Author: Schmitz, Susan L.

Title: *Indicators of Effective Co-Curricular Programing for African American/Black Students at Hennepin Technical College*

The accompanying research report is submitted to the **University of Wisconsin-Stout**, **Graduate School** in partial completion of the requirements for the

Graduate Degree/ Major: MS Career and Technical Education

Research Advisor: Matthew Simoneau, PhD

Submission Term/Year: Spring 2020

Number of Pages: 41

Style Manual Used: American Psychological Association, 6th edition

☒ **I have adhered to the Graduate School Research Guide and have proofread my work.**

☒ **I understand that this research report must be officially approved by the Graduate School.** **Additionally, by signing and submitting this form, I (the author(s) or copyright owner) grant the University of Wisconsin-Stout the non-exclusive right to reproduce, translate, and/or distribute this submission (including abstract) worldwide in print and electronic format and in any medium, including but not limited to audio or video. If my research includes proprietary information, an agreement has been made between myself, the company, and the University to submit a thesis that meets course-specific learning outcomes and CAN be published. There will be no exceptions to this permission.**

☒ **I attest that the research report is my original work (that any copyrightable materials have been used with the permission of the original authors), and as such, it is automatically protected by the laws, rules, and regulations of the U.S. Copyright Office.**

☒ **My research advisor has approved the content and quality of this paper.**

STUDENT:

                    NAME: Susan L Schmitz   **DATE: 5/15/2020**

ADVISOR: (Committee Chair if MS Plan A or EdS Thesis or Field Project/Problem):

                    NAME: Matthew Simoneau   **DATE: 5/15/2020**

This section for MS Plan A Thesis or EdS Thesis/Field Project papers only

Committee members (other than your advisor who is listed in the section above)

1. **CMTE MEMBER'S NAME:**   **DATE:**

2. **CMTE MEMBER'S NAME:**   **DATE:**

3. **CMTE MEMBER'S NAME:**   **DATE:**

This section to be completed by the Graduate School

This final research report has been approved by the Graduate School.

Director, Office of Graduate Studies: **DATE:**

Schmitz, Susan L. *Indicators of Effective Co-Curricular Programing for African American/Black Students at Hennepin Technical College*

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to identify co-curricular engagement opportunities that will effectively connect with African American/Black students to foster a great sense of belonging. The intent was to hear directly from students regarding the barriers to participating in co-curricular opportunities and what they would like to see offered. Eight students took place in a focus group and the qualitative results were powerful and point to the intense relational connection to faculty and the need to find mentors similar to themselves for the purposes of guidance to succeeding in the dominant culture where they are most often marginalized. The findings are important for creating action at the college to improve the campus culture.

Table of Contents

Chapter I: Introduction

The State of Minnesota has one of the largest education opportunity gaps in the nation. According to the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017), "The 3-year graduation rate in 2014 for first-time, full- time students at public 2-year institutions was highest for Asian students (28%) and lowest for Black students (10%); graduation rates ranged from 14% to 23% for students in the other racial/ethnic groups" (2017). At the state level, the U.S. Census Bureau (2020) and U.S. Department of Education (2017) report that Minnesota has one of the largest education disparities in the country with students of color graduating from two-year colleges at the rate of 42% while white students graduate at a rate of 53 %. In addition, nationally, students at two-year colleges report experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, lack of health insurance and mental illness (Goldrick-Rab, Coca, Baker-Smith, & Looker, 2019). Hennepin Technical College is no exception. In addition to a racial disparity in graduation rates, basic need fulfillment follows suit. The #RealCollege Survey revealed that African American/Black students experienced basic needs insecurities at a disproportionally higher rate than their white peers.

Table 1

Basic Need Disparities of Hennepin Technical College Students

Racial or Ethnic Background	Food Insecurity	Housing Insecurity	Homelessness
African American/Black	58%	78%	31%
White or Caucasian	34%	50%	17%

Hennepin Technical College is an open admissions institution and the largest technical college in the Minnesota State System. The college has two campuses located in the Minneapolis suburbs of Eden Prairie and Brooklyn Park. The two campuses are 22 miles apart with duplicate

student services provided at each campus, such as: Financial Aid, Advising, Career Services, and Student Life. Staff travel between the two campuses to provide services for students at both locations. In addition to the geographic difference, there is student demographic differences as well: 70% of the students are located at the Brooklyn Park Campus and 30% at the Eden Prairie campus. Additionally, the Brooklyn Park Campus immigrant population is primarily West African and Latinx while the Eden Prairie Campus immigrant population tends to be East African and Russian. Minnesota is leading the Nation in educational disparities; students of color at Hennepin Technical College are less likely to complete than their white counter parts by 18 %. (Minnesota State, 2018).

At the national and state levels, experts suggest examining college policy, procedures, and developing support strategies to increase program completion (Moore & Shulock, 2010). For the purposes of this research, the focus is on fostering a sense of belonging through co-curricular programming to address the racial disparity in the completion rate of students at Hennepin Technical College. The impact of social and academic integration has been the subject of significant research throughout the years (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993; Pusser, 1993; Schlossberg, 1989). According to this research, a student's first year at an institution, and an increased level of involvement and sense of belonging increases a student's rate of persistence (Albert, 2010).

African American/Black students at Hennepin Technical College complete degrees at a lower rate than their white peers. The three top reasons for students to drop out of HTC are record holds, earning lower than a C in the first semester, or withdrawing from a course in the first semester (Stop. Drop. Enroll, 2018). African American/Black students are more likely to

experience one of the three predictors in their first semester, which increase the probability of not persisting.

The Hennepin Technical College Student Life Department was created in 2012. The Department was combined with the Career Development Department in 2016 to augment the work of each department by working together.   The primary focus of the combined department is to integrate career and career relevant ideas into the co-curricular programming. According to the Higher Learning Commission, "Co-curricular programs are suited to the institution's mission and contribute to the educational experience of its students" (Higher Learning Commission, 2018). The engagement opportunities offered to students at Hennepin Technical College include; a Leadership Series, Peer Mentor program, Student Success Day, Etiquette meals, Career Preparation workshops, SkillsUSA, Phi Theta Kappa (PTK), Student Senate, special interest clubs, access to local, state, and national leadership and affinity conferences.

Student Life and Career Development's student co-curricular engagement initiative encompasses four quadrants of success. The four quadrants are derived from the Hennepin Technical College (HTC) Advisory Board survey, University of MN Health survey, #RealCollege survey, and Stop, Drop, Enroll! study. The four quadrants of focus are Basic Needs, Communication, Managing Stress, and Professionalism. Focusing on student-identified predictors of success and needed supports, address the overall retention rates at the college.

College completion is a Nation-wide problem that disproportionately affects African American/Black students.   At Hennepin Technical College efforts are being made to address this issue. However, current efforts are not attempts are not enough as the gap still exists.

Statement of the Problem

Across the state of Minnesota, students of color succeed at lower rates than their White peers (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2016). As the population in Minnesota grows more diverse, colleges must determine how to successfully support underserved communities and increase the rate of degree completion. Degree completion fosters generational change by increasing economic opportunities and helps the State meet its workforce demands. If this problem is not addressed, the educational and workforce gap will continue to widen.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study was to identify co-curricular engagement opportunities that are relevant to African American/Black students at Hennepin Technical College. This study also sought to understand which co-curricular engagement will increase a sense of belonging enough to foster self-efficacy and increase help-seeking skills. Results from this study can be used to inform Hennepin Technical College about current and future co-curricular offerings. This is the first study of its kind at Hennepin Technical College.

Significance of the Study

Hennepin Technical College has increased the enrollment of new students. However, student retention from semester to semester is the reason for over-all declining enrollment at the college (HTC Institutional Research & Data Operations, 2019). This is especially true for African American/Black students. Understanding how to engage students in relevant co-curricular programming to foster a sense of belonging is the focus of this research. Students consider essential questions that lead to mattering: "Do I feel I matter to the institution? Do I feel noticed, appreciated, welcomed?" (Schlossberg, LaSalle, & Golec, 1990) Are these questions critical to the on-going success of students? "…academic and social integration do

influence attainment, but the findings of most studies are mixed regarding which form of integration is most important…" (Deli-Amen, 2011).

The lower than desired completion rates at Hennepin Technical College of students 24 years of age or older, attending school part-time, commuting to campus, and working 20 or more hours per week is a college priority for two reasons. First, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Board of Trustees measure Hennepin Technical College on completion rates. Secondly, the State of Minnesota is facing a skills gap of qualified workers (RealTime Talent, 2019). Over 1,000 degreed candidates are added to the workforce each year from Hennepin Technical College (Hennepin Technical College, 2018). An increase is student completion rates will lead to an increase of qualified graduates entering the regional workforce each year.

This study will guide the work of the Hennepin Technical College Student Life and Career Development Department and the five-year strategic plan for Student Affairs.

Assumptions of the Research

The assumption of this research are based on standards of practice and assumption that will yield accurate and actionable data.

1. Focus group students will be open about their experiences at Hennepin Technical College.
2. Focus group students will answer the questions truthfully.
3. Focus group facilitators will be respectful of all opinions shared during the focus group.
4. Focus group facilitators will keep quality notes that accurately reflect the student experience.

Limitations of Research

1. The data from this study will be limited to Hennepin Technical College and the conclusions cannot be extrapolated to other higher education institutions.

2. Limitation in the demographic data exist as the state of Minnesota records race and ethnicity using the following categories; White alone, not Hispanic, Black alone, not Hispanic, Asian and Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander alone, not Hispanic, American Indian or Alaska Native alone, not Hispanic, Two or More Races, Hispanic or Latino all races. For the purpose of this research, all students identifying as African American/Black, regardless of national origin are included in the data.

3. Base line data at Hennepin Technical College in regard to co-curricular programming is limited.

4. Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, access to students for focus groups was limited.

Definition of Terms

The defined terms below are found through this research paper. Many of the terms are specific to Higher Education and recent global events.

African American/Black. A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as "Black or African American," or report entries such as African American, Kenyan, Nigerian, or Haitian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Co-curricular. Learning opportunities that take place outside the classroom, but complement or reinforce classroom learning, college learning outcomes, and/or college mission (Higher Learning Commission, 2019).

COVID-19 pandemic. The disease has been named "coronavirus disease 2019"

(abbreviated "COVID-19"). This situation poses a serious public health risk and has resulted in a Minnesota Stay-at-Home order (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Growth Mindset. Developed by Carol Dweck, a belief that students' mindsets—how they perceive their abilities—played a key role in their motivation and achievement (Dweck, 2015).

Minnesota State Colleges and Universities. Minnesota State is the third largest system of state colleges and universities in the United States and the largest in the state with 30 colleges, 7 universities, and 54 campuses (Minnesota State, 2019).

Non-traditional student. Age 24 or older, family responsibilities, works, or did not enter college immediately after high school (NCES, 2015).

Open admission. Policy whereby the school will accept any student who applies (NCES, 2020).

Persistence/completion. Percent of a fall entering cohort of full-time regular and transfer students, that are retained, graduated or transferred by the second fall term following original fall enrollment (Minnesota State System Metrics Dashboard, 2018).

Phi Theta Kappa (PTK). Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) recognizes the academic achievement of college students and provides opportunities for its members to grow as scholars and leaders. Established in 1918, Phi Theta Kappa has a presence on almost 1,300 community college campuses in 11 nations. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) recognized Phi Theta Kappa as the official honor society for two-year colleges in 1929. (PTK, 2020).

SkillsUSA. National membership association serving high school, college and middle school students who are preparing for careers in trade, technical and skilled service occupations, including health occupations, and for further education. SkillsUSA is a partnership of students,

teachers and industry working together to ensure America has a skilled workforce (SkillsUSA, 2020).

Methodology

This qualitative study utilized focus groups to answer the research questions. Focus groups were chosen for this research due to the saturation of email communication, historically low response rates, and survey fatigue. During this unprecedented time of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the results from this focus group can be considered valid, but not necessarily reliable. Duplicating this focus group with students not in the middle of Pandemic would likely produce different results. Students were experiencing the added stressors of unemployment or tele-work, home schooling their children, and being forced to be an on-line student at a hands-on school. This all created feelings of extreme uncertainty for the students in the focus group.

Focus groups are a tool that allow for open-ended questions and thoughtful responses around perception and feeling about co-curricular engagement at Hennepin Technical College. A focus group allowed for deeper discussion and focused questions and answers. Focus groups are led by a researcher who takes a non-direct role and uses the open-ended questions to dive deeper into each response and gleam a collection of qualitative data (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Data was analyzed using a thematic reduction process. According to Kruger (1988) focus group data analysis must be systematic and verifiable; systematic in the sense that it follows a prescribed sequential pattern, and verifiable that the process would permit another researcher to arrive at similar conclusions using available documents and raw data. For these reasons, an interpretational analysis process was used to analyze data from Focus Group A (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Interpretational analysis is used to find constructs, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003).

Summary

The college completion crisis in American is an issue being addressed by a multitude of organizations: The Lumina Foundation, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Complete College America, to name a few. The concern of African American/Black students finishing college at an alarmingly lower rate than their white peers is certainly part of the equation and warrants research in how actively engaging students in co-curricular opportunities could foster a sense of belonging and support the increase in completion rate for these students.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

This chapter will identify discuss student involvement, theories of student belonging, student belonging through transitional family support, and student belonging through co-curricular engagement. The purpose of this study is to identify co-curricular engagement opportunities that are relevant to African American/Black students at Hennepin Technical College. This study also sought to understand which co-curricular opportunities would increase a sense of belonging, foster self-efficacy and increase help-seeking skills. Results from this study will be used to inform Hennepin Technical College on its current and future co-curricular offerings. This research is seeking to answer the following questions.

1. What co-curricular activities are currently offered and being attended by African American/Black.

2. What are the barriers experienced to participating in the co-curricular activities at Hennepin Technical College?

3. What co-curricular engagement opportunities are relevant to African American/Black students at Hennepin Technical College?

Overview of Hennepin Technical College

Hennepin Technical College (HTC) is located in western Hennepin County ten minutes from downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota. Hennepin Technical College educates about 5,000 credit-based students per year; 74% of students from underrepresented populations, 46% First Generation College Students, 10% Asian, 22% African American/Black, .7% Latinx, and 52% White (HTC Fact Book, 2019). With the average age of twenty-seven years old, the HTC student works thirty or more hours per week and has numerous financial and familial obligations (HTC Fact Book, 2019).

Overview of Co-Curricular Programming

According to the Higher Learning Commission, "Co-curricular programs are suited to the institution's mission and contribute to the educational experience of its students" (Higher Learning Commission, 2018). In other words, co-curricular is events and engagement opportunities held outside the classroom that enhance or support the college mission, and values.

Examples of co-curricular programming include student clubs, organizations, sports, art and theater, and competitive professional organizations. This type of programming looks very different from institution to institution. A four-year residential campus may hold movie nights, concerts, or even festivals. A two-year community college tends to hold activities much like a four-year college, but typically with less participation. Events like bingo, trivia night, bowling are considered traditional co-curricular events. At Hennepin Technical College, a two-year college focused on preparing students for the work force, the emphasis of co-curricular engagement is career driven. A good example of career relevant co-curricular engagement is SkillsUSA which is a professional organization that gives students an opportunity to compete in a particular discipline, including Auto Technology. In order to reach the students who would benefit participating in SkillsUSA, Hennepin Technical College Student Life and Career Development staff implement what they call 'trip over it' programming. An event is set up at a date, time, and location where it is known students will be. For example, if the auto-technology students have class from 7:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. each day take and take a break at 9:15a.m. each day, the Student life and Career Development department will set up food and messaging about the Auto-Tech club directly outside of the classroom. The necessity to meet students where they are…literally. Student Life and Career Development's (SLCD) student co-curricular engagement initiative for Fiscal Year 20 (FY20) encompasses four quadrants of success. The

quadrants were derived from employer and student surveys: the Hennepin Technical College Advisory Board survey, #RealCollege survey, University of Minnesota Health Indicators survey, and Stop. Drop. Enroll! research. The four quadrants are Basic Needs, Communication, Managing Stress, and Professionalism. Each of the quadrants are aligned with Student Life and Career Development Learning outcomes: Social Awareness, Personal Mindset, Problem Solving, Planning for Success, Collaboration, and Communication.

The quadrants are addressed through a Growth Mindset lens; each area will build upon the previous month's information.

- August-October: Basic needs – What do I need to be successful?

- November-December: Communication – What is the best way to communicate in this situation?

- January-March: Managing Stress – What does this look like for me and why is it important?

- April-May: Professionalism – What does this mean for my work and me?

A few examples include a community resource fair at the student and family welcome night, free personal care items in each bathroom, and a student and alumni panel about college success and the importance of taking care of your basic needs. For the month of October, safety is an important basic need that will take the spotlight. In partnership with the Office of Equity and inclusion, Domestic Violence Awareness month will address visibility, prevention, and support through various activities.

In order to ensure the effectiveness of the co-curricular activities, multiple assessments are used. Assessing the outcomes of the co-curricular engagement is conducted using indirect assessment methods, surveys and attendance numbers. The survey is scored on a five-point

Likert scale and was developed in partnership with HTC's Department of Institutional Research. The results from these assessments are used to inform HTC's co-curricular activities to make improvements.

Student Involvement

The crisis of college completion is a subject of much research. According to the Lumina Foundation; a work force crisis can only be averted by ensuring an increase in degree completion (Lumina, 2019). At the national level, students that begin at a two-year public college, 24 % complete a degree within three years (NCES, 2017). Hennepin Technical College, with campuses in Brooklyn Park and Eden Prairie Minnesota have better that average completion rates at 48 % (HTC Fact Book, 2017). At Hennepin Technical College, an open admissions institution and the largest technical college in the state of Minnesota, 2014 reflects a 50.4 % completion rate for students of color as compared to 61.8 % for white students. This large gap is the reason for this first of its kind study at Hennepin Technical College

Students who participate feel engaged and develop a sense of belonging and mattering are more likely to persist and complete college. As Tinto (1993) and others have suggested, the "social integration" of students with the institution is an important factor in their ability to persist. The role of the student services office has evolved to deal with many of the issues facing students on campus. The atmosphere and climate of a university reflected by how the institution treats and supports students and by the positive nature of peer relations on campus, is important to the self-esteem and confidence a student generates (Swail, 2003, p. 80).

Student involvement, extracurricular, socio-academic, and student activities are all common monikers for what is morphing into co-curricular engagement. Having long been at the center of student retention theory, co-curricular engagement is paramount to increasing retention

and persistence. The more students are engaged with the campus faculty, staff, and additional

engagement opportunities, the more likely they will be to persist and the same students tend to

perform at a higher academic level as well (e.g., Astin, 1975, 1984, 1993; Borglum & Kubala,

2000; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Terenzini, Lorang, & Pascarella, 1981;

Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993).

Theories of Belonging

A student's perception of belonging is a theory that has been put into practice at four-year

colleges for some time now. Primarily focused on traditional four-year college students, the data

does not take experiences of under-served populations into consideration. That said, the impact

belonging has on the persistence track of a two-year college student is supported by the

literature. Several recent studies indicate that a "…sense of belonging may be multidimensional

and context/object-specific" (Hoffman et al., 2002; Tovar & Simon, 2010; Tovar, 2013, p. 263).

The existing literature is complex and varied in the conclusions around the most effective

methods to effect student retention. Social, academic, co-curricular, perceptions of institutional

support are all contenders for effectiveness. As stated by Deil-Amen in the 2011 paper, *Socio-*

Academic Integrative Moments: Rethinking Academic and Social Integration Among Two-Year

College Students in Career-Related Program:

> Applying the model to two-year and other commuting students has generated even more
>
> mixed, and less solid, results. On the one hand, some research suggests the model is not
>
> relevant. Voorhees (1987) found no association between persistence and integration in
>
> one community college. For commuting students, Bean and Metzner (1985), Tinto
>
> himself (1993), and Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) contend background

characteristics and external circumstances have a greater impact on persistence than on

campus factors. This aligns with research on the pivotal influence of significant others

who encourage college goals in students' personal lives (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda,

1993; Nora, 1987; Nora, Attinasi, & Matonak, 1990). On the other hand, studies using

national two-year samples (Deil-Amen, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005) and a

meta-analysis of six studies (Wortman & Napoli, 1996) show academic and social

integration do influence attainment, but the findings of most studies are mixed regarding

which form of integration is most important. Halpin (1990), Mutter (1992), and

Pascarella and Chapman (1983) found community college persistence was influenced

by academic integration, not social, and Tinto, Russo, and Kadel (1994), and later Tinto

(1997) found classroom involvement not only facilitates academic integration, but also

promotes integration beyond the classroom. In contrast, other scholars find community

college students, similar to racial/ethnic minority students in other settings, experience

"validation" *outside* the classroom, which influences persistence (Attinasi,

1989; Rendon, 1994; Terenzini et al., 1994). Also, several qualitative studies find the

social dimensions of two-year colleges play a role in persistence, with intellectual and

social contact with faculty, staff, and other students outside of class of particular salience.

(Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; London, 1978; Neuman & Riesman, 1980; Rosenbaum

et al., 2006; Weis, 1985)

Belonging Through Transitional Family Support

 Family support of students and their pursuit of a college education is an important factor

in success. Research conducted by Schlossberg in 1990 and Tovar in 2013 highlighted the

importance that family support plays in student success. As a non-traditional student navigates

through the unknowns of college, family is heavily relied upon to support the student through the transitions. In a small study published in 2018, it was found that due to the lack of programmatic support for students, the students were forced to rely on families for the transitional support required for success (Goings, 2018, p. 9). Family support is also one of the greatest predictors of success for non-traditional students (Tovar, 2013).

Belonging Through Co-Curricular Engagement

If a student feels like they belong on campus and fit in, they are more likely to persist and complete college. Co-curricular engagement provides students with an opportunity to engage with other students, staff, and faculty from the college and broadening their support system at the college. In Deli-Amen's study of 238 students from diverse backgrounds, it was found that a student's perception of successful integration into college relied heavily on staff, faculty, and other agents from the college supporting students through a successful transition. Students spend the majority of their time on campus in class interacting with faculty; developing co-curricular programming supported by faculty, tied to college mission, and perceived as highly relevant to career success is important. Based on the preceding research, building a sense of mattering and belonging through co-curricular career relevant programming theoretically should be very successful.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter will review the method and procedures applied to conduct this research. The purpose of this study was to identify co-curricular engagement opportunities that are relevant to African American/Black students at Hennepin Technical College. This study also sought to understand which co-curricular will increase a sense of belonging enough to foster self-efficacy and increase help-seeking skills. Results from this study can be used to inform Hennepin Technical College on its current and future co-curricular offerings. This research is seeking to answer the following questions.

1. What co-curricular activities are currently offered and being attended by African American/Black.

2. What are the barriers experienced to participating in the co-curricular activities at Hennepin Technical College?

3. What co-curricular engagement opportunities are relevant to African American/Black students at Hennepin Technical College?

Subject Selection and Description

African American/Black student population was chosen for this study because of the disproportionate number of African American/Black students that drop out and do not complete a degree or certificate at Hennepin Technical College. With Minnesota having one of the largest education disparities in the country, and the Minnesota State Colleges and University unveiling Equity 2030, this group of students was an imperative choice.

Students from Hennepin Technical College's Blacks Rising in Education and Academics (BREA) received the initial invite to participate in the focus group and asked to invite at least five other students from Hennepin Technical College. Using a group of known individuals to

expand the pool of participants is called Snowball Sampling (Crossman, 2019). This method of finding participants was chosen because the African American/Black cultures tend to be relational, trust carries a great deal of weight and students were more likely to attend if invited by someone they trust (L. Otieno, personal communication, April 8, 2020).

Instrumentation

The instrumentation for this research consisted of a focus group utilizing the research questions. Focus groups are a tool that allow for open-ended questions and thoughtful responses around perception and feeling about co-curricular engagement at Hennepin Technical College. A focus group allowed for deeper discussion and focused questions and answers. Focus groups are led by a researcher that takes a non-direct role and uses the open-ended questions to dive deeper into each response and gleam a collection of qualitative data (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The research questions for the focus group were developed by the researcher and were vetted through the UW Stout and Hennepin Technical College IRB processes and considered valid and reliable.

Data Collection Procedures

This qualitative study used a focus group to determine the recommendations for successful co-curricular programming. Qualitative data is by nature non-numerical and lends well to a focus group. Focus groups are a tool that allow for open-ended questions and thoughtful responses around perception and feelings, which could be interpreted for meaning. Qualitative research was an ideal fit for a focus group that examines the micro-level relationships between African American/Black students and co-curricular engagement at the college (Crossman, 2020). A focus group allowed for deeper discussion and focused questions and answers. Focus groups are led by a researcher that takes a non-direct role and uses the open-

ended questions to dive deeper into each response and gleam a collection of qualitative data (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Focus groups were chosen for this research due to the saturation of email communication, historically low response rates, and survey fatigue. During this unprecedented time of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the results from this focus group can be considered valid, but not necessarily reliable. Duplicating this focus group with students not in the middle of a Pandemic would likely produce different results. The students were experiencing the added stressors of unemployment or tele-work, home schooling their children, and being forced to be an on-line student at a hands-on school. This all created feelings of extreme uncertainty for the students in the focus group.

The study was designed pre-COVID-19 Pandemic and conducted as the state of Minnesota was going the second month of a stay-at-home order due to the pandemic. Because of the intense situation caused by the statewide-declared peacetime emergency, it was only possible to gather one group of students together instead of the originally planned three groups. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus groups was held on Zoom with student present from the Eden Prairie and Brooklyn Park Campuses. Due to the punishing amount of stress students were experiencing, the focus group and survey were conducted after students had completed the majority of their courses.

On May 6, 2020 eight students met for 67 minutes via Zoom. The Zoom meeting was set up as invite only, record and chat feature disabled, and the ability to mute, and disable the camera were allowed. Prior to the focus group, the Consent Form was shared with each student via email and each responded with an email indicating they were proceeding into the focus group with affirmative consent. To ensure a successful focus group with usable data, students must

feel a level of trust with the facilitators and comfortable enough to be sure their thoughts and feelings will be respected (Krueger & Casey, 2015). It is for this reason the decision was made to use two group facilitators that are closer in age and similar ethnicity to the students in the focus group. The focus group was conducted by Laura Otieno who has a M.S. in Non-profit Management from Hamline University and works within Student Life and Career Development at HTC and Corey Young jr. who has a M.S. Higher Education from Saint Cloud State University and is the Assistant Director of Enrollment Services at HTC. Laura was the primary facilitator and Corey Young kept field notes and offered follow up questions to probe deeper into the meaning behind student comments and thoughts. The researcher did not participate in the research because as the director of the department and white woman in her 50's, there is a power dynamic, generational, and cultural differences that could influence the results of the focus group.

The focus group data was stored for the duration of the thesis preparation and grading process on a secure drive accessible only by the researcher. After the thesis was complete and accepted by the University of Wisconsin Stout's Graduate School, the data and field notes were deleted from the researcher's secure drive. There was no personally identifiable information regarding students contained in the research notes.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the focus group was organized in a bulleted format on a Word document and organized using a highlighter to identify common themes and ideas. Interpretational analysis process was used to analyze data from the focus group (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Interpretational analysis was used to find constructs, themes, and patterns that could be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied (Gall, Gall, & Borg,

2003). Additionally, two meetings were held with the researchers, one immediately following the focus group and the other two days later to dive deeper into the repetitive themes and create a shared understanding of the outcomes.

Limitations

Limitation of the method used include the following:

1. This study is a snapshot in time and the results will likely be different as student populations change.

2. Given the COVID-19 pandemic student opinions may be skewed due to COVID stress and fatigue.

3. Student responses are from a small representative population of African American/Black students and may not wholly represent all African American/Black students.

4. The research is limited by the state definition of the demographic group African American/Black. There is no option for students to indicate country of origin.

5. Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, access to students for focus groups was limited.

Summary

A focus group was the primary source of the research data. Two focus group facilitators that more closely mirrored the ages and ethnicity of the focus groups were used to help ensure an atmosphere of trust and respect. Due to the extraordinary effect of COVID-19, the focus group model was challenging. If not for current technology and access to technology for students, this research would not have been possible.

Chapter IV: Results

This chapter will discuss the findings from the focus group and introduce the important themes from the findings. The purpose of this study was to identify co-curricular engagement opportunities that are relevant to African American/Black students at Hennepin Technical College. This study also sought to understand which co-curricular will increase a sense of belonging enough to foster self-efficacy and increase help-seeking skills. Results from this study can be used to inform Hennepin Technical College on its current and future co-curricular offerings. This research is seeking to answer the following questions:

1. What co-curricular activities are currently offered and being attended by African American/Black.

2. What are the barriers experienced to participating in the co-curricular activities at Hennepin Technical College?

3. What co-curricular engagement opportunities are relevant to African American/Black students at Hennepin Technical College?

Demographic

The focus group was comprised of seven Hennepin Technical College students and one recent graduate. All eight students are between the ages of 24 – 44, two identify as male, and six of the students identified as female. The average age of the Hennepin Technical College Student is 27, so the age rage of the participants was an accurate reflection of the students at Hennepin Technical College. The college does have more men than women, so the sample gender was not representative of the college. All eight students identify as African American/Black. Origin of birth was not disclosed for this research.

Analysis

The focus group highlighted some known themes of concern at the college and also highlighted ideas that had not been brought forward. The data also highlighted the systemic problems within higher education and society – micro-aggressions, pervasive color blindness, and the inability of general humanity to embrace cultures authentically enough to produce an inclusive world where a sense of belonging is innate.

Theme 1: Equity without inclusion. What is the cost of access and equity without inclusion? The focus group students talked about fear. Fear of the unknown, the fear of not seeing people that look like them, and a fear of not being welcomed. The participants talked about staff and faculty not understanding cultural differences and why they are important. One student said, "I always felt dismissed by my teacher and that made me not want to stay at the school any longer than I had to. If there was something going on outside the classroom….even with free food, I would go home. I figured if my teacher did not care if I was there, no one else will either."

According to the students in the focus group, faculty have the most profound impact on students, their feelings of self-efficacy, and comfort in participating in co-curricular activities. Student's perception of their instructor being on their side, supportive, and truly inclusive of who they are as a person is the gateway to belonging at the college. Once inclusion is accomplished and a quality relationship established between a student and faculty member, a student is more likely to participate in co-curricular activities. Conversely, students stated if they do not feel welcomed in class or respected for what they bring with them to the classroom, students feel an aversion to doing anything outside the classroom and are not likely to participate in co-curricular opportunities. While stated by the focus group, this theory warrants more research.

Theme 2: Holding space. Addressing the concept of holding space (physical and emotional) for students to connect with fellow students who have shared lived experiences is a commonly understood need that many colleges fill with a multi-cultural space and clubs focused on black empowerment. While the preceding things were mentioned and important to the focus group, the opportunity to create deeper connections alongside students and mentors with similar lived experiences took the spotlight. With the acknowledgement of systemic racism, students understand the necessity of learning how to successful navigate not only school, and the workplace, but also society - within the norms of the dominate culture. The students want and need conversations and interactions that are honest, real, and meaningful.

Research Questions

The following information is the results of the research questions for this study. Also included in the information about the research questions is direct data from the focus group participants

Research question 1. *What co-curricular activities are currently offered and being attended by African American/Black?* African American/Black Students at Hennepin Technical College participate in a variety of activities: Student Senate, Clubs, Organizations, and family events. The reason students attend these events is food is almost always offered as part of the event.

Research question 2. *What are the barriers experienced to participating in the co-curricular activities at Hennepin Technical College?* A variety of barriers were mentioned during the focus group. How the students are communicated with is a serious barrier. While the college's official form of communication is email, over time, it has become the least effective and least preferred method. Other barrier is the way a student feel on campus and is treated by

faculty/staff, schedules, and transportation. Specific comments from the focus group are listed below:

- Not knowing your resources or not seeing someone who looks like you. Fear of unexpected, not feeling safe or welcomed.

- Wanting a welcoming environment

- Scared to ask for help because no one approached the openly, needing connection and potential hand off. The power of hand offs and increasing the communication.

- What is effective communication, email isn't a sufficient communication.

- Students just don't feel as comfortable

- Having student navigation is important.

- Having representation is important but the right person in place is more important.

- Just because they look like you doesn't mean they are with you.

- Strategic programming approach to the communications and type of events. "Needs to know that the school cares"

- Feels the difference of being Black on campus, feels more hostile just being black in classroom and outside of classroom

- Hearing the word Black In student organizations sometimes discourage students to join because they already feel the discrimination on campus.

- Staff, faculty or other students don't really understand cultural differences and how to work with the group. Culture on campus has to change

- Faculty don't take time, are distant, faculty make students feel challenged

- Body language from staff and faculty causes difficulty for the initial relationship of the faculty and student relationship

- one student felt positive experiences from staffing while walking in the hall ways

- Smiles on campus from staff, students notice some staff aren't as friendly

- have some difficulty with feeling belittled by staff members vs white students

- Classroom experiences directly affect the feeling towards non people of color staff on campus

- Classroom experiences causes students not to want to be involved in events outside of classroom

- Feels racism and discrimination not only HTC but just about everywhere, Systemic racism is alive and well in today's higher education

- Student feels that they have to "bite their tongue" constantly

- Eden Prairie advisor did a great job of sitting down and taking time with student.

Research question 3. *What co-curricular engagement opportunities are relevant to African American/Black students at Hennepin Technical College?* The students in the focus group indicated that more general culture events outside of the 'special months' or typical days like MLK Day in January. In addition, much time was spent on the acknowledgement of systemic racism and how it defines their lives. Specific suggestions are quoted as below:

- Suggested staff training on interacting with different cultures

- Students suggested relevant programming, example: understanding financial aid, its impact and how a student that has attended multiple institutions would navigate it.

- Suggested a diverse library staff. Current staff are intimidating to engage with if English is not the student's native language.

- Presenters of color during events like Keys to success

- Acknowledge student's efforts through events/certificates that recognize their hard work

- Suggested: cultural artwork around the campus that reflects the students

- Cultural events

- Students noted that BREA needs more financial and staff support to be able to reach more students on campus.

Results

The questions explored within the focus group of barriers to participating in activities and what engagement opportunities students would like to see resulted a two over-arching themes of importance related to a creating a sense of belonging through co-curricular engagement. 1) The cost of access and equity without inclusion is great; 2) Holding space (physical and emotional) for students to connect with fellow students that have shared lived experiences.

Chapter V: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

This chapter will discuss the findings from the focus group, conclusions, and recommendations. The purpose of this study was to identify co-curricular engagement opportunities that are relevant to African American/Black students at Hennepin Technical College. This study also sought to understand which co-curricular will increase a sense of belonging enough to foster self-efficacy and increase help-seeking skills. Results from this study can be used to inform Hennepin Technical College on its current and future co-curricular offerings. This research is seeking to answer the following questions.

1. What co-curricular activities are currently offered and being attended by African American/Black.

2. What are the barriers experienced to participating in the co-curricular activities at Hennepin Technical College?

3. What co-curricular engagement opportunities are relevant to African American/Black students at Hennepin Technical College?

Discussion

African American/Black students at Hennepin Technical College complete degrees at a lower rate than their white peers. At the state level, the U.S. Census Bureau (2020) and U.S. Department of Education (2017) report that Minnesota has one of the largest education disparities in the country with students of color graduating from two-year colleges at the rate of 42 % while white students graduate at a rate of 53 %. At Hennepin Technical College, an open admissions institution and the largest technical college in the state of Minnesota, 2014 reflects a 50.4 % completion rate for students of color as compared to 61.8 % for white students. While both of these numbers are higher than the national and state averages, students of color at

Hennepin Technical College are less likely to complete than their white counter parts by 18 %. (Minnesota State, 2018). The purpose of this research study was to identify co-curricular engagement opportunities that are relevant to African American/Black students at Hennepin Technical College and improve persistence by increasing a sense of belonging.

Conclusions

Based on the research students commented on small interactions at the college and the impact the interactions had on their sense of belonging. Many of the comments were centered around feeling like a number, fake smiles, dismissive body language, overwhelming sense of being 'less than' and a lack of understanding about the power of the 'hand off'. The power of the hand off, a seemingly innocuous and every-day occurrence wields more power than one might think. The student that comes to a staff or faculty member with a question, does so because there is a level of trust the student feels. By taking the time to hear the student and walk/call/email the person who can actually solve the problem is powerful. Starting the handoff with an introduction, explanation about the person you are handing off to and what they do at the college builds the relationship between the three of you and, in essence, if done with care, can transfer the trust the student has for you to the person who will be assisting them with their current question. These webs of relationships and trust build a system of confidence and support the students' desire to persist.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that the Student Life and Career Development department focus on the two major findings: inclusion and holding space. Inclusion is an area that covers a broad spectrum of subject. To build a culture of inclusion, students need to see themselves reflected at the institution. A sense of belonging starts with a level of comfort and a feeling of familiarity as a student walks the halls. If a student has one connection at the college

that looks like them or has had similar lived experiences, the sense of kinship creates a special sense of belonging. The students from the focus group were also quick to point out that looking like them is not enough – they need to know they are student focused and care about the successes of every person at the college. While the college is actively working to hire and retain a staff that is more reflective of the student body.

Equally important to a campus culture of inclusion, is for students to have space to connect with others who have similar lived experiences. As stated above, addressing the concept of holding space (physical and emotional) for students to connect with fellow students is a commonly understood need that many colleges fill with a multi-cultural space and clubs focused on black empowerment. While the preceding things were mentioned and important to the focus group, the opportunity to create deeper connections alongside students and mentors with similar lived experiences took the spotlight. Notably, using the word 'Black' in the club names or events, repel some African American/Black students as they already feel discriminated against while on campus and attending something that uses 'Black' in the title or name creates another layer of being different. With the acknowledgement of systemic racism, the students want to understand how to successfully navigate not only school and the workplace, but also society - within the norms of the dominate culture.   The students want and need conversations and interactions that are real, raw, and action oriented.

Recommendations

The college needs to work to increase the staff and faculty of color and work systematically, one program area at a time to build a culture of inclusion. Understanding the way other cultures work is not enough. Staff and faculty need to develop new frameworks to solve

the most challenging challenges with culture, race, diversity, equity, and inclusion by critically reflecting on self, personal values, and social cultural systems as a whole.

The Student life and Career Development department will plan to engage with new faculty during the new faculty orientation to introduce them to the Student Life and Career Development co-curricular engagement and find touch points throughout the year to build support from faculty.

The suggested action is to create bi-monthly round table conversations with starter topics and guest facilitators from the community. The topics will be focused on the struggles and successes of African American/Black Minnesotans. It is critical that the round table conversations evolve organically and allow for space to ask question and dive into deeper.

References

Astin, A. (1975). *Preventing students from dropping out*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Astin, A. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, *25*(4), 297-308.

Astin, A. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Bonwell, C., & Eison, J. (1991). *Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom*. ASHE ERIC Higher Education Report No. 1. ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education. Washington, DC: The George Washington University.

Borglum, K., & Kubala, T. (2000). Academic and social integration of community college students: A case study. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *24*(7), 567-576. doi:10.1080/10668920050139712

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). Coronavirus disease basics. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#Coronavirus-Disease-2019-Basics

Crossman, A. (2019). What is a snowball sample in sociology? *ThoughtCO*. Retrieved from https://www.thoughtco.com/snowball-sampling-3026730

Crossman, A. (2020). An overview of qualitative research methods. *ThoughtCO.* Retrieved from https://www.thoughtco.com/qualitative-research-methods-3026555

Deli-Amen, R. (2011). Socio-Academic integrative moments: Rethinking academic and social integration among two-year college students in career-related programs. *The Journal of High Education*, *82*(1), 54-91. doi:10.1080/00221546.2011.11779085

Dweck, C. (2015, September 22) Carol Dweck revisits the 'growth mindset'. *Education Week*.

    Retrieved from https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/09/23/carol-dweck-revisits-the-

    growth-mindset.html

Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2003). *Educational research; An introduction.* Boston,

    MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Goldrick-Rab, S., Coca, V., Baker-Smith, C., & Looker, E. (2019). City University of New

    York: #RealCollege survey. *The Hope Center*. Retrieved from

    https://hope4college.com/wp-

    content/uploads/2019/03/HOPE_realcollege_CUNY_report_final_webversion.pdf

Halpin, R. L. (1990). An application of the Tinto model to the analysis of freshman persistence

    in a community college. *Community College Review, 17*(4), 22–32.

    doi:10.1177/009155219001700405

Higher Learning Commission. (2018). Policy title: Criteria for accreditation. Number:

    CRRT.B.10.010. Retrieved from https://www.hlcommission.org/Policies/criteria-and-

    core-components.html?highlight=WyJjby1jdXJyaWN1bGFyIl0=

HTC Institutional Research & Data Operations. (2019). Retrieved from

    https://htcbirp1.hennepintech.edu/reports/powerbi/Everyone/Weekly_Stats

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). Focus group interviewing. In K. E. Newcomer, H. P.

    Hatry, J. S. Wholey (Eds.), *Handbook of practical program evaluation* (4th ed., pp. 506-

    534). doi:10.1002/9781119171386.ch20

Minnesota Office of Higher Education. (2016). Educational disparities. Retrieved from

    https://www.ohe.state.mn.us/pdf/EdDisparitiesInfographic.pdf

Minnesota State. (2018). Accountability dashboard: Strategic framework performance methods. Hennepin Technical College.

Moore, C., & Shulock, N. (2010). Divided we fail: Improving completing and closing racial gaps in California's community colleges. *Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy*. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED513824

Mutter, P. (1992). Tinto's theory of departure and community college student persistence. *Journal of College Student Development*, *33*(4), 310–318. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ449636

National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). Undergraduate retention and graduation rates. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_ctr.asp.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). The condition of education glossary. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/glossary.asp#o

Pascarella, E. T. (1980). Student-faculty informal contact and college outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, *50*(4), 545-595. doi:10.3102/00346543050004545

Pascarella, E. T., & Chapman, D. W. (1983). A multi-institutional, path analytic validation of Tinto's model of college withdrawal. *American Educational Research Journal*, *20*(1), 87-102. doi:10.3102/00028312020001087

Phi Theta Kappa. (2020). What is the phi theta kappa society? Retrieved from https://www.ptk.org/about/faq/

Schlossberg, N. K., LaSalle, A. D., & Golec, R. R. (1990). The mattering scales for adult students in postsecondary education. *American Council on Education, Washington, DC. Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials.*

SkillsUSA. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.skillsusa.org/

Statzell, D. (2016). Hennepin technical college fact book. Retrieved from

    https://www.hennepintech.edu/_documents/institutional-

    research/facts/HTCFactBook2016.pdf

Terenzini, P. T., Lorang, W. G., & Pascarella, E. T. (1981). Predicting freshman persistence and

    voluntary dropout decisions: A replication. *Research in Higher Education*, *15*(2), 109-

    127. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/40195427?seq=1

Terenzini, P. T., Rendon, L. I., Upcraft, M. L., Millar, S. B., Allison, K. W., Gregg, P. L.,

    Jalomo, R. (1994). The transition to college: Diverse students, diverse stories. *Research*

    in Higher Education, *35*(1), 57-73. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED360943

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research.

    Review of Educational Research, 45(1)*,* 89-125. doi:10.3102/00346543045001089

Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (1st ed.).

    Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd. ed.).

    Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student

    persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, *68*, 599-623. doi:10.2307/2959965

Tinto, V. (1998). College as communities: Taking the research on student persistence seriously.

    Review of Higher Education, *21*(2), 167-177. Retrieved from

    https://canvas.harvard.edu/files/307265/download?download_frd=1&verifier=oGZ7y2Rp

    Ecq1eSDy3LT6HFnkXM4Re7wccxRB1wqN

Tinto, V. (1999). *Adapting learning communities to the needs of development education students*. Paper presented at the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, Stanford University. Tinto, V. (2001). *Rethinking the first year of college.* Higher Education Monograph Series. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University.

Tinto, V. (2005). Epilogue: Moving from theory to action. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success*. Westport, CT: ACE/Praeger.

Tinto, V. & Goodsell, A. (1994). Freshman interest groups and the first year experience: Constructing student communities in a large university. *Journal of the Freshman Year Experience*, *6*(1), 7-28.

Tinto, V., Goodsell, A., & Russo, P. (1993). Building community among new college students. *Liberal Education*, *79*(4), 16-21.

Tinto, V., & Russo, P. (1994). Coordinated studies programs: Their effect on student involvement at a community college. *Community College Review*, *22*(2), 16-25. doi:10.1177/009155219402200203

Tinto, V., Russo, P., & Kadel, S. (1994). Constructing educational communities: Increasing retention in challenging circumstances. *Community College Journal*. *64,* 26-29.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). American community survey. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/note/US/RHI425218.

U.S. Department of Education. (2018). Undergraduate retention and graduation rates. *National Center of Education Statistics.* Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_ctr.asp

U.S. Department of Education. (2017). First-Time postsecondary students' persistence after 3

years. *National Center of Education Statistics.* Retrieved from

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_tsc.asp

Wiersma, W., & Jurs, S. G. (2009). *Research methods in education: An introduction* (9th ed.)

Boston, MA: Pearson.