles can be used to derive themes from the codes (Saldaña, 2016).
**Structural coding.** Within the elemental category, one method to code qualitative data is structural coding. It is commonly used for qualitative studies because it’s ideal for studies utilizing a question-based study with participants. One benefit of structural coding is once the codes have been identified, they can be organized into patterns. Secondly, the pattern of codes can then be sorted into initial themes (Saldaña, 2016). For example, students’ lived experiences can be coded into patterns and organized into the pre-determined levels of the SEM. Then once codes have been identified within the different levels of the SEM, they can then be coded into initial themes, such as perceived knowledge or behaviors about academic success. This coding strategy was useful in allowing the researcher to quickly access the data without trying to further code the data during the first cycle coding stage.

**Second Cycle Coding**

In the second cycle coding stage, the initial themes are then analyzed further to identify emerging themes. To analyze the initial themes, the researcher needs to be able to classify, prioritize, integrate, synthesize, abstract, conceptualize, and build theories from the codes that fit into emerging themes identified by the researcher. Second cycle coding helped identify all the emerging themes that have been sorted into patterns during first cycle coding (Saldaña, 2016). This allowed for easier interpretation and understanding of how SoC are successful at this institution.

**Axial coding.** Axial coding “aims to link categories with sub-categories and asks how they are related,” (Charmaz p.148, 2014 as cited in Saldaña, p. 244, 2016). This coding strategy helped to determine which initial themes are consistent and more dominant, allowing the researcher to “reorganize” the data to ensure redundant codes and
initial themes are removed (Saldaña, 2016, p.244). Repetitive codes were also removed and codes that were more inclusive and representative of students lived experiences were selected. Axial coding was used to help the researcher identify which initial themes were more consistent and inclusive, therefore, allowing the emerging themes to be representative of students live experiences and their academic success.

Quality in Qualitative Research

Just as quantitative methodologies have ways to measure validity and reliability of processes and data, qualitative methodologies also have ways in which they ensure for these concepts. Two ways to verify for quality in qualitative research methodologies are through rigor and trustworthiness.

Rigor

In qualitative research, rigor refers to “employing a systematic approach to research design, careful data collection and analysis, and effective communication,” (Cottrell & McKenzie, 2005, p.233). To ensure for rigor in this study, the researcher utilized Phenomenological Hermeneutics, which included bracketing and engaging in reflexivity for pre-conceived knowledge, biases, experiences, and prejudices before, during, and after the focus groups. Data collection was done via focus groups, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and participants were asked to fill out a consent form prior to the focus groups being conducted. Data analysis was completed via two rounds of coding; first cycle coding with structural coding and second cycle coding with axial coding.

Another method to improve the rigor of this study was employing “multiple data sources in an investigation to produce understanding,” a process known as triangulation
In addition to recording the focus groups, notes were written on the interview guide on how the participants responded to each question. Behaviors and reactions as participants answered questions were logged and used to support the audio recordings (Krueger, 2015). By using both audio recording and notes taken by the PR and RA, they were able to triangulate audio recordings with observed behaviors and reactions. This effort of triangulation was an attempt to ensure that students’ lived experiences were accurately reported based on audio recording and observations of participants responses.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a term used to describe the validity of qualitative research and can be broken down into four sub-categories; they are credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Rolfe, 2004; Whitney, 2010). By attempting to achieve each of the four sub-categories, this study aimed to be as trustworthy as possible.

**Credibility.** Credibility can be likened to internal validity when comparing qualitative research to quantitative research. Credibility can also include the researchers’ training, experience, and credentials (Cottrell & McKenzie, 2005). Some methods to ensure credibility are to bracket and engage in reflexivity, which was completed by the primary researcher and the research assistant. Triangulation of methods, sources, analysis and theory is another method to improve credibility.

To further ensure that this research was credible, the PR worked with a thesis chair with extensive knowledge on qualitative research. The chair provided guidance and support as to which qualitative methodologies to use, assisted in the development of the focus groups interview guide, suggested questions that could be asked, and provided
clarifications during the data analysis. In addition to the thesis chair, the PR also secured the help of a RA to conduct the focus groups and assisted with the data analysis. This RA was a Robert E. McNair Scholar as an undergraduate student and conducted multiple qualitative research projects under the guidance of a different faculty mentor.

**Dependability.** Dependability is similar to reliability in quantitative research (Cottrell & McKenzie, 2005). Dependability is ensured when the research methodology is similar to other qualitative research and has similar rigor (Whitney, 2010). For the current study, the PR used a Phenomenological Hermeneutics methodology design, which has been utilized in other qualitative research. The research proposal, including methodology was reviewed prior to conducting the study. Two of the committee members were from the PR’s graduate program and the third committee member was a staff member from OMSS. They are experienced in qualitative methodology, quantitative methodology, and experienced in working with students of color. By having the committee review the proposal, it was deemed similar and was rigorous when compared to other qualitative studies.

**Transferability.** Transferability is related to external validity or the generalizability of the results. While results aren’t generalizable to most populations in qualitative research, there are methods that attempt to ensure results are transferable to similar populations in similar settings (Cottrell & McKenzie, 2005). One method is to provide rich and thick descriptions of the phenomenon of interest, which would allow future research to justify aligning results and conclusions between studies. This was accomplished in this study by discussing the lived experiences of SoC through narratives
detailing participant responses, as well as observations made by the researchers during the focus groups.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability looks at the data analysis to ensure objectivity and accuracy (Whitney, 2010). After each focus group session, the PR and the RA met briefly to go over their facilitation notes to ensure reflexivity and to bracket their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, known as “peer checking.” (Rolfe, 2004, p. 4). Peer checking is an attempt to ensure the accurate recording and portrayal of the participants lived experiences and tries to limit bias from the researchers own experiences (Rolfe, 2004). Member checking is “data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those groups from whom the data were originally obtained” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, para. 1). Some benefits of member checking include:

- Gives participants opportunity to correct errors and challenge what are perceived as wrong interpretations.
- Provides the opportunity to volunteer additional information which may be stimulated by the playing back process.
- Provides an opportunity to summarize preliminary findings.
- Provides respondents the opportunity to assess adequacy of data and preliminary results as well as to confirm particular aspects of the data.

(Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Member checking was completed by verbally summarizing each participants response after they answered during the focus groups. This helped ensure that the researcher was collecting data accurately and representative of the lived-experiences of participants.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Participant Demographics

Twenty seven students participated in the focus groups and three in-depth interviews were conducted, totaling 30 undergraduate students who identified as SoC from multicultural student organizations (MSO) who participated in the study. Table 1 provides student demographic information organized by MSO. Students from the Asian, Black, Latin, and the Hmong MSO participated in this study. Table 2 provides participant majors/minors as additional background information. Not all students indicated a minor when completing the demographic section of the informed consent document.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MSO</th>
<th>1st &amp; 2nd Year</th>
<th>3rd + Year</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian Student Org.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F: 3 M: 3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Student Org.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>F: 5 M: 3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hmong Student Org.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F: 7 M: 6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Depth Interviews.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F: 1 M: 2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All students who participated in the study were undergraduate students. “F” represents female and “M” represents male.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical Laboratory Science</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary/Middle School Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Facilitators, Barriers, and Supports for Academic Success

To improve the rigor and trustworthiness of the research, the primary researcher (PR) and research assistant (RA) utilized the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community levels from SEM as predetermined categories for data analysis. Once the codes were identified and organized into predetermined categories, they were then coded to identify emerging themes which included facilitators, barriers, and supports. Once the major themes were identified, the data was then coded into sub-themes. Throughout this chapter, all themes are discussed within the various levels of the SEM.

Intrapersonal Level: Facilitators

Intrapersonal is the first level of the SEM and reflects the biological and personal aspects of a person’s life, such as knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, skills, socioeconomic status, and can also include gender and sexual orientation, race/ethnicity,
religion, or health (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2013). While all themes impacting the academic success for SoC are listed separately within the different levels of the SEM, it’s solely to organize the emerging themes in a sequential order and they are not mutually exclusive. This means that themes listed in one level of the SEM are influenced by themes listed in the other levels and vice versa. At the intrapersonal level, several themes were identified through the data as facilitators for success, these include the following:

- Self-identity
- Involvement
- Self-learning
- Navigating academia
- Health
- Worldview

**Self-Identity**

When asked to share their thoughts on being successful at this institution, many students mentioned things about their identity. Many of the things mentioned were aligned with codes such as:

“Getting to know myself  
“Figuring out what you want to do”  
“Knowing my limits”  
“Important to just be myself”  
“Living out the dream you always believed you could”  
“Being grateful that I get to have an education”  
“Having a positive mindset”  
“No doubt that I will graduate”

Observations during the focus groups showed that a majority of the students were still in the process of learning about themselves and their identities through involvement on campus and courses. Others were still debating educational and career paths since most of the focus group participants were first- and second-year students. Others
reflected on important skills and personal values that contribute to their success, such as learning how to be self-sufficient and understanding that they had the privilege and opportunity to attend higher education. When asked about their attitudes contributing to their academic success, most of the participants were unable to provide examples. Some students did answer the question, but didn’t list attitudes. Rather, they mentioned being motivated to complete their degree and being adventurous with their college experience.

Involvement

A vast majority of students were energized and excited to talk about their involvement on campus. They provided extensive personal narratives pertaining to why and how resources, offices, and services were utilized to help them succeed. Refer to the Community Level for more information about resources, offices, and services contributing to academic success. Student narratives were coded and aligned with phrases such as:

“Subject to change and using outside resources”
“Being open to new thing”
“Getting involved”
“Finding opportunities”
“Participation”

Students valued their involvement on campus because it helped them reflect, develop, and improve on some of the narratives mentioned prior. For example, they learned about available resources and joined student organizations to either build on a skill set or to find a community to connect with. Participating with organizations on-campus and utilizing different resources has also helped students decide on career paths, changing majors, and getting the support they need to be successful at this university. Being involved on
campus has given students numerous opportunities to engage in leadership activities that otherwise would have been unknown.

**Adaptive Learning Styles**

Another theme that emerged from students when asked about their perception of academic success was having an adaptive learning style in learn from faculty and how they learned study habits from peers. Some of the reoccurring codes were:

- “In-class person”
- “Knowing when you need help”
- “Visual and having examples”
- “Being more proactive”
- “Asking for help”
- “Advocate for yourself”
- “Time management”
- “Goal setting”

Most of the students preferred having a mixed approach to learning. Depending on the topic, such as a math for example, they liked having the professor show them the problem and solve the problem step by step, observe students completing the problem to ensure they understood the process, and finally completing the assignments by themselves. Most of the students also mentioned learning how to ask for help in college from mentors and older peers. Others learned how to manage their time and set goals for themselves, however, some students reported struggling with those skills.

**Navigating Academia**

When it came to success and academia in general, participant responses were focused on academic achievement. Some of the codes identified aligned with:

- “Pass all your classes because now they count towards your major”
- “Good grades.”
- “Print off lecture slides.”
“Finish my degree with the highest GPA.”
“Putting in the hours.”
“Your goals become so much more enhanced once you get to college.”

These types of responses are to be expected of course, since achieving an acceptable GPA and passing courses are required in higher education. Students also shared that they had high hopes in achieving their goals while in college because they were exposed to new things. Students also shared that they were aware of expectations required of them in college, but felt that they weren’t prepared to fulfill them.

Health

Some of the students mentioned that their health was important to them, and this was echoed by others once it was brought up. One benefit of employing a phenomenological approach is that students are able to discuss things mentioned by other participants. Some codes reflecting this theme were:

“Keeping a balance”
“Be healthy within yourself mentally and physically”
“Transparent with how I’m feeling”

A majority of study participants reported that it was difficult finding balance between their health and academics during their first semester of college. Other students mentioned being overwhelmed with school, work, personal life, and trying to get the most out of their college experience. A few students said they were able to find a balance in their first semester and shared that the second semester was easier and more comfortable.

Intrapersonal Level: Barriers

Intrapersonal barriers to success were coded into two broad themes and ranked from major to minor based on the most dominant codes identified based on the
amount of codes generated through the focus groups and interviews. For instance, students most frequently reported struggling with skill building then with feeling overwhelmed. The two themes that emerged were:

- Struggles with skill building
- Feeling overwhelmed

**Struggles with Skill Building**

Many students voiced concerns about struggling with skills needed to succeed in college. Codes that exemplify this problem include:

“Need to learn how to prioritize”
“How to study”
“Managing and scheduling both personal life and academic; balance”
“Professionalism”
“Time management”
“Sleep”
“Stress management”
“Money management”
“Not good at talking to teachers”
“Really hard for me to go to office hours”

All of the students who participated in the focus groups and interviews struggled with prioritizing. For example, one student wanted to do well in his courses and develop meaningful relationships with his friends by being involved on-campus. However, at the same time, he started a fitness Youtube channel and started working off-campus. Other students mentioned how they don’t actually know how to manage their time because they were never taught this skill. Another main concern brought up by students was that they don’t know how to study on the collegiate level. Some students were able to adjust their study habits, but others still reported struggling past the first year of school. Students also mentioned not being comfortable approaching professors or utilizing office hours and said they would rather utilize tutors or talk to their friends.
**Feeling overwhelmed.** Most students also felt overwhelmed their first semester in college. Example of codes that were identified were:

- “Struggle for me personally was figuring out my balance”
- “School and like homework are overpowering my social life”
- “ Didn’t really know what would work for me”
- “Try to sum everything up and try to put it all together, but majority of the time it doesn’t work”
- “Give you so much stuff that you have to process”
- “I’ve been doing so much I kind of forgot”
- “Didn’t know how to handle the class”
- “The transition (from high school to college)”

Many students seemed lost as to how to get their life in order. They struggled with how to choose what to do first because they perceived all the options before them as equally important. Students also seemed overwhelmed and were unprepared for the amount of schoolwork given in college required to pass. In addition to schoolwork, students also felt overwhelmed with the amount of opportunities available to them as college students, ranging from involvement on campus to employment.

**Intrapersonal Level: Supports**

In addition to sharing their thoughts and perceptions on services, offices, and resources contributing to their success, SoC in this study were asked to reflect on their college experiences so far. They were specifically asked to consider, if they could, what advice would they give themselves when they first started college. This question was asked to explore how resilient students were when faced with struggles and adversity. Resilience can be defined in many ways, but for the purpose of this research, the definition will be limited to academic resilience. Academic resilience can be thought of as “the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful, despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the
same background from succeeding” (Morales & Trotman, 2004, p. 8). Of the codes identified for resiliency and growth, emerging themes were generated that only fit into the intrapersonal and interpersonal level of the SEM.

Codes corresponding to examples of resiliency supports identified at this level of the SEM were organized into five themes and ranked from most dominant to least dominant based on the amount of codes generated from the focus groups and interviews. These themes were:

- Learning and adapting with a growth mindset
- Academic resilience
- Identity development and resilience
- Health, wellness, and resilience
- Involvement on campus and resilience

**Learning and Adapting with a Growth Mindset**

All of the students who participated in the study reported how they adapted and changed their learning styles with help from friends and mentors. Some of the things mentioned included:

- “You never stand taller when you get knocked down and you get back up”
- “Personal hardships in my past that kind of showed me if I could get through that, then I can get through this”
- “Know ourselves and start building the foundation of who we are as a person”
- “Story from adversity, then learning to cope with the environment to improve your GPA”
- “Letting yourself experience the whole thing before you make any judgement for it”
- “Don’t sweat the little things and focus on the bigger picture”
- “Inspired me to see the world differently”
- “Lifelong learning”
- “Always think to myself I need to try”
- “Being on your own is, well, scary at times, but exciting.”

As students struggled with issues and problems, such as experiencing racial microaggressions, they learned how adapt and better navigate their
environments. Students grew and adapted with assistance from mentors, academic support staff, and family members. It was commonly reported in this research that being the target of racial microaggressions made SoC reevaluate their relationships with their White peers and motivated them to develop new relationship with others. Study participants also mentioned how using a growth mindset in college helped them view the world differently and encouraged them to continue learning about themselves and their identity.

**Academic Resilience**

When asked to reflect on their experiences so far in college and what advice they would give to their younger selves, SoC listed:

“Stay in school”  
“Study and develop study skills; understand the way that you study and how you learn”  
“Utilize your resources”  
“Seek out help”  
“Know how to plan my days better, when to do homework…and other things”  
“One grade doesn’t define the whole entire experience”  
“Have an organizer on my phone”

Over time, many students developed skills that promoted academic success in college. All of the students mentioned either modifying their studying habits to fit the demands of college level or developing entirely new study skills. They also mentioned how study skills and behaviors were changed as a result of a tough first semester. A majority of students who participated in this study reported learning how to ask for help, and how this skill connected them to different resources, offices, and services at their university. Students also learned how to utilize these resources to help them succeed. Some reflected on grades and how one bad test score doesn’t define the rest of
the class. A few of the students mentioned using an organizer or planner for the first time in college, which assisted with better time management.

Identity Development and Resilience

Many students in this research shared how adversity and struggles in college helped shape their identities. Some of the codes aligning with this theme were:

“Stay motivated”
“Be comfortable with myself”
“I avoid those crowds because I don’t want those type of experiences”
“Learned to reach out”
“Not to blame myself so much”
“It’s ok to not do your best, to fail at something, and remain staying humble and true”
“Go out of your comfort zone.”

Many of the students were determined to stay motivated to graduate. Others were learning to be comfortable with their identity as they progressed through their undergraduate experience. SoC mentioned how they learned how to reach out to others, mostly upper-class students and peer mentors who shared a similar racial and ethnic identity, to help guide their identity development. This helped students explore their identities outside of their comfort zone leading to a better understanding of the influence of race and ethnicity on self. Additionally, students discovered that college can be a tough journey and learned to forgive themselves and be less critical of themselves.

Health, Wellness, and Resilience.

Some students mentioned prioritizing their health and wellness after having gone through adversity and struggles, both personally and academically. Some of the codes that aligned with this theme were:

“Prioritizing my mental health”
“Be a human and maybe sleep and eat every once in a while”
“Had to heal from emotional wounds”
“Be more okay to not be okay”
“Learned how to like give myself some time to just be myself and do things that I want to do”

Students were open to talking about their mental health. Many acknowledged that their mental health was important to them and once the topic was brought up in a group, others also voiced their thoughts about mental health. They didn’t go into details, but did mention getting support from friends and offices to manage their stress and to improve their mental health. Most of the female identifying students mentioned being alright with not feeling okay and used that opportunity to reflect on factors causing their distress. This was not a common observation among men.

**Involvement On-Campus and Resilience**

As previously stated, being involved on-campus helped student succeed and build resilience. Some of the things students would have mentioned to their younger selves that fit into this theme were:

“Be more involved on-campus”
“I was involved in more things; (they were) making me happy”
“I wasn’t always alone”

Being involved on campus, either in student organizations or by utilizing resources, services, and offices, helped students be successful because they were learning new skills from friends made in MSOs. This type of involvement also helped students build resilience based on the relationships they had with peers, mentors, and academic staff. In addition, being involved on-campus helped decrease isolation and made some students feel happy.
Interpersonal Level: Facilitators

The interpersonal level of the SEM gives attention to the social groups, formal and informal, and social connections surrounding an individual. It looks at how family, friends, peers, intimate partners, and social groups can influence a person’s behaviors and, in turn, how individuals will interact with others (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2018; CDC, 2013). As stated previously, the various influences of what impacts student academic success across the SEM should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but that each level can influence the other levels. At the Interpersonal Level, there were several facilitators for success found which include the following:

- Students of color, friends, and social support
- Religion and spirituality
- Academic staff and faculty support
- Having a mentor(s) and being a mentor
- Hall director

Students of Color, Friends, and Social Support

Having a close support group, whether it be in class or in a social setting, was one of the most significant contributors to student success. Social support also intersected with being involved in different organizations and utilizing various offices, services, and resources. Codes that fed into this theme included:

“Have a good social life through my friends”
“Able to share and help me, learn from them, and they can learn from me”
“Feel more like connected to campus and feel like I belong more”
“Similar interests to me and similar thoughts and beliefs”
“Give you more opportunities”
“Peers who are always supporting me in my goals and aspirations”
“Pushing me to become the best version of myself”
“Once you actually find like the right people to study with you’ll be fine”
“Should reach out and talk to other students of color and people”
“So the people of color, we make sure we are sitting together”
“Other multicultural students treat you with respect, don’t experience these indirect tactics”
A majority of the students reported being more academically successful when they were connected to other SoC or resources, such as tutors and peer mentors. Other SoC bring comfort and a sense of belonging at the university. One student mentioned how being with other SoC increases their success and they don’t need to worry about indirect tactics when compared to their White peers. In this case, indirect tactics refers to racial microaggressions, which are “every day subtle or ambiguous racially related insults, slights, mistreatments, or invalidations” (Torres-Harding & Turner, 2015, p. 464).

Many study participants also felt safer and more open to voicing their opinions when they were around other SoC because they felt their voices were being validated. Students also mentioned being motivated to complete their work and learning how to reach out for help after observing other students do the same. Being involved with different MSOs gave students plenty of opportunities to grow and develop their identity. Having this type of social support also helped some students learn skills that they didn’t have prior to attending college, such as learning new study habits from their friends.

**Academic Staff and Faculty Support**

Study participants mentioned academic staff and faculty members helping them succeed in college. It should be noted that most students mentioned staff members who were from particular offices on campus. This aspect of student support will be discussed further in the Community Level section below. Some of the codes that exemplify this from an interpersonal perspective include:

“Reach out if I do need help”
“Feel comfortable using office hours”
“Connect to your professor and understand where they're coming from and them understanding you”
“Get to know me or just care about my grades and being open minded”
“Coaches
“Vice Chancellor…windows of opportunity for students to speak their mind.”

When it came to office hours, all of the first- and second-year students knew about them, and some had gone to visit their professors. Students did mention having supportive professors who were invested in their learning. For example, one student shared,

When I go to office hours, you can meet your professor a little more one-on-one personally. And you know that they really are there to help you and want you to pass their class and want you to really understand what they're teaching you.

Third- and fourth-year students were also aware of office hours, but unlike first- and second-year students, they tended to ask for help from their peers who were enrolled in the same class or had taken the class previously. These students shared that they were more comfortable asking for help from friends because they had a better connection with peers than staff or faculty. Some of these older students also spoke about having a professional relationship with administrative staff members, such as the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, and used this opportunity to express their concerns.

**Family Support**

Students also identified family support as a factor contributing to their success. Interactions with family members ranged from updating parents about their academic progress to being able to answer questions from younger cousins. Some of the codes from the narratives were:

“Having her (mom) know that I’m doing ok and that peace of mind”
“My parents support and their expectations of me”
“To make my parents proud of me”
“My little cousins; passing down my information and helping them”
“Older siblings help with tips”
It seems parents play an important role in supporting, encouraging, and setting expectations for their children. Students also mentioned not wanting to let their parent down and trying to succeed in college to make them proud. A few students reported being able to serve as a role model for younger family members because they were the first in their family to attend college.

**Having a Mentor and Being a Mentor**

Many students mentioned having a mentor and stated it was beneficial to their academic success. Likewise, students also described how being a mentor helped them succeed in college because of the expectations from younger students. Some of the codes aligned with:

- “Showing me everything”
- “Encouraging me to go to OMSS”
- “Told me to sign up for Student Support Services”
- “Reach out and give me those opportunities”
- “Seeing student leaders making a difference”
- “Representing your group”
- “Eventually share my story, it’ll maybe give the younger students some hope that they’re not alone”

Students received guidance from older peers, mentors, and student organization leaders who introduced them to different offices and resources on campus. These people played an important role in teaching SoC how and where to seek out help. First-and-second-year students also recognized that they had a role to fulfill as mentors due to younger students from their respective high schools potentially attending this university.

**Interpersonal Level: Barriers**

The vast majority of students who took part in this research reported struggles, issues, and problems associated with peers and people around them. Interpersonal struggles, issues, and problems were coded into three broad themes ranked from most
dominant to least dominant based on the amount of codes generated from the focus groups and interviews. These themes include the following:

- Microaggressions
- Issues with faculty members
- Issues with peers and roommates

**Microaggressions**

Microaggressions can be defined as “brief and commonplace everyday exchanges that communicate hostile, derogatory, denigrating or negative slights and insults to certain individuals because of their group membership” (Campus Climate, 2019). Some of the codes indicating microaggressions for SoC were:

- “Roommates talk about he finally has a Black friend and that’s kind of hard to hear”
- “Treat me like they’ve never seen a multicultural student before”
- “Treat me like I’m an outsider”
- “Do I ever use lip gloss on my eye”
- “Hearing some comments in the halls or in the classroom or around the buildings”
- “Basic stereotypes (towards) maybe Black people, Asian, Hispanic”
- “Don’t understand the impact of their words”
- “Once anyone says “Black”, they look at him; harming him in the way they do that”
- “Always want to touch my fricken hair or something”
- “No one wanted to sit next to me, mentally hurts me sometime”
- “People come in and ask for help, but don’t want you to help them”
- “Certain top administrators only come to our Orgs to ask us to do (them) favors and talk about how diverse this campus is”
- “White students will talk to each other and pull you out of the conversation”

All students who participated in the focus groups and interviews reported experiencing some sort microaggression from their White peers. While interactions may be small and well-intended, experiencing exchanges like these on a daily basis has the opposite effect. Microaggressions caused some students to doubt their ability in being a student at this university. Some of the students in this research worked as tutors, and
when they were ignored by students or a White student was mistaken as the tutor, they began to question their academic and professional abilities. Several SoC also mentioned how White students always want to touch their hair without consent or being overly expressive about wanting Black friends. Others felt isolated because of behaviors of their white peers when it came to group work or participating in class. For example, some students mentioned how no one wanted to sit next to them during the first day of class, and instead of focusing on the lecture, they were wondering what was wrong with them for the duration of the class.

**Issues with Faculty Members**

Students also mentioned struggling to connect with professors. Some of the codes aligned with this theme were:

- “Professors go through the slides so fast”
- “Don’t feel comfortable going to their office hours because they are more critical”
- “I feel like I get the vibe that they don’t want to help”
- “Feel like they don’t want to connect”
- “Really no relationship”
- “Hard for me to go to office hour”

A majority of students felt their professors weren’t connecting with them, and suggested reasons for why ranged from different communication styles to lack of cultural understanding. Some students also mentioned not being able to utilize office hours, after going in for the first time, because of the interaction. Study participants felt professors weren’t helping students when they take advantage of office hours.

**Issues with Peers and Roommates.**

Issues were also brought up by participants in this study about peers and roommate situations. Some of the codes identified for this problem included:

- “Resident Assistant (RA) she doesn’t care…don’t get a response back”
“People might exclude you for that (coming from low income) sometimes”
“Partying, drinking, vomiting”
“Condom outside my door.”
“Fire crackers exploding in the bathroom.”
“Feel like they won’t hear it the way I want them to hear it.”
“Talking bad about how the Cove are only open to orgs.”
“Can’t be in my room and stuff like that.”
“Makes me super anxious; hard to do homework”
“Changed dorm hall, felt a lot more hate towards me”

Some of the students who lived on campus stated having issues with their roommates, such as flags being hung up that made them feel uncomfortable. When asked to take the flag down, the roommate took it down, but hung it up somewhere else less visible. Other students brought up how these types of disruptions affected success and made them feel anxious to ask for guidance from their Resident Assistants. SoC also mentioned not interacting with peers around them because they did not want their opinion incorrectly interpreted. A few students reported changing residence halls after the first semester and perceived more hate in their new resident hall. They weren’t sure if it was due to different resident hall cultures or if the students around them didn’t like them for who they were.

**Interpersonal Level: Supports**

Students who participated in the focus groups and interviews reflected on how family, friends, and peers helped them to be more resilient. Emerging themes were ranked from most dominant to least dominant based on the amount of codes generated and included:

1. Social life and resilience
2. Family and resilience
3. Advocacy and resilience
Social Life and Resilience

Students reflected on several things about their social life and advised their younger selves to:

“Don’t feel pressured to drink”
“Find those people that are going to like speak to your needs and make you feel happy”
“Not being overly stressed about meeting new people”
“I think to myself, well if they can do it, I can do it too.”

After a year or two at college, students would tell their younger selves that there are other options for social activities besides drinking with friends and peers. A third-year college student specifically mentioned not drinking at all since she started college. A majority of students also recommended finding like-minded individuals who share the same values and to not be overly stressed when not making a ton of friends. During the focus groups and interviews, first-year-and-second-year students had a perception that they had to make a large number of friends rather quickly. However, when compared to older students, they preferred to keep their circle of friends smaller and more personal.

Family and Resilience

A few students also mentioned how family experiences and struggles helped motivate them to pursue their education, and how it helped them build resilience while in college. Example codes included:

“Mom sacrificed a lot just so that we can come here”
“I need to work hard just so that I can succeed in that life”
“Knowing that they (parents) worked like hell to keep us in school is something that keeps me going”

Participants reflected on the struggles that their parents and family went through to get them into college. Some mentioned the initial and ongoing financial struggles their
family faces and it keeps them motivated. Hmong students specifically talked about how their parents had to flee persecution, genocide, and war due to the Secret War in Laos and the Vietnam War. These students used this shared experience to motivate themselves to succeed in college.

**Self-advocacy and Resilience**

When it came to self-advocacy, only the older students in the study mentioned it. Participants for this study were recruited from MSOs and many of these student organizations plan and implement programs around social justice. Through these events, they may have learned how to advocate for themselves from the presenters they bring in and from their advisors. Some of the codes aligning with this theme were:

“To be more critical”
“Not be afraid to question higher education administration”
“Understand this is fucked up and we should question it and we should ask administration why”
“Not be afraid to go out there and ask questions and get resources if you don’t know”

In general, these older undergraduate students have experienced more issues and adversity compared to first- and second-year students. Through these experiences, they learned to use their voices to advocate for themselves and for other SoC. They mentioned how they are more confident bringing questions to administrators, and they said they understand how the current system isn’t helping them be as successful as they can be. They also reported knowing which resources to access if they aren’t sure exactly how to proceed with their questions or concerns.
Community Level: Facilitators

For the purpose of this research, the community level encompasses all organizations, services, resources, and offices located within this university. Included in this level are resources such as formal and informal rules or regulations, availability of common lounges, and availability of space for safe discussions about issues students are facing (CDC, 2013). As previously stated, while all themes impacting the academic success for SoC are listed separately within the levels of the SEM, it’s solely to organize the emerging themes in a sequential order and they are not mutually exclusive. Based on interpretation, themes may overlap within the different levels of the SEM and even between other levels. At the Community Level, several themes for facilitators were found and in terms of the organizations on campus students felt best supported their academic success. These offices and organizations include the following:

- Office of Multicultural Student Services (OMSS)
- Student Support Services (SSS)
- Campus Climate Office (CCO)
- Counseling and Testing Center (CTC)
- First Year Cohort Program
- Additional Office

Office of Multicultural Student Services

OMSS was one of the offices SoC utilized the most. They mentioned the office as a place where they were comfortable asking for help and seeking direction. They also mentioned certain services offered and aspects of the office that specifically contributed to their success. These sub-themes are described in detail immediately below.

OMSS staff members. Staff members in OMSS were major contributors to student success. They provided a range of resources and opportunities for students, as is indicated by the following codes:
“Got my first bad grade…immediately e-mailed me…to talk to my professor”
“Will help you no matter what; wants to see you succeed.”
“Willing to sit down with you and figure it out.”
“Huge advocate for me.”
“Provide good resources and tutors.”
“Always been super warm to me.”
“Realized computer science wasn’t for me because of my advisors.”

Staff member in OMSS fulfilled many roles for SoC and helped out in many ways, included reaching out to students to ensure they spoke with their professors about grades, academic advising, and advocating for students. Students also mentioned how OMSS staff members supported their academic growth along with their personal development through critical discussions. Further, OMSS staff members introduced them to different professional opportunities, ranging from leadership development to employment.

**Academic support.** In addition to having staff members who supported them, students also mentioned having academic services available through OMSS. Some of the services mentioned were:

2. Access to tutors
3. Heikema Scholars
3. Mentoring and Readiness for College (MARC) Program
4. Multicultural Validation Program (MVP)
5. Academic Success Institute (ASI)
6. 4-D Program

During the focus groups and interviews, almost all of the students voiced how beneficial it was to have access to more individualized tutors through OMSS. This one-on-one academic resource helped students pass courses and to better understand concepts in their classes. Some students also had support-type roles with the MARC program where they mentored and served as tutors to K-12 students throughout the academic year. A couple of students were part of ASI the summer before they started their first
year of college. They shared that professors in the ASI program treated them differently because they were more personal and more passionate about the classes they taught. These students were more comfortable on campus and were exposed to college life prior to the start of school, which made the transition into higher education a bit easier.

**Leadership development and involvement.** All of the students recruited for this study were from MSOs and mentioned how being involved on-campus helped them be successful at this university. Example codes that fit into this theme include:

- “Expand their like horizon and their experiences”
- “I’m more comfortable; help me get out of my comfort zone”
- “Forced to learn how to time manage, have to balance on top of your schoolwork and work life”
- “Feels like a safe environment”
- “Can voice my opinion and not be ridiculed for it”
- “Meet the supervisors”
- “Develop friendships and connections that you never had before”
- “Being a part of something that other people associate with”
- “People acknowledge you for who you are”

Students who are in MSOs have a space where they can experience new opportunities and overcome challenges. A majority of SoC also mentioned how being in a student organization forced them to learn how to manage their time more efficiently since they balancing their involvement with coursework, their personal life, and work. All of the students spoke affectionately about their involvement, with many stating that it was the sole reason they have a sense of belonging on campus. These students reported better academic success because they modeled their friends’ and older more experienced students’ behaviors in asking for help. In addition to opportunities with MSOs, students were given the chance to further develop leadership skills with professional conferences and meetings beyond the college campus.


**Student Support Services**

SSS was an office frequently discussed during focus groups and interviews, and several emerging sub-themes were identified:

**SSS academic advisors.** Many of the students who participated in this study were enrolled in SSS and stated how their advisors contributed to their success. Example of codes included:

- “Academic advising more than my regular assigned advisor”
- “Will always be there and ask questions”
- “Teach me about how to be more involved with the community”
- “Telling me about counseling and testing; the math tutors”
- “Helped me focus on more stuff that I care about”
- “Tells me to utilize the resources on campus”
- “Somebody I could talk to about how I was feeling”
- “Questions about my Financial Aid”

All students enrolled in SSS stated utilizing their SSS advisor more than their assigned primary advisor. Students mentioned being able to talk to their SSS advisors on a more personal level and feeling more comfortable when asking questions about academics. Students shared that their SSS advisors were able to direct them to additional resources and services outside of their office. Overall, the encouragement given by SSS advisors and the information about resources on- and off-campus helped some SoC be successful at this university.

**SSS peer mentors.** Students who were enrolled in SSS also mentioned how their peer mentors played a role in their success. Some of the codes included:

- “Super willing to meet with me”
- “Answers a lot of my questions”
- “Don’t think I felt the transition stress as much”
- “Meet more people and feel more comfortable on campus”
- “Sense of belonging on campus”
- “Comfortable at UWL”
- “Getting connected to resources”
- “Encouraged me to apply to resident life”
Peer mentors played a crucial role in helping SoC transition into college. They also connected students to resources on-campus and helped them feel more comfortable. Some students mentioned how their peer mentors not only answered their questions, but also encouraged them to apply for different positions at the university. Having peer mentors who are closer in age and willing to assist contributed to the success of first-year students.

**Academic Support.** In addition to academic advising and providing peer mentors, SSS also provided academic support to SoC in the form of:

1. Having extra space for school work
2. SSS tutors
3. Writing Center

Having a space for students to complete their assignments and school work contributes to their success because they are in a comfortable space and have access to services offered by SSS. For example, SSS tutors promote SoC achievements by being accessible and providing individualized tutoring. Compared to the university library, where students many times had to wait for a tutor to become available, students appreciated having one-on-one support from their tutors in SSS. Additionally, the Writing Center in SSS helped students with their papers and critiqued essays, which provided the opportunity for students to develop their writing skills.

**Campus Climate Office**

Older students were more aware of the Campus Climate office (CCO) and their services. Of the things mentioned, some examples of codes generated included:

“Awareness through performance”
“SEEDS”
“Hate and bias support.”
“Felt more like the burden was lifted off my shoulders that I wasn’t the only one carrying this weight.”
“Reached out to me, signaled to me that they cared.”
“Safe environment.”
“Very cozy.”
“Peers or advisors that are in there.”

Students expressed feeling safe in the CCO because it provided a space where they could process difficult situations. The CCO can support students who have experienced a hate or bias incident. For example, one student shared how a CCO staff member helped him process his experience with hate and felt validated in that he wasn’t the only one being targeted with this type of behavior. Other students stated how the CCO has resources, such as books and videos, that can be checked out for educational purposes or enjoyment. Some students also shared that the space offered by the CCO is a space where they could safely discuss their racial and gender identities.

**Counseling and Testing Center**

Focus group participants also mentioned the Counseling and Testing Center (CTC) as a resource for success. Codes that allowed this theme to emerge within the Community Level of the SEM included:

“Open and dedicated to helping make school a bit more accessible”
“Close and the whole discreet type of thing”
“Space to kind of unpack the things that have been weighing me down”
“Release the emotional trauma”
“Allow you to talk about anything just to get it out of your system”
“Relaxation room”

Students who utilized the CTC received support they needed to be successful at this university. As the students stated, the CTC is a space where they can unpack and feel more at ease with their current struggles. Counselors helped students process through trauma events in their lives and helped start the healing process. Some of the students also recognized the importance of the CTC being confidential and discreet.
First Year Cohort Program

Some students in the focus groups mentioned benefits of being a part of a first-year cohort program. Codes associated with this theme include:

“14 other people that are taking the same class as you”
“You know they’re reliable”
“We have an office, free printing, and mentors”
“We have our own tutors for each of the classes”
“Exposing some students into the field of research”
“Able to bond with like other people”
“Have a sense of belonging”

Being part of a program where they were enrolled in courses as a cohort played an important role in the success of SoC. Students explained that they perceived their cohort members to be more reliable when it came to group work because they could depend on each other. Having an office space to study and hang out with other students in their cohort or having additional mentors were further positive aspects of the program. Study participants also mention having a sense of belonging to this university due to this program. Finally, the first-year cohort program helped expose SoC to different research opportunities and taught them about the role of research in various careers.

Additional Offices

It is important to note there were some additional offices mentioned as far as what contributes to the success of SoC, but students didn’t elaborate on those as with the offices discussed above, thus they were not coded as a theme, however, it is important to state that they were mentioned by some participants. Examples included the Access Center, Student Health and Science Center, Career Services, and the Financial Aid Office.
Community Level: Barriers

Within the community level there were issues that were identified that created barriers for academic success. The themes identified within this level include:

- Inclusive negligence
- Issues with student association
- Food services and catering company

Inclusive Negligence

The students who participated in the focus groups and interviews mentioned many things that aligned with inclusive negligence, a phrase coined by undergraduate student researchers who wanted to address racial inequalities at their university (Institute for Social Justice, n.d.). Some of the codes mentioned were:

- “Trying to make everything more diverse, but don’t know how to”
- “You want us to be here, except you have nothing for us”
- “In classes there is a lot of white folks and I didn’t see a lot of people who were like me”
- “I don’t think our campus brings enough awareness to the different cultures.”
- “Evident that a lot of people don’t have to be in conversations about diversity and inclusion”
- “We feel so uncomfortable not because they are white, it’s because of how they act around us and the types of people that they are”

A vast majority of study participants perceived their university community as being harmful. Students who did not mentioned that they either ignored behaviors towards them or that it no longer affected them. Some students mentioned how the university is trying to make everything more diverse, but doing it in a way that isn’t supportive of SoC. They also mentioned a lack of diverse resources, services, and restaurants outside of the university. Many students reported how being in a classroom with predominantly White peers makes them feel isolated and prevents them from actively engaging in the classroom or with professors. Students also mentioned how
interactions with White peers make them feel uncomfortable because of how they are treated or perceived.

**Issues with Student Association**

Older students who were in at least their third year of college mentioned issues with the official campus-wide student governance group. The governance group aims to protect and support students on campus. Some things mentioned by study participants were:

“Push back on things that are coming out of MSOs
“Pretty racist conversations”
“Sexist and racist things”
“You (Student Association) try to take them (Diversity Senate Seats) away from us, then you like try to undermine us”

The student governance group was said to push back on initiatives and proposals supported by SoC. Older students who either served as Senators in the governance group or receive updates from their Senators also perceived the discussions during weekly meetings to be racist and sexist. Students who have been on campus for a few years and who have been involved with the MSOs noticed the struggle to keep their diversity Senate seats from being taken away by their White counterparts.

**Food Services and Catering Company**

Students who frequent the eating facilities on-campus also mentioned a lack of variety in the choices offered. Some of the codes aligning with this theme include:

“Adapting to the food here”
“Change the food; food was cheaper (at my other university); it was grown organic”
“Change it so that we can use rooms without (catering company) permission.”
“I shouldn’t be forced to order from a company that can’t make good food because I want to have something on-campus.”
Some of the students mentioned how a lack of variety in food choices sometimes prevents them from eating at all. They didn’t want to eat the same kinds of food every day, and when the food facilities tried to make diverse types of food, students tended to avoid them because they knew it would not taste authentic. Older students also reported disliking the current system where students can’t cater off-campus food while using rooms on-campus. Many students shared a similar interest in having more diverse food on-campus and access to a greater variety of food.

**Community: Supports**

Students who participated in this study were also asked to give recommendations on how to improve the campus environment to create better support for the academic success of students. When asked about recommendations they would provide, many students offered their insights on how professors can build stronger relationships with them. Some of the codes aligned with this theme were:

- “Want to know how you’re doing”
- “Passionate about the topic and love questions; happy to see you; explain it to you with enthusiasm”
- “Aware of who their students are; know your name.”
- “When there’s someone struggling, reach out to me and have a conversation with you”
- “Understand where we come from and our potential”
- “Not making students go to these events (MSO events) for extra credit”

Participants noted that they have had some good experiences with professors at the university and professors had qualities similar to those mentioned above. Having a better connection with faculty can contribute to the success of SoC. For example, having faculty members who are willing to invest in students’ passions or even simple things like getting their names correct, can help students build strong relationships with professors. Some students also mentioned being more successful if their professors
understood where they came from, such as understanding their background. Students noted that professors who were excited to see students and explained concepts from class with enthusiasm increased the likelihood of utilizing office hours. Some of the older study participants recommended that faculty can offer support to MSOs by encouraging their students to attend multicultural events; not just for extra credit, but to promote cultural events and help expand their knowledge and perspectives of diverse populations.

**Recommendations from Students**

Students who participated in this study were also asked to give recommendations on how to improve the campus environment for the academic success of students. The information given was coded to identify emerging themes for recommendations from student perspectives. Emerging themes for recommendations were limited to information given and emerging themes weren’t generated for all levels of the SEM like previous sections.

**Recommendations for Faculty Members**

When asked about recommendations they would provide, many students offered their insights on how professors can build stronger relationships with them. Some of the codes aligned with this theme were:

“Want to know how you’re doing”
“Passionate about the topic and love questions; happy to see you; explain it to you with enthusiasm”
“Aware of who their students are; know your name.”
“When there’s someone struggling, reach out to me and have a conversation with you”
“Understand where we come from and our potential”
“Not making students go to these events (MSO events) for extra credit”
Participants noted that they have had some good experiences with professors at the university and professors had qualities similar to those mentioned above. Having a better connection with faculty can contribute to the success of SoC. For example, having faculty members who are willing to invest in students’ passions or even simple things like getting their names correct, can help students build strong relationships with professors. Some students also mentioned being more successful if their professors understood where they came from, such as understanding their background. Students noted that professors who were excited to see students and explained concepts from class with enthusiasm increased the likelihood of utilizing office hours. Some of the older study participants recommended that faculty can offer support to MSOs by encouraging their students to attend multicultural events; not just for extra credit, but to promote cultural events and help expand their knowledge and perspectives of diverse populations.

**Administration and Academic Support Staff**

Students provided recommendations for administrators and academic staff members to support SoC. While these recommendations may be specific for this group, they can shed some light on how to support all students at this university. Some examples of codes identified for this theme were:

“Need the people who aren’t listening to start listening”
“Start supporting more multicultural student organizations”
“Biggest for students of color is to actually like show up (to multicultural events)”
“If they were White, they need to use their White privilege to exercise powers to advocate for other people on this campus”
“If they were Black, I feel like I would say, use your voice and don’t let it be muted by other things (or) other people”
“Someone has to speak up and a group of people need to take action”
Overall, the students were cognizant of the issues around diversity and inclusion at their university, and how it may be addressed by administration or staff. The longer students were on campus, the more they noticed who was invested in addressing changes around social justice and who was not. Some students encouraged faculty and staff to attend MSO events and others encouraged their White administrators and academic support staff to support diversity initiatives.

The University Community

Based on how this level of the SEM has previously been defined in this research, students provided recommendations that were coded into the Community Level. Since codes could not be organized into a single emerging theme, they were placed into a broad general recommendation for the university community.

“One set building for all MSOs and for the Cove, and for like OMSS to have a bigger space”
“Scouting things (events) going on where they went to…diverse areas”
“More recognition for the work that students do willingly, they’ll share loud and proud without acknowledging who did the work”
“Celebrate MSOs more; acknowledge that we exist”
“Keep funding programs specific programs like Heikema or MVP”
“Have more people of color that worked on campus”
“Wish diversity was a bigger thing at this campus”
“You guys want us to be a part of the campus, but yet we were never invited and we don’t’ know what’s here”

Several students mentioned updating the main science building on campus, but probably weren’t aware that updates are in progress. Students also mentioned more recruitment events for high schools in diverse areas to attract more SoC. Students said they wanted more recognition for the events they develop and implement. These events brought speakers from around the nation and raises awareness about diversity issues on-campus. Some students also suggested providing OMSS with more funding for the
creation of stronger outreach programs to reach more SoC. A few students wanted more education and awareness around the stigma of mental illness. In addition, another student expressed his appreciation for gender inclusivity at his institution.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion and Discussion

The first research question aimed to explore perceptions of SoC regarding institutional services contributing to their academic success. Students who participated in the study discussed five offices that provided academic services, counseling sessions, and opportunities for leadership development that contributed to their academic success. Students also mentioned some additional offices, but did not expand on them personally. This could mean that students were aware of these additional offices and the services they provided, but didn’t actively utilize or seek out those services for their academic success.

Institutional Services Contributing to Academic Success

Office of Multicultural Student Services. OMSS was identified as a major contributor to SoC academic success. Students mentioned that OMSS staff members played a major role in their academic success, academic support programs helped them build essential skills, and the office provided leadership development opportunities to help them develop personal and interpersonal skills. For instance, one student mentioned how OMSS staff members were “willing to sit down with (students) and figure it out.” In other cases, students discussed how OMSS staff members served as “huge advocates for me” by communicating issues with other administrative staff (i.e., hall directors, staff members from other offices, professors).

Having staff members who could offer support in many areas helped contribute to the academic success of SoC. Students may seek out career advice, may share personal
and traumatic issues with staff members, or may seek out guidance to deal with racism and discrimination. It’s important for staff members to recognize that students may seek help outside of academics and support them to overcome those issues. This finding is similar to

Students indicated that OMSS provided them with “good resources and tutors.” Students preferred utilizing tutors in OMSS not only because they were more comfortable in the space, but tutors could provide more individualized attention. Additional programs in OMSS contributed to student success because they helped students build skills. For example, one summer program mentioned by students helped prepare them for college because they took college level classes for credit. This program also helped students with the transition from high school to college because they lived on-campus in a resident hall for six weeks, which made them feel more comfortable on campus.

Having additional services to help students pass their courses or helping them build essential skills (i.e., time management, study skills, test taking skills, and coping mechanisms) can help SoC be successful. Many students who participated in this study were academically underprepared when they enrolled in college. It’s important for offices to provide additional services that can help students develop the necessary skills to be successful or connect them with other offices who can provide the services they need.

OMSS houses all the student-led multicultural student organizations (MSO). Each MSO has their own set of by-laws, with specific missions and goals, and different cultural events that they put on for their members and the university. The MSOs serve as a safe space for students to build their leadership skills and connect with
other students who share a similar cultural background. In addition to housing the MSO, OMSS provides other leadership opportunities, such as the Multicultural Student Leadership Development weekend, for students to connect with other student leaders. All students who participated in the study discussed how being involved on-campus, whether it be in a student organization or other organizations, helped them develop important communication and leadership skills.

College is a time for students to gain a better understanding of their identities, expand their horizons, and deepen their critical and reflective thinking skills. One way to achieve this is to encourage students, particularly SoC, to join different organizations so that they can be exposed to different opportunities for their professional and personal growth. This also means staff members must be cognizant of student organizations that exists at their institution so they can direct students to appropriate organizations.

**Student Support Services.** Another office that was discussed as a major contributor to students’ academic success was Student Support Services (SSS). SSS is a federally funded TRIO program and provides services to enhance academic skills, increases student retention and graduation rates, and assists students in enrolling in graduate studies. Since SSS is federally funded, there is an application process and students must meet certain criteria to be eligible for the program. Participants who were enrolled in SSS utilized their advisers for a variety of reasons. For example, students mentioned that their SSS advisers “teach me about how to be more involved with the community,” and “helped me focus on more stuff that I care about.”

Similarly to OMSS staff members, SSS advisers played many roles to support the academic success of SoC. Students were able to discuss courses with their advisers and
planning classes for the following semester, discussed career options, and were able to share personal struggles. Students mentioned how they met with their SSS advisers more often than with their university assigned academic adviser. This illustrates how supporting SoC in all areas of their growth can contribute to their academic success.

SSS has a peer mentoring system in their office and students discussed how this was another factor that contributed to their success. Students mentioned their peer mentors eased the transition from high school to college and made them feel more comfortable on campus. Peer mentors helped to create a sense of belonging on campus which was crucial helping students feel connected to the university. Students also mentioned how peer mentors were willing to meet with them and answer any questions they had about college.

It’s important to note that social support in college is crucial for the success of all students, but even more so for SoC who may feel isolated. Peer mentors can be one method to help SoC feel connected to the university because they tend to be closer in age with students and can have a more casual relationship with their mentees. They may be able to answer questions that advisers may not be able to answer directly, such as being safe at parties where alcohol may be involved or where to find condoms on campus.

**Campus Climate Office.** The students who mentioned the Campus Climate Office (CCO) shared that it’s a “safe environment,” “very cozy,” where they could get “hate and bias support.” This office was important for students to address and receive support for various forms of hate and biases. For example, one student mentioned being targeted with a racial insult when the following conversation occurred:
One White student said "Do you ever use lip gloss on your eye…eyelids?" and to me I'm like "Oh I get what you're saying because Asians don't really have eyelids like they do.” It didn't click right away, but eventually it did.

The student reported the incident to the CCO and a staff member reached out to help process and provide support through the ordeal. In addition to supporting SoC, the CCO also offers various programs that help students explore their identity. One program is a creative arts program where students create plays and scripts about their experiences with racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and other forms of -isms. During this process, students get to share their experiences and are supported by their peers. Once scripts are created, they put on a show for the entire university.

This type of work through the CCO is crucial for students with marginalized identities, particularly SoC, because having a space where they can talk about racist incidents helped them cope with the incidents. These types of programs can also decrease feelings of isolation because students begin to recognize that they aren’t alone in these situations and can find a common ground to support each other. This space also allows students to recognize the various forms of privileges and oppressions they have, therefore, can advocate for themselves.

_Counseling and Testing Center._ The CTC was mentioned by a few students as a “space to kind of unpack the things that have been weighing me down.” These students were comfortable utilizing the CTC to help them process personal issues they were going through. One student also specifically used the CTC to “release emotional trauma” where the student processed and healed from trauma. The CTC is an important space for students because it allowed students to cope with emotional needs with the help of a counselor. This type of professional resource can help determine the root causes of
trauma and promote healing. These students’ lived experiences show that they may have
to be especially resilient because they had to overcome issues beyond normal
circumstances.

First Year Cohort Program. As far as what promotes academic success, two
students also mentioned a first-year cohort program, which accepts 15 eligible first-year
SoC who are declared science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) majors. Some
benefits of being in this program were moving into residence halls one week early to
become familiar with the campus, learning about research, enrolling in STEM classes as
a cohort, receiving free tutoring, and earning a $1,000 scholarship. Participation in this
program required scholars to attend weekly meetings with a graduate student adviser,
participate in required activities, attend trips to research facilities, maintain a 3.0 GPA,
and meet on a regular basis with an assigned peer mentor.

Enrolling as a cohort into STEM classes (i.e., Biology, Chemistry, Math) helped
students be successful because they perceived their cohort members as reliable
students. In addition to taking classes together, these students have an office space where
they can connect on a more personal level. Students can connect and build stronger
relationships with each other while attending classes or visiting facilities that conduct
research. The added support of meeting with a graduate student adviser was also helpful
because similarly to having a peer mentor, being able to meet with a graduate student and
talk about classes and getting tips on how to be an effective college student was
beneficial. Overall, students mentioned how being a in this program increased their sense
of belonging on campus.
Additional Factors Contributing to Academic Success

The second research question explored additional factors outside of institutional services contributing to the academic success of SoC. On an intrapersonal level, participants of the study discussed how their self-identity, involvement in student organizations, self-learning and navigating academia, and their health were important for their academic success. In addition to those factors, resilience is important to SoCs academic success because it can help students overcome issues and learn how to adapt to stressful situations. In terms of supports related to resilience on this level, adopting a growth mindset helped students improve their learning. They built their academic resilience by learning how to ask for help and utilized the resources and services available to them. Their identity development, health and wellness, and involvement on-campus also contributed to their resilience.

On an interpersonal level, most of the students indicated that being with other SoC who shared similar cultural backgrounds were crucial for their academic success. A majority of the students also mentioned that having connections with formal and informal social groups, such as study groups or their professors, were important because they were able to learn new things, such as better study habits. Some students also mentioned that their religion and spirituality along with family members were crucial for their academic success. Resiliency on this level was developed by have social support from peers and friends, having support from family members, and also learning how to advocate for themselves to

It’s important to understand that the Socioecological Model (SEM) is a dynamic model, specific levels are interconnected and can influence one another which indicates
that the categories and themes overlap. For instance, when students mentioned that their self-identity was important, and learning about their identity was heavily influenced by interacting with other SoC and being involved in student organizations, thus the interaction of these confluences built their resilience because they received the support they needed. Additionally, support from peers, faculty and staff members, and family members helped students learn how to navigate academia and learn more about their strengths, which contributed to their academic success. Once students learned these skills, they then passed that knowledge onto other students and peers.

**Comparing Perceptions of Success Based on Class Standing/Year in College**

The third research question explored a possible difference in perceptions of academic success based on class standing/year in school for SoC. Out of 30 students in this study, only five were third-year students and one was a fourth-year student. Even though there were only six students who were third and fourth year students, their perceptions of success were noticeably different when compared to first and second year students.

**Projection versus reflection.** A vast majority of first and second-year students shared their perceptions of success by projecting what they thought it meant to be successful. They didn’t expand too much on what they had done to be successful in college thus far. They shared thoughts and ideas on how to be successful, but didn’t share how they’ve applied it to their academic or personal lives. First- and second-year college students were aware of what need to be done to be successful in college, but not quite at the level of applying those knowledge and concepts to be successful. For example, one first year student shared “college is where you become the best you can be,
a very well-rounded person and experience that as well. As well as figure out what you want to do in life.” A second-year student stated, “I think being successful is having a sense of direction, like in what you want to do and like just knowing ahead of time where you want to be in life.”

Third- and fourth-year students on the other hand were able to share, in detail, how they utilized different resources and skills to be successful along with prioritizing their activities compared to first- and second-year students. These older students reflected on the steps they had taken to become a successful college student and were able to identify who they sought help from to be successful. For example, one third-year student shared, “The first thing that comes to my mind is my SSS advisor, I go to her frequently when I have questions and she helps me utilize the resources on campus.” A fourth-year student stated, “Realized computer science wasn't for me because of my advisors, but they helped me realize that I shouldn't go that route. Just talking to the advisors and providing their time (and) giving me extra support that I needed.”

One explanation for the difference in perceptions of success could be due to duration of enrollment in college. Older students have been in college longer and have more experience, therefore, are more likely utilize skills to be successful. In addition to that, older students have been enrolled longer, so they may be more aware of offices and services that the university offers compared to first- and second-year students. Older students did mention utilizing offices and other institutional services more often than first- and second-year students. It’s crucial to inform first-and-second-year students of institutional services and resources available so that they can access these resources
sooner rather than later. It’s also equally important to encourage students, particularly SoC, to seek out these additional resources because they may less likely to seek help.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The concept of thriving in college provides a comprehensive and holistic approach to supporting student success in college. Ash and Schreiner (2016) stated:

In order for a student to thrive, they must have support in not only academic performance and engagement, but healthy relationships, openness to difference, commitment to making a difference in the world, and a positive perspective on both the present and the future that engenders hope. (p. 39).

For students to thrive at a university, they will first need to be engaged in their learning process, which occurs when a student is deeply passionate or energized by their studies. Secondly, students will also need to be academically determined by goal setting, managing their time and utilizing resources, self-regulated learning, and the ability to apply skills and knowledge gained to unexpected situations. Thirdly, students will also need to be socially connected to others, which represents the social relationships they have with their peers and the quality of those relationships. Fourthly, Ash and Schreiner state that students who have a diverse citizenship are more open-minded about differences when engaging with others of a different diverse background. Lastly, positive perspective refers to student’s ability to positively reframe stressful or negative situations into learning opportunities (Ash & Schreiner, 2016). These five concepts of thriving will align with the findings from this research and are used in the following sections to provide comprehensive practical recommendations to continue building stronger systems to support all students, but particularly SoC.
Engaged Learning and Academic Determination Through Emotional Intelligence

The vast majority of first-and-second-year students mentioned feeling overwhelmed in college and struggling with building essential academic skills, but third- and fourth-year students were more proactive with their time, utilizing their study skills more effectively, and learning how to advocate for themselves to be academically successful. Students can achieve Ash and Schreiner (20) thrive concepts of engaged learning and academic determination by being more emotionally intelligent (EI). By teaching SoC, particularly first-and-second-year students, to be more EI, universities can help them process through their feelings of being overwhelmed to be academically engaged and energized with their coursework. Being EI can also help students set goals and priorities after they’ve processed and managed their stress.

There is a unique opportunity for students to develop and build their EI. This university now requires all incoming first-year students to enroll in a high-impact, one credit course designed to help students transition into college. This is a perfect opportunity to include course material on EI so SoC can first learn how to process through their emotions with healthy coping mechanisms so they can remain engaged with their coursework. Secondly SoC can stay academically determined by learning how to prioritize their time, set goals, and develop essential academic skills.

Importance of Faculty and Staff of Color in Higher Education

Many of the students who participated in the study mentioned being uncomfortable because they couldn’t relate to faculty and staff members. One way to continue supporting the successes of all students, particularly SoC, is to hire more faculty and academic support staff of color. Umbach (2006) explored the impact faculty of
color had on undergraduate student’s engagement in higher education. The research indicated that having a diverse faculty improved the learning environment and encouraged a broader range of teaching pedagogies. Faculty members of color were also more likely to utilize interactive and collaborative learning with their students, which can encourage students with different ethnic backgrounds to learn from each other (Umbach, 2006).

Studies have also shown that faculty members can serve as undergraduate research mentors and guide student towards employment opportunities, engaging in undergraduate research, have discussions about graduate school, and can help students navigate their many identities (Schwarts, 2012). By having more faculty and academic support staff of color, Ash & Schreiner’s (2016) thrive concept of “social connectedness” (p. 39) could be achieved because students may have more opportunities to build quality relationship with faculty members who understands their ethnic background and lived experiences.

Creating Diverse Citizenship in White Students

While it is important to explore and provide recommendations to support the success of SoC, it’s equally important to address implicit bias in White students. Implicit bias can be defined as “the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner; implicit bias is activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control (Kirwan Institute, 2015, para. 1). Students who participated in the focus groups mentioned “they treat me like they’ve never seen a multicultural student before,” “always want to touch my fricken hair,” and included phrases such as “white students will talk to each other and pull you out of the
conversation.” Findings from this research suggests that White peers of SoC may have some implicit bias that manifests verbally and physically in the form of behaviors like those mentioned above.

One recommendation is to encourage White students to participate in implicit bias workshops to raise their awareness about their own implicit biases. This is beneficial because they would have the opportunity to learn about how they perpetuate racism and develop their own identities. One way to achieve this is to utilize Helm’s White Racial Identity Development Model (See Appendix E) to structure activities and discussions around racism and identity for White students.

Carnes et al. (2012) implemented a workshop to raise awareness about implicit bias against women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and the results were promising. Faculty who participated in the workshop had an increased awareness of their implicit bias four to six months later and were able to describe plans to make changes or had already made the necessary behavior changes. This suggests that implicit bias workshops could prove beneficial as far as improving how White interact with SoC.

Establish Sustainable and Equitable Partnerships

At the Community Level of the SEM, one recommendation for offices not being utilized is to establish sustainable and equitable partnerships with offices such as OMSS and SSS to provide additional support for the success of SoC. Offices can incorporate Ash & Schreiner (2016) social connectedness to establish meaningful and quality relationship with students. Students mentioned support for MSO and MSO events as examples of how they want to be socially connected. This means that SoC would like
academic staff members and faculty to participate and attend cultural events that they work so hard to coordinate for the university. This will help students recognize academic staff and faculty members and relationship building can start from there. Any opportunity to connect with students on a more personal level increases the likelihood that students will interact with academic staff members and faculty members.

The partnerships between offices must go beyond just providing services. Efforts should be made to mirror certain positive aspects, such as providing a space where students are comfortable and create a sense of belonging to encourage utilization. Offices not being utilized should recognize that support for all students, particularly SoC, should go beyond the walls of an office. University employees can support and encourage students by attending cultural events, having conversations about systems of power and privilege, engaging in cultural humility, and be comfortable being uncomfortable at these events.

**Address Inclusive Negligence**

Students reported that the university continuously tried to increase diversity, but it’s evident that actions to increase diversity and inclusion aren’t occurring. Students also reported that Student Association, one of the student governance body that exists to protect and support all students, pushed back on proposals sponsored by MSOs and other diversity groups (i.e., LGBTQ student organizations). These diversity student organizations, including MSOs, have one diversity Senate position that represents their organization on the Student Association. In some years, all these student diversity groups may have enough members to fill those Senate positions and in other years, there aren’t enough members to fill these vacant positions. When this occurs, there are often conflicts
between Student Association and these student diversity organizations because of all the vacancies.

One recommendation to address inclusive negligence is to pass policies that prevent the removal of these important and crucial diversity Senate seats. These seats are important because they represent the collective voices of each respective MSO and must be present when critical decisions are being made for the entire student body. When these diversity Senate seats were filled, they were able to propose and pass innovative bills to protect all students, such as the bill proposed to include gender neutral bathrooms in every building on-campus. If these seats are removed, then it prevents students with marginalized identities to have a place at the table where critical decisions are being made.

Increase Student Recruitment Efforts in Diverse Communities

A study assessing individual and institutional characteristics to evaluate factors that either encouraged or discouraged academic achievement indicated that having a more diverse student population was associated with increased social engagement because less students reported feeling socially isolated (Allen, 1992). Similar findings from this study indicates that having a more diverse population can assist SoC succeed. Students mentioned feeling more connected to campus and had a greater sense of belonging. Having a more diverse population will benefit all students because they have the opportunity to engage with and learn from others with a different, but unique lived experiences.

One recommendation is to create outreach programs geared towards recruiting diverse students, first generation college students, Queer students, and students from
different socioeconomic strata. One student from the focus groups shared that there were recruitment efforts at her high school, which was located in the suburban area of a large city. However, her friends who attended high school in the city weren’t recruited to attend this university. By creating a consistent and sustainable outreach program for these urban areas, the university would have an opportunity to share with students what they have to offer.

Additional Funding for Academic Success

Another recommendation is for this university to provide additional funding for offices already being utilized to hire more staff members or implement more programs supporting the academic success of SoC. Students who participated in the study had the opportunity to utilize tutors, peer mentors, and received support from staff member. However, for the students who aren’t connected in this way, they may or may not be receiving the necessary support to succeed. Providing additional funding for offices that explicitly assist SoC can offer additional opportunities can connect them with resources or services.

Recommendations for Future Research

Findings from this study can be improved upon and quantified. One recommendation for future research is to create a survey or tool to more objectively measure the consistency of perceptions of success among a larger and possibly more representative sample of SoC. While qualitative research, such as this study, provides a depth of knowledge and perceptions from focus groups participants, the results aren’t generalizable. Creating a tool influenced by the findings from this study can help this university gain a better understanding of how to help all students, and in particular SoC.
It can also help further define the idea of academic success among SoC, and can inform what additional support to offices or services may be needed.

A second recommendation is to recruit more third- and fourth-year students. Of the 30 students who participated in the focus groups, 26 were first- and second-year students. It would be beneficial to recruit more third- and fourth-year students to explore how they’re succeeding in college and their lived experiences. Though additional methodological changes would have to be implemented, possibly focused on sampling and type of data collected, this would also be one way to better be able to answer whether there is a difference in perceptions of success among SoC based on year in school. It would also be beneficial to recruit students with different gender identities; all participants identified themselves as female or male, which excludes students who fall outside of those binaries. Exploring perceptions of success of students who fall outside of these gender binaries can provide insight on how to support these students, in particular, to succeed at this university.

A final recommendation is to conduct key informant interviews with MSO advisers to get their perspectives on how they support student success. Findings from this study suggest that there is a connection between student success and their relationship with advisers from different offices. While it’s important to understand student perceptions of success, it’s also important to better understand how MSO advisers support SoC success. In this way, other faculty members and academic support staff can adopt these behaviors and become an integral part of the success of SoC at this university.
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APPENDIX A

SOCIOECOLOGICAL MODEL
(Women’s Health Education Program, 2010)
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE
1) Welcome students, Introduce yourself, and thank them.
   a) Keep the environment warm and welcoming.
   b) Respect participants views and opinions.
      i) Remember the purpose of the study
      ii) Communicate clearly to participants (ie: informed consent, voluntary, right to
          not answer if they aren’t comfortable, right to leave)

2) Go over Informed Consent Form
   a) Purpose of the Study
   b) Confidentiality
   c) Voluntary
   d) Will be recorded and transcribed

3) Opening Question: Please tell us your name, you personal gender pronouns, your
   major, and something you enjoy doing outside of class.

4) Introductory Question: Could you please share the first thing that comes to mind
   when you think of being successful at UWL?

5) Key Questions:
   a) Key Question #1 (Intrapersonal): What skills (personal/academic) do you need to
      be successful here at UWL? What type of attitude do you need to be successful?
      In terms of knowledge, what do you need to know to be successful?
      i) Member Check: Summarize what was said and confirm with participants.
   b) Key Question #2 (Interpersonal): Please share with us, who helps you be
      successful here at UWL?
      i) Member Check: Summarize what was said and confirm with participants.
   c) Key Question #3 (Organization): What services, offices, or resources help you be
      successful here at UWL?
      i) Member Check: Summarize what was said and confirm with participants.
   d) Key Question #4 (Institution/Community): How does this community
      (UWL/Greater La Crosse) contribute to your success?
      i) Member Check: Summarize what was said and confirm with participants.
   e) Key Question #5 (Policy/Society): What policies exist here at UWL that
      contributes to your success?
      i) Member Check: Summarize what was said and confirm with participants.
   f) Key Question #6 (Resilience): Knowing what you know now about yourself what
      would you tell your first-year-college-self?
      i) Member Check: Summarize what was said and confirm with participants.

6) Ending Question (All-things-considered): Suppose you could speak to one person
   from the board of regions who could make any change happen, what would you say
   to this person?
   a) Member Check: Summarize what was said and confirm with participants.
7) Ending Question (Summary): With what I just summarized, was it an adequate summary
   a) Member Check: Summarize what was said and confirm with participants.

8) Ending Question (Final): Have I missed anything or does anyone have anything else to add? This is our first series of focus groups for MSOs, do you have any recommendations on how we can improve?
   a) Member Check: Summarize what was said and confirm with participants.
APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS
1) Please tell us your name, Personal Gender Pronouns, your major, and something you enjoy doing outside of class.

2) Could you please share the first thing that comes to mind when you think of being successful at UWL?

3) What skills (personal/academic) do you need to be successful here at UWL? What type of attitude do you need to be successful? In terms of knowledge, what do you need to know to be successful?

4) Please share with us, who helps you be successful here at UWL?

5) What services, offices, or resources help you be successful here at UWL?

6) How does this community (UWL/Greater La Crosse) contribute to your success?

7) What policies exist here at UWL that contributes to your success?

8) Knowing what you know now about yourself what would you tell your first-year-college-self?

9) Suppose you could speak to one person from the board of regions who could make any change happen, what would you say to this person?

10) Have I missed anything or does anyone have anything else to add? This is our first series of focus groups for MSOs, do you have any recommendations on how we can improve?
Informed Consent Document

Protocol Title:
Assessing Students of Color’s Perceptions of Services Contributing to Academic Success: A Prospective Phenomenological Hermeneutics Study

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Purpose and Procedure
The purpose of this study is to assess the perceptions of academic success in students of color at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. The Office of Multicultural Student Services (OMSS) is collaborating with the principle investigator for this study and results from this thesis can be used to develop more programs or evaluate policies at this institution to be more supportive of students of color.

Potential Risks
There are minimal risks anticipated for this study, but participants may feel uncomfortable with some topics covered.

Rights and Confidentiality
Participants must be undergraduate students enrolled at UWL, be 18 years and older, and must identify as multicultural student, such as Black, Latinx, Asian or Pacific Islander, American Indian, Alaskan Native, or racially mixed. Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw or refuse to answer any question without consequences at any time. All information will be kept private and confidential. Participant data will not be linked with personally identifiable information and data will be stored in a password protected computer.
**Possible Benefits**
Participants may have a better understanding of other students perceptions of academic success and may be able to incorporate those factors into their own success while here at UWL. The researchers may have a better understanding of student success. OMSS will receive recommendations from the researchers to improve their retention efforts of multicultural students at UWL. This may directly benefit students personally if they have the option to take advantage of associated programming.

**Alternative Procedures**
There are no alternative procedures for this study.

**Cost and Compensation**
There are no costs for taking part in the study.

**Voluntary Participation**
Participation is completely voluntary. Participants can withdraw from the study at any point or refuse to answer any questions without any consequences.

Questions regarding study procedures may be directed to Researcher Jason Yang at yang.jaso@uwlax.edu or to the Thesis Chair Dr. Whitney, Department of Health Education & Health Promotion at ewhitney@uwlax.edu or at 608.785.6794. Questions regarding the protection of human subjects may be addressed to the UW-La Crosse Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (608) 785-8124 or irb@uwlax.edu.

**Demographic**

Age: _______ Ethnicity: __________________________ Gender Identity: ______

Years Attended UWL: ______________ Major/Minor: ______________

Participant (Printed) ___________________________ Date: ______________

Participant (Signed) ___________________________ Date: ______________

Researcher (Printed) ___________________________ Date: ______________

Researcher (Signed) ___________________________ Date: ______________
APPENDIX E

HELMS’ WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY MODEL
Helms’ White Racial Identity Model

- **Contact**: acceptance of socially imposed racial categorizations & rules
- **Disintegration**: confusion about commitment to own group; movement between feelings of comfort & discomfort about race
- **Reintegration**: idealization of own group; external standards used to define self & others; lack of empathy for others
- **Pseudo-Independence**: rationalize commitment to own group & tolerance of others
- **Immersion/Emersion**: challenges Whites to understand how they have benefited & contributed to racism; requires questioning, self-reflection, & critical analysis
- **Autonomy**: internally derived definitions of self, demonstrate positive racial group commitment, & possess the capacity to relinquish racial privilege

(Hays & Erford, 2013)