Transfixed on Eliminating Barriers: Re-conceptualizing Student Success Practices in Contemporary Higher Education at a Public Historically Black College and University

By

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Abstract

As higher education continues to grapple with declining enrollments, a shifting demography, workforce demands, and external accountability pressures to increase graduation rates – institutions face many complexities. Minority-serving institutions, in this case, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), are positioned to continue providing postsecondary access and completion for students. This study examined the experiences of 14 Black administrators working in direct or ancillary student success roles at a public HBCU. Using a critical comparative case study (CCS) vertical and transversal analysis (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2018), document analysis, observations, and semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection methods employed. There are three emergent findings: 1) the salience of race and equity remain interconnected within the practices of HBCU administrators, 2) the university used data analytics and educational platforms (e.g., Educational Advisory Board – Navigate, DegreeWorks, Early Alert, among others) to guide its student success policies and practices across the campus and high-touch practices (e.g., academic coaches, advising, tutoring etc.) to guide the student success strategy practice, and lastly, 3) despite the institution's innovative student success practices, leadership within the HBCU sector is dynamic and administrators experienced many complexities amid institutional silos, funding inequities, external accountability pressures, and remaining committed to mission. The findings of this study fill a gap in the literature on contemporary experiences of administrators working at a public HBCU, offering some lessons that could be garnered by administrators at other postsecondary institutions where there is a focus on wanting students to be successful amidst competing, and sometimes conflicting, external pressures for resources, accountability, and positive student outcomes (e.g., graduation).

Keywords: HBCUs, Black Administrators, Student Success, Data Analytics

Dedication

To all the educators that make an indelible impact on children daily. Your sacrifice and power can truly change the lives of students, families, and society.

Jane and Alisa, your unwavering commitment to students, unmatched work ethic, and humility kept me throughout this journey. I will honor both of you as I advocate for equity in education.

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Chapter One: Introduction

At their inception, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) sought to educate newly emancipated slaves despite a rancorously segregated society (Anderson, 1988; Gasman, 2007). Currently, there are 101 HBCUs spread across 20 Southern and Midwestern states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands (NCES, 2016). HBCUs are not monolithic; Black colleges and universities vary in institutional type (two-year and four-year), control (public and private), gender (single-sex or co-ed), financial resources, religious affiliation, and other ethos (Brown & Daniel, 2001; Ricard & Brown, 2008). Their missions are steeped in preserving Black history and culture (Albritton, 2012; Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Winkle-Wagner & Lock, 2014). HBCUs were birthed out of the need to challenge political and social exclusion in an environment that held one race as superior to another (i.e., racism) (Evans, Evans, & Evans, 2002), providing access and opportunity for Black students who might have been left out of the postsecondary educational attainment (Albritton, 2012). In 2011, HBCUs made up 2 percent of the degree-conferring Title IV institutions and enrolled nearly 350,000 students, which is 1.6 percent of all students in higher education in the United States. Currently, approximately 7 percent of Black undergraduate students nationally attend an HBCU (IPEDS, 2011).

HBCUs, as defined in the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), were established for the purpose of providing educational opportunities for African Americans – who were traditionally and systemically excluded from other colleges and universities in the United States (Gasman, 2007; Ricard & Brown, 2008). HBCUs provide access to low-income, first-generation, and high-achieving students of all ethnicities that seek to pursue a higher education, which is crucial to

ensuring that the United States' 2020 college degree attainment goals[1] are achieved (Freeman et al., 2016; Gasman, 2009; Nichols, 2011). HBCUs continue to be shaped under multiple lenses (i.e., historical, economic, cultural, and political) that intersect and define Black people and communities in the United States (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007). For example, Wooten (2015) argued that HBCUs have historically remained underfunded (i.e., state diverting resources away from Black organizations) with no fear of repercussions given the state-sanctioned racial inequality. HBCUs continue to deal with the deep entrenchment of these legacies. The same officials with both administrative and legislative purview that ensured the resource inequity were now responsible for deciding if HBCUs met performance standards in which they had been deterred from meeting (Wooten, 2015, p. 5). According to Gasman (2009), economic issues such as smaller endowment and disproportionately low-income students served by HBCUs result in a financial crisis given the marketplace of higher education.

Historically, HBCUs have received fewer resources than PWIs even when institutional size is taken into account from the state and federal government, foundations, and business industry (Gasman, 2009; Jones, 2016). Notwithstanding, the federal government has failed to increase financial resources at a constant rate given the historical deficits in funding toward HBCUs (e.g., keeping funds stagnated at HBCUs, while increasing funding of postsecondary institutions as a whole) (Jones, 2016; Minor, 2008). Furthermore, mechanisms such as outcomes-based funding, which requires institutions to show measurable achievements (e.g., graduation) have negatively impacted resources allocated to HBCUs and have pressured them to become more selective given the inequity in funding model (Washington Lockett, 2017). Additionally,

1 Driven by the need for the United States to remain "economically competitive" in an interconnected/complex global economy (Nichols, 2011, p. 1), the 2020 Degree Attainment (American Graduation Initiative) goal was one of the key components of President Obama's Administration. During a 2009 address to a Joint Session of Congress, he stated that the United States should acquire once again the status of being the nation with the largest percentage of college-educated citizens in the world. To achieve this would require increasing the percentage of American ages 25-64 with a college degree from 41.2% to nearly 60%.

endowment building is driven through alumni contributions which are, on average, lower at HBCUs than PWIs. As Gasman points out, even alumni-giving rates are a consequence of institutionalized racism: “These lower rates result in part from African Americans’ historic lack of access to wealth, which stems from systemic forms of racism throughout U.S. history” (Gasman, 2009, p. 6). Historical, political, and economic forces continue to shape the racial narratives that inform perceptions of HBCUs and their place in postsecondary education.

External Accountability Pressures

Each sector within higher education is under pressure to ensure that institutions are producing quality degrees, students can seek gainful employment opportunities, and college and universities are running efficiently (i.e., institutions are increasing graduation and persistence rates). According to Jones (2014), at the center of the national dialogue has been the goal to increase “college completion [as stated] in the federal College Affordability Plan and the goals and initiatives of almost every influential higher education philanthropic organization. State higher education leaders are also focused on increasing college completion and graduation rates” (p. 6). Despite the national aim of increasing efficiency and degree production, Hillman, Fryar, and Crespín-Trujillo (2017) have challenged the effectiveness of some of the mechanisms (e.g., outcomes-based funding) many of these organizations employ as hallmarks of progressive higher education policy (Jones, 2014).

Policy initiatives, like performance-based funding (PBF), were espoused to broaden higher education’s focus from access to issues pertinent to government and voter interests, such as outcomes and institutional effectiveness (Dougherty, Natow, Bork, Jones, & Vega, 2011). The implementation of such policies has driven a shift of public colleges and universities funding away from enrollment to evaluation on performance metrics (e.g., student retention and

graduation rates). Today, HBCUs are not exempt from the higher education terrain and stand at a unique crossroad to ensure their future sustainability (Albritton, 2012; Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Gasman, 2013; Minor, 2018). As change is ever present within society, HBCUs must hold steadfast to their historic mission as well as expand their footprint. Albritton (2012) wrote that:

> Even as HBCUs continue their tradition and mission of offering post-secondary education and support to members of the Black community, the changing American context has created a climate that requires HBCUs to consider how to move forward in the next decade. While there remains an unquestioned need for the unique experiences and opportunities HBCUs provide, HBCU presidents, administrators and trustee boards must not be shortsighted in their attempts to ensure that their universities are positioned to meet the demands and the challenges of an ever-evolving society. In so doing, these schools must hold firm to their core mission of offering educational opportunities to Black students as they seek, simultaneously, to expand both their national and global reach. (p. 327)

The landscape of higher education continues to shift amidst calls for increased accountability and efficiency, responses to state divestment in postsecondary education, and efforts to meet the needs of students who represent the changing demography in the United States. There is a need for highly innovative leaders (Freeman, Commodore, Gasman, & Carter, 2016; Gasman, 2013, Nichols, 2004) to traverse this complex terrain, and I argue that historically Black colleges and universities are well positioned to meet these new needs.

HBCU Success

The remnants of racism and its institutionalization in the U.S. continue to cause systematic educational inequalities within education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In addition,

the disparities in K-12 education funding often led to disparities in preparedness of students entering college continue to impact college completion in the United States. Minor (2018) showed that 41% of students that enter a (four-year) postsecondary institution will not complete within six years, and 66% of those students will not finish within four years (p. xi). The 6-year graduation rate at public HBCUs in 2011 was 29%, with an average full-time retention rate of 64% (Gasman, 2013). These rates are higher, if only slightly, for private HBCUs: the six-year graduation rate is 32%, and the average full-time retention rate is 60% (Gasman, 2013).

One should heed some caution in the interpretation of HBCUs as failing in graduation rates. While these institutions are often judged due to their lower six-year graduation rates, scholars assert that, on average, HBCUs serve Black students that are less prepared academically and have fewer resources than their counterparts at predominately White institution (PWI), arguing that "HBCUs may be providing higher levels of graduation for less academically prepared African-American students" (Kim & Conrad, 2006, p. 421). Also, when compared with peer institutions enrolling similar amounts of low-income students, HBCUs have higher completion rates (Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017). Additionally, many students at HBCUs come from low-income families that are financially challenged which at times forces students to reduce course hours, change majors, seek employment during college, assist their family, and several other factors while pursing higher education (Washington & Lockett, 2017). These strenuous economic pressures impact students' families and communities and infringe upon graduation in four years.

Research shows that, compared to students in predominantly White institutions (PWIs), students in HBCUs experience better positive psychological adjustment, greater satisfaction with overall experience, and higher academic achievement (Astin, 1993; Fleming, 2002; Roebuck &

Murty, 1993). Nonetheless, like other colleges, these institutions face significant challenges with student retention and graduation (Harper & Gasman, 2008; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011; Smith & Wolf-Wendl, 2005). Based upon the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), HBCUs have a graduation rate of 30%. There are similar completion rates reflected among some predominantly White institutions with similar student demographics (Kim & Conrad, 2006; Gasman, 2013). Washington Lockett, Gasman, and Nguyen (2018) posited that HBCU senior-level administrators' roles and interaction with students in the HBCU context are a critical component of students' motivation to both engage academically and succeed. For instance, Black women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) positively felt the presence of senior-level administrators in the study by Washington Lockett and colleagues (2018). Washington Lockett et al. (2018) further asserted that, whereas the preponderance of literature centered on student engagement and motivation to and through college is often researched through the gaze of interactions between faculty, academic advisors and academic peers, the impact and influence of senior-level administrators has not often been interrogated.

Given the prior work on HBCUs, success might look different within these institutions. Taken together, the prior work suggested that administrators matter (Washington Lockett et al., 2018) and some of these institutions may offer a different notion of success from predominantly White campuses (Conrad & Gasman, 2015). Yet little is known about what administrators are doing within public HBCUs to facilitate learning and success for students enrolled within a contemporary context. Given their mission, HBCUs face a significant tension reconciling their awareness of ubiquitous, malignant racism with notions of merit and quality, which are themselves deeply racialized and political (Collins et al., 2014; Gasman, 2013).

The purpose of this study is to examine how administrators at an HBCU view student success practices. In this study, I include administrators at various levels within the HBCU to show how their perceptions of student success and the influence of intersecting authorities (e.g., state governments, leadership/governance on campus, funding, etc.) on student success practices. Specifically, in this study, I asked: *In the rise of external accountability pressures, what actions are HBCU administrators taking to ensure funding, but also maintain fidelity to learning and persistence of their students?* Additionally, I asked the following research questions to delve deeper into administrators' experiences on HBCU campuses:

(RQ.1) According to administrators, how do structural systems (e.g., leadership/governance practices within HBCUs, state/federal policy, endowment etc.) relate to student success?

(RQ.2) What, if any, strategies do administrators employ to guide student success practices?

Drawing on critical theory and Black epistemologies, in this qualitative comparative case study (CCS) I sought to understand how the racialized lived experiences of Black administrators working in a public, historically Black university shape their ideas and beliefs regarding student success and its challenges. More specifically, I was interested in how antiblackness (Black students that are positioned as problem) is perpetuated, even unwittingly. I conducted a comparative case study at an institution that I refer to as Robeson State University (RSU).

Summary of Findings

This study yielded three emergent themes from the data:

1. HBCUs are institutions that foster educational equity.

2. External pressures for measurable student success outcomes relate to the use of more technology.
3. Despite alternative views of student success, the institution did have institutional silos and leadership conflicts that were rooted in capitalistic (self-promoting and power driven) logic.

First, HBCUs continue to be beacons of educational equity, a place where race and equity are grounded within administrators' daily work. Much of the data reflected how the institution has had to contend with funding inequities since the onset and create paths for students to succeed in college. Student success is seen as both structural (systemic racism, funding inequities, among others) and success as individual markers (grades, course performance, GPA). The transversal analysis in critical comparative case study allowed for the institution to be situated within the larger sociohistorical and sociopolitical context.

Next, the vertical analysis in CCS, provided the lens to contextualize institutional, state, and federal policies that impact student success work on campus. Specifically, attention to the increased external accountability pressures for students to meet a prescribed set of performance metrics (retention, progression, course hour accumulation) and graduation (i.e., outcomes-based funding). Moreover, the use of data analytics and technology platforms (e.g., Early Alert, Educational Advisory Board – Navigate and DegreeWorks) to provide both aggregated and disaggregated data reports that give insights into where students are situated within a given semester (for example, course completion, DFW rate, student attrition). These platforms can both facilitate and disrupt the status quo. There are challenges that exist with the use of software, such as the ability to foster connectedness (i.e., relationships) with students and support staff. However, at RSU, administrators do utilize academic coaches and advisors to foster

relationships. In addition, the technology can provide a lens to identify institutional barriers that may hinder a student's navigation through the college experience. Also, as the campus engages with various platforms if there is not intentionality with challenging deficit-laden approaches to a student's academic performance – there is a potential to perpetuate the status quo, positioning the institutional priorities such as completion over the goals of students.

Lastly, HBCUs are dynamic institutions that have a robust operation like many campuses, but they are not above varying challenges within the landscape of higher education. Despite, the progress in a comprehensive student success model – the institution is challenged with institutional silos and capitalist logic (self-promoting and power driven), like many campuses, that work against its efforts. Additionally, as campuses continue to improve their institution's student success work, there must be careful attention given to the strategic plan, educational data, and clear channels of communication across the institution. These approaches combined undergirded with an equity-minded focus taking into account the racial disparities and inequities provide a path forward in ensuring timely college completion.

Significance of Study

In this study I aimed to provide insight to scholars and practitioners with direct or ancillary student success and retention responsibilities. I examined the ways structural systems, such as outcomes-based funding, leadership, and technology, among others relate to various student success practices at Robeson State University. Administrators at HBCUs must navigate the various structural systems, for example, measures of quality that are imposed through mechanisms such as performance-based funding, and institutional systems that guide or hinder students' ability to maneuver successfully through college. Some HBCUs are often challenged with being mission-centered, open access, and achieving performance metrics. Scholars have

proven the evaluative formula to be incongruent with interests that HBCUs have as it relates to providing access and opportunity to students that have unequal options for formative schooling years (e.g., pre-K-12) (Washington Lockett, 2017).

These unique leadership experiences at HBCUs impact the measures (i.e., student success models) that are institutionalized, at times perpetuating antiblack ontologies. Specifically, I examined the practices administrators are employing to remain competitive, and mission focused as well as practices that may impede the success of HBCUs. Student success is tethered to these quantifiable metrics of performance, and it could easily put the blame on the student which is inherently antiblack without pointing to larger systemic issues. Simply stated, student success practices can continue deficit-based approaches, or it can be a tool that is used to disrupt barriers to success. Additionally, I capture the insights foregrounded by the upcoming leadership's ideology within the HBCU context. I argue that the diverse experiences of administrators within HBCUs and the contemporary challenges of these institutions provide a framework for further research.

The leadership and governing experiences provide a nuanced interpretation of how these perspectives influence student success. And how administrators identified and responded to challenges around student success and retention given the external accountability pressures. Furthermore, the policies that are enacted on the campus provide a focus to gain information regarding student success practices at Robeson State. This study provides tangible practices of administrators at various levels of leadership and how they manage: leadership/governance issues, contemporary pressures of performance, shifting demographics, continued commitment to institutional mission, and possible transferable ideas that could apply to other sorts of institutions too.

Operational Terms

The terms listed below were used throughout the study:

1. Black/African American – a person that self-identifies with having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. This includes people that mark their racial category as "Black, African American, or Negro" as well as Sub-Saharan African (e.g., Kenyan, and Nigerian) and Afro-Caribbean (Haitian and Jamaican) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).
2. Administrator – The term administrator will be used throughout and will be defined as persons that work in both academic (e.g., vice presidents, deans, academic coaches, chairs, directors etc.) and student affairs (e.g., vice presidents, dean of students, directors, coordinators, etc.) or designated staff with administrative purview of student success.
3. Student Success – This term is normally defined by institutions within documents (e.g., academic/facility master plan, strategic plans, college/school/department plans, etc.) however, contingent upon the institution and professional the concept is defined differently. For this study, student success is defined as both structural and individual markers of success. Structural success contextualizes the ways structural inequities permeate institutions, and its actors. Individual success is nuanced and involves a student's ability to complete courses, make timely progress toward degree, learning, and post-graduate success.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences and practices of HBCU administrators working with student success responsibilities. Specifically, I am interested in what ways external pressures (such as outcomes-based funding, leadership/governance issues, and antiblack racism) influence student success practices. This literature review will probe extant literature on the history of HBCUs and student experience, HBCU leadership/administration, and lastly, merit and quality. I maintain that it is imperative to understand how these institutions are racialized within higher education in the United States. The racialized ideological positioning of these institutions, both historically and presently, undergird their contemporary footprint in postsecondary education (Minor, 2008).

Moreover, the experiences of students and administrators provide further context regarding the research that has occurred with these groups of people at HBCUs and the overall impact of this sector of minority-serving institutions (MSIs). Additionally, the perspective of HBCU administrators gives insight into more effective practices that has occurred at the institution. Merit and quality are discussed to show the interplay of standardization emphasizing reliance on achievement and selectivity within an unequal system imbued by inequality, white supremacy, and antiblackness. In the era of accountability and as competition for state resources increases, institutions must meet performance priorities for various stakeholders to secure funding and maintain institutional viability and accreditation. The intersections of the areas provide further context for understanding the nuanced experiences of HBCU administrators in today's higher education. Given the tumultuous society in which they were birthed, HBCUs have continued to be a force within higher education in the United States.

Brief Context and History of HBCUs

HBCUs are critical to the education of Black (and other) students, and particularly low-income, first-generation students (Freeman et al., 2016; Mobley, Daoud, & Griffin, 2018). Historically Black colleges and universities remain beacons of educational, religious, social, and political leadership and equality (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Brown & Daniel, 2001). They are dedicated to racial uplift and empowerment, educating first-generation and minoritized students, and are committed to public service (Albritton, 2012; Esters & Strayhorn, 2013). The Higher Education Act of 1965, as reauthorized[2], defined a historically Black college and university as an institution that was founded prior to 1964 with the principal mission of educating African American students. HBCUs were established for the purposes of providing educational opportunities for African Americans who were traditionally and systemically excluded from higher education (Gasman, 2007).

These institutions must be accredited or on a clear trajectory toward accreditation (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2015). Many of the HBCUs were established by the second land-grant act, the Morrill Act of 1890, which granted a reinvestment of federal funding for land-grant programs (e.g., Agriculture, Military Training, and Engineering) (Gasman, 2007; Harper et al., 2009). The state institutions founded by the Morrill Act of 1862 did not extend to Black people due to the racial segregation and exclusion of the country at that time, so the Second Morrill Act extended funding to establish additional Black land-grant colleges and to extend funding to

[2] The Higher Education Act was authorized in 1965 as the federal government's legislation that governs the relationship between the federal government, colleges and universities, and students. HEA is supposed to be reauthorized every five years (the last reauthorization was in 2008 – Higher Education Opportunity Act), but has been revised eight times. The policy has rules and regulations that postsecondary institutions must comply with to be eligible for Title IV federal student aid programs and others (American Council on Education, 2018).

historical state institutions (post-Civil War) in the southern states that were not able to participate previously (Thelin, 2011; 1890 Land-Grant Universities the Second Morrill Act, 2015). Though this represented a progressive time in American higher education it is important to note that the Second Morrill Act which founded the seventeen Black land-grant colleges had stipulations that required states to prove race-neutral admission criterion, forfeit federal funds, or establish separate agricultural and mechanical institutions for Black people (Gasman et al., 2008). Despite the language of the Morrill Act, which emphasized equitable distribution of federal funds, "the seventeen Black institutions were disproportionately neglected with respect to facilities, salaries, and staffing" (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Thelin, 2011, p. 136). These institutions were separate but never equal in terms of their resources.

Most of the early HBCUs were populated by newly freed people (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2014). The academic basis for these Black colleges was a curriculum that brought primary and secondary education for the recently freed enslaved people that were unable to attain a formal education (Gasman, 2007). The Freedmen's Bureau began to establish Black colleges during the mid-1800s, in addition to, Black churches (African Methodist Episcopal and the African Episcopal Zion) and white missionaries (American Baptist Home Mission Society and the American Missionary Association) including several others (Gasman et al., 2008; Thelin, 2011). Many of the White northern missionaries that founded Black colleges were self-interested and sometimes racist, due to the overarching goal to Christianize Black people to their form of Christianity (Gasman, Baez, & Turner, 2008). Those institutions founded by Black churches were Morris Brown in Georgia, Paul Quinn in Texas, and Allen University in South Carolina. White missionaries founded colleges such as Fisk University in Tennessee and Spelman College in Georgia.

Since 1837, HBCUs have grown and contributed to the United States in major ways, including in both civilian and military leadership. Reflecting on the importance of HBCUs historically, Oliver and colleagues (1996) stated that:

> HBCUs have been a pathway in fostering educational, economic, cultural, civilian and military leadership to the fabric of our society. With over one hundred fifty-nine (159) years through adversities, this community of institutions, still are a viable beacon of the American system of higher education.
>
> Throughout our societal growth, the major portion of prominent Black Americans in leadership capacities in the military and civilian arena have been HBCU graduates. Even as of January 1994 the majority of all Black generals and flag officers in the U.S. Armed Forces are graduates of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. (Oliver et. al., 1996, p. 202)

Today, HBCUs (at either the graduate or undergraduate level) have educated "some 75% of all African American Ph.D.'s, 46% of all African American business executives, 50% of African American engineers, 80% of African American federal judges, and 65% of African-American doctors" (Wilson, 2007, p. 12). According to Brown & Daniel (2001), "HBCUs award 28% of the Black bachelor's degrees, 16% of the Black first-professional degrees, 15% of the Black master's degrees, and 9% of the Black doctoral degrees" (p. 32). Additionally, in the 2011-2012 academic year, public HBCUs conferred more than 90% of the two-year (associate degrees), two-thirds of baccalaureate degrees, and more than 80% of the master's degrees (Gasman, 2013; Jones, 2016; Lee & Keys, 2013). One reason that HBCUs have played such a pivotal role in educating Black students is that Black students who have attended HBCUs are better acclimated

academically, socially, and cognitively when compared to their peers at predominantly White institutions (Allen, 1992; Cokley, 2000; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002).

Student Experiences within HBCUs

The preponderance of higher education literature encompasses a multitude of studies that indicate the advantageous academic, social, professional, and psychological effects for Black students of attending historically Black colleges and universities (Allen, 1992; Astin, 1975; Astin, Tsiu, & Avalos, 1996; Bonous-Hammarth & Boatsman, 1996; Davis, 1991; Fleming, 1984, 2002; Flowers, 2002; Gurin & Epps, 1975; Roebuk & Murty, 1993). And those African American students who attend predominantly White institutions (PWI) face issues of isolation, alienation, lower academic performance on average, and deficient support (Allen, 1985, 1986; Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Braddock & Dawkins, 1981; Smith & Allen, 1984). Research by Astin (1975), who analyzed data from over 100,000 student surveys administered in both 1968 and 1972, contended that the isolation and alienation among Black people at PWIs potentially contributes to higher forms of student success at HBCUs. Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative analyses over the course of four years, Fleming (1984) found that at HBCUs Black students maintained higher academic achievement, a greater satisfaction with academic and social engagement, and had better relationships with faculty as compared with their counterparts at PWIs. Moreover, African American students had an overall greater comfort level and success within their HBCUs. Following Fleming, Davis (1991) used data from the National Study of Black College Students (NSBCS) that surveyed 888 African American students at HBCUs and 695 African Americans at PWIs. Davis (1991) found differences in the ways African American students viewed their campuses in addition to the ways that these institutions contributed to their essentials. That study found that more students at HBCUs found the out-of-classroom activities

to be in-line with their interests (28% at HBCUs as compared to 12% at PWIs), while those African American students at PWI reported that they "hardly ever" engage in activities (31% at PWIs compared to 23% at HBCUs). These foundational studies (Davis, 1991; Fleming, 1984) examined African American satisfaction and student success and paved the way for numerous subsequent studies comparing the two types of institutions.

Allen (1992) used the NSBCS to survey 928 African American students attending PWIs and 872 African American students at public HBCUs. Employing a multivariate approach to investigate the relationship between academic achievement and social involvement in campus life, and occupational aspirations and a correlational analysis to investigate key bivariate relationships and multiple regression analysis to "specify the net and joint effects of key predictor variables on student outcomes," Allen discovered African Americans students that attended HBCUs reported better academic performance, greater social involvement, and higher occupational aspiration than Black students at PWIs (Allen, 1992, p. 35). Thus, Allen's study substantiated Davis's (1991), showing that African Americans who have positive social support systems are apt to greater levels of satisfaction.

Looking at 443 responses from African American students at comparable HBCUs and PWIs, Outcalt and Skewes-Cox (2002) found that the students tended to be engaged at various levels of involvement both extracurricular and academic, which resulted in higher levels of involvement with those students attending HBCUs. Students at HBCUs tutored other students, completed more homework, and reported being less bored in class. This elevates Allen's (1992) work, which purported the cognitive and environmental gains fostered by both the academic and social atmospheres at HBCUs. It is also imperative to note that despite the supportive climate at HBCUs than PWIs, students were less inclined to be satisfied with the student support services

(e.g., housing, financial aid, community service opportunities, healthcare, and career placement). HBCUs are dynamic and provide a variety of experiences for students.

The HBCU environment cultivates a welcoming-cultural experience that is relatable for its students and faculty (Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011), there is also a gendered perspective that is necessary to understand. Freeman and McDonald (2004) found that the environment at PWIs have a more negative impact on Black students' experiences when compared to their counterparts, resulting in higher attrition rates and lower academic performance. Conversely, students attending HBCUs had higher aspirations and experienced better psychological adjustment and self-image compared to those at PWIs in one early study (Gurin & Epps, 1975). This work echoes Fleming's (1984) work that also found high achievement to be correlated with attendance at HBCUs for Black students. Clearly, HBCUs contribute to student success in multifaceted ways, which I consider below.

HBCUs Contributions to Student Success

Scholars that have engaged in research on the experiences and outcomes of students attending HBCUs have found that these institutions provide high-touch (i.e., nurturing) environments with unique academic engagement (Allen, 1992; Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Bonous-Hammarth & Boatsman 1996; Jackson & Swan, 1991; Nettles, 1991). For example, Allen (1992) found in his study that beyond personal traits (e.g., K-12 preparedness, personal ambition, and student's intellect) other factors could positively contribute to academic achievement such as an institutions quality of life on campus. HBCUs provide optimal social-psychological factors and nurturing environments that produce positive student outcomes as it relates to psychological and social-psychological adjustments, higher grade point averages, and overall satisfaction (Fleming, 2002; Flowers, 2002; Roebuck & Murty, 1993).

Overall, the research looking at the differences between HBCUs and PWIs shows that HBCUs have greater social and academic experiences for their students. Other literature further supports the vast differences in students' experiences at HBCUs and PWIs (Fleming, 1984; Nettles, 1988). Kim (2002) probed the effects of cognitive ability for African American students attending an HBCU or PWI and found no significant variation. Using a national longitudinal data set, Kim & Conrad (2006) analyzed through hierarchical linear and non-linear modeling, 941 African American freshmen and found that students enrolled at both HBCUs and PWIs had similar completion (i.e., graduation) chances. With this in mind, students at HBCUs indicated that the atmosphere and services provided on these campuses had greater experiences of engagement, acceptance, support, and caring about the student's well-being. Alternatively, those Black students at PWIs reported feelings of isolation, a sense of hostility, and racial discrimination. These elements portray the nurturing components of HBCUs and the positive student outcomes that stem from those efforts.

In October 2015, Gallup Education released findings from a study that argued Black graduates of HBCUs are more likely than Black graduates of predominantly White institutions to be progressing in their lives, particularly in areas of finance and well-being. 40% of Black graduates of HBCUs strongly agreed that they had support and applied learning experiences while 29% of Black graduates of other institutions did so. 54% of HBCU Black graduates and 43% of non-HBCU graduates have strong social relationships and they are pleased by their daily tasks and are inspired to achieve goals. Moreover, college experiences were also linked to thriving lives post-college. 35% of HBCU graduates strongly agree that they had a professor who cared and got them excited about learning and a mentor who encouraged them to achieve their

dreams; only (12%) of Black non-HBCU graduates strongly agreed with the three encounters (Seymour & Ray, 2015).

Summary

The value of HBCUs is difficult to dispute. These institutions are evidenced to provide educational opportunities for students who are marginalized, a credence that has truly marked their place in American higher education. The commitment needed to do this successfully, since 1837, affirms their purpose that they truly are "beacons of equality." These institutions are affordable as it relates to tuition as well as are triumphant community engagers. Not only do HBCUs provide educational attainment, but also the social, political, and religious leadership for African Americans – thus, the training of future generations (Allen & Jewell, 2002, p. 242). The campuses embody diversification, and it is seen through the diverse faculty and students (Mobley et al., 2018). Lastly, the Afrocentric curricula seen in variations at most HBCUs, the competitive environment (Conrad & Gasman, 2015), and support offered to facilitate learning sets them apart (Gasman & Commodore, 2014; Gasman & Nguyen, 2014; Gasman, Nguyen, Conrad, Lundberg, & Commodore, 2017; Perna et al., 2009). This echoes a case study, where Perna et al. (2009) found that the HBCU environment was advantageous for the preparation of African American women for careers in the STEM fields. In a recent study, Washington Lockett, Gasman, and Nguyen (2018) contend that not only do faculty, academic advisors, and peers contribute to the cultivation of success (i.e., Black women success in STEM) within HBCUs, but senior-level administrators (e.g., deans, provosts, vice presidents, presidents etc.) outside of their managerial and strategist duties also positively impact student engagement and motivation in STEM. Nichol (2004) asserted:

Since the Civil War, presidents of HBCUs have struggled with students who are

> underprepared, inadequate management, dwindling financial resources including low endowments, competition for students and faculty members, an alumni base with not much wealth, and students from low-income families who may be unable to pay ever increasing tuition. (p. 222)

These leaders continue to be challenged with the racial and structural discrimination that is embedded within the social institutions of the United States. While these studies demonstrate the positive value of HBCUs for students, still unknown is exactly how institutions try to meet these students' needs amidst contemporary challenges from the perspectives of administrators.

In this study, I provide a contemporary perspective of those in leadership at HBCUs and how they are managing historical racial inequity given today's challenges. I situate this study at the intersection of historical founding of HBCUs, its challenges and successes with student achievement within a complex and unequal society, and the experiences of HBCU administrators that provide oversight and leadership daily. HBCU leadership is an essential factor to the future success and sustainability of these institution (Washington Lockett et al., 2018).

HBCU Leadership

During the early 20th century, the genesis of Black college leadership shifted from White to Black. Since then, Black college presidents historically have been stereotyped in a negative light (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Gasman, 2007; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). These negative characterizations (e.g., Uncle Tom, accommodationist, and authoritarian) that were formulated continues to be perpetuated in today's context (Gasman, 2011). Much of the commentary regarding HBCUs leadership were during a time of legal segregation and the influence of the White philanthropist. In a historical analysis of three presidents, Gasman (2011) contended presidents were "tasked with balancing internal campus politics, involving faculty, students, and

boards of trustees … and those with their hands on the political and monetary purse strings" (p. 862). Gasman purported that a more nuanced perspective of the leadership at Black colleges is needed, due to racist historical depictions that underlay preconceived, negative associations.

HBCUs are institutions that promote educational, social, and political equality (Brown & Daniel, 2001). Their present-day contributions remain steadfast on the grounds of racial uplift and empowerment, educating first-generation and minoritized students, and a commitment to public service (Albritton, 2012; Esters & Strayhorn, 2013). In a study focused on presidents at HBCU public-land grant institutions (N=18), with six HBCU presidents representing 33% of the population participating, Albritton (2012) found these institutions to be committed to the empowerment of the underserved and the public good. These findings echo the historical institutional ethos, which most HBCUs share, as campuses that racially uplift and empower Black students, are committed to providing opportunities to those that desire higher education and are committed to community relations. This study also found HBCU presidents to have a staunch desire to financially contribute to their alma maters, elevate their race, and empower Black people to be impactful.

Leadership amidst Challenges: Competencies and Approach

There are many skills needed to successfully lead HBCUs. It is important to understand the challenges, and approaches as new leaders aspire to serve in executive roles on these campuses. Gasman et al. (2010) reflected on President Obama's stance on the state of HBCUs, writing that "although he acknowledges societal and systemic racism, he also promotes individual responsibility – hewing a middle path between the perspectives from the left and right…" (p.2). This ideology substantiated that President Obama is a pragmatist and believes that in a heightened increase in college degree completion and additional student performance

metrics if HBCUs are to successfully navigate the current economic and social environment (Gasman et. al, 2010). Though simply stated, this presents major challenges when trying to actualize higher degree completion rates considering the historical inequities (Wooten, 2015), student input (marginalized "underprepared" students), and current climate of policy around higher education (some states' steady disinvestment of postsecondary education).

Presidents of Black colleges in the 21st century have to increase the fundraising capacities at institutions and be strategic about the ways in which they operationalize donor relations, engage faculty, staff, student, alumni, and supporters on the importance of philanthropy, provide leadership of endowment managers, and are the overall front-runner for fund raising (Andrews et al., 2016; Cantey et al., 2013; Esters et al., 2016; Freeman et al., 2016; Gasman, 2013; Hall, 2011; Nichols, 2004; Williams et al., 2007). Philanthropy has always been an intricate part of the fabric of higher education funding and is increasingly becoming more salient with the disinvestment of college (Gasman, et al., 2008; Thelin, 2011). In a qualitative study that included 16 current presidents, three board members, and two presidential search consultants, Freeman et al. (2016) maintained that skills needed to be centered on: (a) vision, (b) communication across stakeholders (internal and external), (c) engaged leadership in fundraising, (d) an entrepreneurial approach, and (e) fostering a collaboration and teamwork across the institutions. This echoes an earlier study by Hall (2011), who argued that "presidents have to focus on their four primary roles of fundraising, building trust, vision and relationship building." Nichols (2004) examined the unique skill sets that are warranted of HBCU leadership and governance as they must be able to adapt to the changing environment. More specifically, he postulated that presidents at public universities need to be abreast of the federal and state government statutes to ensure that policies introduced are advantageous and must be skilled at strategic fundraising mechanisms.

For many of these institutions there has been an increase in turbulence as it relates to the high turnover rates of presidents, long-tenure, inexperienced boards, and presidents at the retirement stages (Gasman, 2013; Hall, 2011; Seymour, 2008; Stuart, 2016). In a recent study identifying and addressing issues that those new to the presidency face at HBCUs, Hall (2011) contended the actual stress associated with the position (often unmentioned) and presidential retirements are factors that contribute to the leadership crisis where there are not enough good leaders at HBCUs. "The number of presidents leaving HBCUs is increasing, and the applicant pool of new presidents is shrinking. Therefore, retaining new presidents is a key to maintaining quality of leadership within the HBCU system" (Hall, 2011, p. 353). This further affirms the need to strengthen the pipeline to the presidency of HBCUs through intentional grooming and mentoring (Commodore et al., 2016; Ruffins, 1998). In a report published out of the Center for Minority-Serving Institutions by Gasman (2013), which also elevates on Hall's earlier claim that the presidencies of HBCUs are getting older, "On average, HBCU presidents serve 6 years compared to 8.5 years nationally…. But a cadre of HBCU presidents have served very long terms – a full 16% have served between 15 and 25 years" (p. 14).

More recently, HBCUs have been hit with the Postsecondary Institutions Ranking System, the shift in criterion for the Parent PLUS Loan program administered by the United States Department of Education as well as statutes being introduced in some state legislatures regarding the "carrying of concealed handguns on campuses" (Gasman & Collins, 2014; Price et al., 2016). The Parent PLUS is a federal, low-interest-loan program from parents of students to assist with educational expenses, including the cost of attendance remaining after scholarships and student loans are expended (Gasman & Collins, 2014). In 2011, the Department of Education tightened its lending policies, resulting in economic stress for both students and

institutions. This resulted in approximately 28,000 HBCU students were not able to cover the funds needed for tuition, and ultimately, these institutions lost millions in revenue. Additionally, the Department of Education introduced the Scorecard to provide students and their families' information regarding average tuition, loan debt, and graduation rates. Employing performance-based funding and other measures aimed to encourage higher education institutions to simultaneously lower costs and improve quality (Gasman & Collins, 2014).

HBCUs were partly to blame due to lack in communication with the administration and that they should take a note from other MSIs that have a united front when interacting with these various constituencies. For instance, lack of communication on the part of the HBCU leaders is one of the challenges that new presidents should consider. Presidents at HBCUs in this 21st century must stay well-informed as it pertains to multiple constituencies and maintain relationship whereby, they can advocate on behalf of what's best for their campuses. There are lots of contemporary challenges leaders must deal with. For instance, Price et al. (2016) in a study using multi-wave national survey assessed (N=103) HBCU presidents, using descriptive statistics to examine the responses of perceptions and practices of carrying concealed handguns on their campuses, found the idea of concealed weapons expansion to be unfavorable. Specifically, most presidents (97.4%), most students (94.9%), and most faculty (97.4%) were not in agreement with carrying concealed handguns on campus. This comes as those in state legislatures make policies (right-to-carry) which might adversely impact respective campuses. These diverging issues combine to underscore the importance of new leaders being equipped with the toolkit to be effective and competitive. This toolkit involves tutelage and innovative practices aimed at improving the institution. There is a need to grow new leaders during these trying times.

Mentorship & Grooming for HBCU Leadership

The path to the presidency is not monolithic and requires grooming and mentoring from current and former presidents (Commodore et al., 2016; Freeman & Gasman, 2014; Gasman, 2011). In a recent study, Freeman and Gasman (2014) surveying 10 HBCU presidents, participants stated it was their responsibility to groom future leaders to ensure effectiveness of HBCUs. Importantly, HBCU female presidents tended to groom women and the male presidents groomed men. Additionally, Freeman & Gasman (2014) noted the propensity of HBCUs to recycle presidents, in addition to a superfluous presence of long-standing presidents, to be problematic.

In a study aimed at understanding the nuances of the HBCU presidency, the perspectives of 21 participants (including current presidents, search consultants, and board members) were analyzed using semi-structured qualitative interviews (Commodore et al., 2016). The researchers noted that all participants mentioned the importance of mentorship in the ultimate success of upcoming presidents. The presidents also suggested formal mentoring programs, such as the American Council on Education Fellows program as critical for aspirants as well as their participation with them (Commodore et al., 2016). In 1998, Ruffins talked extensively about the new grant available for HBCUs to participate in the ACE program, which had a track record for producing college presidents, vice presidents, deans, etc. with the primary goal to help groom upcoming leaders through mentoring (Ruffins, 1998).

Much of the literature on HBCU presidents' centers on the complexities that exist because of the social construction of race (Wynter, 1993). These complexities (e.g., academically underprepared students, institutional/family support, rising tuition, low-endowment, retention and graduation, external pressures, aging leadership, etc.) continue to permeate the institutional

landscape today. In some instances, scholars have garnered the perspectives of HBCU administrators regarding these complexities (Hirt, Amelink, McFeeters & Strayhorn, 2008; Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, Bennett, 2006; Strayhorn & Hirt, 2008). In a qualitative study looking at the nature of student affairs (SA) work at HBCUs, Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, & Bennet (2006) examined 70 administrators (67% female and 33% male) employing data collected in the National Professional Life Survey (NPLS). These professionals (71% mid-level, 31% cabinet level, 41% administrators) worked at over 25 HBCUs in the United States and reflected several administrative areas (e.g., admissions, advising, career services, residence life, student activities, and counseling). Hirt et al., (2006) found that administrators working in student affairs at HBCUs workload was "positively challenging" and stressful (noting stress stems from limited resources) likely because of multi-tasking. Furthermore, Hirt et al. (2006) found that the administrators' collegial work environment is pragmatic, and service oriented with a student-centered focus.

The idea that administrators report having a sense of duty to serve students and "do more with less" is quintessential characteristics for most HBCUs. Additionally, Hirt et al. (2006) asserted that most of the administrators in the study reported that students perceived them as a mother, father, sister, or grandparent which is later substantiated in research by Hirt, Amelink, McFeeters, and Strayhorn (2008) who employ the concept of "othermothering" found in African American feminist literature. In a qualitative study employing interview and focus group technique, Hirt et al. (2008) examined the nature of relationships student affairs administrators (70 administrators, 89% African American, and majority 67% identified as female) form with students. Findings suggested these meaningful relationships between administrators and students are "driven by a sense of cultural reproduction" and attribute to the academic success (retention

and degree attainment) in which SA professionals at HBCUs are working to accomplish (Hirt et al., 2008, p. 224). This study provided useful insights regarding senior leaders and student affairs professionals, but more research is needed to understand contemporary practices of administrators that work in similar and other student success roles.

A study by Strayhorn & Hirt (2008) explored the social justice role of both HBCUs and Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), asking: (1) How do the institutional missions of both HBCUs and HSIs reflect issues of social justice. (2) How the perceptions of administrators employed at both institutional types reflect a social justice perspective. The findings revealed four social justice concepts: power, empowerment, cultural maintenance and critique, and equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity focused on administrators' commitment to provide access to higher education for members of underserved populations, and cultural maintenance and critique centered on administrators' ability to fulfill the needs of minority students (a mechanism for them to give back) as well as a desire to maintain the cultural traditions. A sense of empowerment was key to administrators' comments in the study, not only access to higher education but amplifying of students' voices to achieve was most rewarding. Lastly, power was reflected in the administrators' perspectives, for example, the comparison of themselves with other elite institutions and minority-serving institutions (MSIs) as it pertains to equitable distribution of financial resources (Strayhorn & Hirt, 2008). "Administrators at MSIs are acutely aware that the most measurable form of power is resources and resources at these institutions are scarce" (Strayhorn & Hirt, 2008, p. 212).

Summary

HBCU presidents and those that aspire to be should diversify their skill sets and bring a more entrepreneurial and evidence-based approach to the role given the pressures of the position

(i.e., funding, performance metrics, advocacy) (Andrews et al. 2016; Williams & Kritsonis, 2007). The changing landscape of higher education given these pressures and the upcoming leadership familiarity with these issues will allow HBCUs to adapt and continue their commitments. The current economic challenges at the state level that has reduced allocations by default sets a greater demand on presidents to be more entrepreneurial. Williams and Kritsonis (2007) suggest that donor relations and endowment management is no longer left up to those administrators that provide purview, but it is incumbent upon institutional actors with fundraising responsibilities to have a concerted strategy prior to donor cultivation that is philosophically sound. These entrepreneurial endeavors provide a diversification of the funding base and allows for external revenues to be secured, thus assisting in the operations of the institution. As mentioned above, Andrews et al. (2016) point to the unique approaches that deans of the colleges of business at HBCUs bring, such as their breadth of knowledge as it relates to the market-driven environment and commerce as well as the stringent accreditation standards put forth by the accrediting body. Though this study does not look at presidents/chancellors specifically, it is important to understand the challenges and practices of those in positions of leadership within HBCUs for those that aspire to be in the future. Moreover, much more work is needed on how leaders within HBCUs face the contemporary challenges and still try to maintain the historical mission of uplift.

As the leadership of HBCUs continue aging, and retirement is nearer for many at the helm, these institutions must continue and re-imagine their place within higher education. Many of the competencies needed to be successful as executive officers (presidents/chancellors) require a critical understanding of the historical inequities (providing access and opportunity). Navigating current challenges with policy (nuanced interpretation of state/federal policy) and

financing (diversifying funding structure), alongside important accountability metrics, such as graduation and retention rates, is essential for the future of HBCUs. Administrators working within HBCUs have much experience that has not been captured in the literature as it pertains to these constructs. Furthermore, in this study I sought to contribute to this area of research and provide context to the practices these professionals employ to remain competitive within higher education. Student success is a pivotal focus of HBCUs as evidenced in the literature and the student population that makeup these campuses are impacted by their performance. Many institutions are judged on several measures such as selectivity (college admission), research productivity (publication and grants), endowment, etc.

Merit and quality undergird these principles. Students who deserve to gain admittance into college (based off individual performance) and the outcomes institutions produce in a capitalist society set those that "win" as legitimate and deserving without context of racial hierarchies and class differences. I will explore the phenomenon of racialized merit and quality in the following section.

Merit and Quality as External Pressures for HBCUs

This section contextualizes traditional notions of student success and the external accountability pressures that HBCUs encounter in thinking about success. Much of what is determined as meritorious is situated in an unequal system imbued by reproducing and maintaining dominance. While meritocracy assumes that decisions are made on merit, there is often a race or religious component at play (Tierney, 2007). One's ability to achieve status is based on the individual's merit (i.e., qualifications) that hinge on seemingly objective criterion. "Merit is one tool that is emphasized because society pits one individual against another without

prejudice. The best man wins" (Tierney, 2007, p. 389). With the continuous challenges because of the social construction of race and racism, Tierney (2007), stated:

> Thus, to fully understand merit, one must also understand the socially constructed worlds in which the meanings of merit have been created. From this perspective, merit is neither an objective nor an ahistorical, decontextualized term. Instead, it is a word embedded in subjective and, ultimately, philosophical meanings. (Tierney, 2007, p. 391)

Tierney (2007) opined that in order to conceptualize merit one has to understand the complexities that exist as a result of the way in which society was socially constructed. Moreover, racial diversity in addition to other factors (e.g., test scores, grade point averages, letters of reference etc.) should be considered when assessing whether a person merits admission. Specifically, the structural inequities that minoritized students face also deserves consideration to be admitted. The social inequities such as racial and structural discrimination have proven to be intractable and "when social institutions such as colleges and universities are analyzed one cannot merely look to see who has applied and assume that if one student does better than another that the higher test scores merits admission" (Tierney, 2007, p. 392). Thus, the structural inequities that facilitated discrimination of certain groups of people (e.g., first-generation, low-income, students of color etc.) are evident in ineffective schooling, implicit biases, and low expectations perpetuate oppressive forces and impede opportunities for disenfranchised groups to gain admission. Institutions have begun to think critically and change practices.

Some of the theoretical assumptions regarding merit and college admissions are based on implicit conceptions regarding the process of college admission. Specifically, college admissions decisions have historical underpinnings and contemporary advancements such as goals to diversify colleges and universities (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2014). The first assumptions are

that postsecondary education is a privilege that only deserving students are extended the opportunity. Secondly, college is a vehicle to social opportunities for people that were traditionally left out and college admissions should work toward rectifying historical discrimination. Lastly, higher education benefits from a diverse student population (a position that assumes all students benefits educationally) (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2014, pg. 38). These underlying factors govern the practice of many higher education professionals and as it pertains to some HBCUs the selectivity and open access admission standards challenge traditional conceptions of merit.

Some HBCUs stand at a crossroad given the historical discrimination coupled with the increased accountability as it relates to performance (Washington Lockett, 2017). HBCUs are now under pressure despite the proven impact they provide in postsecondary education to begin changing college admission standards. The complexities in college admission challenges HBCUs to espouse policies that may infringe their ability to provide access to students. Furthermore, merit is implicitly detached from the social inequities that exist within the United States.

Despite the attempt to consider holistic admissions practices such as race or comprehensive exams (Geiser, 2009; Tierney, 2007), selective institutions have continued to use standardized testing as the mechanism to determine the ability of students to be successful in postsecondary education (Alon & Tienda, 2007; Lawrence, 2001). In recent times, there are some selective institutions that have dropped the standardized tests as a part of admissions. The use of merit that emphasizes students' performance on standardized testing and high school GPAs (i.e., academic characteristics) is often held as objective measures to determine college admission (Baez, 2006; Killgore, 2009; Lawrence, 2001).

Killgore (2009) contended that student achievement is overwhelmingly determined by academic achievement, which in conjunction with nonacademic achievement is used to "justify the admission of students who help the college gain or maintain prestige, public legitimacy, or financial stability as well as maintaining the college's underlying traditions, identity, and endowment" (p. 478). Institutions' commitment to status influences an objective form of merit. Merit, however, is often a subjective construct that reifies inequality within higher education. HBCUs provide a more nuanced interpretation of merit, one that contextualizes historical discrimination that is reproduced in social institutions.

Absent a contextualization of structural inequities because of race and racism, the narrative regarding merit as it relates to college admissions is often used as a mechanism to situate the individual as being completely responsible for their supposed merit. HBCUs must contend with the pervasive ideals of a true meritocracy with the recognition of pernicious and persistent racial inequality. Tierney (2007) argued:

> Structural discrimination is a socioeconomic pattern within American society that has proved intractable. A history of injustice—slavery is the starkest example—created structural inequities that ensured certain groups of individuals would be discriminated against by way of ineffective schooling, implicit prejudices, and lowered expectations. The result is that those individuals who were subjects of racial discrimination continue to be denied equal opportunities. (p. 396)

The metrics that define not only merit, but quality within higher education is then juxtaposed to institutions like HBCUs without careful context, proving to be incongruent with reality of the social world. A meritocracy that espouses one's individual qualifications based upon an objective criterion is a fictive imagination. The student success at HBCUs provide a

counter-narrative to these beliefs. This study is not about admissions in general, but this section is focused on contextualizing the external pressures of student performance.

To maintain that higher education as a privilege is an argument that assumes students can compete given their individual abilities and that the "competition is fair and that all students have the opportunity (and background) to know how to compete" (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2014, p. 38). In an era of accountability and efficiency within postsecondary education, we must have a more nuanced interpretation of merit as well as the markers of institutional quality. Despite the research that has proven the educational impact of HBCUs and their contribution to providing many students access into the middle class (Boland & Gasman, 2014), HBCUs are criticized for their completion statistics as evidence of inefficiency and lack of performance.

Boland and Gasman (2014) purported that many HBCUs serve students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and often are impacted by ancillary factors (e.g., finances, life stressors, etc.) that negatively impede academic performance. Furthermore, much like the outcomes at HBCUs, the completion rate of students with similar characteristics are comparable to other institutions. Contemporary higher education finance is dominated by the culture of accountability and efficiency (i.e., institutional performance). These markers impact the quality indicators, in which, HBCUs are susceptible especially when juxtaposed to PWIs (Baez, Gasman, & Turner, 2008; Jones, 2017; Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Scholars (Astin, 1985; Kuh, 1981) defined quality using several indicators to standardize American postsecondary along with others (Bowles & DeCosta, 1971; McGrath, 1965; U.S. News and World Report (USNWR)). For example, Kuh (1981) *Indices of Quality in the Undergraduate Experience,* indicated four indices of quality in undergraduate student experience: context, input, involvement, and outcomes.

The context indices involve variables that are easily quantifiable like the number of faculty with doctorates, the expenditures per student, or the size of student population. Input indices, focuses more on the admission qualifications of entering students such as intellectual ability, aspirations, sex, high school class rank etc. as a mechanism of quality that is also measured quantitatively. Additionally, involvement indices, quality is assessed by the informal interactions among students and faculty, students' satisfaction with the institution, and the students' investment in curricular and co-curricular activities. Lastly, outcome indices suggests that retention rates, achievement levels (e.g., Graduate Record Examination scores, postgraduate fellowships), student development (cognitive, affective, psychomotor), and alumni status (income and community service) are quality indicators which benefit both students and the institution (pp. 10-11). Two of the most used (popular) indices input and outcome, serve as primary markers for quality within higher education.

The use of high school class ranks as well as standardized tests (such as, Scholastic Aptitude Test and the American College Testing Program) are the indicators that are used most oft to depict the academic ability of students entering college. However, given the variance in grading standards, class rank is rarely used in academic studies (Kuh, 1981). Some critics of open admissions suggest that students that are underprepared "reduce educational quality for everyone" (Flagler, 1981, p. 1, cited by Kuh, 1981). Some HBCUs with open enrollment given their mission to educate underserved and disenfranchised students are judged through this lens. Kuh argued that exclusive reliance on input indices as a viable quality indicator is a myopic interpretation absent of ancillary documents that may differentiate whether students are using talents in other ways. "It is not surprising therefore that most attempts to determine 'quality' have lined ability with certain outcome variables, usually achievement" (Kuh, 1981, p. 16).

Second to that of input indices is outcome, which is used frequently to measure quality is the "value-added" by the undergraduate experience.

The retention of students is seen as an indicator of an institution's ability to meet students' expectations on campus. Students that voluntarily withdraw from institutions and those that transfer has been interpreted as poor institutional quality (Kuh, 1981). These indices parallel in contemporary higher education with the outcomes-based models (Jones, 2016; Washington Lockett, 2017) that are used as an effort to ensure productivity and efficiency among institutions. Funding that was once used as an incentive to universities in addition to the state appropriations (PBF 1.0) were now used as the primary instrument to assess institutional quality; thus, the shift from enrollment funding to performance-funding model (such as, retention and graduation rates) (PBF 2.0) (Washington Lockett, 2017). Washington Lockett (2017) found that despite performance-based funding not being completely inadequate that institutions with high populations of low-socioeconomic and racial minority students to be "at a stark disadvantage to highly state-supported Predominantly White Institutions" (p. 47). Some, public, HBCUs that have been and continue to be underfunded are now governed by performance models which has caused institutions to become more selective to survive and continue in good financial standing (Toldson & Washington, 2015).

Given the complexities around students' backgrounds and variance in institutional mission, researchers Tandberg and Hillman (2013), found between 1990 and 2010, there were no significant difference in degree production in states operating under performance-based funding policy. HBCUs have missions steeped in providing educational access for underserved students from academically disadvantaged backgrounds and a high concentration of low-income (nearly 85% HBCU students receive Pell Grants). Educating minoritized students given the structural

inequities is complex and a challenge that HBCUs have proven success. More research is needed to better understand the practices of administrators today. Student success as it pertains to input (selectivity) and outcomes (retention) are hallmarks of institutional quality (i.e., performance), and others. Public HBCUs, along with other institutions, must provide demonstrable evidence of their quality and efficiency as required by multiple governing authorities (e.g., state/federal government, accrediting bodies, etc.). One of the major ways this is demonstrated is through persistence and students completing a degree program (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2014).

College student persistence (i.e., retention) continues to be challenging for institutions and capturing the administrators' experiences of those developing programs, strategies, and policies to enhance student success outcomes is critical to student success. This section focused on the external pressures regarding quality, merit, and success and how they seep into thinking about what quality and success are in HBCUs.

Summary

Higher education in the 21st century is ever evolving. HBCUs are not exempt from the evolution that occurs within higher education terrain and are uniquely positioned to continue their impact and contributions to educating a nation of plurality. Identifying potential issues as well as the practices HBCUs are employing to successfully graduate students is critical to their future sustainability. As the leaders of HBCUs are on the brink of retirement it is imperative to identify the current challenges and skills needed to be a successful leader at these institutions. Much of the literature focuses on HBCU presidents/chancellors and not much is known from the perspectives of administrators that have direct or ancillary student success responsibilities. Proven student success at HBCUs within an unequal system that is highly racialized provide space for further inquiry to understand the influence of policy at the state and federal government

(e.g., outcomes-based funding and non-) and institutional/governance issues on campus. Many institutions, including HBCUs, must demonstrate to various constituencies their ability to operate efficiently and meet the performance needs of stakeholders and accrediting agencies. In the era of accountability within higher education, merit presents a challenge for some HBCUs currently. And yet not much is known of how administrators navigate concepts of merit in their institutions while still upholding their historic missions. My study explores exactly these questions. In the next chapters, I outline the theoretical framework and methods of my research.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

This chapter will focus on providing an understanding of how institutions are racialized within higher education. The first section, Race and Humanity, elucidates the global hierarchy of humanness and the way Black people were positioned in an antagonistic relationship with society. This fallacy provides an opportunity to contextualize the ways racially identifiable institutions are viewed historically, and in present day, for some people. These logics then provide the groundwork for engaging with the tenets of Critical Race Theory and the idea of antiblackness. "While the condition of anti-blackness provides a backdrop for understanding the persistent and pervasive devaluing of Black people and… Black institutions, CRT underscores the benefit of and need for counter-narratives told by those most closely connected to those institutions" (Williams, Burt, Clay, & Bridges, 2019, p. 566). This theorization allows for the data to be engaged through the racial disparities that exist because of the social construction of race (Omi & Winant, 2014). Race and Humanity, starts by contextualizing the understanding of how Black bodies were positioned within the inception of the United States, and thus, by extension the institutions that are closely tethered to educating Black people.

Race and Humanity

Sylvia Wynter (1993) theorized how race and the discourses that originated in the forming of America positioned a global hierarchy of humanness (i.e., "Man" as life/free –and "Other" as death/enslavable). Specifically, Wynter (1993) argued that the initial conceptions of humanness and its contemporary footprint required re-imagining a world that where thinking moves beyond "a challenge made to symbolic representational systems and their "stereotyped images." Wynter's thought remains important because the Black body as permanent slave "Other/nonhuman" has continuity in today's social institutions (Dancy, Edwards, & Earl Davis,

2018), even at HBCUs. That is the idea of Black people starting at enslaved peoples in the US has impacted how Black people are treated in contemporary society. Here, I will describe Wynter's view on how the concept of race came into being, and I will consider two of her most important claims: 1) the idea that Black people were assumed to be permanent slaves in the U.S., and 2) the idea that HBCUs are prescribed a label of inferiority due to their historical mission centered on educating Black people merely because of the social construction of race, resulting in a longstanding racism against this group of people (Wynter, 1993).

The social construction of race and subjugation of Black people undergirds the fundamental development of the United States, its institutions, and global order (Wynter, 1993). For example, the United States initiated as a nation with the enslavement and genocide of Black and indigenous people. This point is reflected in my study when, considering that HBCUs have historically been disenfranchised economically, politically, and socially in a way that mirrors the general subjugation of Black people in the country. The very institutional structure, including conceptions of institutional quality and which students merit admission, operates within a system that is antithetical to educating Black people. These Eurocentric systems were often built with the express purpose of subordinating Black people (Cole, 2020).

The categories (humanness = European and nonhuman = African/Black) that were subjectively formed in Wynter's (1993) theoretical ideas create a lens which still informs how some view not only the people in higher education, but institutions as well. One of the important aspects of the theories that I am using is to explore how basic "humanity" or the idea of "humanness" is structured (Wynter, 1993). The social construct argued that to be human is to be free, knowledgeable (a rational man) and European ostensibly ordained by God (i.e., Man). And to be less than or non-human would mean to be enslavable, savage (irrational), and of African

descent (i.e., Other to Man). The dichotomy sets up Black people to be less than human at the inception of the country.

Postsecondary education is structurally aligned to the discourses that hold a permanent hierarchy of humanness and non-human (i.e., white = human and Black = non-human other) (Dancy, Edwards, & Earl Davis, 2018; Fanon, 1952/2008; Wynter, 1993). The discourse that represented the social hierarchy in today's accountability era within higher education determines who can gain access, the metrics that define quality (performance), and the narratives around certain types of programming established to move students toward completion (graduation). This stratification of humanity was actualized in the form of "stereotyped images"[3] that held a triadic model[4] of Judeo-Christian perception of non-Christians (i.e., idolaters[5]). As it pertains to higher education, Black institutions have had to contend with this illogic in terms of academic rigor, enrollment competition with desegregation, unequal funding from state legislatures, athletics, and academic preparation for college, among others.

Premise of Racial Hierarchy

As the Spanish state began to rationalize the institutions of the new empire, Spain was no longer satisfied with relying on legitimation from the papacy. Now a series of juntas made use of "Aristotle's *Poetics* in order to displace the theological mode of legitimation that had granted sovereignty to Spain on the condition that it carry out the work of evangelizing the peoples of the

3 Wynter (1993) stated, "all people of African descent (as well as Africa itself, its culture, way of life, and so on)…represented non-evolved, and therefore, genetically inferior, human Other."

4 "This difference was one expressed in degrees of rationality, with the symbolic-cultural distance between the two groups being seen as innately determined difference. This difference, they then argued, made it clear that the "Indios" had been as intended by natural law to be "natural slaves," as the Spaniards had been also intended to be natural masters. Once the right of Spanish sovereignty had been located in "the nature of the people being conquered" (Pagden 1982:39), a "knowledge-of-categories" system of discourse would set out to represent all the cultural differences that had been geopolitically and socioenvironmental determined, as part of a "stereotyped image" of innate differences predetermined by Natural Law" (p.35).

5 "…the term idolater [non-Christian] was meaningless outside the mode of subjective understanding of Judaeo-Christianity in its statal variant as had been the term Zanj of medieval Islamic geography outside that of medieval Islam. Instead, both were classic cases of the deployment of mobile classificatory labels whose "truth" depended on their oppositional meaningfulness within their respective classificatory schemas" (Wynter, 1993 p. 28).

New World and of converting them to Christianity" (Wynter, 1993, p. 34). This shift from Judeo-Christian model (for which all non-Christians were necessarily the Non –True Self) to the true Rational Self of "Man" was now embodied in the expanding state. Columbus and his fellow Spaniards with commissions to "discover-and-gain" were driven by expanding the wealth of European states, personal economic gains by being awarded a percentage of tax collected on expropriated land, and the mobility of status (e.g., non-nobly given status of noble blood) to be rewarded the prestige of aristocracy. Wynter (1993) reflected on this shift to secularization and the racial caste that now emerged:

> If at first the stereotyped image of "idolator" that had regulated Columbus's own behaviors toward the indigenous people had, in the beginning, been the obstacle to a more inclusive *propter nos*, it was soon to be replaced with a new "stereotyped image" based on the Aristotelian concept of *natural slaves*. This concept was generated from a new and powerful symbolic construct that would come to take the place, in the now-secularizing Judaeo-Christian cultural system, that religion and the sanction of supernatural had earlier taken for the role-allocating structures of the feudal-Christian order, one that had been based on the principles of *caste*.
>
> The new symbolic construct was that of "race." It is essentially Christian-heretical positing of the *nonhomogeneiy of the human species* was to provide the basis for new metaphysical notions of order. These notions provided the foundations of the post-1492 polities of the Caribbean and the Americas, which, if in a new variant, continue to be legitimated by the nineteenth-century colonial systems of Western Europe, as well as continuing hierarchies of our present global order … (Wynter, 1993, p. 34)

Essentially, this is important to understand because this new notion of order was based on a *by-nature difference* between Europeans and the people of indigenous and African descent. Wynter (1993) is arguing that Black people were made permanent slaves given the order of Natural Law upon which the United States was founded. Of importance, the triadic model: natural masters, natural slaves, and civil slaves was given legitimacy now on a post-religious (i.e., no longer dependent on legitimacy from the papacy) premise. This Aristotelian concept of natural slaves was adopted by a series of juntas (royal jurist and theologians) that followed this logic to differentiate indigenous people *as ones who were by nature different from the Spaniards.* This rhetoric (rationale) was legitimized by *symbolic-cultural* differences "…between the two groups being seen as an *innately* determined difference" (Wynter, 1993, p. 35). This resulted in the "Indios" being intended by natural law to be "natural slaves" and the Spaniards had been positioned as natural masters.

> Once the *right* of Spanish sovereignty had been located in *"the nature of the people being conquered"...,* a "knowledge-of-categories" system of discourse would set out to represent all the cultural differences that had been geopolitically and socio-environmentally determined, as part of a "stereotyped image" of innate differences predetermined by Natural Law. …It is at this conjuncture that the triadic model of what has been called the racial caste hierarchy of Latin America based on the ideal of mestisaje …was first laid down. (Wynter, 1993, p. 35)

The concept of "natural slave" is different from that of a "civil slave," who were considered as a commodity. Natural slaves (*Indios* and *Indias*) albeit attached to the Spanish settlers as *encomienda serfs* had the autonomy of reason (rational beings) contrary to *negros* and *negras* "civil slaves" (i.e., indigenous people were seen as children and the Spaniards as adults). The

idea of a natural slave made enslavement connect to personhood and to observable categories (i.e., color). Furthermore, Wynter (1993) contended, that while the indigenous people were free vassals of the Crown, they had to be kept under the guardianship of the Spaniards like children-to-parent relationships. For this to be legitimate, the Spaniards had to replace the indigenous peoples as the *disposable slave labor force.* This is a way of uncovering the root of how we think about race in the United States, and it all goes back to the history of enslavement. Since the land-labor ratio in America was in excess supply there was a need for a disposable slave labor force. Those slaves that were transported of African descent which were categorically determined as civil slaves "and therefore as legal merchandise, would now function as the only legitimately enslavable group of the three" (Wynter, 1993, p. 35). Additionally, the subjective *by nature/Natural Law* difference was legitimized through a biblical system of representation. Wynter (1993) stated:

> The construct of a by nature/Natural Law difference was also used in the case of *negros* and *negras,* if in tandem with a biblical system of representation. On the basis of their lineal descent, they, too were represented as legitimate civil slaves. As the descendants of the biblical Ham and the inheritors of his curse, it was clear that they were also "disobedient by nature" and intended by Natural Law to be controlled by their slave masters, the Spaniards. This "stereotyped" representation – which detached them from their "moorings in reality" and allowed them to be perceived and treated as legitimately enslavable – not only constituted their *actual* enslavement, but also created the empirical conditions in which the moral and philosophical foundations of the post-1492 polities would be laid down. (p. 35)

This logic has permeated the educational landscape and its institutions. The forming of race set up a new ideology within society that had never existed before in human history among the human species (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). This categorical fallacy that positioned Black people as permanent slaves has manifested and been coupled with racialized institutions, such as HBCUs. According to Gasman, Baez, & Turner (2008):

> Such a label may carry a particular stigma that some [minority-serving institutions] MSIs would rather avoid. All "racialized" labels may carry meanings of value and worth, and so we should stop and reconsider our labels, as they are always embedded in power relations that value some things over others. (p. 6)

The power relations speak to the subjective interpretation of the "civil slave" and the inherent antiblackness that "informs and facilitates racist ideology and institutional practice…constructs Black subjects, and positions them in and against law, policy, and every day (civic) life" (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 417). HBCUs were initiated to serve Black people and by proxy associated with the "permanent slave" and nonhuman categories. The permanent underfunding of these institutions also plays this out in historical and, in some cases, in the present day. My interest here is in the way that these institutions – by nature of how they were positioned into the racial hierarchy/order may also have people working within them who carry out these ideas – even inadvertently. For example, funding disparities for public, land-grant, colleges and universities that have led to Black institutions receiving a gap in funds when compared to their predominantly White institution counterparts.

Summary of Wynter's Antiblackness

There is a constellation of factors that continue to perpetuate this ontology "white superiority," in which, merit and quality are tightly coupled. "Merit (or, in its institutional form,

"quality") is often defined narrowly…" as it pertains to standardized testing (e.g., admission test scores), research prowess (e.g., publications and grants), and institutional status (selectivity) (Astin, 2016, as cited by Garcia et al., 2017; Gasman et al., 2008; Wooten, 2015). Thus, HBCUs (and others) remain susceptible to prescribed notions of "blackness," in which other institutions are not held because of the demographics of these institutions. Often in higher education, "traditionally white colleges [that] are held out as the "norm" to which Black colleges are expected to adapt" (Wooten, 2015, p. 2). Because HBCUs have a different level of "blackness" their attempts to be held to the norms of traditional white college are different, too.

Critical Race Theory

In addition to Wynter's ideas of the global hierarchy of humanness that positioned Black people as "permanent slave," I use critical race theory to understand the racial disparities that exist within a Black educative space by understanding how race is endemic, the storytelling and counter narratives of Black administrators working as student success practitioners. CRT lineage stems from legal studies and has been applied interdisciplinary in multiple social sciences, including education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Harper et al., 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT derived from several predecessors: critical legal studies (CLS), feminism, and continental social and political philosophy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013), with the early work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman in the mid-1970s, as the civil rights movement of the 1960s had stalled and they grew increasingly distressed with the progress of racial reform in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). Ladson-Billings (1998) asserts, "CLS [critical legal studies] scholars' critique mainstream legal ideology for its portrayal of U.S. society as a meritocracy but failed to include racism in its critique. Thus, CRT became a logical outgrowth of the discontent of legal scholars of color" (p. 11).

CRT within the field of education research is used as a Black theorization of race and racism. “CRT enters the field of education as a decidedly Black theorization of race…a tool to analyze race and racism” (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 416). CRT represents an attempt to understand the experiences of Black people as they “make sense of and respond to institutionalized racism” (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 416). Dumas and Ross (2016) suggested that CRT focuses more poignantly on antiblack racism (a theory of racism) and antiblackness centers on an antiblack world (a theory of blackness). Dumas & Ross (2016) argued:

> BlackCrit becomes necessary precisely because CRT, as a general theory of racism, is limited in its ability to adequately interrogate what we call ‘the specificity of the Black’ (Wynter, 1989). That is CRT is not intended to pointedly address how antiblackness – which is something different than White Supremacy – informs and facilitates racist ideology and institutional practice. More, it cannot fully employ the counter stories of Black experiences of structural and cultural racisms, because it does not, on its own, have language to richly capture how antiblackness constructs Black subjects, and positions them in and against law, policy, and every day (civic) life. BlackCrit helps to explain precisely how Black bodies become marginalized, disregarded, and disdained, even in their highly visible place within celebratory discoursed on race and diversity. (p. 417)

For this study, I will utilize several tenets that a CRT framework employs, with a rooting in BlackCrit:

1. Racism is normal, not aberrant in American society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013): It is intricately embedded within the fabric of the United States and its institutions. Thus, the rules and laws that are guised under equal opportunity (color blindness) can only rectify

the more overt forms of discrimination and very little for the daily forms of racism that people of color confront.

2. Commitment to social justice: CRT is committed to historical context and the role it takes in shaping contemporary problems (Winkle-Wagner, Sule, & Maramba, 2019).
3. Storytelling and Counter-narratives: Critical race theory challenges racial oppression and the status quo (Delagado & Stefancic, 2013), rejecting the notion of Whiteness as standard. The premise is based on our culture constructing a social world that is self-interested and the rules, practices, and assignments of prestige and power that prove unfair must be spoken against to promote a better world. Harper et al. (2009) stated that "CRT uses counter-narratives as a way to highlight discrimination, offer racially different interpretations of policy, and challenge the universality of assumptions made about people of color" (p. 391).
4. Interest-convergence: Interest Convergence argues that change occurs when the "self-interests" of White people and people of color converge over a common goal (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2013).
5. A critique of liberalism: Argues that people earn their status in society based on individual merit. This concept is challenged by critical scholars maintain that people in the United State are given advantages and disadvantages based on ascribed characteristics (skin color) (Winkle-Wagner, Sule, & Maramba, 2019).

Applying the Theoretical Framework

In the United States, Black people have historically and contemporarily been devalued and positioned as problem (Dumas, 2016; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Wynter, 1993). The pervasive rhetoric that put in place a racialized social hierarchy (Wynter, 1993) continues to inform the

framing of institutions in the United States. Moreover, the concept of antiblackness undergirds this hierarchy and provides an understanding of how Black people and Black institutions are disparaged. Specifically, antiblackness argues that Black people are in a structurally antagonistic relationship with humanity (Dumas, 2016). “Slavery is how Black existence is imagined and enacted upon, and how non-Black people – and particularly whites – assert their own right to freedom, and right to the consumption, destruction, and/or simple dismissal of the Black” (Dumas, 2016, p. 3). Furthermore, Dumas (2016) argued that antiblackness is not solely a racial conflict that can be resolved (through organized political struggle) but rather to come to a more nuanced, “understanding of utter contempt for, and acceptance of violence against the Black” (p. 13).

The antiblackness that has situated the Black individual as problem has also been closely tethered to the Black institutions (i.e., HBCUs) (Allen et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2019). These antiblack (deficit-laden) narratives regarding HBCUs that diminish the contributions of these institutions and those within them while privileging PWIs (ubiquitous in the public imagination) must not go unquestioned (Williams et al., 2019). This study seeks to theorize both race and racism by first employing the concept of antiblackness and the use of critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework taking the context of HBCUs as articulated by institutional actors with student success duties.

In this chapter, I used Sylvia Wynter (1993), *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas A New World View,* as point of entry to conceptualize how this positioning of the Black body as permanent slave was socially constructed in the beginning of the United States. HBCUs are not above reproach and like other institutions of higher learning they face challenges that must be examined, and CRT provides a gaze whereby these counter-narratives can be

discussed. Critical Race Theory is useful because it provides a lens to examine counter-narratives told by institutional actors, in this case, Black administrators at HBCUs. The use of CRT methodology allows race and racism to be foreground in all aspects of the research process, challenges traditional research paradigms that are used to interpret people of color experiences, and lastly, provides solutions to racial, gender, and class subordination in society and its institutions (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Scholars have used antiblackness and CRT as a theoretical framework allows me to capture the experiences of administrators and how they respond to accountability pressures such as outcomes-based funding (Allen, McLewis, Jones, & Harris, 2018). Specifically, I used CRT to interpret the participants' understanding of 1) the role that race and racism plays regarding student success practices, and 2) how policies and practices are enacted on campus. Antiblackness provides a lens to understand the contemporary marginalization of HBCUs, the students, and its actors. Lopez (2003) contended that "the only difference between racism today and of the past is that modern-day racism is more subtle, invisible, and insidious…it has merely assumed a normality, and thus an invisibility, in our daily lives" (pp. 82-83). CRT's utility as theoretical framework enables hope of demystifying that we live in a racially neutral society and "tell another story of a highly racialized social order: a story where social institutions and practices serve the interest of White individuals" (p. 85). It is critical to recognize the ways race affects students of color, HBCU campus environments, and student success. By not engaging in this exploration, we fail to understand the full experience (Moore, Webb, Smith, Lacy, & Martin, 2018).

The theoretical framework helped to shape research questions, and how I framed the relationships built with administrators, the analysis, and lastly, interpretation of the data.

Ultimately, the theory helped me connect a smaller number of experiences to the larger social world.

Chapter Four: Methodology

The purpose of the study is to provide an analysis of perspectives of HBCU administrators and to identify potential "best-practices" for the sustainability of HBCUs (Gasman & Commodore, 2014). This critical qualitative comparative case study seeks to understand the experiences and practices of Black administrators within a public historically Black university, regarding how they manage student success given current educational challenges (e.g., desperate K-12 performance, institutionalized racism, low-endowment, persistence, and completion rates, etc.). In this chapter, I outline the research design and methodology for my study.

In this study, I asked the following overarching research question: In the rise of external accountability pressures, what actions are HBCU administrators taking to ensure funding, but also maintain fidelity to learning and persistence of their students? By external accountability pressures, I am particularly interested in issues such as outcomes-based funding where institutions must demonstrate the best possible outcomes to state or federal governments or risk losing funding. Additionally, the following sub-questions allow me to delve deeper into administrators' experiences and practices on HBCU campuses:

(RQ.1) According to administrators, how do structural systems (e.g., leadership/governance practices within HBCUs, state/federal policy, endowment etc.) relate to student success?

(RQ.2) What, if any, strategies do administrators employ to guide student success practices?

Below, I describe the critical comparative case study research design that I used to explore these questions.

Rationale for a Critical Comparative Case Study Design

I used a critical comparative case study (CCS) design for this study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). I employed a qualitative comparative case study research as mechanism to search for meaning and understanding of the lived experiences of Black administrators within HBCUs. I did this aiming for what Merriam and Tisdell (2016) call a "richly descriptive" analysis (p. 37). This qualitative study sought to understand narratives of Black administrators given the complex interrelationship between higher education and society. A case study approach was useful for this study because this was a unit-based analysis with multiple methods. The critical CCS approach was useful in this study because it allowed for the interaction of multiple concepts, such as location and time to be engaged when assessing the unit of analysis (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 13). Employing Patton's (2002) approach to purposive case selection, this critical qualitative case study sought to understand the experiences and practices of Black administrators working in a Black educative space, with a student success lens that will yield the most information and impact on development of knowledge (p. 230).

More specifically, I used a critical comparative case study (CCS) method developed by Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) because "not only are sites not autonomous – they are influenced by actions well beyond the local context and the current moment, and thus the idea of 'bounding' them, which others argue is the hallmark of case study research, is an illusion" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 13). CCS pays attention to power and inequality and is guided by "critical theory [which] aims to critique inequality and change society; it studies the cultural production of structures, processes, and practices of power, exploitation, and agency; and it reveals how common-sense, hegemonic notions about the social world maintain disparities of various sorts"

(Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 39). In other words, this approach allows for connecting even a single case to the larger social world.

A critical approach was particularly useful for this study because I was trying to understand persisting racial inequality and emancipatory conditions among HBCUs, which are racially classificatory institutions (Pasque, Carducci, Kuntz, & Gildersleeve, 2012). Critical qualitative inquiry has evolved from merely interpretivist, "which was the mandate of traditional qualitative inquiry," to a more social justice-based inquiry that calls for researchers to be change agents, promoting "ethically responsible activist research" (Canella, Perez, & Pasque, 2015; Pasque, et al., 2012). To that end, Canella et al., (2015) further asserted that "the pursuit of social justice within a transformative paradigm challenges prevailing forms of inequality, poverty, human oppression, and injustice" (p. XX).

This study was focused on inquiry with a hope to eradicate inequity (i.e., helping socially oppressed persons) and centering the voices of oppressed groups of people (Canella et al., 2015; Denzin, 2015). Guba & Lincoln (1994) contended that the root of critical approaches is critical theory, suggesting that the aim of inquiry should be change-making (Canella et al., 2015; Pasque et al., 2012). In addition, critical approaches should focus on critiquing and transforming, "the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender structures [that are exploitative and oppressive] … by engagement in confrontation, even conflict" (p. 113). Additionally, through this change-making, critical research affords the researcher the opportunity to become active with participants in their everyday lives (Apple, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

Traditional case study research focuses on a "bounded system" or contemporary phenomenon, what is known as "the case" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) in which inquiry should be seen "as an object rather than a process" (Stake, 1995, p. 2). These traditional methodological

approaches to case study research are bounded by both space and time (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995). I chose a critical comparative case study in order to look across and through sites and scales to probe "spatially non-contiguous assemblages of actors across scales" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 46). The CCS approach re-conceptualizes the idea of bounding cases (i.e., the unbounded case) from the traditional delineation of bounded case approach in qualitative case study in three ways: horizontal, vertical, and transversal comparisons within the case, or phenomenon (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006). Bartlett & Vavrus (2017) defined each comparison as:

> (1) expecting multiple sites of study at a single scale (through horizontal comparison); (2) examining what they have in common by looking at national or international policymaking (through vertical comparison); and (3) exploring how these horizontal and vertical connections were formed historically and have led to spatially differentiated effects (transversal comparison). (p.43)

The horizontal comparison situates the complexity of administrators' experiences with leadership and governance, policy development, and the practices (implementation) that impact student success functions at the institution. There are two distinct differentiations within the horizontal comparison: the *homologous* and *heterologous*. A heterologous comparison are entities (e.g., *NGO, a clinic, a school*) that are categorically distinct, but have meaningful influence (*unfolding*) on the phenomenon of interest. The homologous is defined as entities that have corresponding structures or positions that will be compared (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The homologous comparison is often driven by juxtaposition and provides space to compare and contrast entities (e.g., policies, practices, programs etc.) that may result in similar or different practices and why (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). This study is situated at one institution which

eliminated the ability to compare across institutions, and consequently, this method was not employed for this study

For this study, I utilized the vertical axis approach to CCS. This vertical analysis allowed for the appreciation of the socially complex web of relationships (practices and/or policies) that extend beyond the predetermined groups or levels (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). As my study engaged multiple intersecting constructs, the vertical axis allowed for an investigation of policies and practices regarding student success within the HBCUs. This yielded opportunities for me "to consider how actors [administrators] respond similarly and differently to a mandate from state or federal authorities…Their variable appropriation of policy as discourse and as practice is often due to different histories of racial, ethnic, or gender politics in their communities that appropriately complicate the notion of a single cultural group" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 75). The student success rhetoric is often ambiguous from campus to campus in higher education and there is not a single definitive statement defining student success in higher education (in this case HBCUs, specifically).

In this study, I used vertical comparison to understand the intersections of policies that influence contemporary practice. The evolution of student success is greatly influenced by historical trends in higher education (e.g., higher education expansion via GI Bill, retention theory that focused on student's background and integration into college impacted persistence/dropout). Additionally, the "achievement-gap"/ "education debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2006) which led to focus on college transition (i.e., first-year programming overshadows completion rates), advancements in technology (early alert) (Tampke, 2013) and refocus on graduation (performance/accountability), and rising costs/underemployment of graduates now influence the ways in which colleges and universities navigate student success (Bastedo,

Altbach, & Gumport, 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979). Moreover, many issues internal and external to the academy impact institutions policies and practices regarding student success (Pasque et al., 2012). These include institutional bureaucracy, supposed meritocracy, accreditation agencies, institutional ranking, educational foundations/philanthropists, outcomes-based funding, academic capitalism, funding, and publication peer review process, etc. New notions of student success should be considered as older ideas (often centered on white men) might not be as applicable in HBCUs or with students of color (Perna & Thomas, 2008). These various entities or constructs and the use of vertical comparison provide a general scope for multi-scalar (i.e., "[the case] spans the local and the national, the national and the global case study research, and that the researcher no longer sees these as binaries or as discrete levels") (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 80).

Lastly, given the social construction of race (Wynter, 1993) and the inception of HBCUs which came out of racial segregation in education in the United States, an examination of the historical roots are important and I used the transversal axis as a mechanism to compare the themes within the institution in this study. Bartlett & Vavrus (2017) asserted that "the study of history allows us to assess evidence and conflicting interpretations of a phenomenon …Too often, researchers take for granted the ways institution operate today rather than looking at them analytically through a historical lens" (p. 94). The perspectives of African American/Black administrators regarding racial inequality, meritocracy, and student-success practices, archival and/or documents were analyzed using transversal comparison. This approach was useful because it created a more robust contextualization of the historical constructs that continue to permeate the landscape today. Using this approach allowed for a deeper and broader analysis that

enabled case studies to be transferable to other institutions or spheres, such that researchers can use these cases to understand larger social-structural issues.

Research Site

The study focused on Robeson State University[6], a public, comprehensive, doctoral-conferring HBCU. Robeson is a public, coeducational institution located in the southwest region of the United States with approximately 7,000 students. This site was an ideal location for this study due to regional location and historical logics (e.g., legal segregation, resulting in the founding of HBCUs, specifically, 1890 public land-grant universities). Additionally, the state higher education commission system evaluation metrics govern the university's financial makeup. This point provided a more nuanced contextualization of how a state institution within the structure of performance-based funding model functions given the institutional type.

College completion policies that are driven by institutional outcomes are supported by specialist organizations, or educational foundations (Hillman, Fryar, Crespin-Trujillo, 2017). These educational foundations use intermediaries such as Complete College America and other non-profits to influence higher education policy as it pertains to college completion (Mangan, 2013). I selected a public HBCU because of the paucity in research regarding them compared to private HBCUs, and the complex intersecting governing structures that guide these institutions. Additionally, public institutions are more susceptible to some external pressures from the state because they are often at least partially funded by state governments. In this study, I examined how these distinct institutional administrators experience and understand the complexities of race and racism, antiblackness, issues of governance, and what challenges surround notions of student success. Ultimately, I am interested in what drives the strategic direction of this university as it

6 All names and places are pseudonyms

pertains to quality and social justice. I created a research design like Bartlett & Vavrus (2017) who:

> Attempted to illustrate this point by showing how cotemporary problems at the local or national level is rarely the result of spontaneous circumstances happening in 'the now' or circumscribed conditions that only affect one neighborhood, city, or state. There is a process to their manifestation that arises over time and in relation to decisions being made hundreds or thousands of miles away (p. 109).

In this study, I compared the ways administrators at this university negotiate imposed notions of merit while maintaining visions of social justice. To do so, I employed several methodological techniques, including observations and interviews (Creswell, 2007).

Participant Recruitment

This study focused on administrators at a historically Black colleges and universities. The participants of the study included African American/Black administrators at the senior-level, mid-level, and early career stages. The institutional trust was cultivated with administrators over an extended period of time when I started my doctoral program. Participants from multiple levels of leadership gave a more nuanced interpretation of how policies and practices are enacted on the campus as well as any conflicting logic. The administrators self-identified as Black or/and African American and could be of any sex or gender (e.g., male, female, transgender, nonconforming etc.).

I selected participation so that there were ideally five administrators at every level of leadership. I invited administrators at the institution to participate via emails and face-to-face introductory meetings. Specifically, I utilized individual contacts via their digital footprint (i.e., information on campus website) by both calling and emailing them. I also used institutional

connections as gatekeepers to gain participants for the study. For example, the gatekeeper assisted with identifying various administrators across the campus that would be willing to participate in the study and made the initial connection via email contact or in-person.

Also, I intentionally recruited administrators from both student and academic affairs units with an attempt to have equal numbers of participants from both units. I hypothesized that these administrators likely had direct or ancillary student success responsibilities on the respective campuses. For this study, administrators were considered to be student affairs professionals (coordinators, directors, assistant/associate vice presidents, vice presidents) or academic affairs professional staff (coordinators, directors, special-assistants, assistant/associate vice presidents, program managers/specialist, deans, department chairs, coaches, advisors etc.).

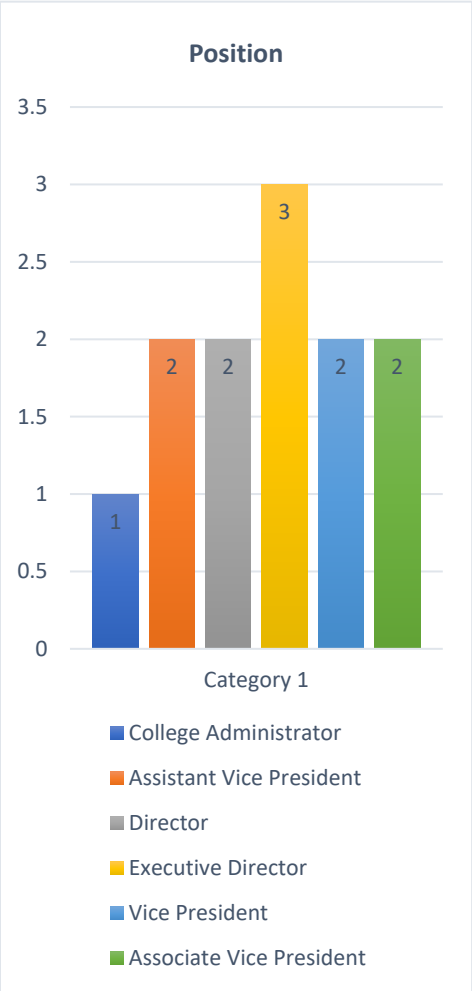
Additionally, I included administrators within fiscal affairs/administration (e.g., chief of staff, executive assistants, assistant/associate vice presidents, etc.) as participants in the study. These administrators were targeted with the rationale that they would provide a more nuanced (i.e., "ground-level," policy development/implementation perspective). I did not include the University presidents/chancellors because they are less likely to have direct student contact (i.e., University presidents/chancellors may provide macro-level or "high-level" interpretations of policies and institutional practices).

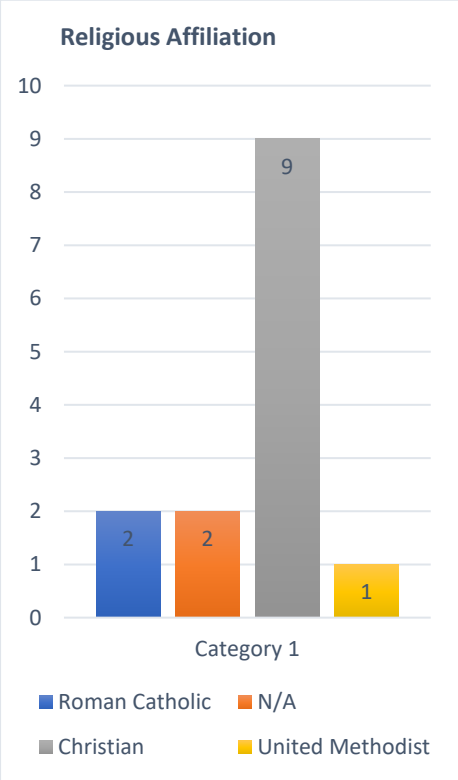
I invited select administrators at Robeson State at various leadership levels to participate in this study (via university organizational chart) by sending them recruitment emails and attending university-wide events (e.g., convocations, president's day, faculty institute, etc.). Those who agreed to participate were asked to suggest other administrators or colleagues who may be interested. Thus, I employed the expansion of the network of participants using the snowball or chain referral sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Patton, 2002, p. 237). This

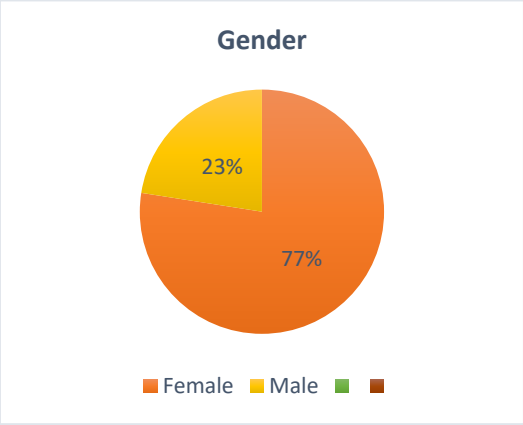
strategy was employed to ensure that persons participating have a greater motivation or/and comfort, due to colleagues/friends referring them to me.

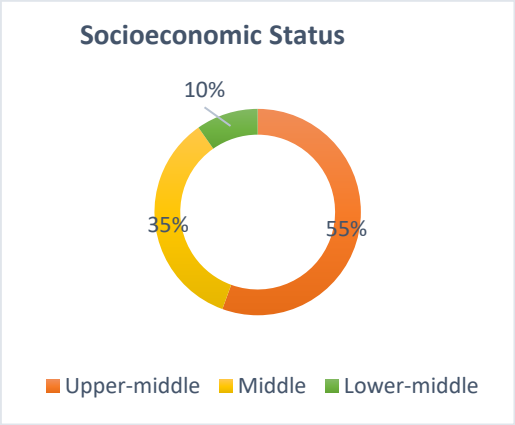
Figure 4.1 captures some of the participant profile data. In total, I recruited 14 participants to participate in the study through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews at the study site until saturation of the data was reached.

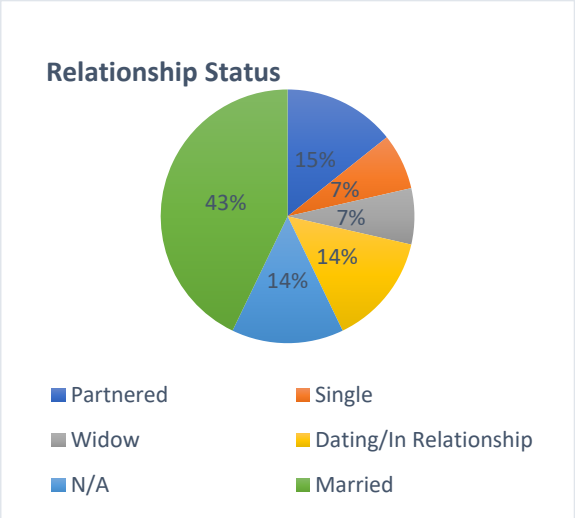
Figure 4.1. Participant Demographic Information











Data Collection

To better understand the experiences of administrators, I utilized institutional artifacts (policies/ procedures, documents, etc.), interviews, and observations (Creswell, 2007). In total, I completed the following forms of data collection in this order, as explained below:

1) 14 semi-structured interviews
2) 10 hours of observation of meetings, informal meetings, and events
3) 119 pages of document analysis

Figure 4.2. Three Primary Methods Used in Data Collection.

Interviews

Participants of this study were 14 Black educators working at public HBCUs at various career levels (e.g., early career, mid-level, senior level) and across campus divisions (i.e., academic departments, student affairs, student support services etc.). The interviews conducted for this study were semi-structured (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Fontana & Frey, 2005). Fontana & Frey (2005) asserted that "interviewing includes a wide variety of forms and a multiplicity of uses … interviewing involves individual, face-to-face verbal interchange." Furthermore, interviews are a useful tool to gain insight into the lived experience of participants and its meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). For this study, interviewing was my primary methodological technique. The semi-structured approach to interview provided a "more procedural nature of conversation and the social dimensions of knowledge production" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 55). Specifically, the CCS approach was focused on the interaction patterns in interviews and the belief that knowledge is socially produced, not discovered by researchers (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). To answer the questions of this study, I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews lasting between 45-90 minutes with participants. Patton (2002) suggested several categories contingent upon the data I sought to gather during interviewing:

> (1) experience and behavior questions that elicit what respondents do or have done, (2) opinion and value questions that elicit how respondents think about their behaviors and experiences, (3) feeling questions that elicit how respondents react emotionally to or feel about their experiences and opinions, (4) knowledge questions that elicit what respondents know about their worlds, (5) sensory questions that elicit respondents' descriptions of what and how they see, hear, touch, taste, and smell in the world around

> them, and (6) background and demographic questions that elicit respondents' descriptions of themselves. (Patton, 2002, pp. 348-351)

Focal themes of my interview protocols included educational background, racial experiences in school and society, perceived notions of student success, policies and practices that guide the institution. Though these protocol themes provided a frame for the questions that I asked, I also reflected on each observation and interview to see if there were any other themes that arose organically, such as: educational technology, student success and retention efforts, and race (Appendix A). Whenever possible, I conducted informal brief interviews with participants before or after observations.

Observations

Qualitative inquiry provides an opportunity for direct participation in and observation of the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). Participant observation is the most comprehensive of all research strategies and allows insights of depth and detail to be captured for the reader to understand what occurred and how it occurred (Patton, 2002). Direct observations (i.e., personal contact with and observations of a setting), Patton (2002) contended, has several advantages:

> First, through direct observations the inquirer is better able to understand and capture the context within which people interact…Second, firsthand experience with a setting and the people in the setting allows an inquirer to be open, discovery oriented, and inductive because, by being on-site, the observer has less need to rely on prior conceptualizations of the setting, whether those prior conceptualizations are from written documents or verbal reports. A third strength of observational fieldwork is that the inquirer has the opportunity to see things that may routinely escape awareness among the people in the setting. A fourth value of direct observation is the chance to learn things that people

> would be unwilling to talk about in an interview. A fifth advantage of fieldwork is the opportunity to move beyond the selective perceptions of others. Finally, getting close to the people in a setting through firsthand experience permits the inquirer to draw on personal knowledge during the formal interpretation stage of analysis. (pp. 263-264)

I was not able to attend council meetings (e.g., academic deans' meetings, consortium meetings with various campus offices/divisions, cabinet meetings with executive leaders at the campus) to observe participants. However, I was able to observe smaller impromptu meetings with administrators working to improve student success. These are spaces where campus leaders convene to discuss programs and initiatives, evaluation, and strategy. Additionally, I was able to observe in academic/supplemental support hubs or/and centers that house student success functions (e.g., student success center, tutoring spaces, advising/coaching offices etc.). I used these impromptu meetings to triangulate information from interviews and provide a nuanced context for perspective shared in interviews regarding student success practice. In total, I completed 10 hours of observation across the informal meetings, and sub-topic/sub-group meetings (e.g., tutoring session). From the observations, I created a primary record meaning that I transcribed my field notes (often taken in a notebook) into word documents for analysis.

Documents

Documents were useful for this study to get a better understanding of strategic priorities of the institutions. Specifically, I collected documents such as strategic plans, academic master plans, and brochures that captured the messaging the institution has as it pertains to student success. In addition, I was able to secure documents from participants in the study that covered a broad scope of topics. The documents provided a fuller context of the campus and the stakeholders (e.g., government, accrediting agencies, governing boards, community etc.) that the

administrators serve. The documents were accessed via the World Wide Web and in-person (e.g., lobbies, waiting areas, lounge etc.). “Records, documents, artifacts, and archives – what has traditionally been called “material culture” in anthropology – constitute a particularly rich source of information about many organizations and programs” (Patton, 2002, p. 293). I used documents such as strategic plans, institutional academic master plans, brochures, end-of-year reports, documents shared by participants and handbooks to triangulate the data that I collected. In total, there were 119 pages of documents that I included in the analysis.

Field Notes

During data collection, particularly during observations, I took field notes with key themes that undergird the overarching study: how educational quality is discussed, defined, and responded to; how administrators discuss questions of racial and educational inequality; how they discuss the purposes of education at an HBCU; discussions of the pressures imposed by the need to seek funding, and particularly by state performance-based and federal funding; and other discussions of lived experiences regarding race. These smaller observations allowed me to get better understanding of their student success practice. Gaining access to these meetings required trust and rapport (Creswell, 2007). Administrators were much more open to discussions in these smaller meetings.

Data Analysis

According to Denzin & Lincoln (2008), qualitative research does not have a prescribed methodological approach to analyzing research. In fact, it involves an amalgamation of various methods used in many other disciplines. I employed an iterative approach using inductive and deductive codes to qualitative research and data analysis (Maxwell, 2013). This method was used as a tool because inductive codes allow themes to emerge directly from the data; the method also

provides flexibility in categorization. I used deductive codes to identify theoretical constructs that appeared throughout data. I wrote memos regularly during data analysis (Maxwell, 2013) both to capture and stimulate my analytic thinking around the data. I wrote emic memos around recurring themes (terms/ideas) that the participants are using. Additionally, etic memos were written when analyzing data based on the theoretical concepts presented. Both the emic and etic memos were used as general exercise to tease out constructs for data analysis. In addition to the memos, I completed coding of all data.

Coding is considered the primary categorization strategy in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013). I transcribed the first few interviews to start the initial coding and codebook, and then utilized a transcriber for the following interviews for this study. I listened to all recordings and coded all data in this study. In using practices of critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996) a systematic analysis of the transcript involved three stages of coding (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2012, p.7). I initially read over each of the statements 2-3 times gaining familiarity with the content and themes within the text (Thomas, 2006). I then used low-level (Carspecken, 1996; Patton, 2001) inductive codes (Thomas, 2006) drawn from the data using two–three-word clusters that aligned with the administrator's own words and correspond that with emic memos. Based upon the initial analysis of the low-level codes, I assigned a category in accordance with the text and other chunks of text. Looking at themes I reduced overlap and redundancy and then incorporate most salient themes (Creswell, 2002, p. 266, Figure 9.4, as cited by Thomas, 2006). All observations and documents analyzed utilized the same coding and data analysis techniques that were used in the analysis of interviews.

Following this level of inductive analysis, in concert with deductive codes drawn from the theoretical constructs in data, I then identified analytic questions from the transcript

(Neumann, 2009) based upon data collected. These questions asked of the data allowed for a re-coding of data with analytic questions centered which led to a reduction in overlapping codes throughout the codebook.

In the third stage of analysis, I used both low-level codes and the codes related to the analytic question (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2012). Then, I analyzed the data using high-level codes (Carspecken, 1996) parallel to the other two stages of codes. The high-level codes involved coding three transcripts in a word document and using direct two-to-five words from the transcript data to categorize the codes into potential themes. The low-level codes were very close to the data, I then moved emergent themes into various columns. This coding schema was then organized within the Nvivo software. As other transcripts were coded the themes shifted and some were collapsed into others. Based on the data, these codes were high inference, in that, the meaning derived was implicit or subtle to capture larger societal constructs pertaining to ideas and practices of student success in HBCUs (Winkle-Wagner, Sule, & Maramba, 2012). I analyzed all data in this way, including documents, observation notes, and field notes.

Data Validity and Trustworthiness

Qualitative inquiry has many detractors that challenge the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Shenton, 2004) typically because validity and reliability are not translated in the same form as they are in naturalistic work. To address trustworthiness in this study, I triangulated data collected using interviews, document analysis, and observations – of which, interviews are the primary data collection strategies for qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 2009; Shenton, 2004). This comparative case study allowed for data to be triangulated, and representative of phenomenon across the institution (Shenton, 2004). Also, after each of the interviews, I provided space for member checks, allowing participants to clarify “on the spot” any part of the interview as well as

at the end of data collection (Merriam, 2009; Shenton, 2004). As another form of member checking, once interviews were transcribed, I sent copies of the transcriptions and any preliminary analysis to participants to ensure logic was representative and accurate. If a participant felt that the data presented was not representative of their ideas, I redacted upon request the contested data and/or made revisions based upon the participant. Lastly, frequent debriefing sessions with my advisor and with colleagues afforded opportunities for me to broaden the scope of experiences and perspectives while interpreting the data (Shenton, 2004).

Researcher Positionality

I am a proponent of the missions of HBCUs, an alumnus, and a practitioner. These institutions afforded me the opportunity to obtain a postsecondary education. Notwithstanding the volatile societal practices (social construction of race, slavery, and institutionalized racism) that birthed these institutions – HBCUs have continued to press forward. As a student, I enjoyed my undergraduate experience and development at Tennessee State University, a public HBCU. To that end, I participated in co-curricular activities such as student government, which introduced me to the interworking of a university through the various University committees I served on. When I think about the college-going process, I must say that HBCUs were not institutions that were within my scope of consideration due to out-of-state tuition. The introduction into HBCUs came from extended family that had considered TSU but did not attend. The influence of my cousin was the sole reason that I applied to TSU (the only HBCU that I applied to) and receiving a four-year scholarship afforded me the option to go out-of-state. A combination of these experiences and others has led me to this work and my stance on HBCUs.

Student success in higher education is predicated on several complexities occurring nationally with the academic performance of P-20 education. The deterioration of the traditional family structure, deindustrialization, globalization, colonialism, antiblackness, white supremacy, and economic disparities plaguing minority communities all intersect to influence the effectiveness of our educational system. Failure to fully consider these issues was in constant conflict with the well-intended standards espoused by organizations that emphasized retention metrics. Specifically, the conversations around access and opportunity (i.e., whether to increase enrollment benchmarks, shift recruiting strategies away from low-performing districts), producing graduates that can participate in the marketplace, and institutional effectiveness (degree production in discipline, institutional policies/ practices) positions some researchers to focus on an ideal of higher education which no longer exists; hence, educators find themselves facing the harsh realities of the Ugly Truth and opt to continue the Pretty Lie. My education and work experience at a HBCU strengthened this realization. The diverse experiences at a Historically Black University undergirds this research. These constructs drive my inquiry and research that aims to advocate change, eliminating oppressive practices, and inform the sustainable trajectory of HBCUs and student success in higher education.

In this study, I sought to understand how experiences of Black administrators working at a HBCU shaped their ideas and beliefs about student success. Specifically, I was interested in how their own experiences, and awareness of institutionalized racism influence how they viewed and negotiated meritocratic discourses about schooling. The study explored the historical and contemporary policies that drive decisions on campus at Robeson State University. Finally, the study examined successful strategies used to sustain HBCUs as it pertains to student success initiatives (practices). With that in mind, this study challenges certain grand narratives and

allows a space for scholar/practitioners to re-conceptualize or embrace more appropriate notions of student success.

Chapter Five: Transversal Findings – Considering History and Institutional Norms

Using qualitative inquiry, I explored the ways Black administrators lived experiences, policies, and practices impacted student success at a public historically Black university. Specifically, I used critical case study (CCS) to contextualize the ways in which Black administrators navigated institutional bureaucracy and state governance. The transversal analysis allowed me to situate the historical relations that inform the present-day activities of the university. For example, using the transversal analysis I was able to examine issues such as shifting funding structures in higher education (from an enrollment-based formula to a performance-based model) (Alshehri, 2016), inequities in funding of P-20 education, preparation in K-12 schooling, and lastly, how race and subjugation inform present day social conditions. This is a critical case study, and the utility of Bartlett and Vavrus (2016) method allowed me to attend to international, national, and local dimensions in relation to culture, context, space, and place. In particular, the transversal analysis helps to answer the research question, In the rise of external accountability pressures, what actions are HBCU administrators taking to ensure funding, but also maintain fidelity to learning and persistence of their students? The major findings suggested that race and social injustices are critical components of student progression and graduation on campus.

There were two emergent claims in the data:

1.) Race was a salient factor that underpinned many of the administrators' student success practices on campus. In this study, the structural inequities in academic preparation and funding continue to impact the successful completion of students. This nuanced interpretation at times provided opportunities for administrators to not position the

student as problem, but rather to consider larger systemic issues, and offer strategic support services to assist them toward graduation.

2.) Student success at RSU was defined as outcomes: Retention, Persistence, and Graduation. There was a commitment to social justice and mission among administrators. In addition, the university was steeped in performance data as it pertains to students moving efficiently through the institution and graduating with the skills needed to be successful in their postgraduate endeavors. Many of the institution's efforts were undergirded by the ability for students to hit prescribed metrics identified by the state.

Salience of Race and Social (In) Justice and Their Intersection with Student Success

The two sections in this chapter focus on the intersections of race, inequalities, and student success that neither the institution nor its students choose. The second section looks at the ways practitioners are operationalizing student success given the external factors. A transversal analysis allowed me to focus on the ways these external influences (e.g., racial construction, inequities, funding, academic preparation) affect a student's ability to be successful in college. The importance of race and the institution's commitment to social justice, at times, are seamless, and at other times may be incongruent. HBCUs continue to provide a space for Black students, and others (such as low-income students and women), that were traditionally left out of higher education (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2014). In today's landscape, these institutions maintain that modus operandi and their administrators remain keenly focused on creating educative spaces for low-income and students of color to attain a postsecondary education.

As a racially identified institution, some HBCU administrators remained critical of notions of equity by having a nuanced interpretation of academic preparedness, race as a social construct, fostering a sense of belonging, and postsecondary education as a tool for social justice.

Understanding the historical implications of race and racism was ever emergent in these data and is an essential component of this critical case study.

The transversal analysis presented in this chapter provides a sociohistorical lens in which inequities in higher education funding and under resourced K-12 education has created a system that was and remains unequal (Wooten, 2015; Smith, 2016). This persistent dynamic has fueled many administrators' focus on chiseling away at these injustices by being explicit in the language used to talk about these issues. Also, they are committed to providing an educational experience that can meet students where they are through many avenues (e.g., a diverse faculty, in-classroom quality education, and predictive analytics) in their everyday practice to push the needle on student success. Dr. Danielle Smith, an assistant vice president, stated the inseparable mission of HBCUs and social justice. When asked about the mission and social justice, she responded:

> I'm not sure I understand how those are different because social justice is who we are. I mean, that is who we are. You know, I don't want to give away too much but here's the point. If you've lived on this earth in America for as many years as I've lived on this earth in America, you have seen a sea of social justice where the African American community has always had to come together and where the HBCU community has been important in making sure that you have a source of, and resources, necessary to move that social justice needle.

Providing educational access and graduating students were seen as a critical part of the mission at the university. Given the institution's identity as an HBCU, the administrators viewed social justice and education as closely tethered. Dr. Raquel, an executive director in academic affairs reflected:

> I think they're kind of one and the same. I see them as the same coin, two different sides. I think that you can't do this, in my mind, you can't do education where it, regardless of the population, without having some level of connection to social justice because they're not separate things.

Historically Black universities began out of structure that was segregated and racist. In relation to one of CRT's tenets, a commitment to social justice, both Drs. Raquel and Smith explain that given the plight against Black people in the United States, HBCUs have been stewards of social justice (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). They understand the historical context and the role it takes in shaping the contemporary issues students face today. Despite the challenging genesis of HBCUs, these universities continue to forge a way in the larger higher education terrain. Understanding this historical perspective is a critical function of the transversal analysis method in comparative case study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016). A middle manager in academic affairs, Dr. Tiffany Redd, referenced the historical inequities that should be foregrounded: "I think the institution, because of its history, has an obligation to always, what's the word? Always be mindful of social justice whether it's for African Americans or any student population that we serve." Moreover, the inherent biases that are imbedded within the social fabric of the United States, and globally, continue to be situated within the context of its institutions as well. Dr. Danielle Smith an assistant vice president, explained:

> First of all, race is socially constructing. There is no such thing as race. It is something that white America designed to make sure that African Americans from slavery to this day always considered themselves less than although I've never considered myself less than, and will always, and as a woman I've experienced more gender bias at this institution than I have racial bias.

Dr. Smith's assertion of racial construction provided an example of CRT's tenets, race as endemic (Harper et al., 2009), intricately embedded within America and its institutions. Dr. Smith further described how antiblackness undergirds this positioning of Black people as problem. A tool of antiblackness was designed that from slavery to present day was used to ensure Black people considered themselves to be less than White people, dispossessing them of their humanity. Dr. Smith rejects the way race is constructed in her own identity and likely challenges this logic in her everyday practice, too. Given the proximity of Black administrators employed by this institution she experienced more gender biases. Administrators also provided critical understanding of ways some underrepresented students of color and first-generation students' environments put them at a disadvantage resulting in them being academically underprepared, and secondly, how they view their academic self-efficacy impact how students transition academically to college, which I consider in the following section (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2014), where the participants described the way students are prepared academically while contemplating the contexts from which students came.

Academic Preparation within Context

Administrators were critical of the under-preparedness of students given the performance of K-12 education for some students that attended the institution. Academic preparation (or the lack thereof) is the fault of the educational structure. The structure of institutions is making it so that some students are less prepared and the quotes below suggested this. These unfortunate circumstances are not the fault of the students, but rather, reflect the persistent educational inequalities in communities around the country. Thus, not all students will come into the university with high grade point averages or excellent ACT/SAT scores. Understanding the nuances of students' educational backgrounds is crucial for administrators. These varying levels

of preparedness are a quintessential ethos of this HBCU's commitment to maintaining a mission that leverages its resources to support the students enrolled (i.e., meeting them where they are and launching them forward). Furthermore, the administrators challenged how race is reflected among academic majors and the language used to address inequalities on campus. This HBCU is extremely diverse, and is proud to have a diverse faculty, but administrators still do their due diligence to ensure that the varying levels of preparedness is understood amongst a diverse faculty. Dr. Keith, associate vice president for academic affairs, shared his insight regarding the degrees of student preparedness:

> So, preparedness and, with me, I don't put that all on students a lot of times. It's like, oh my goodness, although your transcript says you've had these courses, I'm not naive enough to say, "Well, it's just the students." It's my pet peeve to hear other faculty members really put it all on the students. So, it's what's been done to them. I'm aware what goes on at the lower levels at schools or whatever. That certain schools … And you can look at statistical data on just how successful certain school systems are and it's, like, those numbers aren't lying … students come in with various, varying competencies and so they might be weak in mathematics and it's the role, I think it's the role of the university to have services in place early … I don't like marginalizing even students that come in and they are deficient. If they're deficient then it's not just enough to recognize they're deficient. What am I gonna do? This is higher ed. I'm supposed to be a professional so what difference am I gonna make in that person's life?

Dr. Keith's reflection highlights the systemic discrimination that students are subjected to because of their environment. He challenged colleagues that had assumptions made about students' preparedness and developed a nuanced interpretation of statistical data from successful

schools. This critique of liberalism, a tenet of CRT, provides a lens to better understand how larger systemic issues (e.g., social, educational opportunities, political, economic) factors intersect to explain the varying competencies that students may enter college with regardless of their merit or ability (Winkle-Wagner, Sule, & Maramba, 2019). The question of whether the institution is part of the problem was demonstrated by Dr. Keith's understanding of the complexities that exist based upon how stratified resources are in K-12 schools. In this way, according to some participants like Dr. Keith. RSU challenges the deficit-laden characterizations of its students and brings contextual background within the scope of reasoning. This is not to say that they aren't met with colleagues (administrators and faculty) that uphold contrary logics. Administrators focused on the importance of making higher education a place where students' backgrounds and academic preparedness was important to cultivating the student success practices at RSU. Reflecting on what constitutes success, Dr. Debra Smith, an academic coordinator, stated:

> Student success to me would be, there are many ways to measure it, but one of the measures would be accepting the student where they are and then moving with them as much as you can to develop them to grow to whatever their fullest potential is, but it starts with accepting them, in a non-judgmental way, exactly where they are and then moving them forward.

Dr. Smith's idea of acceptance allows for students to bring themselves within the higher education experience and fosters a sense of belonging for them that is critical for student success. In addition to non-judgmental approaches, some administrators were able to communicate the usefulness of identifying elusive language that is used to explain systemic issues that impact how students enter postsecondary education.

Dr. Denise Jackson, vice president for academic affairs, reflected on the ambiguous language being used within higher education. When asked about her view of success she remarked:

> It's interesting you bring that up because, and it's interesting because we went to a conference yesterday where probably five percent of the participants were African American and the facilitator, who was white, introduced student success as an outgrowth of social justice, and so it was very kind of chilly climate after that. Very interesting, but he said, "If you look at the work that was done in the civil rights era to build upon this level of equity, education served as a way to create spaces for access and success and we've got to measure ourselves against that," and so I think he had them until that moment because they had never thought about how that might look and how you've got to do all this work at the same time.
>
> It's not just, I think for many people they've looked at access and we got that down. Access is not necessarily a big elephant in the room, but they frame things around key words like Pell eligible or URM, under-represented minorities, so they're using some targeted terms to just get down to Black [people]. You know, just get down to it because I think the framing is trying to sterilize it, so it won't be so impactful, like, people don't, if when we talk about race ethnicity, it's such a scary term for so many people so they try to sterilize it so it won't be such a heated kind of thing but it just is. It just is. You can't get around it and that's why, like I was telling the faculty, "Hey, we got to talk about this stuff, this stuff matters and we've got to show people who are here, who are in the trenches, that your work is valued no matter what kind of path you came from," but our mission is always, we'll always be a historically Black university.

Dr. Jackson stated how conversations that centered on race and ethnicity are challenging, and instead of getting to the core of issues we use sterilized language to talk about it. However, it is imperative that faculty and administrators push through that discomfort to better understand why the work they do matters given its challenges. Dr. Jackson further asserted the lifelong impact that equity work has for students and the sacrifices that families continue to make to ensure higher education is an option:

> It's gonna change his trajectory, and I think when you look at where some of us come from, we know without a doubt that education still makes a difference and while people may not want to deal with it or speak to it, and sometimes people are embarrassed that they didn't come from a trust fund and a this and that. For African Americans, you know, Black twitter is undefeated. We still got the first, the first, the first, the first, the only. That's still going on and, like people are saying, my dad took out their retirement so I could continue to go to school. My dad took a job at this university as a janitor so that I could get my undergraduate degree. That's real. You know? That's a real story and I don't think people can, you know, you can blow it off. You can let it pass you, but what we're doing is really, like my pastor used to say, "If we all do our part, it'll look like a miracle," and there's a lot of credence to that in education because if we're all really focused on the end, starting with that end in mind or that commencement, if we're doing that then a lot of the things, the decisions that we'll make, will be without all the noise that confuses us on a day-to-day basis.

The salience of race and its intersection with student success at RSU is intricately interwoven through ideas about racial uplift like how Dr. Jackson referred to it. The experiences of administrators impact how they approach the complexities that exist within postsecondary

education. Understanding that race is socially constructed and the implicit bias that continues to inform how to view institutions of higher education and students of color is fundamental to student success practice too.

At RSU, administrators remained focused on the convolutions that exist within higher education landscape and its purpose. In all, a belief in education as an opportunity for students to better their lives continue to be at the core of administrators' daily practices. Again, the ways that race, inequalities, and student success intersect permeate social institutions and force a certain adaptation that students or the institution don't necessarily choose (Wooten, 2015). Administrators are closely tethering equity and social justice in their mission and practice; however, these ideas may not translate into the funding structure for the institution itself. Some HBCUs have struggled to maintain equitable funding and have had to do more with less resources over the years.

HBCUs are Constantly Underfunded

The mechanisms that are used by administrators at RSU to guide its student success practices are undergirded by the historical inequities that remain present in society because of the social construction of race. The impact has permeated social institutions and caused inequalities in the distribution of state allocations to higher education institutions (Smith, 2016). Importantly, RSU is situated within a state that has enacted performance-based funding policy for state institutions of higher education. Historically, the state facilitated a separate and unequal distribution of resources to land-grant institutions (Wooten, 2015). In addition, these administrators reflected on the overarching goal of higher education being an extension of the state's goals to produce a workforce by credentialing its citizens. This could be construed as not leveling the field to ensure that students of color, and others (e.g., low-income students), are not

given a fair opportunity to achieve credentials that yield higher paying careers. Dr. Raquel, talked about the importance of equitable allocation of resources to support a quality institution of higher learning:

> One of the things when you're fighting for equality and you're fighting for equity in those things, you are also saying that we do have the merit and the qualities that, well, we meet the standard. The standard is met. What we're saying is the standard is met yet sometimes we're still not getting the justice that we need. Nobody's saying we want to be less and a matter of fact, a lot of times what we're saying is we are as good or better and so why can't we get the same level of resources?

Dr. Raquel rejected the notion of whiteness as standard (Harper et al., 2009), an example of CRT, by challenging the unfair funding practices at RSU. This data indicates the ways in which institutional antiblackness is situated and disrupts negative depictions of HBCUs that have consistently been underfunded resulting in its marginalization. The larger systemic issues that are driven by race, and racism, is countered by the practices of administrators at RSU. The recognition of the funding disparities that have existed since the inception were reflected upon by many administrators. States operated dual and unequal systems of higher education and Black institutions have had to contend with this gap in funding. Additionally, the funding disparities that RSU contend with annually stem from this racist illogic. For example, state-sanctioned racial inequality (segregation) led to dual systems that privileged whiteness and benchmarks and standards associated with White institutions – thus, impacting its financial resources (Wooten, 2015).

A vice president, Lily Warren, challenged the budgeting process given the past and current disparities in funding:

> [In] terms of Black and white, on a day-to-day basis, you knew there were the issues of the federal match wasn't the same and, you know, of course you have more challenges in terms of what your student needs were, and you would like to think that the budgeting process would acknowledge your greater challenges on the state and federal level if possible and provide you with more funds.

Funding challenges are not new to higher education and persist given many intersecting factors, but these inequities are compounded when you contextualize historical discrepancies in funding and the ever-changing funding models. It is important to understand these challenges are rooted in structural deficit viewpoints about Black people and Black institutions (Williams et al., 2018). Institutional antiblackness here constructed HBCUs as lacking value and these structural-historical forces overtime denigrates their value within public discourse. Without acknowledging the seemingly deliberate underfunding by state governments. This state-sanctioned inequality is one of many. Other examples include performance-based funding that has facilitated an unequal distribution of resources, specifically, to MSIs that disproportionately serve low-income students and students of color.

Hillman and Corral (2017) noted that these students experience disproportionate budgetary cuts compared to non-MSIs in the same state: "Without successfully equalizing or stabilizing the capacities of universities, especially MSIs, PBF models will ostensibly exacerbate the inequality it proposes to address" (p. 1769). Nevertheless, RSU continues to strive toward innovation informed by a historical perspective as they seek to increase the success of its students. Not only did administrators try to reconcile the larger societal issues that led to an inequity in funding and steady divestment, but they also had a keen sense of understanding that

increasing retention and persistence rates were mechanisms to prepare students for graduation and the institution's standing within higher education.

Dr. Sarah Love emphasized the push toward increasing credentials to meet workforce demands in the state and the desire to have students be professionals that contribute civically and within their communities:

> I think the challenge is very similar to what's happening K through 12 is this whole issue of equity and I think at a HBCU there's an expectation that there will be some equity for our students and I think we still are because of everything from enrollment to the types of students we serve to financial constraints, we just, at this institution, have not been able to really create that equity for our students and I think that's the best way to explain that. It's not been successful and so how do we get to these legislators to say, "No, if you want to see those results, you got to create equity." Sending everybody to a community college is not creating equity and giving everybody an associate degree is not creating equity. … You're trying to create a workforce. You're trying to bring, it's about economic development. You're trying to bring businesses here and minimally pay people, train people so that they can go and do these jobs. That's what you're trying to do because if you were trying to really create equity for under-served people, you'd be giving them a bachelor's degree. You'd be training them up in fields where they can make six figures or over $75,000, you know?

Higher education at RSU must contend with the state workforce goals, divergent inequities, challenging budgets, and performance metrics set forth by state legislators. Dr. Love's concept of postsecondary education was nuanced and understanding the intersecting logics is an important perspective when you consider its role in fostering social justice. The ability to

facilitate an equitable educational experience present challenges when you have a history of injustice and trying to meet the demands of state governments. RSU is focused on not only producing graduates that move through a degree program in timely fashion, but also on learning, an equitable distribution of students of color within high yielding industries, and finally, on being attentive to students' goals for attending college.

Dr. Love acknowledged the challenge of trying to support students financially and delivering the necessary support services on campus to ensure they are successful. In this section and the previous section, I have focused on the external factors (e.g., racial construction, inequalities, funding, and academic preparation) that influence student success. In the next section, I explore how the institution operationalizes student success at the university.

Student Success at RSU Defined as Outcomes: Retention, Persistence, and Graduation

Student success at RSU was framed in relatively traditional ways by administrators. Two divergent themes were present in the data:

1) Success as overcoming structural obstacles, and

2) Success as individual outcome markers (credit hours attainment, course completion, degrees conferred).

As a public university, Robeson State is required to meet metrics of performance identified by the university higher education commission of the state. This outcomes-based model has put in place a system that funds the university based on several indicators (e.g., retention, progression, and completion) that administrators use to identify the institution's position in terms of degree production within the 4-year and 6-year periods. The first construct of success was linked to structural inequalities and these metrics (retention, persistence, and graduation) are not linked to the inequities that students face. For example, though success as

linked to individual markers are not necessarily linked to the idea that race and inequality might also be connected to success outcomes – they do not account for structural inequalities. Dr. Danielle Smith, reflected on those influencers to her work as a practitioner:

> I would say the biggest influencer for me right now in my work is the State of Robeson Mandate where we … have a specific performance related to students in terms of meeting those 30-, 60-, 90-credit hour benchmarks. In terms of student graduation, students obtaining degrees and how that affects the institution's bottom line in terms of funding.

The ability of students to move throughout these curricula and achieve identified benchmarks is critical for the state's funding assistance. In addition to students accumulating the course completion hours (30-, 60-, 90-credit hours) as the ultimate retention effort – there are other indicators as aforementioned such as four and six-year graduation rates, research and sponsored programs, adult students, and others. More specifically, the 30-, 60-, 90-credit hour benchmarking is the cumulative earned hours that students must meet or exceed during an academic year to be counted in the outcome formula. Dr. Denise Jackson further explained the student success strategy at RSU:

> We, of course, use a traditional method so we look at first to second year retention. We look at persistence but not to the degree probably other places look at it. We don't have that conversation much about persistence even though it's something we collect, and we do evaluate and measure it. We look at the number of degrees produced but we have not, we do embrace the six-year rate that we have had conversations and we have evaluated four-year rates but because it's not necessarily something we're measured on by the state, we don't necessarily look at that but I do look at it because so much effort was made to reduce the degree to 120 [hours].

According to Dr. Jackson, administrators were focused on efforts that have been identified by the state as performance metrics, but also consistently focus on providing pathways for students to finish college within four years, while being sensitive to the fact that some students' paths are not linear and often involve issues that extend beyond the confines of the institution such as personal situations that impact a student's progression through a degree program. Kim Taylor highlighted the rigid pathways that students encounter as they maneuver college:

> Student success at RSU is movement, the accumulation of hours, the accumulation of hours and movement through the system and its movement from one level to the other and eventually graduating but it's not a straight line. Our students' success is based on a movement in and out of the system and eventually reaching the end goal whereas, as some majority institutions students come in bam, bam, bam, they're expect to do four years, be through, go on about your business. That's not as clear cut here.

Retention remained a challenge for students at RSU, according to many campus documents. Critical to Taylor's reflection that students accumulate credit hours a bit differently at RSU in terms of timing, there is still no connection between progression and external inequalities. In addition, other nuances come into play as administrators identified factors that impede their efforts include, for example, the overall costs of postsecondary education.

At RSU, retention emerged as a multidimensional challenge that is situated within the larger sociohistorical context and is often seen by society as a student's inability to perform academically, as suggested by participants. This bounded understanding doesn't allow for systemic racism to be considered as students experience K-12 schools. The outcomes of these systemic educational issues provide a nuanced interpretation for administrators that are evaluated on a student's ability to accumulate a set amount of credit hours each year of matriculation.

Students may experience one or a combination of these issues as they navigate college. Dr. Sarah Love shared her insights:

> Where we have room for improvement is to get students to complete [their hours] and then, of course, retention. So, we have, that's the retention is really where we need to focus is how do we get people back, and so one of the things the president has highlighted is that that has a lot to do with finances for students, and so we've got to be able to create a way for, we have to deal with the affordability piece of attending RSU and helping students, help, if we're going to admit them knowing that their, you know, that's going to be a challenge for them we need to be in a position to assist in some way.

Administrators constantly navigated the pressures of performance-based funding with the realities that students are faced with due to structural inequalities. Taylor's perspective highlights the often-rigid pathways that students encounter as they navigate college. Dr. Love's insight reflects that rigidness by pointing to the financial burden some students experience prior to enrolling and thereafter. As students are impacted financially given the structural inequalities, Dr. Love indicated the role of the institution in directing resources to assist students that need financial support. Student success here is based on individual markers (i.e., financial need) and structural inequality that families deal with as they access postsecondary education. Accumulation of credit hours during the academic year can be impacted if students are tasked with financing their education. The idea that administrators oscillate between these competing factions is evident in the data and the centrality of the funding model. Keith, an associate vice president in academic affairs demonstrated in three words the institution's focus:

> Student success, progression. Well, this is what I'm all about: retention, progression, and

graduation. Those are the three terms that stay on my mind. We've got to be about that. Keeping our students, progressing them and graduating them in a timely manner.

The centering of the state's interest in producing certain outcomes is prevalent in many of the practices of administrators, but these metrics are not connected significantly by state governments with the structural inequalities that continue to permeate social institutions. This is student success defined at RSU, the centrality of retaining students, progressing, and graduating them in the most efficient and timely manner – is the focus. For some administrators this notion of success being linked to progression and graduation is even more nuanced at this historically Black university and requires historical perspective. Those distinctions involve learning as construct of importance as well as factors that students face beyond graduation, for example, the skills necessary to obtain and navigate a career, graduate school, or entrepreneurship.

These ways of thinking of success common across many administrators in the study – rigid and predefined – do in many ways reflect antiblackness, too. They are buying into a system that is well beyond the HBCUs and at times these ideas are antithetical to ideas about mission. It also provides a lens of understanding, CRT's critique of liberalism (Harper et al., 2009), in that students enter postsecondary education at varying levels because of the systemic economic, social, and educational opportunities that often disadvantage people of color in ways they don't choose.

Student Success Defined as Learning and Post-graduation Preparedness

RSU's focus on individual outcome markers of success, such as increasing the retention, progression, and graduation metrics for students is central to their student success operations. Intricately embedded within that approach are additional focuses on the quality of education that students receive during their enrollment. Not only are administrators looking at the empirical

performance, but they are also concerned with a student's preparedness as they exit the institution. This notion does blend both the individual markers of success and structural inequalities. Also, this theme is about learning, too, and that differs a bit from the above theme which focused on outcomes such as grades and course completion.

Not only is the institution concerned with their mandates of retention and completion, but there is some sense of connection to whether the student is prepared to thrive in a post-graduation life. Dr. Danielle Smith expanded on that scope when defining student success for RSU students:

> I don't think my definition of student success is any different than the institution because what we define as student success is ultimately graduation. I mean, that's what we define. A student is successfully completing the degree and then is able to successfully navigate a career whether that career is going to graduate school or getting a job or starting their own business, whatever that career is.

The ability for students to graduate from postsecondary education and possess the needed skills to be successful in chosen career, submit a competitive portfolio for admission to graduate education, and practice the skills needed to launch their own business all are essential to the overall success of the student. There is tension at play here since graduation alone doesn't always equate to being able to successfully navigate a career. However, there is recognition that beyond graduation being defined as student success, it should also involve a student to launch into the next phase of life whether that be a career, graduate school, or entrepreneurship. Some performance metrics do require institutions to collect exit data on students that graduate, for example, data on students transitioning into careers (college-to-career) data post-graduation and the students that enter graduate or professional schools. Student success for other administrators

involve many factors while students are enrolled. Dr. Raquel, an executive director for strategic initiatives, stated:

> So, on an individual level, I define a student's success as them being able to progress through, matriculate through the institution and, of course, meet certain metrics like retention, their progression metrics and those things and eventually gain a degree but within that, when you unpack it, it's being in the right major, getting exposed to the right co-curricular activities, being able to fund that education so that you can stay in school and meeting all of those satisfactory academic progress. I think student success is a lot of that but on a macro level whereby we are meeting the metrics that we have for the state around retention and graduation and in credit hours and students getting jobs and all those things as well as our students having the learning outcomes that we set out for them. So, when the university puts together learning outcomes and departments put together learning outcomes, we want to see that happen on a big level. So, it's not just the numbers of graduation and retention, but it's did they learn what we want them to learn and are they able to go out and function in their next endeavor and be able to do well.

Administrators understand that many issues impact a student's retention, progression, and completion. The factors that may impact a student's success involves students being in the right academic major, the experiential learning opportunities, meeting satisfactory academic progress (i.e., maintaining satisfactory grade point average and eligibility for financial aid), and having the finances to fund their education. All these indicators are crucial to the success of students and their ability to remain in good academic and financial standing with the university. One, or a combination of these indicators can impact a student's ability to be successful while in college. These factors are also substantiated by the institution's commitment to ensuring that meaningful

learning and intellectual growth has happened. The achievement of learning outcomes that has been set forth by the institution is a key indicator of success. Did the students learn the skills identified in the learning outcomes and were they able to leave and perform well in their next level of life was a key metric of success administrators identified? Learning brings together the individual markers of success and structural inequalities, according to this participant.

Dr. Sarah Love, an assistant vice president, further asserted:

> I think it is about a learning process and its finding your brain and empowering you. So, I do believe that but we're in this state in this country where it's about a output, and so I just feel like for my personal belief, I think that whatever it is a student walks in this door wanting to achieve, they need to do that. So, if that's getting a degree in four years, if that's getting a degree in six years, if that's never getting a degree, I wouldn't want them to waste money but whatever that is they're trying to do and helping them achieve that I think is what's best but I think if we're very clear on what our core values are and what we profess to accomplish with our students, then I don't think a student would come in the door, like, wanting, say, "Hey, I'm going to RSU 'cause I just want to take philosophy classes for 10 years," you know what I mean? Like, I think a student would say, "Okay, I'm gonna leave there and I'm very passionate about police brutality and I think I want to be a doctor," then I think that student should be able to come here and be able to learn about social justice and all those, criminal justice system, all that stuff and be well versed in it and support and be able to do service learning and be in the community and be an advocate, whatever that is, and finish with a degree in biology with whatever they need and pass the MCAT.

Learning is a construct that expounds the conventional interpretation of student success as only output. The focus on students being empowered through knowledge impacts the success of students at RSU. Administrators described a need to balance the metrics identified by stakeholders with insight into whether a student is achieving what they set out to when they engaged higher education. This is a practice that some leaders on campus tried to espouse and to create opportunities for students to engage with via their academic coaches. Having a set of core values as students engage postsecondary education sets the foundation for the expectation of what the institution expects of the student. However, the goal of the university is not only student progress within their degree programs and graduation, but also a fidelity to learning as set forth by learning outcomes developed by multiple stakeholders that comprise of the system of higher education according to these participants. There is a bit of tension here between the rigid preconceived ideas of success and the desire for learning and mission to be part of it too. The success tied to prescribed metrics might be Eurocentric – a vestige of antiblackness.

Summary

Student success at RSU is a complex concept. These complexities exist within two ideas: first, student success is connected to structural inequalities such as under resourced institutions. Secondly, individualized markers of success are removed from those structural inequalities and connected to passing classes and graduating. Administrators had to constantly grapple with the tension between these two varying notions of success. There are many intersecting indicators that administrators balanced daily to ensure that the university remains a viable institution of higher learning. Learning also was important for administrators to ensure that students not only moved through courses, but also learned the objectives needed to be successful in future endeavors. Learning did detract from the individual idea of graduating and provided a deeper knowledge

growth that sets the foundation for life after college. At times, it seemed that administrators were suggesting that they might get so busy with moving the progression needle that learning becomes secondary to the institution's goal of efficiently graduating students.

Yet administrators agreed that students' journeys to higher education are different and require a unique level of understanding from administrators. That differentiated understanding with an overlay of race and racism provide context for how administrators navigate daily decisions pertaining to student success. There were often competing logics that are at the forefront of the student success practices at RSU and involved many stakeholders (e.g., state, and federal governments, accrediting agencies, governing boards, faculty, structural inequalities). Administrators maintained that they must provide leadership through all the competing factions to facilitate student success. This involves incongruent logics, at times, that often-present challenges to the institution in terms of its values. However, at RSU, administrators remained resolute in their promise to provide an educative space whereby students can realize their higher education dreams regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. While administrators did not always mention external accountability that it is indeed part of the equation and likely influenced their views. It is one thing to know these are the views – success is complicated but participants are trying to think about educational backgrounds and context. And it is another thing to consider how they practice this in their own administration of programs and initiatives.

Chapter Six: Vertical Findings – Examining Complex Policies and Practices

This chapter provides evidence of the way definitions in the transversal chapter unfold in policy and practice. The transversal analysis allowed for historical relations to be examined within contemporary culture, context, space, and place. In this comparative qualitative study, I used national, state, and local contexts to provide insight into how student success is operationalized at Robeson State University. The vertical analysis approach within this critical comparative case study (CCS) allowed me to analyze the complex structures that inform policies and practices at RSU. Administrators at varying levels of leadership have unique perspectives regarding the influence of these entities and their work. The policy discourse at the federal and state level has direct implications on institutions of higher learning and helps to explain some of the administrators' views in Chapter Five, too. For example, nationally, the federal government is focused on college completion (degree attainment) for several reasons: increasing the country's standing globally with the largest percentage of educated citizenry, the demand for postsecondary training within the knowledge economy, lifetime earnings increase, and the College Scorecard, which provides a centralized database to ensure consumers understand the value and costs associated with colleges and universities as a mechanism of accountability.

Additionally, state governmental policy (i.e., performance funding) has direct implications on its institutions, in this case, a public HBCU. As argued in the last chapter, at RSU, administrators were focused on predetermined outcome metrics that the state has initiated and much of their efforts were centered on ensuring that students are supported to achieve graduation and success. It is clear through these data analyzed that policies and practices have been adopted to maximize the institution's standing within higher education, and thus, creating innovative solutions to academic and student support services offered by RSU. More

specifically, performance-based funding policies have directly impacted the contemporary practices of the university. In a university document, Strategic Approaches Ahead, RSU focused on state appropriations to all public institutions and identified a tiered reduction in state funding and its impact to the campus operations. The appropriation was based on the performance metrics identified in the state's funding formula with attention to a potentially tiered decrease in funds, for example, how a five, ten, or fifteen percent decrease in state assistance could impact the institution. The emphasis to improve efficiency by an evaluation of costs and benefits and student completion is a criticality for university leadership as this strategic framework document demonstrated.

This chapter focused on how the institution is using high-touch practices, technology (e.g., Educational Advisory Board, DegreeWorks, Early Alert system) and data analytics to inform student success decisions. In addition, the data produced is used to increase access to academic tutoring based on information identified by faculty or instructor. Lastly, student success coaches use the educational data to meet and support students as they navigate college. At RSU, student success operates within a duality. Success as linked to individual markers (e.g., grades, course completion, and GPA). Success as linked to structural inequality (e.g., race, funding inequities, resources, state policy, and institutional bureaucracy). These constructs often overlap or compete as administrators assist students toward graduation.

This chapter has three major findings:

1.) RSU is consistently monitoring student success. One way is educational technology platforms to deploy predictive analytics and increase its data access across its campus, but there are other ways (e.g., summer bridge programs, academic advising, etc.). This enhanced data capacity coupled with a goal to

diminish barriers to completion is supported by multiple initiatives, for example: interim sessions, summer supplemental instruction, and regular auditing of policies that might have an adverse impact on a student's progression and retention.

2.) Academic course performance data is regularly assessed. And courses with high DFW rates ("D" or "F" grade or withdraw) or bottleneck courses are identified to understand course repeats and completion data. Early Alert efforts are also enacted to get students into the support services (tutoring) directly following the 3-week assessments. In addition to the technology platforms and data analytics, Robeson State is providing a safety net of programs and initiatives that are supported by a dedicated staff (success coaches) that are the bedrock to the institution's student success practices. Students' progress is tracked carefully through technology, advising and programming attempts to respond to student issues. There is an iterative approach to identifying barriers and finding innovative approaches to support students as they navigate college.

3.) Despite the innovative approaches to mitigating barriers to student success, RSU experiences campus silos and leadership conflicts that present complexities in navigating this work. Robeson State furthers the logic that HBCUs are dynamic institutions like many other institutions of higher education. Focusing on the campus culture, strategic plan, institutional silos, and communication are critical to providing support and success of students.

Guiding Student Success Practices: Technology, High-Touch Practices, and Tutoring

With increasing emphasis on the outcomes and accountability of institutions of higher education, RSU takes account of institutional policies and practices that impede or enhance the institution's ability to provide support to the students it enrolls. Specifically, administrators relied on educational technology platforms and data analytics to make strategic decisions in terms of policy changes and support services offered. Early Alerts are used to determine students in need of support. Academic course performance data is collected and analyzed to better strategize solutions for successful course completion. Lastly, this chapter focused on how institutional culture and leadership conflicts impact RSU's student success practices. Data in this section focused on three distinct claims:

1) Technology is one approach to supporting students' progress, but the institution has initiated many high-touch practices and policy revisions to retain and graduate students.
2) Academic Course Data Performance and Early Alerts as Strategic Approaches is defined as interrogating course data, leveraging the 3-week assessment (i.e., Early Alert), and accessibility to tutoring through TutorMe, peer tutoring, and faculty tutoring.
3) Students Need Different Things: Approaches to Supporting Students is linked to the various high-touch services, such as academic/life coaching, using advising software and data, and ongoing academic advisement trainings that administrators use to support its student success practice.

Dr. Denise Jackson stated that the institution's position was to mitigate impediments that adversely impact the student from matriculating in their disciplines:

> We are transfixed on eliminating all of the barriers that impede their completion, and so even some of our policies, doing regular policy audits, looking at the impact of even our work with textbook affordability some years ago was about removing those institutional barriers. Some of the work that we're doing, having 24-hour access to tutoring, is removing that barrier of I can't get to the tutoring center by from 5:00 to 9:00, some of that. The library access, the 24-hour library access we have during mid-terms is around making sure people have. So, it's like what are the barriers to student progression and what, how can we diminish those in a way that will propel students to the next level and keep them on track.

Dr. Jackson's reflections represented the iterative process the university engages in to understand institutional processes and whether the university is contributing to the obstacles students face when moving through their majors. This practice connects to success-as-linked-to-structure idea discussed in Chapter 5. Access to university services such as tutoring, and the library are two mechanisms that administrators focus on to ensure that students do not experience barriers to academic support services. The student experience was not centered in terms of the traditional hours that libraries may operate, and those hours were extended to ensure that students who may work off-campus, have familial obligations, or other obligations are considered.

The regular auditing process of campus policies allows for real-time adjustments to catch any issues that may arise to hinder a student's trajectory. The institution is positioned to create pathways to increase the success of students on campus. Programs that are established to ease the transition into college and create opportunities for students to test out of learning-support courses as well as attain credit hours has been a strategy employed by the university. More specifically,

RSU has used interim terms and other streamlined degree offering to provide multiple pathways to graduation. Dr. Sarah Love reflected on the Summer Bridge initiative:

> So, we've implemented a bridge program for the last, this is our third summer this summer, where students with academic deficiencies can come in and for a week, we really, we work with them so that they can test out of that learning support requirement and we're seeing some really good results, like, about 80% of the students who are coming are testing out of that in a week. Last year we had maybe 60 students go through, and I was able to secure funding for 300 students to do that this summer. So, that is huge and I'm real excited about that. So, I'm, I mean, we're on the phone, like, calling people, like, "This is gonna cost you $50 and this is gonna save you one hour of class time in the fall." That's 15 hours of time. I pay $50 and come and do this in the summer. So, we are, we're working that and then the other thing is the advisement.

These opportunities are created for students whose performance on standardized tests (e.g., SAT/ACT) was not as strong and who might benefit from a chance to work within a course with additional learning support and instruction. This program is about responding to structural inequalities that cause students to be underprepared as they enter the university. This summer intensive is designed to give students identified as having academic deficiencies an opportunity to get ahead in those academic areas by providing learning support with the end goal to test out of the corequisite course. The corequisite model has proven beneficial for students that struggle in gateway courses (e.g., college-level Math and English). Providing these services at a minimal fee with administrators soliciting grants to help support this effort has allowed for more students to take advantage in the summer session and save both time and money. CRT's critique of liberalism (Winkle-Wagner, Sule, & Maramba, 2019), provide a useful lens when understanding

how many people in the United States are given advantages and disadvantages based on ascribed characteristics as a response to the systemic impact of race and racism. Many students enroll in college with varying levels of preparedness that have direct implications to the permanence of race within society and its institutions. Opportunities like the summer bridge program challenge the notion that people earn their status in society based on individual merit.

There are other completion initiatives and interim terms that aid in the ability for students to attain course credit and move timely through degree programs. Dr. Sarah Love explained that:

> The most recent thing, so we have these completion initiatives to help students stay, to meet those benchmarks such as the Mini-semesters, Spring Break, and summer school. We have the Degree in Three to try to push students to do it, to graduate even earlier than four years but the main thing we're focused, I'm focused on at this point, is really looking at advisement.

The interim sessions push on the notion of individual markers of success which, at times, may not take inequalities into account. There must be intentionality around the structure of these programs to have them serve as disrupters to structural inequalities. These programs at RSU allow for students to attain credit hours prior to the start of the fall semester, move out of the corequisite course, and an early introduction to the campus support services offered.

Administrators are focused on streamlining services and curriculum delivery options to provide flexible degree program offerings. Additionally, administrators have employed technology platforms to drive decisions at the institution. Lily Warren, a senior administrator, introduced the Educational Advisory Board (EAB) as a strategic partner in the institutions student success efforts: "We were able to join the EAB consortium. We spent that money to get us in the next class. I think they take about a class of 10 schools a year, and the student success

collaborative, which is very critical, so we can look in real time at the data pertaining to student success and retention." Keith, an associate vice president in academic affairs, further iterated the integration of data analytic services EAB provides:

> The university subscribes to some data analytic service. Education Advisory Board, and, so, I became familiar with that probably within the first two weeks of being in this position and it just really, when I was introduced to it, it really showed me the power of predictive analytics in terms of looking to see where your students are, allowing you to see where they're any bottlenecks. Allows you drill down into, say, courses. Instructors that might be within a program that might be, when students enroll in this professor's class, then there seems to be a longer time to the end point at this particular point … so, it's allowed me, it's not anything I've implemented, but it's something I've pushed, helped push, to tell deans, to tell department heads, to tell them I'm available to come over to talk to their faculty to show them how to use this.
>
> For your own course to evaluate yourselves to see how effective you are and let you see how you're doing. If you're, and have discussions with them look, students are really struggling with this. Is there anything we can do to help you get through that. And, so, that's not anything I put in place. That's been my boss that's really pushed that and also through Title III funds that we've gotten that. So, use of that data, that real-time data to see, and historical data too, just to see where the hang-ups are with particular programs. So that's useful … want there to be more conversations around that that even as part of assessment, personal assessments, evaluations that department heads and deans look at that to say, hey, look, we're only as successful as our students are.

Educational technology solutions like partnerships with EAB allow institutions to leverage data to inform the decisions that impact operations of the institution and serve its students. The ability to assess historical data and determine trends (i.e., courses, instructors, programs) that might have an adverse impact on a student successfully navigating the institution, coupled with research and strategic campus partnerships are integrated into the administrative structure. The ability to have data that provides a descriptive analysis of the student's movement through the university has provided a more robust assessment of how the institution should redirect to ensure that students receive the academic support needed. This use of technology is about tracking the individual success markers of students both in aggregate and disaggregate ways, but how the data is deployed can perpetuate structural inequalities or actively disrupt the performance of students. Antiblackness provides a useful theoretical lens as data is presented within technological platforms, it is important to consider the ways in which deficit-based interpretations can further position Black students and institutions as problem (Williams et al., 2018).

Similarly, in the document analysis, an institutional guidebook documented a working group of various campus stakeholders, such as: Advisors, Coaches, Department Chairs, and Faculty that utilize the platform, EAB Navigate, to coordinate strategic care across the areas and offices. Communicating campaigns, managing the advising caseload post 3-week assessment, and Early Alert campaign results. In addition, annual comparative data that captured faculty alert usage, student GPA, and credit completion was assessed by a group of administrators at RSU to capture the impact of the uniformed support given to students. Leveraging these data reports created an opportunity for markers to be pinpointed for future student success work.

Keith mentioned the impact of Title III[7] funds on the university's effort to access this type of technology and partnership. The use of data to understand challenges and opportunities being employed by many stakeholders: department chairs, deans, administrators, and staff. Course data is an essential component of the educational platform viability and the opportunity for administrators to be both proactive and responsive given students' performance in courses.

Academic Course Data Performance and Early Alerts as Strategic Success Approaches

The ability to determine courses that have a proven record of difficulty for students is critical to the advising and retention efforts. Administrators reported using course performance data to determine the issues that students experience in certain courses during the semester. The early alert system is used by faculty that use a first 3-week assessment to determine if students will need additional academic support to successfully complete a course. Academic staff then use the early alert data to create a 3-week campaign for students to get them connected with tutoring and academic success coaches. In a summative report from the document analysis, called Closing the Loop, a campus document indicated a detailed outline of campaigns (i.e., timeline, objective, and communication method) during a semester. This campaign outline, coupled with an early alert system, provided an additional layer of sight and support to identify vulnerable students by course. These success strategies have been proven to provide a centralized data structure to understand, for example, how often a student might repeat a course, or the average grade associated with a course.

Dr. Denise Jackson, a senior administrator, shared her insight regarding academic course data and deploying strategies to identify and assist students:

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7 Title III Part B, Strengthening Historically Black Colleges and Universities Program: Title III-B authorizes the Strengthening Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) program award grants to eligible institutions to assist them in strengthening their academic, administrative, and fiscal capabilities. These programs are typically funded through annual discretionary appropriations; and with additional annual mandatory appropriations provided through the FUTURE Act, which extended mandatory funding beyond fiscal year 2019. https://www2.ed.gov/programs/iduestitle3b/index.html

> How long is it taking a student to get through that and then we do need to kind of understand that. One of the things that we're looking at now are course repeats, and so we're looking at some data and the first group we looked at was our math lower level because most of the course repeats come out of the lower division courses … some of the efficiency measures I'm looking at more, like, what are the bottleneck courses, where do students get stuck, how are we doing on tutoring, what are they coming in to be tutored on, what's the impact, where did they start, where did they finish and I'm also very interested in where do they get placed? If they decide to go to graduate school, where are they going? Some additional measures that kind of start when you enter and look at how you exit.

The use of course data is being used to consider the time and financial resources that are expended and ways to mitigate those "bottleneck courses" to ensure students aren't unfavorably impacted. This is a mechanism of success as disrupting structural inequalities to provide ways for students to achieve. The Early Alert system is integrated into academic courses that enable faculty with a tool to guide students to support services at scale to ensure a timely intervention. It is important to note, the Early Alert system is a tool of navigating antiblackness. RSU is using this tool to circumvent Black failure due to an expectation that students meet arbitrary standards. More specifically, prescribed performance standards whether intentional or not puts blame on the student. Instead of the institution pushing to not adhere to normative standards. Despite underlying systemic issues, such as underfunded K-12 schools, the expectation that students meet standards within a system inherently unequal – the Early Alert tool can be used as a mechanism to navigate antiblackness. Dr. Danielle Smith, shared how the Early Alert system operates:

> We only have a 15-week semester. So, you think about that. You've missed, you have already at a fifth of the semester shown that you're having difficulty. So, that's when the faculty would alert the student to our system, give us some, we have some, it's a more of a drop-down menu to tell us why the student is alerted and then we as a team then do something. First the student gives some information that says you've been alerted. If it's for tutoring, if the faculty member says the student is not doing well, needs some tutoring, we have a whole team that does tutoring.

Once the faculty person identifies a student that might have struggled during the first few weeks of the semester, an alert is sent to multiple campus staff persons and immediate steps are taken to meet with the student and connect them with supplemental support services (e.g., tutoring, academic coaching). Additionally, administrators were strategically interrogating data to make better decisions, like assessing course repeats and tutoring to determine these factor's level of impact on student success. This iterative process is employed to better understand the bottleneck courses and impediments that infringe upon a student successfully navigating the curricula.

An institutional document, Debriefing Bottleneck Courses, confirmed that students at the institution struggled more in the first- (100- level) and second (200- level) year courses and created further scheduling pressures each year. The administrators used the document to guide a strategy to support students that were experiencing challenges in certain courses and instructors. As I was analyzing the documents, this document seemed to reiterate the need to find the "bottleneck" courses that Smith mentioned.

Administrators at RSU have a holistic viewpoint of student success that involves what happens post-graduation as it pertains to graduation and employment. In all, the positioning of the institution as a facilitator of success that is removing barriers and the timeliness to degree

completion is critical to the student success strategy at RSU. Understanding the academic preparedness and performance of students within courses earlier in the semester allow for time to enact services (e.g., tutoring and advising) that might shift the course outcome (i.e., “D” or “F” grade or withdraw - DFWs) and change of majors.

In an institutional document, Strengthening Strategic Engagement, an administrator provided a guidebook to improve progression and completion. The document was used to provide strategy for decreasing DFW rates in high demand courses with an effort toward: utilizing EAB, course revitalization, embedded tutoring, interim sessions, and student engagement with academic success coaches. The document further supported RSU’s effort to use data and high-touch practices to adapt new ways of engaging students within courses and with the use of academic coaches. The document further specified the need for adoption of a 3-week assessment (early alert system) in courses with a propensity to have higher DFW rates to obtain early course performance data.

The timeliness of the early alert system, such as that suggested by early course performance data, is crucial for its effectiveness. A director and academic specialist, Dr. Sandra McDaniel, explained:

> But here lies the issue with tutoring. We must have a system in place where you’re able to reach students week one, no later than week two, of the semester. We cannot have a system that identifies students at the mid-term to look at grades and see where they are and see who needs tutoring with hopes that they’re gonna pass their class. So, we have to engage students early in this tutoring process, and I think a lot of schools across the country struggle with that. I think they wait and allow the student to come to them say, “I need help,” rather than them, the university staff and personnel taking the responsibility

> to say, “Hey, I know you don’t need any help, but I want to make sure that you don’t get to a place where you do need help.” So, we’re going to be preventive, and I think we need to do preventive maintenance with students’ week one and week two with tutoring if we expect them to be successful and that involves everybody on campus.

Many times, there are direct correlations to a student being able to access academic tutoring early and their ability to be successful in a course. This type of support considers structural inequalities and requires faculty or instructors to be intentional as they engage in the instructional dynamics of their courses. Their visibility serves students in two ways: 1) the ability for students to be seen and foster a relationship with the professor, and 2) the opportunity for the university to enact proactive interventions within its capacity. Counter-storytelling, a CRT tenet, point to countering mainstream views of academic tutoring and allows for new ways of thinking and practices that can drive student success. At RSU, administrators understand historical marginalized groups and shifts the onus to the institution to break down barriers to accessing academic tutoring, timely – not the student (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Winkle-Wagner, Sule, & Maramba, 2019). Dr. McDaniel, explains the central role of course instructors and faculty in the early alert system:

> If I’m teaching a class, it’s my responsibility to notify somebody in the tutoring department that, “Hey, Joe Blow needs help right now,” or “I have not seen Joe Blow in class in three weeks,” or “This person has not shown up, they’re on my roster, I don’t know who they are.” We have to be very intentional if we want students to be successful and here’s the reason why I say this. A lot of times students don’t necessarily have academic issues. There could be personal things going on. Their mother, father could’ve passed away. Grandma and Grandad who raised them could’ve passed away or

> transitioned and they don't know how to deal with that. They don't know how to cope with that. So, they might need counseling. They might need somebody to walk them through that experience. It could be a student who might have a medical issue and he or she might have to have surgery that's gonna pull them away from school for two or three weeks. So, if you are involved and you know who your students are, you'll have that relationship with them to know that they can come and tell you those things.

Importantly, RSU administrators understand that students are people that have to face life's complexities. This type of understanding encompasses a collective effort to ensure support services are utilized within the appropriate scenarios and is directly considering structural inequalities at play. Many college students must balance their everyday lives with their educational journey. It is not always an academic issue that presents an impediment to their success in college. There is intentionality placed within the process that guide students to success, in this case, support services, including counseling, healthcare, and emergency support. In addition to these services, tutoring and advising continue to be the bedrock of academic success in college.

Students Need Different Things: Approaches to Supporting Student Success

Supplemental support services like tutoring offer many benefits to students. RSU has improved the structure of tutoring and realigned its management to have a centralized office that coordinates the tutoring services across the university with attention toward accessibility, collecting data, and embedding the tutoring services within the learning management system (LMS). Debra Smith explained the access and the various academic areas that is offered through TutorME:

> Because of the federal funding, in addition to our faculty tutors, we are able to provide online tutoring for our upper-division students because we don't have enough faculty to provide one-on-one or small group tutorials for all or most of the classes at the university which is why our faculty tutors are focused on the general ed courses. For our upper-division students, we have a tutoring platform called Tutor Me and its available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to students through their LMS eLearn page here at our university. Because of that access, no matter what a student's major is, they are able to receive some sort of assistance because the platform provides tutoring in over 300 areas.

Accessibility for students in tutoring is critical for administrators' student success efforts. In addition to the access, it is important that administrators remain committed to data as they make real-time decisions regarding services needed for students. Tutoring platforms, such as TutorMe, provide administrators with necessary data that can be used to better strategize support. Also, the ability for students to have access to easily navigable platforms that they can set appointments has aided in their ability to improve students' grades in courses. There are many incentives and strategies that administrators employ to make tutoring a consistent destination for students who need help. Dr. Sarah Love shared some of these:

> So, our tutoring students can make appointments online. Students can, they're assessed. They're sent a survey. They're given a specific amount of time and we have also, one of the things about tutoring is students who come more frequently do better, and so we implement incentives so students who come three times, two times, we give them t-shirts or we do different things so we can get them back in the door, and so students are really improving their performance at least one letter grade if they're coming to maybe three or

> more sessions. So, we are, we're really trying to attack it, attack our, I guess our challenges, strategically in our area, and so we're collecting a lot of data.

The administrators understand that it is not enough for a student to engage one time in tutoring, but rather that tutoring works best when it has a cumulative effect. Student participation in tutoring is assessed by student surveys administered post-sessions and the overall usage of the resources by students. The data are considered as students are counseled regarding their academics and used to tailor the resources necessary for students to successfully complete courses with a competitive grade. To further its efforts, RSU is launching a peer tutor/mentor program that would be imbedded within the course. Dr. Denise Jackson talked about this new initiative at RSU:

> Making sure people know what the resources are and we're talking more about the use of peer leaders or peer mentoring systems and getting students who really can understand and some, we have a new program we're trying to stand up, that will use embedded tutoring so that peers will be in the course room so they can hear the information that's being passed on and they can also be more of assistance to the student as they're trying to get the information and amass the information and it's worked very well in a lot of situations so we're looking at that.

As students strive toward mastering concepts within courses given the academic tutoring support via TutorME, faculty tutors, and peer leaders, academic advising serves as another prong of success practice at RSU. There is a concerted effort to provide faculty and staff with professional development that demystifies academic advising. As a result, administrators have streamlined processes and developed strategic advising plans and invested in software to help the

student experience be less cumbersome. Dr. Denise Jackson, talked about a training that the institution is working to institutionalize that supports academic advisors:

> So, I probably touched over 100 advisors across a whole day, and we really just dug into demystifying advising … and people had so many ah-ha's out of that experience. It was really quite interesting because there was just a lot of things that they didn't know, and so I came away saying …"We need to do this every semester," so we do have something that we institutionalize and we're supposed to tape it next time, record it, so we can post it on the web.

This level of training for campus advisors equips them with the same information and yields a more consistent advising experience for students. This continuity in advising information is crucial for students and it allows for a better personalized student experience. Administrators have developed an academic advising syllabus that outlines the expectations for students and the academic advisor. Dr. Sarah Love outlined the advising model at RSU:

> We are using a comprehensive advising model. So, a lot of schools they focus on, like, one form of advisement, like, it might be appreciative advisement. It might be intrusive advisement. Well, we have concluded that students need different things and so if we're approaching this from a developmental standpoint, then you don't prescribe the same medicine to all students. So, our advisors, we've invested a lot in professional development. We've developed a new strategic plan for our advisement center. We've never even had this … we have an advising syllabus the students receive so they know what's expected of them, what they're gonna receive from us and what they're gonna learn, and so we've been really work, students love it.

Advisement software and data are used to help administrators make decisions regarding course offering that allows students to have a better advising experience, and surveys are used after each advising appointment. Dr. Sarah Love shared insights regarding the implementation of the advising software that has improved the advising experience:

> We've been, we do assessments of service after every advisement appointment and students are given an hour for advisement appointment. We've implemented new software where they can get in line anywhere, they want to get in line. They text in and they're texted back to let them know, "Hey, you got 10 minutes, your appointment," not even appointment. Just walk in. So, we don't have people having to wait and are dissatisfied. They can make appointments. So, we've really improved that experience for our students, and so when we look at our, when they leave, we ask them to do a survey and we monitor those results every single week. So, they're putting a report, they're reviewed, if a student's not happy they're contacted. We try to work through that and so that's been huge.

This tech focused approach can provide both a positive and downsides to advising students. The upside to this tech approach is the ability to ensure that students are proactively advised before and during each semester. This enables students to be able to access courses that are on their degree map and gives advisors an ability to redirect students that need additional supplemental or personal support. It also provides another layer of insight for the institution as it pertains to course demand. Some of the downsides to this tech approach are the potential of losing out on the relationships fostered between students and staff, due to, advising capacity. Advising hundreds of students in short appointments can counter the cultivation of meaningful relationships that also foster student connectedness and success.

Not only is the institution collecting data, but they are using it in real-time to address any issues that may arise after students are advised. These data can produce reports that show administrators the demand of courses needed to ensure that students' progress is not hindered. Dr. Tiffany Redd focused on how, exactly, RSU advises students with the end-goal in mind:

> [Students] who are coming back to school, we offer the courses when they need them. We offer the advisement when they need it and … what we've done as a university is invested our time and effort into prior learning assessment … so we have a robust prior learning assessment program to move people on through their degree programs.

The ability to give students credit for their work experience and have convenient advising scheduling improved the student experience and time-to-degree. Given the number of support services that RSU provides to support students through graduation, some administrators have concerns that having students in their first two years interact with the professional advisors takes away from students engaging early with their academic departments. Additionally, all the support service units present challenges with the synergy needed to have maximal impact on student trajectory. Keith talked about these issues:

> Okay, and, so, it seems like we've kind of struggled with making sure we get a handle on that. I mean, we have an area that took over advising all first- and second-year students, which it's a good thing to ensure that they're advised, but at the same time when a new student comes to the university, they need to create as soon as possible a firm linkage with that academic program and the faculty members in it. And, so, having professional advisors sometimes, I mean, if they don't interface with the departments more directly, then there's a gap there, okay? At some point, by the time the faculty gets to see them their junior year it's like, "Oh, my God." I mean, it's like, have there been any mistakes

> in advising or something like that? Now you have to kind of reroute that student to get them back on course or whatever. So, more synergy with, say, a lot of the student support activities. We have a ton of student support activities. I mean, we got the coaches. We have the advisors. We used to have what's called consortium advisors that would be a faculty person within, say, the college that kind of oversaw all of the college advising activities.

With the many initiatives aimed at improving academics, advising administrators are working to create continuity among the various efforts. In this instance, Keith talked about what happens when there's an interaction breakdown among the advising units. Students are misguided and then experience issues as they are advised by faculty in the academic department.

There is a safety net that the institution has identified to better support students to degree completion. Academic advising and coaching are interconnected, and administrators recognize the importance for students to have dedicated staff to ensure they stay on track academically. Students face many things as college students, and administrators understand that additional life coaching is needed as well to support students as they navigate college. Life coaching was seen as advantageous for students at RSU, especially for early transitioning students. Dr. Danielle Smith shared:

> We have a team of academic success coaching where they will actually do what we used to do years ago, what we call appreciative advising or intrusive advising. Advising not in the fact that they're an advisor but they're doing that type of work where they're doing life coaching. Look, you must make class. I know. Next semester doesn't schedule 8:00 o'clock classes you can't seem to get up and get there but this semester, you gonna must get up. You're gonna must get to class because it's important for you to attend class.

> Sometimes it's just a talking to especially for our early launch students who are trying to transition from high school to college. They were used to mama being the alarm clock telling them to wake up every morning and now they must have their own alarm clock and have to wake themselves up because their roommate is not their mama, and we have students that have a difficult time transitioning.

Finding practical tips to ensure students are learning their rhythm and how to be successful in college is reinforced by academic coaches. Terrence Caldwell, a success coach for first-time first-year students, talked about triaging the various things that may arise for students during their first year:

> I help them adjust and get acclimated within their first year of college, helping them matriculate through their first year of college by triaging different issues that may arise within their first year, being an academic support mentor, professional, whatever it is, that they need. Also, help them with time management, learning time management, learning study skills. We give them planners; we give them the tutoring schedules and different things like that.

The advising structure at RSU is decentralized. Kim Taylor, an executive director, stated the beneficial support provided by the Title III Strengthening Historically Black Colleges and Universities Program funds that are used to support the academic coaches:

> Coaches are working out of three entities. Title III has two of them. Title III has, I think they fund all three of them. They have their caseloads, interact with them, so always a student should be touched by somebody. It may not be an advisor, but somebody's supposed to be touching them and following up and say, "You're not going to class, you got all Fs at mid-term, what is going on?" Then you have a new group that was a grant,

also running through Title III, and they're doing second-year students. They're doing coaches for the second-year students and then student affairs have coaches also.

Academic coaching was used in both the first- and second-year programming to support students at RSU. In addition, student affairs use a group of advisors to support student engagement efforts for Black male students. These units combined serves as a safety net of support that are dedicated to maneuvering students through the college experience. The needs vary student-to-student, but these advisors are trained to do comprehensive advising/coaching and use software to create consistent academic advising regarding the various degree programs. One of the tools the university administrators has put in place is DegreeWorks[8], a degree auditing program, which allows both students and academic advisors to check-in on a student's progress in an academic degree program to completion.

Terrence Caldwell, further discussed his role as an academic success coach at RSU:

> Teaching them what the degree map looks like, how to follow a degree map and going through their degree work. So, we use a software called DegreeWorks and DegreeWorks just pretty much maps out their four-year trajectory here and so they're able to go on and see where their current success, how many, like, what classes they've already enrolled in. What the future should look like for them so next semester … there's a what if option that if they choose to change their major in the midst, they can see what it looks like with the classes that they've already taken, things like that.
>
> So, we go through that and we, let's see, we use the appreciative advising method. Some of the most successful days that I've had has been consistent interaction with the

8 DegreeWorks – A web-based degree auditing and transfer articulation tool that inform students which courses they need to take and when, and allows advisors to easily track progress toward degree completion (Ellucian, 2021) https://www.ellucian.com/solutions/ellucian-degree-works

> students. So, days that my schedule is booked with nothing, but student appointments and students are coming to my appointments, those are, because I know that I'm doing a good job, we're having great conversation and I'm seeing students walk out of here uplifted, motivated, and inspired to continue their education. So, the days are very, I have good successful days but, like I said, the students, it takes them time to get adjusted and pick up on the notion of coaching. So, when they pick up and they start coming in, they're filling my calendar up with meetings, I'm having a pretty successful day.

These were different moments of advising. This approach is closer to trying to build relationships which is different than just tracking data on students on the tech side. However, the technology does assist with identifying students that need the one-on-one coaching. It is important to note that technology can only be as good as the application and the intentionality of administrators using it. While they are being encouraged to use individual markers of success (when success is linked to the individual's choices and work), many of the practices are considering structural inequalities. The way administrators think about student success translates to policy and practice on campuses. These notions are not disconnected and different. Administrators' understanding of the complexities that face students as they transition into university impact the way technology is deployed on campus and the support programs and initiatives. However, this level of student success practice is not void of its challenges. At RSU, administrators had some issues with the silo's nature of departments and the institutional impact on communication across units.

Figure 6.1 below represents Robeson State's Student Success Model. This model represents the six major student success focuses and how the campus is strategizing innovative solutions to college completion based on the data presented throughout the findings. This model

is undergirded by the university's commitment to ensuring students enroll and complete degrees efficiently as a part of the performance funding formula.

Figure 6.1. Student Success Model Overview

Roadblocks to Student Success for Practitioners

Institutions of higher education are dynamic and structurally different (Martin, 2016). The organizational culture and administrative structure sometimes experience conflict that may have an adverse impact on the university's ability to fulfill its endeavors. This chapter focused on leadership challenges and organizational silos that could result in institutional self-sabotage. The chapter also spoke to the ways administrators navigate this terrain toward achieving its goals. There are multiple units that drive student success at RSU. These findings indicated that at RSU there exists silos, which results in leadership conflict that impedes the shared institutional focus on improving academic outcomes for students. Importantly, these barriers are not exclusive issues amongst this cluster of minority-servings institutions, but ones that impact many

institutions throughout the larger postsecondary landscape. These conflicts are often couched in academic capitalism, campus politics, bureaucracy, and shared governance structures. Notwithstanding these realities, RSU continues to press toward centering its students' needs as they engage them academically from enrollment through graduation. This section claims focused on two potential roadblocks to student success:

1) A challenging institutional culture and leadership conflicts that are steeped in organizational silos hinders innovative student success practices. Some administrators recognize the ineffective leadership, power struggles, and disconnect between understanding how the intersecting issues that impact a student's success creates tension within leadership. These practices were recognized as being resistant to change, and ultimately, not feasible approaches to successful practices. However, these roadblocks can eventually be diminished if clear lines of communication, collaboration, and relationships are fostered.
2) Leadership at HBCUs in complex times requires future leaders to manage a dynamic landscape. The lack of strategic leadership and commitment to creating a campus culture that is data driven, innovative, and team oriented could thwart progress. Building a team that can engage in tough conversations entrenched in data and creating a culture of bidirectional communication that may challenge certain practices are critical skills needed to disrupt educational inequities at RSU.

Challenging Institutional Culture & Leadership Conflicts

RSU is a dynamic institution that must contend with campus politics that can hinder progress in the student success practice. The organizational culture and leadership at RSU seem to conflict with one another. Despite the progress in efforts to support students to and through

graduation with data analytics, support programs, and resources, there remains challenges that continue to limit its institutional success. Some of the leadership is engaged in a power struggle contrary to the values espoused by the institution. Lily, a senior administrator, talked about the challenge with leaders that are focused on grabbing power at the detriment to the institution:

> [A] culture of what I can control, how many divisions I have but not how effectively you could run or implement the responsibilities of that division. So, you had, like, a land grab type attitude for administrators or let me run it, let me run it. There was one administrator who ran several divisions and was clamoring to get more but they were all disasters. So, I think the biggest thing was just the attitude and the environment per se.

Lily reflected on the ways that power can impact the ability of the institution to be effective. The organizational structure had a breakdown when the leadership was not held accountable for the fidelity of student success program initiatives. One of the critical components of student success is having an organizational culture that is collegial for staff. To this point, Lily described further some of the challenges with student success practice at the university:

> They [Financial Services] were going to run the university through the budget instead of the university being run through a strategic plan identifying the goals and the mission of the institution. So, therefore, I think that was a huge problem that you were going to be given. For example, if I wanted to finance coaches and finance mental health services, the things that you asked me about that could help students at an HBCU, you have to go convince [Financial Services] that this is done although they don't know a damn thing about it but they want to question you about it. Like, what do you want it for? If I told you, you wouldn't know. If I explained it to you, you wouldn't know and if I explained it to you, you do not have a basis to question me.

She indicated that a commitment to the strategic plan and institution's mission is a necessary approach to circumvent leadership conflict. Additionally, colleagues must possess a student-centered focus with attention to the interconnectivity of the various aspects of a student's postsecondary cycle. More specifically, she discussed the conflict of having to convince colleagues in financial services of the importance of mental health and academic coaching to a student's success and degree completion. Having administrators that understand the multifaceted approach of student success is critical to launching and sustaining innovative programming. Dr. Sandra McDaniel, reflected on the complexities of leadership division within Black educative spaces:

> [You] can see what's going on. You can analyze it. You have political analysts who help you to understand what's going on you have people constantly out there in the community doing political awareness workshops. So, we are part of the system, so you must know what's going on to be able to work within it to be successful. So, yes, race is here. It's not a comfortable topic for people to talk about but it does exist. I will add this, though. We know that race is really bad with Black and Whites but also race is really bad with Black on Black and that is something that people are not addressing and those type of things actually come into our campuses and it impacts the services that are rendered to our students because Black professionals are not able to work together because they might feel, again, "Hey, I'm smarter than you are, I know more about it than you know about it," and it's not for us to compete. We all know something. My little bit can help you, your little bit can help me, and we put it together, we can help everybody, and so I think we have to be mindful that we can sit on a lot of knowledge because of our areas, and we're actually dis-servicing our students when we do that.

Race is endemic and a part of every social institution, as I discussed in Chapter Three. CRT's permanence of race is evident in the data and underscores the embeddedness of race and racism in the US and its institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). Understanding how to maneuver within the conflict that race imposes on institutions and its actors is critical to being successful. In addition, practitioners not only have critiques of the impact of white supremacy on Black people, but also note the intragroup conflict that happens because of competition in the workplace.

Dr. Sandra McDaniel focused on building collegiality amongst administrators that have varying levels of expertise to maximize the student success efforts, especially within the context of race and the institution's standing within larger society. When I asked about the challenges that are present regarding student success practices, Kim Taylor, an assistant vice president, discussed the leadership roadblocks at RSU:

> I hear the mindset. I hear the mindset around some leaders here but in other leaders I see a protect-myself, protect-my-job [mindset], "Let me keep as much knowledge as I can and not give it to anybody because that way, they can't ever get rid of me. They have to have me here," and we got to get beyond that. Very carefully because there's a lot of tit-for-tat. There's a lot of selfishness within leadership circles and it is, when people push the envelope and want to push us to another level, there's sometimes roadblocks that shouldn't be there. It's about the institution, you know. We jealously look [at other HBCUs] and rather than backing up and saying what did they do, can we do that, can we move to the next level, there's still a lot of in-fighting that prevents us from moving to the next level. There is a notion here, and I understand at other institutions, for people to always get credit, to have more, to control more and to get credit and it's not about are

> the systems you're running successful? No. It's just about having more and more and I'm over this and I'm over that. We've got to quit fighting each other. We've got to be able to sit at the table and institute changes that benefit the students and not be concerned about, "Am I gone lose the number of people I supervise?"

Taylor reflected on the challenge with capitalism and the consequences these characteristics have on advancing the institution's mission. Though these administrators may not be trying to actively undermine the institution's mission but are incentivized by capitalist logic to build their own portfolios. This type of action can present unnecessary roadblocks that thwart institutional progress. Taylor's thoughts crystalize the notion of centering the student on every front while making key decisions daily. It is not beneficial for practitioners to only be concerned with their area (i.e., silos) and organizational purview, but again, to create a culture of collaboration is essential for everyone's effectiveness. These silos are intensified when that sort of division is occurring at the highest leadership levels on campus.

Organizational Silos Hinders Innovative Student Success Practices

This sort of leadership conflict has consequences that permeate through the institution's structure. Ineffective leadership and the resulting silo-structure occurs on many college campuses and directly impacts the university's ability to successfully scale innovative student support services. In with some institutional programs, there can be duplicated or overlapping work amongst different units. Debra Smith, an academic coordinator, stated the detrimental impact of silos on a culture of collegiality:

> [Unfortunately,] as in most universities, there are some people who operate in silos. So, there have been some units of the campus that have been resistant to the efforts to provide or encourage support for the tutoring that's provided through this program because it

> might have had some effect they perceived on something that was being provided someplace else … there are some institutional silos that exist and I think they're probably there although many institutions have recognized that that is not a feasible to way to build university, to build community.

The decentralized nature of organizational structures in higher education is not new. CRT's counter-storytelling provide a lens to reimagine institutional spaces to be more collaborative and inclusive. This lens points to new ways of thinking, knowing, and new practices administrators at RSU employ to challenge traditional decentralized organizational structures within postsecondary education with a move toward centralized structures, in some cases, and cross-departmental collaboration (Winkle-Wagner, Sule, & Maramba, 2019). The university community is at a critical point in the student success work. If the work environment lacks then this could potentially impact the relationships with advising students, too. These structures present unique advantages and challenges for institutions of higher learning. Silos are not typically the best practice for comprehensive organizations that rely on an interconnected web to produce services for students. Debra understood the impact of silos on the organization's student success practices like student tutoring, and she identified the need to create more synergy amongst duplicated efforts across departments. There must be a culture of cross-campus collaboration on campus to maximize efforts to support students. Fostering a community that has a balanced work culture in which leaders can engage in dialogical discussions in a collaborative way is critical to the institution's capacity to move forward strategically and successfully. Dr. Sandra McDaniel described the challenges that threaten student success progress:

> Well, I think when you're dealing with higher education, one has to be reminded that you're dealing with a lot of intelligent, educated, well-trained, well-skilled, well-

> experienced individuals and that's a very good thing, and we have to also recognize that we have various types of leaders who have understanding, who can articulate a plan very well and we have some types of leaders who can't articulate and perform a plan well and then we have those type leaders who are just hands-on. They're trying to do everything they can to reach the goal, and we must recognize that there are different types of leaders. We should understand, accept, and receive and respect that and work, you know, in that manner.
>
> So, I think developing relationships, to talk to one another, to talk through all those things on the first go-around so that you can begin to build trust. You can begin to build understanding and you can certainly work on the same page in serving the same student because it's one institution and we're all reaching the same goal. So, I think first of all getting to know each other and just being very transparent about it, you know, and share your ideas. Share, you know, your personality. Share your management style. Share some of your woes and your disadvantages and your positives and negatives. So, that way we'll have a good understanding of how we need to approach and work with one another. So, relationships are so important when you're looking at a challenge.

Dr. McDaniel understood that, given the complexities of the institution's dynamic, establishing clear lines of communication and relationships are essential components to creating a cross-functional collaboration among the community of practice. Having a nuanced understanding of the team's skill set only enhances the goal of supporting students and helps to create a culture in which leaders can share strengths, weaknesses, questions, and strategies aimed at student success.

Leadership at HBCUs in Complex Times

The external pressures of completion, new technologies, and varying views of student success mean a very complicated leadership role for administrators. Despite the leadership challenges and the organizational culture, administrators at RSU have found ways to continue to advance its student success efforts. The ability to remain focused on the institution's goals and keeping lines of communication open have created an opportunity to continue growing the student success practices on campus. A part of good communication amid organizational silos is building a team of leaders that understand the importance of tough conversations. Dr. Jeanette Harris, college administrator, reflected on surrounding oneself with professionals that will challenge the organization:

> I think we've seen where several of our HBCU's, and maybe colleges in general, are facing some tough times due to lack of leadership or, perhaps not the best leadership and I know leaders at the very top have a very tough job but it's not always a good thing when leaders surround themselves with yes people. Leaders need to surround themselves with someone that's gonna push back because just in my house, I don't know what's in every room of my house but if my son knows what's going on in the garage, my daughter knows what's going on in the kitchen, I need to be able to receive that. So, as administrator, as a leader, I can be running the university, but I don't know everything about financial aid. I don't know everything about student development theory. I don't know everything about enrollment. So, I need to be receptive and surround myself with strong leaders that's gonna say, "Hey, Dr. Harris, that is not right, we can't do it that way." So, our leaders need to listen and be receptive.

As Dr. Harris noted, leaders must engage in bidirectional communication with colleagues, listen, and be receptive to other perspectives. The open dialogue across offices must be inculcated within the institutional ethos and trainings. Despite challenges with leadership and organizational silos there is a desire to strengthen cross-collaborative teams and advance the university strategic plan. Jackson Holmes, an executive director, stated the importance of staying focused on the institution's mission and strategic plan despite conflict and division:

> But for me, it's just a matter of just ignoring what's going on the outside sometimes in terms of what I don't need. I know I can't control what I hear sometimes about this or that so I just put that aside. Let's stay focused on the goal. First of all, as I said, we have our mission, everything that we have and sticking to that. As I said, if you have a plan and along the way people say, "I don't know why you're doing that, da da da." May be one voice but they sound loud and you change that plan, then you become reactionary 'cause now you'll be doing things, and just all of a sudden we just going through the motions and then too what happens that create division.
>
> So, now we have a division, and you have division on top and each person now gonna share their experience so, now we have a divided university. So, now when it comes to playing a role is, like, I'm playing the role that I want to play 'cause this is what, I'm playing the role I want to play but we not connecting at some point. So, and that is difficult when you have different ideas on the table but at the same point as if we stick to what our mission is … so it starts with the leadership, and you already mentioned conflict. It's okay to disagree but we can't now be split, divided. So that is the biggest thing that I've seen in why we can't achieve what we sowed. Divided. It's kind of, you have the same crabs in a barrel and that's what you see. Crabs in a barrel and which is

> sad. Even the students know that. The students know that that's to tell you when it's bad. That the students can tell you more than you know. That's because it's so much going on out there that is reaching down there to people and that's bad because now, you're sending the wrong message on what you're about and higher education.

Leadership that is committed to working within and across traditional institutional structures is important for the organizational culture. Administrators that conflict with plans or ideas or who do not take the time to communicate through those disagreements create a community that is divided. Jackson Holmes broached the nature of working through division as a mechanism for success. As some administrators might indicate discrepancies in how to reach said goals there must be a mutual agreement reached to show unity to the campus and its stakeholders. Operating within a collaborative and unified way amongst campus leadership could mitigate a toxic organizational culture and the negative messaging that may happen regarding the institution's goals. Dr. Denise Jackson, furthered these ideas by focusing on times the institution works well and strengthening those efforts:

> I think that the biggest challenge for us deals with communication, and it seems like such a small thing, but it is so loaded, and we do it right, but we do it wrong and what I mean by that is during the time when students are on-boarding, we talk a lot to each other. We're talking to foundation, talking to research, talking to academic affairs, enrollment management, and student affairs, housing, we're all-day way into the night 7:00 to 7:00. We are talking, talking, talking, and talking. What's going on with this person? What's the ID? They can't get access. You know, all this stuff. We talk constantly and then once we get to that purge day, then we've stopped talking 'cause it's, like, whoo!

There seems to be a common goal that percolates the campus in the days leading to the census date. Dr. Jackson's reflection asserted that there is synergy when various units come together to support the student through onboarding (i.e., the enrollment cycle). The communication is consistent and beneficial for the student during these times. These challenging dynamics present opportunities to strengthen and realign organizational systems and structures to maximize student success efforts and the collaboration of units across the university.

Summary

The university is committed to engaging in student success initiatives to ensure timely completion of the degree. Administrators are using many platforms to delve into student data to better understand what is happening with students enrolled. Data analytic services (specifically, software and data analytic tools such as Early Alert, EAB- Navigate, DegreeWorks, and TutorME) are used by administrators to apply data and research to guide students to graduation with tools that yield a higher return on investment. All this, coupled with high-touch practices, is heavily invested to provide comprehensive support to students in college. The software is used to track the individual markers of success, and it can also facilitate structural disruption according to the data. At RSU, the administrators are developing staff, creating gateway programs, collecting data, and applying it to create a more synergistic experience with academics and student support services.

There is great effort being practiced at RSU to create opportunities for equitable educational experience for the students it serves, with administrators viewing success not only within the confines of the university but as post-graduation landing as well. As student success practitioners engage in their work, that work must include a strategy that is communicated broadly across the campus within appropriate channels of communication so that all who need to

hear the message can hear it. Campus culture is important when implementing strategic initiatives that involve the commitment of the entire institution. A robust strategic plan and an iterative process of analysis embedded within the administrative operations could be used as leverage to further every individual and department effort toward student success. As campus leaders develop their student success models, an attention to silos, campus culture, and communication strategies could bring synergy to the various stakeholders and may well increase the effectiveness of student success programs.

Chapter Seven: Discussion, Implications, Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of Black administrators working at a public Historically Black University, and the ways 14 (early career, mid-level, and senior) leaders practice student success on their campus. I conducted a qualitative case study to fill a gap in the literature to gain contemporary insight regarding practitioners working in direct or ancillary student success roles at a Historically Black University. I used Bartlett & Vavrus (2016) critical comparative case study methodology to situate Black administrators' perspectives and experiences within the transversal and vertical axis.

This chapter contains a discussion, implications for practice, and future research exploration. This study's guiding research question, In the rise of external accountability pressures, what actions are HBCU administrators taking to ensure funding, but also maintain fidelity to learning and persistence of their students? In addition, I asked the following sub-questions to understand administrators' experiences and practices at Robeson State:

(RQ. 1): According to administrators, how do structural systems (e.g., leadership/governance practices within HBCUs, state/federal policy, endowment etc.) relate to student success?

(RQ. 2): What, if any, strategies do administrators employ to guide student success practices?

Discussion of the Findings

This study yielded three major findings from the data:

1) Race and equity continue to be at the forefront of administrators' student success practices at Robeson State University. The data indicated that these factors inform how HBCUs are positioned within a contemporary context. From funding disparities

to the varying levels of student preparedness, success for these Black administrators is seen as overcoming structural obstacles given historical and present-day inequities. The transversal analysis allowed for the contextualization of the historical lineage and the contemporary dynamics that inform student success, and lastly, how these external influences affect student success.

2) Secondly, the university was using data analytics and various technology platforms (e.g., Educational Advisory Board – Navigate, DegreeWorks, TutorMe, among others) to produce meaningful data reports that inform student success work. Practitioners' use many of these mechanisms daily and they take into consideration the structural inequalities that both the institution and students face as they enter and navigate college. Moreover, these platforms allow for the interpretation of historical data and how it will impact a student's success today. Additionally, these technologies are used to inform many policies and practices at the institution. Both policy and practice are interconnected and the ways the transversal findings play out are evident in the services provided by the institution and challenges it faces with educating students amid inequities. There is a duality within the data. Practitioners discussed student success as it linked to structural inequalities (race, funding/resources, state policy, institutional bureaucracy) and student success as linked to individual markers of success (GPA, grades, course completion). These notions might be viewed in isolation, but often overlap as administrators traverse their student success work. The vertical analysis approach in comparative case study allowed for me to situate the institutional, state, and federal policies that inform student success practices. Relationships were a bit of a challenge with the use of educational platforms, the

technology helps students get through, but it may not help students feel valued and connected as people to the institution.

3) Lastly, this data indicated the pressures of innovation amid siloes within the institution, leadership complexities, external pressures, and maintaining a commitment to mission. Despite the inroads in student success work being conducted at the university there must be attention to communication, campus culture, and siloes within the institution. The ability to coalesce around a strategic plan, educational data, and have clear channels of communication could have a more significant impact with the student success work. The institution has had to chisel away at the traditional structures that the institution has operated within and forge new ways of creating equitable outcomes for students.

Much of the literature has delved into administrators' experiences within the senior executive level (i.e., chancellors and presidents) (Esters & Strayhorn, 2013; Freeman & Gasman, 2014; Gasman, 2011) and the skills needed in fundraising, donor relations, transparency, and leadership with endowment managers within higher education. This study expands the skills needed for not only senior level leaders but administrators working at varying levels. More specifically, administrators must understand the complexities that continue to persist as it relates to issues with race and racism to continue being viable options for equity, and for students that are transitioning into higher education. Not only its impact on educational preparedness and outcomes, but financial impact that institutions and families face yearly. In addition to the literature on HBCU leadership, this study expands the gap in literature for administrators that work throughout the ranks of administrations at HBCUs and the need to be technologically

advanced in their skills. And the ability for administrators needing to find a way to blend technology and build meaningful relationships.

The literature has focused on student affairs practitioners, and their experiences supporting students as they progress through their disciplines (Hirt, Amelink, McFeeters & Strayhorn, 2008; Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, Bennett, 2006; Strayhorn & Hirt, 2008). Their sense of duty to meet students where they are and serve them with strains in limited resources to be a culture that was both positive and challenging. These studies undergird the unique relationships that students and administrators have within the HBCU setting. Student success being the support and personal relationships cultivated between administrators seen as guardians that improve the culture and retention of students. This study expands that culture of care that administrators provide for students within the institution. Robeson State is utilizing educational data to make strategic decisions that minimize institutional impediments that counter students' ability to successfully be retained and progress to completion.

Administrators are guiding student success practices with the use of various technology platforms, high-touch practices, and tutoring to understand, and to better support students throughout their educational journey. This use also provides an opportunity for the institution to identify policy, and institutional structures that have an adverse impact like course bottlenecks, tutoring sequence, and more. This study also contributes to the expanding dynamics of the public HBCU culture, that examines the institutional conflict that happens among colleagues. Leaders are neither wholly bad nor good relative to the external pressures. They try their best, they struggle, and they sometimes cave to antiblackness and external pressures.

Leadership amidst Antiblackness and CRT

CRT and antiblackness provided a conceptual framework to understand the complexities that exist within higher education. Antiblackness was subtle and did not resonate as well with some of the data analyzed. Race continues to impact the institution and its actors. This lens also focused on the condition of antiblackness to better contextualize the marginalization of HBCUs, its students, actors, and various stakeholders within postsecondary education in the United States. Since their founding, HBCUs have been disparaged based upon the social construction of race. These minority-serving institutions are often seen as inferior based off their affiliation with how Blackness is perceived. Institutional antiblackness has resulted in the underfunding over the years, and challenged the institution to continue being mission centric, or shift in ways that reflect the sector.

Despite this, RSU has persisted and found ways to cultivate a culture committed to social justice that supports students regardless of their educational background, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. This has presented challenges that administrators navigate daily as they try to remain competitive within the higher education landscape, despite its inequities. As states continue to promote outcomes-based funding with some acknowledgement of the differences as it pertains to students of color, RSU has attempted to mitigate institutional barriers to student success. In addition to maintaining a commitment to mission, learning, and post-graduate success of its students.

Providing resources based upon benchmarks that are closely connected to concept of merit is problematic. The tenets of CRT challenge this very understanding, “the idea that people earn their positions in society based on individual merit…maintaining that many people in the United States are given advantages and disadvantages based on ascribed characteristics like skin

color" (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2018, p. 195). Higher education continues to be a place that is both oppressive and empowering. Specifically, the ways in which performance is connected to merit can create practices (e.g., bridge program, data analytics (bottleneck courses), and academic coaches, etc.) that help students to maneuver the institution, but it also positions the campus to potentially be disadvantaged further as resources are linked to these outcomes, and ultimately, how some view the institution's value more broadly. There are larger cultural, social, economic, and political factors that intersect to maintain the positioning of RSU. The administrators experience many issues as it pertains to their student success practice but remain focused on creating equitable outcomes for their students.

CRT as a lens was used to understand how administrations navigate the racial disparities that exist on their campus because of race and racism. The systems such as outcomes-based funding continue to reinforce the embeddedness of race and antiblackness within institutions in the United States. For example, administrators are strategizing how to hit prescribed benchmarks such as, 30, 60, 90 credit hours (students progressing through programs and accumulating these credit hour standards), and Degree-in-three (attaining bachelor's degree in three years). As states employ these funding mechanisms and the historical funding disparities, RSU has had to adopt language and practices that reflect these priorities. This often led to tension within its operations to disrupt practices that inhibit student success, or continuing notions that create barriers for students to navigate. With an understanding that students are advantaged, and disadvantaged based on no choosing of their own. The practices of administrators at RSU attempted to stay true to mission and meeting the demands of the state. At RSU, administrators offer counter stories that reflect new ways of using technology coupled with high-touch practices to guide the success of students given the unequal educational landscape.

Implications for Practice

Many colleges and universities often exist within the historical and political realms within their state. As increased accountability and outcomes are centered among postsecondary institutions – administrators must take some things into consideration as they lead campuses. Although this study cannot be generalized to reflect an all-encompassing experience for administrators working at public HBCU, it can provide insight into their contemporary practices.

The findings from this study do yield a few practical implications for administrators that are working, seeking to work, or interested in research on HBCU administrators that are working to improve the outcomes of students:

1. Society continues to be impacted by race and racism within education. As institutions continue to enroll underprepared students, and experience inequities in funding new approaches must be developed to ensure students graduate within competitive disciplines. Despite these challenges, administrators are employing new strategies to change equity gaps for college completion. Student success is multi-faceted and having a nuanced understanding of the students' entering colleges and universities today can impact how institutions deploy resources to support students.
2. Additionally, facilitating ongoing assessment of institutional policies and practices can help to reduce the institution's adverse impact on student retention, progression, and graduation. A discussion of student outcomes can either facilitate the increase in attrition and reduction in college completion rates or activate plans that improve retention and graduation through data.
3. Educational data and technology platforms are essential tools for getting a longitudinal perspective on completion and retention rates. The data capacity alone does not

necessarily yield impact, but the use of the data in strategic ways can have longtime benefits. The use of data paired with high-touch practices like academic coaching and advising are essential for success.

4. A culture of transparency, interconnectedness, and collaboration are critical elements of student success. With the competing logics and competition within administrative ranks, administrators must maintain strong communication, cross-departmental collaboration, and equity focus to support students today. A campus's culture can be strengthened or weakened by the inability of staff to work cohesively toward its goals. Nevertheless, there are pockets of opportunity that can still improve the institution's services, and ultimately, the success of its students.

Future Research

This study has focused on the sociohistorical and sociopolitical factors that impact administrators working at a public HBCU. Moreover, the strategies that are being operationalized by practitioners working in direct or ancillary student success roles. Future studies should focus on the impact of the various programming, technologies, and its impact on student outcomes, specifically. In what ways has the summer bridge program impacted student performance and completion? How has academic advising, the use of educational platform (e.g., EAB Navigate) impacted the trajectory of students? How has this suite of programs impacted 4-year and 6-year graduation? The impact of programming is critical component to not only creating buy-in within the campus, but it also provides data to show the growth to external agencies.

Future studies that substantiate these programs with data also provide opportunities to indicate the return on investment for various stakeholders. The ability to show the qualitative and

quantitative impact of student success strategies can present opportunities for campuses to adapt similar models. In addition, this study is limited to one public HBCU campus, future studies should expand to other public HBCUs, and involve a broader net of participants like academic deans. Lastly, as further research is done with administrators at HBCUs, a comparison of campuses could provide a further nuanced interpretation of the data in this study.

Conclusion

The university can be a place that has institutionalized an antagonistic relationship with students, unintentionally. The mere bureaucracy can be an overwhelming process for students to navigate as many are first-generation and low-income. Robeson State student success model began out of a seemingly anti-student culture that shifted the student to the periphery of its operation like many colleges and universities – at times. This logic challenges some of our understanding of the HBCU organizational culture. There were many issues that the institution faced as they started the journey toward repositioning the university's approach to supporting students to completion. Many of the issues have deep rooted logics that still impact its operation like race and racism, funding disparities, and the under preparedness of students entering college, technology, campus infrastructure, among others.

Some of these practices happening at this particular HBCU are not necessarily what one may think about these institutions. It is imperative that we complicate our understandings of this cluster of minority-serving institutions (i.e., HBCUs), or any institution, situating them into just one category because of similar attributes (e.g., size, scope, etc.) is problematic. The practice of some institutions can be very different than what they were founded to be amid a very dynamic social world and its pressures. The culture of HBCUs rooted in collectivism, a mission to elevate, nurture, and uplift, among others, but yet neoliberal forces are encouraging competition and

individualism which puts pressure on the institution and its actors. With the external forces that emphasize in some cases the individual performance metrics from the state, this logic runs counter to the narrative of HBCUs, and specifically, what is seen in these data. Some administrators compete with these neoliberal forces daily trying to maintain collectivist institutional ethos. This is a story of a dynamic Black educative space that is trying to maintain viability, mission, and various stakeholder interests. Some administrators are trying to disrupt many systemic and deficit-laden issues that students and the institution face – often not by their choosing.

While many campuses are being encouraged to use individual markers of success, for example, the student's success is the result of the individual's work – countless practices are taking into consideration structural inequalities. The educational platforms used can serve as a tool that either disrupts the status quo or facilitates the equity gaps emphasizing the fault of the individual student. Robeson State understands the importance of removing institutional impediments that hinder a student's ability to be retained and progress toward timely degree completion. Nevertheless, there remain challenges that could disrupt the meaningful progress made. As many campuses adapt to ways of supporting students there are institutional impediments that may surface which cause conflict among colleagues within the university. It is beneficial for colleges and universities to have equity minded focuses that considers all aspects of the student enrollment and navigation. Secondly, educational data and technology can be used to facilitate or disrupt equity gaps as students traverse the bureaucracy, and academic rigors of higher education. Lastly, the work of improving university operations is challenging, but attention to campus culture and communications can have a significant impact on institutional silos and the success of its students.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol (semi-structured)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study. As we reviewed in the consent form, this interview is completely voluntary and can be stopped at any time. This research study seeks to understand your experiences and practices as it pertains to student success at public HBCUs.

Research Question

In the rise of external accountability pressures, what actions are HBCU administrators taking to ensure funding, but also maintain fidelity to learning and persistence of their students?

Sub-questions:

(RQ.1) According to administrators, how do structural systems (e.g., leadership/governance practices within HBCUs, state/federal policy, endowment etc.) relate to student success?

(RQ.2) What, if any, strategies do administrators employ to guide student success practices?

I. Background

1. Can you tell me about your position and the duties/responsibilities that you have?
2. Tell me about how your educational journey and work experience brought you to this point in your career?
3. Describe some experiences that have positively impacted your career?
4. What challenges have you experienced in your profession?
5. How have those challenges shaped your perception of student success (retention/graduation)?
6. How (if at all) have racialized experiences shaped your work at this institution?
7. How would you define student success?
8. What do you consider to be the purpose of higher education?

II. Student Success Practices

1. What successful practices/strategies do you employ that have had a positive impact on student success and retention?
2. Tell me about a challenging day that you've had? And, how did these challenges inform your decision-making?
3. What is the role of the institution to the student?
4. What factors (PBF, Cabinet, Bds Trustees) influence your day-to-day operation?
5. What are some of the greatest challenges facing students at your institution?
6. How have you addressed those challenges (policy, programming, etc)?
7. How do you reconcile the institutional commitment (social justice) and the notion of merit?

III. Opportunities and Challenges to Student Success

1. How would describe the "typical" student at this institution?
2. Do external constituencies (if examples are needed: governing boards, cabinet, accrediting agencies etc.) drive that student makeup? If so, how do you navigate those various stakeholders as it relates to student success?
3. What issues do you have (if any) as it pertains to institutional actors that impede student success (e.g., financial resources, governance/leadership issues etc.)?
4. Tell me about a successful day you've had at the institution? What strategies/policies (practices) contributed to that success?
5. What impact does state/federal policy have on your work at the institution?

Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences. Is there any additional information you would like to share with me? This concludes the interview and I am turning the recorder off now.