

**Supporting and Empowering Black and Latinx Students at  
Lehigh Carbon Community College**

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## **Abstract**

Graduating from college can enhance one's life significantly, however Black and Latinx students may face significant barriers in this process. This a problematic concern at Lehigh Carbon Community College which is in the predominantly white area of the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania. The local demographics have rapidly changed and so has the college's student population. Over the last 20 years the enrollment gap has closed between White, Black and Latinx students but the gap in degree attainment continues. Black and Latinx students are not graduating in a three-year period at the same rate as White students at Lehigh Carbon Community College. The overall graduation rate for the college is 20%; when disaggregated by race, White students graduate at a rate of 25%, Black students at 11%, and Latinx students at 10% (United States Department of Education, 2021).

A review of literature showed that a sense of belonging is key to Black and Latinx students desire to persist. Several factors can contribute to a sense of belonging, but campus climate, out of class learning, mentoring programs and faculty representation were shown to have a significant impact. I hypothesized that students did not feel comfortable or supported on campus due to a lack of sense of belonging. I implemented the Black and Latinx Student Empowerment and Support workshop to provide students with tools to be successful in college and to empower them to take control of their academic journey which can contribute to self-efficacy.

Thirty participants attended the virtual workshops and qualitative data was gathered from discussion, focus groups and surveys. The results showed that the campus climate is not conducive to a healthy learning environment for Black and Latinx students. The college does not offer enough opportunities for Black and Latinx students to engage, there is a lack of awareness of college policies and procedures, and the college lacks faculty representation for Black and Latinx students therefore lacking opportunities for mentorship. The findings show that Lehigh Carbon Community College needs to strategically plan to support the Black and Latinx students on campus to increase their chances of persisting and graduating.

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## **1.0 Naming and Framing the Problem of Practice**

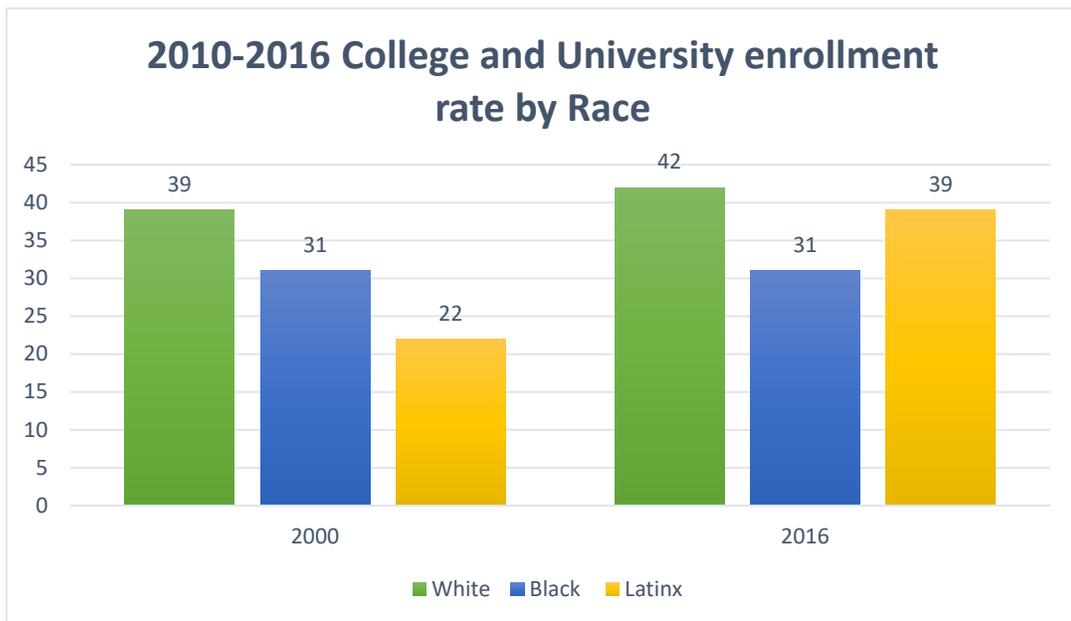
Graduating from college is a milestone and likely increases the chances of economic success (Matthews, 2017). Earning a bachelor's degree translates to earning approximately 62% more than those who only earn a high school diploma over the course of a lifetime (Baum & Payea, 2005). Davies (2001) argues that earning a college degree can also impact an individual's quality of life. According to the United States Census Bureau (2016), only 33% of adults aged 25 and older in the United States earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Data from U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2018) show that earning a college degree also decreases the chance of unemployment.

### **1.1 Broader Problem Area**

Historically there has been significant barriers impacting the enrollment of underrepresented student populations. Many institutions of higher education were founded under racist principles such as slavery; many were even financed by monies from the African slave trade, and others have buildings and statues on campus named after participants in slave trade and racial violence (Harris, 2015). Admissions practices have also impacted the enrollment gap with recruiting practices such as legacy admissions which favor wealthy white students and targeted recruitment at wealthy and predominantly white high schools (Redden, 2020). Colleges have also focused on standardized test scores as a criterion for admissions which impact underrepresented students who are more likely to attend poverty-stricken schools (Redden, 2020). The government

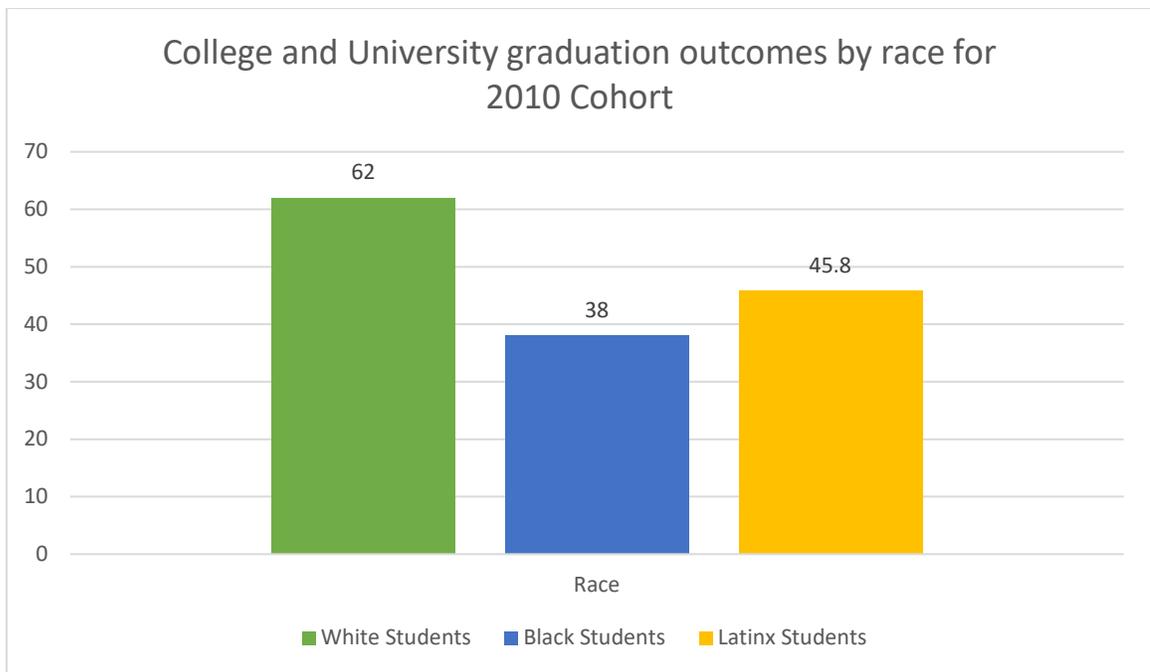
has also played a role in the inequities in enrollment with states placing bans on affirmative action, as of 2019 nine states have bans in place which have been shown to decrease the number of underrepresented students enrolled in their states, particularly Black and Latinx students (Baker, 2019).

However, in recent years, the college enrollment gap has begun to close around the U.S. as shown in Figure 1. In 2000, Black and Latinx students were enrolling in college at a rate of 31% and 22% respectively while White students enrolled at a rate of 39%; In 2016 Black students held steady and enrolled at a rate of 31%, Latinx students 39% and White students increased to 42% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Not only do Black and Latinx students continue to battle inequities in enrollment, but also an inequity of the processes and systems that lead to academic success. Nationwide Black and Latinx students are not achieving at the same rate when compared to their White peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).



**Figure 1 2010-2016 College and University Enrollment Rate by Race**

Low graduation rates for Black and Latinx students is an issue that many institutions of higher education nationwide are facing (Tate, 2017). Nationally, just under half of students who started at any type of college or university in Fall 2010 completed a degree or certificate within six years (Shapiro et al., 2017). Figure 2 shows that when examined by race, White students had a much higher completion rate of 62%, than Latinx (45.8%) and Black students (38%) (Shapiro et al., 2017).



**Figure 2 College and University Graduation Outcomes by Race 2010 Cohort**

When considering community colleges over the same period, enrollment has increased tremendously for Black and Latinx students. In 2017, Latinx students made up 25% of community college enrollment which is up from 13.9% in 2000 (American Association of Community Colleges [AACCC], 2019). Black students had seen a steady increase each year from 2000-2011,

however since then, the number has decreased (AACC, 2019). Black students still make up the second largest minority group of community college enrollment at 13% (AACC, 2019).

White students are more likely to enroll in the top 468 colleges and universities in the country while Black and Latinx students are more likely to enroll in public open access institutions which include community colleges (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Roughly 73% of these students attend the overcrowded, underfunded, open-access system which has much lower graduation rates (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Overall, these open-access schools provide much less economic mobility (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

Open-access and public institutions rely heavily on state and federal funding when compared to their private counterparts. The lack of financial investment in the form of appropriations and financial aid has been shown to lead to a decrease in college graduation rates (Doyle, 2010). A lack of funding leads to reduced academic opportunities and student support services. This lack of funding could lead to the elimination of course offerings, faculty positions, staff positions and support programs (Mitchell, Leachman & Saenz, 2019). Across the U.S. between 2008 and 2018 state spending on higher education was cut by 13% (Mitchell, Leachman & Saenz, 2019).

## **1.2 Organizational System**

I have served as the Director of Athletics at Lehigh Carbon Community College for over six years. Since 2016 I voluntarily served the college by leading Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts which allow me to have more of an impact on Black and Latinx student graduation rates. I have been instrumental in leading efforts to train faculty and staff as well as engaging with students

of color on campus. I am the co-founder and coordinator of the grant funded equity center and the equity certificate program which trains faculty and staff on a variety of equity and inclusion issues. I have mentored students of color as well as hosted town halls and discussions on racial injustice and inequality. In short, my role extends well beyond that of athletics and allows me to support Black and Latinx students at the college.

As a Black man from a low socio-economic background, who became a first-generation college student and successfully navigated the system of higher education. I am one of the few people on campus that personally understands the experiences of our institutions Black and Latinx students. In my role as the Director of Athletics I often engage with students in an informal way compared to other faculty and staff on campus. My recreation programs, athletic events, and the lounges in our building allow me to see students frequently in a relaxed, low-pressure setting.

Part of the reason I pursued an EdD was to get a better seat at the proverbial table, so that I can have a bigger impact on my institution and the students we serve. I was hopeful that I would learn the history of higher education as well as how the system functions. This program has given me the tools necessary to be a better leader, better advocate for social justice while also teaching me the history and functions of institutions of higher education.

The purpose of a community college is to serve the needs of its community. At Lehigh Carbon Community College this proves to be difficult at times due to the rapidly changing local population. Ahmed (2012) describes a non-performative as a statement with no action. The terms diversity, equity, and inclusion are woven throughout the mission, vision, and strategic plan, but the disparity in the graduation rates do not reflect a commitment to these ideas. As an institution of higher education Lehigh Carbon Community College has the responsibility of ensuring that all of its students are given an equal opportunity to succeed.

Lehigh Carbon Community College is in the Lehigh Valley; an area located just west of New Jersey and in between Philadelphia and the Pocono Mountains. Founded on Pennsylvania Dutch values the Lehigh Valley's population traditionally has been over 90% White, however according to Kraus (2016) the Lehigh Valley has been rapidly growing since 2010 due to migration, a booming economy, and growing job market. The Lehigh Valley is the fastest-growing region in Pennsylvania and has been ranked as the top region for economic development in the Northeast (Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation, 2018). With proximity to both Philadelphia and New York City and a relatively reasonable cost of living the Lehigh Valley has become an attractive place to live. According to the US Census Bureau (2010) the population of Black and Latinx people has increased by almost 60% from 2000-2010. The expectation is for this growth to continue over the next twenty years.

Although the college has made improvements, in hiring administrators and staff of color; a better effort could be given to hiring faculty of color. Historically the focus of Lehigh Carbon was serving the majority white population of the Lehigh Valley, and the faculty and staff has mirrored that population. The staff and faculty seem culturally unaware or under prepared to serve the changing demographic.

Community college funding varies by state, but in Pennsylvania the funding is divided among the state government, local government, and tuition. Currently at Lehigh Carbon the local portion of the funding comes from the school districts in the county. The local school districts are responsible for 11% of the colleges revenue and their students receive discounted tuition rates (Lehigh Carbon Community College, 2019).

Personal values and awareness play a major role in how the college facilitates or obstructs the problem. Mission statements, vision statements and strategic plans are key pieces to the puzzle

but the people who are doing the work must have the ability to serve the students. There must be a certain level of cultural awareness involved in all decisions the college make. Everything from course offerings, support services, hiring practices and marketing should be thought of through an equity lens. The administration has direct oversight of the policies and procedures and the faculty's teaching pedagogy have direct effect on the outcome of its students. Better efforts are being made to support Black and Latinx students however a lack of strategic focus and accountability at the college is preventing actionable change from occurring.

The over representation of White people in leadership positions could have in impact on the lack of strategic focus and accountability. It begins at the top with the Board of Trustees, fourteen of the fifteen members are White. In July of 2020, a Latino male was added as an at-large member of the board to represent the Allentown school district, which has the largest Latinx population in the Lehigh Valley. There are sixteen members of the President's Cabinet and all of them are White. There are only three administrators of color on campus who serve in decision making roles, and 5% of the full-time faculty are of color (Lehigh Carbon Fall Fact Book, 2019). Many of the decisions made at the college and instruction in the classroom is done from a lens of White, middle-upper class leadership and this may contribute to the gap in degree attainment.

The culture of the institution causes inequities to be invisible. Some of the norms and practices that take place are based in traditional practices and a lack of awareness on the part of leadership. There is also a trend of promoting from within which allows individuals to remain in positions that have no experiences working at other institutions where diversity and equity may be visible.

Within the past three years, we have begun to collect outcomes data, but we still struggle to gather and strategically use disaggregated data by race. Furthermore, the specific data needed

to make changes is not tracked or shared with the campus population. The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee presented a proposal to the colleges executive team to conduct a comprehensive climate survey. This survey would have allowed the college to determine areas where improvements are needed. The proposal was rejected, and the executive team expressed the feeling of having already accomplishing this task during the Middle State's Accreditation process. I sense a fear exists of discovering information that some may not want to hear. Finding out what students and employees feel about their experiences on campus is important for an institution that espouses its values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

My fishbone diagram shows that most of the issues hindering Black and Latinx students are support services (See Appendix A). Supporting students begins with the colleges mission statement, vision statement and strategic plan. The biggest theme that emerged from the fishboning process is the lack of support and sense of belonging that Black and Latinx students experience. There is a lack of engagement and support services specific to these students.

### **1.3 Stakeholder Description**

The stakeholders involved with creating an environment where Black, Latinx and White students can have equal levels of degree attainment at Lehigh Carbon Community College consist of the college's board of trustees, executive team, faculty, high schools, and students. The Board of Trustees of the college are representatives of the thirteen sponsoring school districts of the college. The trustees work with the administration to ensure that the mission of the college is effectively translated into working policies to best serve the needs of the college's constituents. Ultimately it is this groups responsibility to ensure that the faculty and administration is providing

the students from the vastly different school districts in the county with an experience that is equal across the board. This group meets monthly and comprises mostly retired educators and businesspeople who reside or work in one of the sponsoring school districts. The Board of Trustees must navigate, community relationships, business relationships as well as their respective school districts. These relationships play a major role in the decision that they make.

Working under the direction of and reporting to the Board of Trustees is the colleges executive team which consist of the college's president, three vice presidents and seven deans. This structure was implemented in 2017, previously there was one vice president under the president and only two deans. Since its inception this team has been made up of individuals who are White. This is the group that drives the college, as they are responsible for the daily functions of the college. This group must be committed to equity; to ensure the strategic plan and policies and procedures address the issues that lead to the gap in degree attainment. Commitments to faculty contracts, policies and procedures guide the decision-making process of this group. The college has five additional sites that have vastly different communities with different economies and cultural backgrounds, which must be considered in all decisions. Most of the executive team's work is done behind the scenes, there is not a direct link to the students or the lower-level staff who works on the front lines daily. The executive team relies on their administrative staff and faculty to relay messages about culture changes and how to best serve the needs of the students and the community. One of the challenges the executive team faces is getting to know the needs of the changing demographics of the community and creating ways to provide equitable opportunities.

Research shows the higher the level of faculty representation the better Black and Latinx students do academically (Hagedorn, 2007). Having a faculty that mirrors the student population

can provide opportunities for the college to increase the graduation rates of Black and Latinx students. Nationally 74% of faculty are White, but they are teaching a student population that is only 47% White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). At Lehigh Carbon only, five percent of the full-time faculty is Black or Latinx, while 40% of student population fall into the same categories (Lehigh Carbon Fall Fact Book, 2020).

Often bound by unions and traditional pedagogy, faculty may be unaware of the needs of their students which can affect the way students learn and feel in their classrooms. Learning how to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment will allow all students to learn at the same rate and should produce equitable outcomes.

The local high schools play a role in the success of all students at the college as well, due to the close associations with the sponsoring school districts. The districts provide funding to the college in return for their students getting discounted tuition. The districts should be invested in the success of their students who attend, but are the high schools preparing the students for college level course work?

The stakeholder group that is impacted most are the Black and Latinx students at the college. This group of students make up over a third of the overall student population at the college. How are these students being impacted by the colleges policies, procedures, and campus climate? By not being supported, Black and Latinx students are missing out on the opportunity to earn a college degree which can impact their economic mobility, and quality of life (Matthews, 2017 & Davies, 2001)

In the scenario of providing the opportunity of equal degree attainment for Black, Latinx and White students, the above stakeholders are connected and should be working together. Collaboration among the groups could help solve the problem, but efforts need to be intentional.

It begins with representation at all levels, there needs to be Black and Latinx leaders and educators as part of each group. This will better inform decision making, strategic planning and levels of engagement.

### 1.4 Statement of the Problem of Practice

Aligning with national trends, enrollment of Black and Latinx students continues to increase for Lehigh Carbon Community College, but a significant gap in degree attainment between Black, Latinx, and White students remains. Since 2000 enrollment of Black students has increased by 2% while Latinx student’s enrollment has increased by over 13% (Lehigh Carbon Community College [LCCC] Fall Fact Book, 2010, LCCC Fall Fact Book, 2019). The current racial demographics at the college are shown in Figure 3, white students make up 54% of the student population, Black students make 7% of the population, and Latinx students are 27% of the student population, which earns the college the designation of a Hispanic Serving Institution, and 12% identify as other (LCCC Fall Fact Book, 2020).

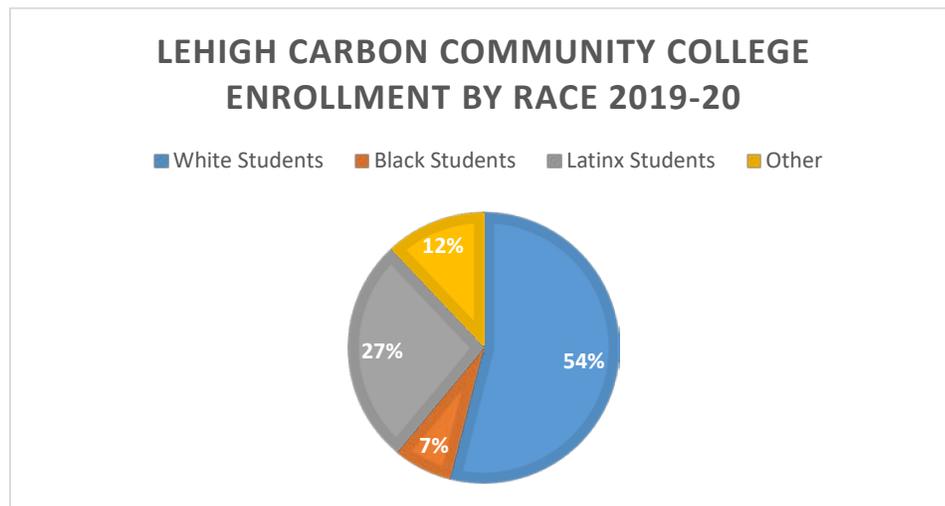
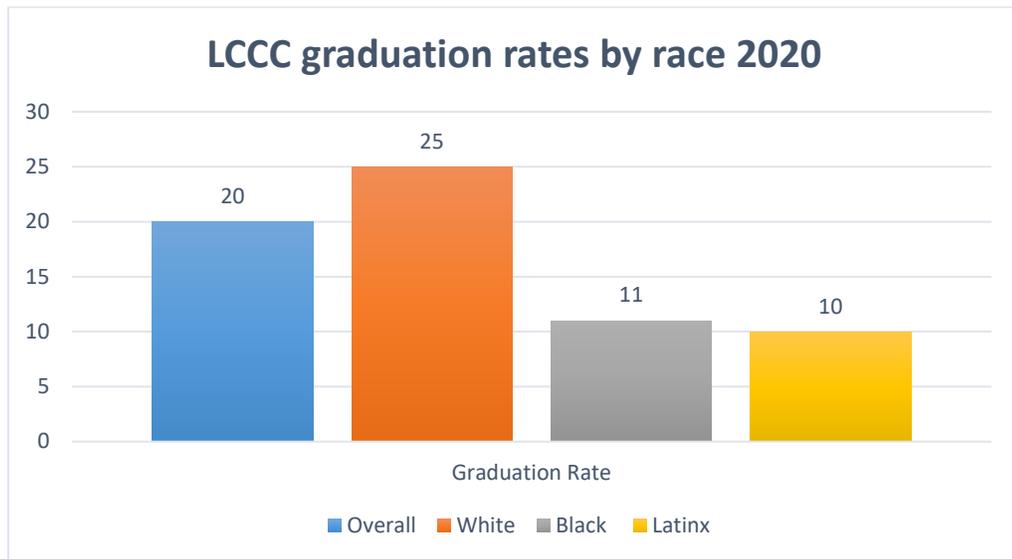


Figure 3 Lehigh Carbon Community College Student Enrollment by Race 2019-20

Black and Latinx students are not graduating in a three-year period at the same rate as White students at Lehigh Carbon Community College. The overall graduation rate for the college is 20%; when disaggregated by race, White students graduate at a rate of 25%, Black students at 11%, and Latinx students at 10% as displayed in Figure 4 (United States Department of Education, 2021). There are problematic racialized differences that need to be addressed by the institution.



**Figure 4 Lehigh Carbon Graduation Rates by Race 2020**

This is an urgent problem that contributes to the overall mission and goals of the college to improve retention and graduation rates as the federal government, state government and consumers look at this data for funding and to rank institutions. Although, the community college graduation rate formula is flawed, the college's 20% graduation rate is below the national average of 28% (Chen, 2020). Metrics that need to be considered in this formula are the reasons students attend community college and how they gauge success. Two of the most popular reasons students choose community colleges are job training and transferring. Students may choose to attend a community college to take specific courses that are required for their job (Chen, 2020). Many students also choose to

transfer to a four-year institution after a few semesters at a community college (Chen, 2020). These students do not count as graduates, but they are calculated in the formula, furthermore part-time students who do not complete their degree within the five-year time frame for the data are also counted against graduation rate (Chen, 2020).

The data indicates that Community College students graduate at a rate of 28% yet, Black (11%) and Latinx (10%) students at Lehigh Carbon Community College are well below those numbers (Chen, 2020; United States Department of Education, 2021). The college has increased its overall graduation rates by four percentage points over the past four years making it reasonable to increase the graduation rates of Black and Latinx students (United States Department of Education, 2016; United States Department of Education, 2020). As a part of the School of Student Support and Success, I work with the departments responsible for the colleges support services which plays a major role in these improvements. Working with this team of professionals and leading the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts for the college positions me well to support the improvement of Black and Latinx student graduation rates.

The disparity in graduation rates between Black and Latinx students compared to White students is apparent at Lehigh Carbon Community College but is also a trend nationwide. There is much research to consider when seeking the factors that impact the gap in degree attainment among Black, Latinx and White students.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

The purpose of this review is to identify what supports or hinders the success of Black and Latinx students in the same higher education system where White students find greater success. Specially I sought to discover what factors contribute to Black and Latinx students feeling supported and connected to their institution. As I was exploring the literature on Black and Latinx student's success in higher education the three themes that emerged were out-of-class learning experience, mentorship programs, and faculty representation. First, I examine the skills students gain and the opportunities that arise from being a part of clubs and organizations on campus. Mentorship programs are also a crucial part of the success of all college students, but for Black and Latinx students, mentorship plays a significant role in their academic success particularly when peer and faculty mentors come from the same racial, ethnic, or cultural background. Finally, I consider how the lack of Black and Latinx faculty hinder the success of Black and Latinx students.

### **2.1 Out of Class Learning**

Retention and graduation rates depend on what is learned in the classroom, however out of the classroom learning experiences can also play a key role in a student's success in higher education. The skills attained from these types of experiences and the students sense of belonging can help determine if students persist to graduation. There are a variety of activities that can be considered extracurricular on campuses; these activities are not typically linked to a course or a

student major nor do students receive credit for them (Creamer, Simmons & Yu, 2017). Examples of extracurricular activities include athletics, recreation, Greek organizations, student government, and other types of clubs and organizations (Creamer, Simmons, Yu, 2017). Participation in student clubs and organizations can offer students the opportunity to develop skills such as communication, leadership, and the ability to work with a team (Huang & Chang, 2004). Trolian (2019) also attributes participation to enhancing soft skills such as critical thinking, which build confidence and the overall psychological well-being of students.

Students who partake in clubs and activities develop a greater sense of belonging to their institution (Strayhorn, 2012). A sense of belonging is the feeling of connectedness a student feels with their campus; feeling accepted, valued, and respected by faculty, staff, and peers are central to this feeling (Strayhorn, 2012). Campus climate, positive daily interactions with faculty, staff, and peers are the key components that contribute to a student sense of belonging (Supiano, 2018; Tinto, 2016). Gant, Geig, Oyarzun, and Reardon (2016) conducted a study that found students who participate in at least one club or activity had a higher sense of belonging; furthermore, that sense of belonging increased if students participated in multiple activities.

Institutions have a responsibility to ensure that students feel welcomed from the beginning of their educational journey, by creating an inclusive culture and providing diverse opportunities for students to interact (Tinto, 2016). Institutions should not take a student's sense of belonging for granted just because they were accepted and decided to attend (Supiano, 2018). Research has shown that participation in student clubs and organizations can enhance learning and a student's sense of belonging; which can contribute to the desire to persist, retention and attainment of a bachelor's degree (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terezini, 2005; Tinto 1993, 2016).

Underrepresented student's sense of belonging has become a common part of campus strategic plans, and professional development (Strayhorn, 2018). Black and Latinx students are likely to feel isolated and disconnected from the college environment and often experience feelings of invisibility and discrimination from the college community; particularly those who attend predominantly white institutions (Baker, 2008). Navigating the system of higher education can be daunting for Black and Latinx students who invariably are confronted with academic, social, and financial barriers. Black and Latinx students benefit greatly from participation in extracurricular activities, and this participation has been shown to be a positive influence on their graduation (Baker, 2008). Along with developing skills such as communication, critical thinking, leadership, and teamwork. Participation in clubs and organizations can increase Black and Latinx students' comfort in dealing with different races and cultures on campuses (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Huang & Chang, 2004; Trolan, 2019). Being a member of a student organization gives Black and Latinx students the opportunity to network and socialize with peers both inside and outside of their racial or cultural identity groups; these interactions can prove to be vital as they help students gain leadership and communication skills (Harper & Quaye, 2007). Learning to communicate with peers of different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds is one of the most valuable skills that students can gain through building relationships while participating in clubs and organizations (Harper & Quaye, 2007).

For Black and Latinx students the opportunity to participate in clubs and activities that they can identify with culturally is essential; it can enhance their sense of belonging and may provide a better social experience and contribute to academic success (King & Howard-Hamilton, 2000). This is particularly important for Black and Latinx students who are seeking to find membership in or identify with the campus culture when attending predominantly white

institutions (Kuh & Love, 2000). These students are often seen as the representative or translator for their culture or race in predominantly white classrooms, which can increase the feeling of loneliness and cause students to feel isolated (Tatum, 1992). Stereotype threat also plays a role in a Black or Latinx students sense of belonging and how connected to an institution a Black or Latinx student feels, the need to prove negative stereotypes wrong can lead to anxiety and lower levels of performance ultimately having a negative impact on the ability to graduate (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001).

## **2.2 Mentoring Programs**

Participating in out of class learning experiences such as clubs and extracurricular activities can lead to mentoring opportunities. All students can benefit from mentoring, but particularly Black and Latinx students as they face barriers that their White counterparts may not before and during their academic career (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). These barriers may prevent them from seeking the help and supports necessary to complete a college degree, and eventually force them to drop out (Salinitri, 2005). Both Black and Latinx students often describe their campuses climate as chilly and uncomfortable (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Therefore, it is important for Black and Latinx students to receive mentoring when attending predominantly White institutions to combat feelings of isolation and contribute to a positive sense of belonging (Jacboi, 1991).

A consistent definition of mentoring does not exist as it pertains to research and outcomes however, Tareef (2013) presents a working definition of mentoring that guides this paper. Specifically, Tareef describes mentoring as a process in which an experienced person guides the mentee through the process of developing his or her own ideas that will contribute to their learning,

personal, and professional competence. Mentors often act as counselors providing support, advice, and guidance about the students' academic career as well as professional careers (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). When students enter higher education an adjustment period is necessary, there is a need for both personal and academic guidance (Salinitri, 2005). Some of the issues that first year students face when entering college are time management, home sickness, independence, and academic preparedness (Salinitri, 2005). Mentors seek to create a lasting, impactful, and collaborative relationship with mentees that can be beneficial for both parties. These relationships typically match senior level students, staff, or faculty with freshmen in a formal or informal setting (Salinitri, 2005).

Students can be mentored formally or informally, and both types of mentoring can be beneficial (McKinsey, 2016). Formal mentoring programs are initiated by the institution and come with prescribed guidelines to determine how the relationship should be formed (McKinsey, 2016). Informal mentoring materializes organically among individuals (McKinsey, 2016). Initiating the relationship refers to programs where students are assigned a mentor through an institutional initiative or program. Carger (1996) argues that informal mentoring is more effective stating "you cannot assign mentors any more than you can mandate friends" (p. 29). Mentor and mentee interactions are key to student persistence regardless of being formal or informal (Tovar, 2015). Faculty mentoring is not teaching as, these interactions typically take place outside of the classroom during office hours, in a lounge or even in the homes of faculty members (McKinsey, 2016). These relationships can be facilitated through faculty approachability; students want faculty who are both easy to approach and available (Roberts & Styron, 2008).

Having a peer mentor who students can rely on for advice about how to navigate through the process and expectations of college life proves to be beneficial (Demetriou et al., 2017). Peer

mentors can contribute to persistence and a sense of belonging through social interactions (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). Alocer and Martinez (2017) argue that due to these social interactions; within the research it is difficult to determine which interactions of a peer relationship have the significant impact on a student.

Black and Latinx students particularly benefit from formal, faculty led mentoring with a focus on academic success and report less satisfaction when participating in a peer mentoring program (Santos & Reigadas, 2002; Booker & Brevard, 2017). Black and Latinx students report higher levels of satisfaction when having mentors of the same cultural background or race (Allen & Eby, 2007). Studies have shown that there is a positive correlation when matching students with mentors who are of the same race or cultural background (Dahlvig, 2010). Furthermore, these mentoring relationships contributed to their sense of belonging on campus (Booker & Brevard, 2017). The homogeneity in cultural background and ethnicity is a positive trait of mentor relationships among Black and Latinx students (Santos & Reigadas, 2002). Many Latinx students also face a language barrier when attending predominantly white institutions; therefore, the ability to match a student with a mentor who can speak or understand the language is significant (Rios-Ellis et al. 2015).

One of the issues with matching Black and Latinx students with mentors is often there is not enough faculty from the same culture or race. In 2016 there were 1.5 million faculty in post-secondary education institutions; of those, 11% were Black or Latinx. Furthermore, Black and Latinx faculty accounted for only 6% of the full-time faculty in in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Often Black and Latinx students have mentors from different cultural backgrounds and races. These mentors are helpful in guiding students through their

academic career, however having a mentor from the same cultural background or race can enhance the relationship due to the mentor's awareness of what the students are going through (Bush, 2018).

Due to the low percentages of Black and Latinx faculty compared to the growing numbers of Black and Latinx students, faculty are becoming culturally taxed (Pimental, 2017). There is an expectation that minority faculty members can and should mentor all students of color on their campuses because of the shared cultures (Capers, 2019). One study suggests that institutions where there is not enough faculty of color a culture must be created where it is acceptable for white faculty to mentor Black and Latinx students (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). White faculty ultimately will serve as mentors to Black and Latinx students. Institutions must make training their faculty to work with diverse student populations a priority (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). Often faculty are so focused on job related task such as research and getting promoted, mentoring students is not as important. Conversely faculty of color often spend too much time mentoring the students of color out of necessity and miss out on the opportunities to be promoted or conduct research (Pimental, 2017). Mentoring needs to become a part of the faculty evaluation process for improvements to be made and for all faculty to take the task seriously (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007).

### **2.3 Faculty Representation**

Finally, as connected to mentoring there is a need for an increase in Black and Latinx faculty representation. Black and Latinx faculty can better serve students of a similar cultural or racial background due to shared values, interest, and understanding; furthermore, they also act as a source of social capital on campus (Capers, 2019). For instance, over a five-year period, Georgia

State University raised its graduation rate of Black and Latinx students by approximately 30%; enrollment of Black and Latinx students has also gone up by 10% (Chiles, 2016). Georgia State has implemented many programs to contribute to the increase in numbers but most notably 10% of their faculty is Black (Chiles, 2016). Having a corresponding amount of faculty of color can enhance Black and Latinx students learning experiences and contributes to their sense of belonging at an institution (Chiles, 2016; NewsOne Staff, 2011). Retention and graduation rates rise for Black and Latinx students, the higher the level of faculty representation (Hagedorn, 2007).

Students come and go on campuses, but faculty can make a lasting impact on the institutions culture and reputation (Lynch, 2013). Hiring faculty who mirror the changing demographics on campuses gives students of color a chance to seek role models and potential mentors, but it can also contribute to a sense of belonging on campus for these students (Apprey, Hill, Mcgrann, Taylor & Wang, 2010). We know that there is a discrepancy in the amount of Black and Latinx students enrolled in higher education compared to the amount of Black and Latinx faculty. The turnover rate for ethnic diverse faculty is so high that essentially the hiring of a Black or Latinx faculty simply replaces another Black or Latinx faculty who left the institution (Moreno, Smith, Clayton-Pedersen, Parker & Teraguchi, 2006).

Institutions have begun to implement strategies for hiring and retaining a diverse faculty (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Bilamoria & Buch, 2010; Efstathiou et al., 2018). Recruiting Black and Latinx faculty is a challenge for many institutions due to location, mission, history, demographics, and financial resources (Apprey, Hill, Mcgrann, Taylor & Wang, 2010). To begin this process institutions should promote diversity & inclusion and implement a diversity plan (Romero, 2017). These plans must have support from upper-level administration and can outline the commitment to hiring and retaining a racially and ethnically diverse faculty. Practices such as

advertising open positions in places that focus on the experiences of racially and ethnically minoritized faculty, and search committee training can contribute to increased numbers of Black and Latinx faculty hires (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013 & Apprey, Hill, Mcgrann, Taylor & Wang, 2010). Including a member of a diversity team or the equal opportunity office on all search committees should be a standard practice to ensure an inclusive process (Romero, 2017). For instance, the University of Virginia has put in place associate deans in each of its schools with the focus of recruiting faculty and graduate students of color (Apprey, Hill, Mcgrann, Taylor & Wang, 2010).

Recruitment and retention are vastly different, and attention must be given to both or the revolving door for Black and Latinx faculty will continue for institutions (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). Just as with students, creating a welcoming environment can contribute to a positive sense of belonging for Black and Latinx faculty; sponsoring special events such as themed receptions and dinners can contribute to faculty retention (Romero, 2017). More importantly implementing mentoring programs for faculty of color can have an impact on retaining a diverse faculty (Efstathiou et al., 2018). Mentoring should be done for faculty of color at all stages in their careers, but particularly during the first three years, such as the faculty mentoring program at the University of Virginia (Apprey, Hill, Mcgrann, Taylor & Wang, 2010).

More importantly to retention of Black and Latinx faculty is closing the wage gap, compared to white faculty, and ensuring that Black and Latinx faculty receive fair evaluations regarding tenure. When compared to White faculty, Black and Latinx faculty earn \$10,000 to \$15,000 less per year (Ordway, 2017). To increase the number of Black and Latinx tenured faculty institutions need to also reconsider promotion requirements such as the number of published articles and research history and consider the invisible labor that Black and Latinx faculty take on

(Rucks-Ahidiana, 2019). Institutions should consider including how much time and effort goes into formally and informally mentoring Black and Latinx students, advising student organizations and the extra committee work that Black and Latinx faculty are involved in due to their racial and cultural identities (Rucks-Ahidiana, 2019).

It is also important to consider the role that staff, and administrators play in the lives of Black and Latinx students. Black and Latinx students may look to staff and administrators when there is not equal representation of faculty, faculty are not available, or students simply develop relationships with staff and administrators. Black and Latinx students state that the benefits of these relationships include having someone who listens, supports, encourages, and provides cultural affinity (Strayhorn, 2008; Torres & Hernandez, 2009). White staff and administrators tend to focus solely on Black and Latinx students' academic performance while Black and Latinx staff and administrators take a more holistic and authentic approach to getting to know students which both nurtures and provides social capital (Luedke, C.L. 2017).

## **2.4 Summary of Review of Supporting Knowledge**

Degree attainment is an important indicator for an individual's future; maximizing earning and career potential could depend on an individual's level of education (Baum & Payea, 2005; U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2018). Black and Latinx students graduate at a rate significantly less than their White counterparts; although enrollment in higher education is up for these students (Shapiro et al., 2017).

Black and Latinx students, ultimately, experience higher education differently, often coming in with a set of barriers different from White students. Black and Latinx students are more

likely to be first generation or low-income students than their White counterparts (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). Barriers these students face include financial, cultural, feelings of isolation, as well as getting over the hurdle of remedial education (Markowitz, 2017; Shields & O'Dwyer, 2017). In addition, the structure of many institutions particularly PWIs, limits racially minoritized students sense of belonging and further increases the likelihood that these students will experience discrimination.

Institutions should bear the responsibility of ensuring Black and Latinx students can overcome these barriers. Campus climate plays a significant role in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all students. Providing a diverse array of clubs and activities for Black and Latinx students to participate will allow them to gain necessary skills attributed to participation; more importantly provide them the opportunity to network with peers and faculty (Huang & Chang, 2004). These opportunities can contribute to a Black and Latinx student having a positive sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012).

Institutions should also be responsible for having a plan in place for hiring and retaining a diverse faculty, staff, and student body. This institutional ownership would contribute to a reduction in the feelings of isolation and discrimination when attending predominantly white institutions (Baker, 2008). Although enrollment of Black and Latinx students are on the rise; there are significant gaps in the number of Black and Latinx faculty compared to White faculty (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Having greater representation of Black and Latinx faculty on campuses would allow for more ethnic matching of mentors which can contribute to positive graduation rates for Black and Latinx students (Allen & Eby, 2007).

Creating a sense of belonging among Black and Latinx students at institutions is the key to overcoming some of the barriers these students face and increasing graduation rates. Institutions

should make it a priority to implement strategies into its strategic plan that enhance the sense of belonging for Black and Latinx students (Strayhorn, 2018). Therefore, it is woven into the fabric of every part of the institution. There are several initiatives and policies that can be implemented by institutions to create a sense of belonging for Black and Latinx students, but ultimately this task will be easier if Black and Latinx students are able to work with peers and faculty that look like them. Recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty, staff, and student body should be a priority.

Each of these three themes also emerged in the fishbone process, further strengthening my argument and approach to addressing this issue. Potential solutions for increasing the graduation rates of Black and Latinx students should include engaging students in campus activities and providing support services through mentoring. Most importantly ensuring that Black and Latinx students could network and work with a faculty and staff similar or identical to their race or cultural background.

### **3.0 Theory of Improvement and Implementation Plan**

If Lehigh Carbon Community College can provide the targeted supports outlined in the driver diagram to Black and Latinx students, the college could increase the sense of belonging for Black and Latinx students (See Appendix B). Creating a sense of belonging and supporting Black and Latinx students is important when striving to increase the rate of graduation. By implementing direct supports such as creating student groups, mentorship programs and conducting outreach can lead to a desire to persist and increased graduation rates (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terezini, 2005; Tinto 1993, 2016). Currently the colleges graduation rate is 20%, however when disaggregated by race White students graduate at a rate of 25%, Black students 10%, and Latinx students 11% (United States Department of Education, 2021).

The college's student population is 54% White (LCCC Fall Fact Book, 2020). The college is in Schnecksville PA where the population is 97% White (United States Census Bureau, 2010) and the faculty closely mirrors the local population. A sense of belonging is the feeling of connectedness a student feels with their campus; feeling accepted, valued, and respected by faculty, staff, and peers are central to this feeling (Strayhorn, 2012). Campus climate, positive daily interactions with faculty, staff, and peers are the key components that contribute to a student sense of belonging (Supiano, 2018; Tinto, 2016). Black and Latinx faculty can better serve students of a similar cultural or racial background due to shared values, interest, and understanding; furthermore, they also act as a source of social capital on campus (Capers, 2019). Having a corresponding amount of faculty of color can enhance Black and Latinx students learning experiences and contributes to their sense of belonging at an institution (Chiles, 2016).

Understanding the difficulty of rapidly turning over the faculty at the college, implementing a targeted support to empower and educate Black and Latinx students on how to navigate the system will contribute to a sense of belonging for Black and Latinx students. The literature validates that targeted supports for Black and Latinx students can increase the rate of persistence from semester to semester; ultimately lead to higher graduation rates.

### **3.1 Aim Statement**

To exceed the colleges current semester to semester retention rate of 71% from spring 2021 to fall 2021 semester by providing targeted supports focused on empowering and supporting Black and Latinx students (LCCC Fall Fact Book, 2020). By increasing the semester-to-semester retention rate, I suspect that will also increase the odds of students persisting towards a degree.

### **3.2 PDSA Cycle**

Although referring to employees the following description fits my change idea perfectly. According to Heathfield (2019) empowerment is the process of an individual enabling themselves to take control of and be responsible for your work (school) environment. Empowerment is closely related to self-efficacy, which is the belief that one is in control of their life and can make positive changes (Broom, 2015).

My change idea is to implement a Black and Latinx students Empowerment and Support Series to help students feel supported and empowered. The series will provide basic information

and tools that will empower Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College to take control of and be responsible for their education. Through my interactions with these students, I hope it will be evident that I have navigated the same system and I am a person with whom they can relate too.

Topics of focus will on the following areas:

#### Session I

1. The purpose of being a student at LCCC
2. What is important to know for a college student
3. Cultural identity
4. How to find information

#### Session II

5. How to be assertive and form an argument
6. How to communicate effectively with faculty and staff
7. How to use college as time to network and plan

An important part of these sessions will be the assigning of task and recommendations for the participants to embark during the time following the sessions. These could include task such as:

1. Emailing a professor
2. Questioning a grade on an assignment
3. Seeking out a service on campus
4. Participating in a club or activity
5. Academic assignments

Due to the current issues, we are facing with Covid-19 and remote learning, this may be particularly impactful to these students. Lehigh Carbon Community College's spring 2021 semester is entirely online therefore students, especially incoming freshmen will not be on campus to build relationships, participate in activities and learn the processes that are needed. My intervention can be critical to students to fill in the gap of the online learning environment.

### **3.2.1 Plan Protocol**

A recruitment flyer will be developed to advertise the program and its goals. Recruitment will be an open process and participants will be recruited in a variety of ways (See Appendix C). I will utilize the colleges social media, the college's student email system to solicit eligible participants. I will also leverage faculty and staff in multiple departments to share the program with students. I also have students in my personal network with whom I may be able to solicit their participation.

The targeted participants will be Black and Latinx students who are in their first, second or third semesters at Lehigh Carbon Community College. The participants can be either part-time or full-time students, which will allow me to see if there are differences in these two groups. My goal is to have at least 30 participants who complete the program and complete the follow up surveys.

After a three-week recruitment and registration period the selected participants will be contacted and assured that all information shared in surveys would be confidential and shared only in collective form. At the same time participants will complete a pre-survey to gauge their knowledge of basic college information and basic demographic questions.

Following each session participants will complete a survey of new learning. These surveys will ultimately allow me to measure the impact and satisfaction of the program but will also show if follow up is necessary for an individual or the group. Another component of this program will be constant formal and informal contact with the participants in between sessions to provide continued support to the students. These contacts can be made via video meeting, phone, text, or email. After the second session I will conduct focus groups with participants to gather necessary data which will be followed by the post survey to all participants.

### **3.2.2 Methods and Measures**

The inquiry questions for my project will determine if Black and Latinx students feel supported and have the awareness to be successful at Lehigh Carbon Community College. This project will be mixed methods, both qualitative and quantitative. The data gathered from this project will determine if the intervention is successful and what adjustments will be needed for future cycles. The questions are as follows:

1. How knowledgeable are Black and Latinx students about the higher education process of applying, retaining, and graduating?
2. How aware are Black and Latinx students of the services provided by college?
3. How do Black and Latinx students feel supported/ comfortable on campus?
4. How does being informed and feeling supported contribute to self-efficacy?

### **3.2.3 Quantitative Data**

Quantitative data will be utilized to express numbers of participants, project satisfaction and most importantly the graduation rates of Black and Latinx students. The quantitative data which will be collected through the registration process and post surveys will allow students to be coded in the colleges database known as Banner. By coding the students in Banner, it will make it easier to pull retention and graduation data. The quantitative data is important as it will show if the project ultimately contributes to an increase in rate of retention rates for Black and Latinx students at the end of the semester.

Quantitative data will be analyzed at the end of the spring 2021 semester to determine if participants are on track to graduation. Participant satisfaction is also important as this project could have a lasting impact on the college. That data analysis of the satisfaction will be valuable to determine the level of participant satisfaction for future iterations.

### **3.2.4 Qualitative Data**

Qualitative data will be crucial to this project as it will show knowledge gained, feelings of support and sense of belonging. The qualitative data will show where students started and finished regarding their knowledge of the college and its processes. The qualitative data will also reveal if students felt supported and developed a sense of belonging to Lehigh Carbon Community College during the project. Feelings of support and sense of belonging are imperative due to Covid-19 forcing all classes to take place remotely. The college needs to be sure Black and Latinx students are feeling supported and gaining a sense of belonging even though they will not be on campus during the semester.

Qualitative data will be collected through the distribution of surveys throughout the project. These surveys will establish baseline data, assess new learning, impact, and satisfaction. Focus groups will also be used at the end of the project to gauge the impact and seek suggestions and recommendations for future implementations.

Most of the post survey questions will be open ended to allow participants to reflect and give personalized answers. Utilizing this data as well as information learned through discussions and regular checks ins throughout the project will also be useful. This data will be transcribed throughout the process and organized into relevant themes that will help determine if Black and Latinx students are lacking the self-efficacy to be successful at the college and if the new skills developed had a positive impact on their college experience. It is necessary to analyze the data constantly in case something comes up that could impact the project and or its participants.

I hope this project will provide the necessary data that can be used to identify gaps or flaws in the system. The data can be used to inform the colleges strategic plan and influence policy and procedure changes. Increasing the success of Black and Latinx students positively impacts the students, college, and community.

### **3.2.5 Measures**

The lagging measure for my projects is the graduation rates of Black and Latinx students at the end of the 2021-2022 academic year. This outcome will be measured at the end of 2020-2021 to determine the success of the program but data will not be complete until 2021-2022. The leading outcomes will be the semester-to-semester retention and grade point averages of the students participating. The leading measures will be the most important outcomes prior to 2021-2022 as it will show progress towards the goal. The project focus is supporting Black and Latinx

students to feel more connected on campus and provide the knowledge to navigate Lehigh Carbon. The participants sense of belonging will be the key driver measure as it will determine if Black and Latinx students are feeling connected to the campus. Process measures will include participation in workshop sessions, check-ins, focus group, and surveys. Satisfaction with this session will also be a part of the process measures. The more we can keep the students engaged and learning the more impactful the experience will be. Balance measures, including my capacity to work with the participants given my daily responsibilities, will be monitored to measure the impact on the system. Currently working in the Admissions Office in the specialized role of Director of Special Recruitment due the suspension of athletics for the 2020-2021 academic year. Most of my time is spent focused on recruiting and not retention, furthermore I am reporting to Enrollment Management as opposed to the School of Student Support and Success. Additional balanced measures could also be how many students utilize other campus resources and the capacity of these programs to meet the increased need.

## 4.0 Results

Many factors can contribute to an individual's lack of academic success at Lehigh Carbon Community College however, there are a few factors that have a significant impact on Black and Latinx students specifically. To determine what these factors are I implemented the Black and Latinx students Empowerment and Support Workshop, which was a two-part workshop designed at providing information, skills, and an opportunity to network with students and staff from a similar cultural background. These findings are the result of a pre-survey, post-survey, focus groups and discussions held during the workshops.

The campus climate, a lack of support and a lack of outreach and orientation on the process and the basic skills to be successful academically contributes to the retention and graduation rates being substantially lower for Black and Latinx students when compared to their white counterparts. By implementing targeted efforts focused on providing support through mentoring and out of class engagement, this study explored whether the college would be able to retain Black and Latinx student's semester to semester therefore leading to higher graduation rates. Throughout the implementation of the Black and Latinx Student Empowerment and Support Workshops, I hoped to better understand how knowledgeable Black and Latinx students were about the process of higher education, if they were aware of the services provided by the college, if they felt supported and comfortable on campus, and if being informed and supported contributed to self-efficacy. These three themes can lead to students feeling confident in their ability to be successful academically. Furthermore, it can also contribute to a student's sense of belonging.

The research done by Dr. Terrell Strayhorn on sense of belonging is woven throughout my findings. As noted in the literature review, his work explored different identity groups and how

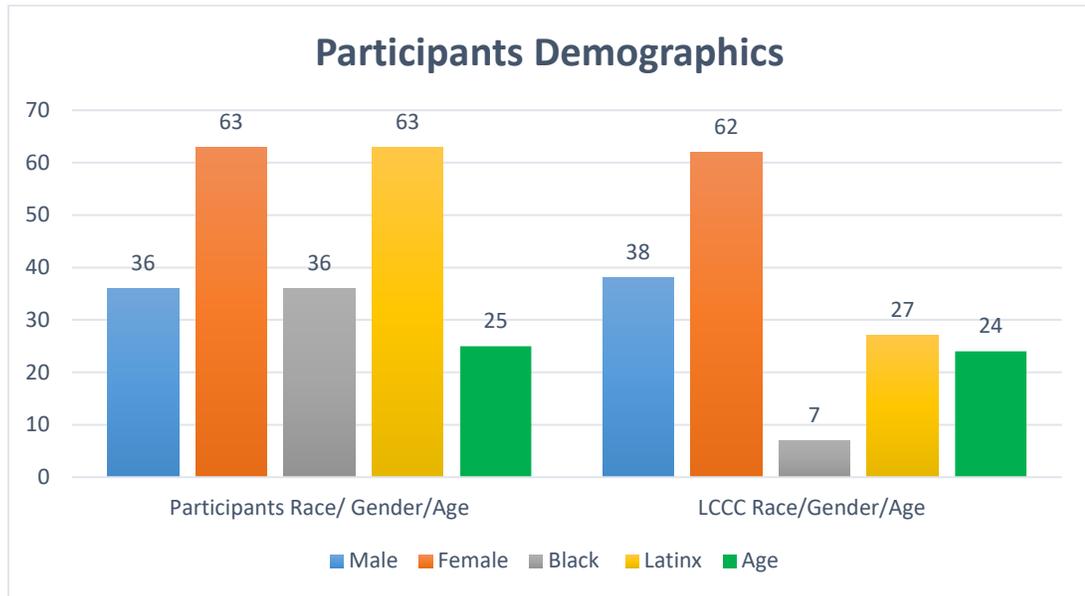
belonging on campus is critical to the student's ability to persist and achieve academically (Strayhorn, 2018). Furthermore, his research explored how students' lived experiences contribute to their need to feel they belong on campus (Strayhorn, 2018). The literature also shows that many of the issues faced by Black and Latinx students can be attributed to being first generation students which is defined as being the first in their family to attend college (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018).

#### **4.1 Recruitment and Participation**

The Black and Latinx Student Empowerment and Support Workshop that I designed and implemented is a targeted effort designed to provide students with tools that will make them feel confident and supported on campus. The recruitment period took place virtually due to COVID-19, which forced the college to go to a remote learning format in the Spring 2021 semester. I used electronic means to promote and recruit participants, I utilized the student newsletter, which is sent weekly via email to all students, as well the colleges social media accounts (See Appendix C). I also connected with colleagues on campus who work with students daily to solicit participation.

The participant demographics reflected the current student population at the college. Of the thirty participants nineteen identified as female and eleven as male, regarding race nineteen identified as Latinx compared to eleven Black. The average age of the participants was 25 years old with twelve of the participants falling within the 19-22 age range. As of the fall 2020 semester at the college 65% of students identified as female compared to 34% males (Lehigh Carbon Fall Fact Book, 2020). The current enrollment data shows that 27% of students are Latinx and 7% are

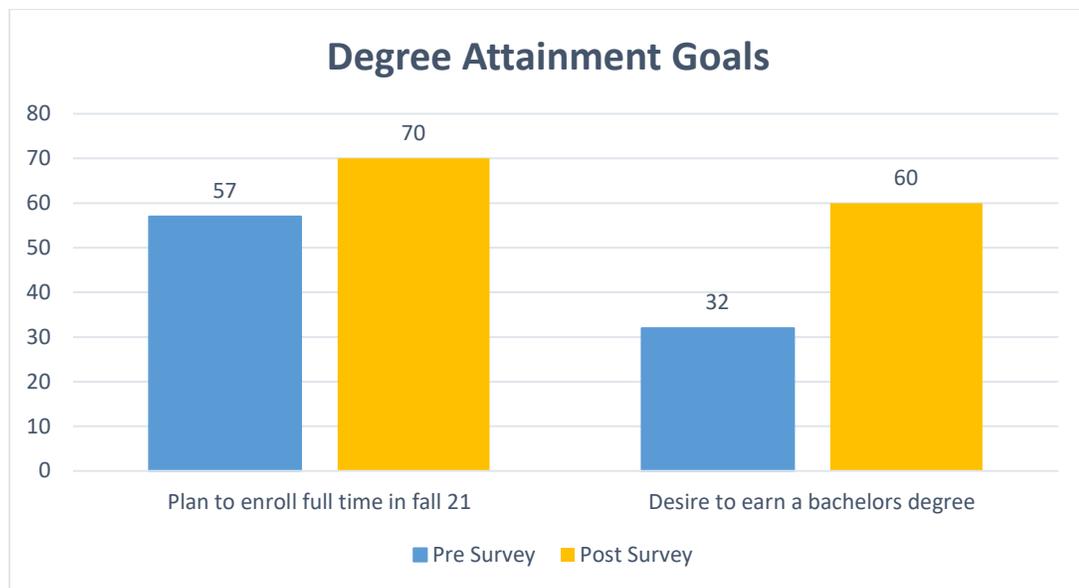
Black, and the average age is 23.75 (Lehigh Carbon Fall Fact Book, 2020). These demographics are shown in Figure 5.



**Figure 5 Workshop Participant Demographics**

Participants were registered for the research study and guided through the process of completing consent forms and the pre-survey virtually prior to the first workshop being held on February 9, 2021. The pre-survey collected demographic information as well as baseline information about how students feel about the higher education process, services at the college, and the campus climate. I presented two 2-hour workshops that covered various topics and included group discussions. After each workshop, each participant completed a survey of new learning to see what information was gained, as well as their level of comfort when engaging with the presenter and participants. Focus groups were also held after the workshops to further discuss and confirm findings with the participants. Finally, after all sessions were held, a post- survey was distributed to reassess the data gained from the pre-survey to see if there were any positive changes.

In the pre-survey, participants responded to the question; Do you plan to continue at LCCC in the Fall of 2021 and 57% of the participants expressed that they plan to continue as a full-time student. When asked: Do you plan to earn a college degree 68% stated that they plan to just earn their associate’s degree and not continue their education. Each participant expressed that they had gained what they hoped to by participating in the workshop and 100% expressed that participating had a positive impact on their future enrollment and degree completion goals. When asked the same questions regarding Fall 2021 enrollment plans and degree attainment goals participants showed increases in both categories. On the post-survey 70% of participants stated they plan to enroll as a full-time student which is a thirteen percentage points increase. Even more impactful was that 60% felt that participating had a positive impact on their overall desire to pursue a bachelor’s degree. These comparisons are shown in Figure 6.



**Figure 6 Degree Attainment Goals of Participants**

The two workshops were offered virtually, I provided to separate sessions to best accommodate the schedules of the participants. Each workshop had a session at 3:30 PM and another at 6:00 PM. The workshops consisted of informative presentations and discussions to allow students to engage with each other and the presenter. In my role as one of the few administrators of Color on campus and my desire to pursue a doctorate degree, I hoped that my personal story will have a positive impact on the participants in this workshop.

#### **4.1.1 Workshop I**

The first workshop was held on February 9, 2021, and was titled What Is Your Why? The objective of this session was to help participants determine what motivates them to pursue a college degree. I started the session with a review of college, local and national data. We also explored and discussed our cultural identities and how it has impacted their education journey thus far. We wrapped up this session with a presentation and discussion on important things to know as both a college student and at student at Lehigh Carbon Community College and how to find information (See Appendix D). At the end of this session students were given the task of seeking out a campus support service or participating in a club meeting or activity and reflecting on that experience.

#### **4.1.2 Workshop II**

The second workshop was held on February 23, 2021 and was titled Taking Control! The objective of this session was to provide participants with the tools and confidence to take control of their academic careers and be responsible for the results. The session began with a reflection on Session I and the assignments given to connect with a campus support service or participate in a

club meeting or activity. We then discussed a recent and timely article by on Racelighting which refers to People of Color questioning their own thoughts and actions due to systematically delivered racialized messages that make them second guess their own lived experiences with racism (Wood & Harris, 2021). Following this discussion, I presented and led a discussion on students' rights, knowing where you stand academically, communicating with faculty and staff, networking, and planning for next steps in the process.

## **4.2 Data Analysis**

The goal of the data analysis process was to determine what the biggest area of needs are for Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College that could contribute to better retention and graduation rates. The Qualitative data was accumulated by reviewing pre-survey (See Appendix E) and post-survey responses (See Appendix F) as well as information gathered through discussions and focus groups. The data was continually analyzed as it was collected, and I kept notes throughout this process of key points that arose from discussion. I went through the process of analyzing the data for specific themes.

After grouping the data, it was clear at which themes emerged as most prevalent. The themes were sense of belonging, lack of support, and lack of knowledge. These three themes are displayed in Table 1 along with definitions and examples. After determining the three themes and I interpreted it against the existing literature and within the context of Lehigh Carbon Community College to discuss the findings and make conclusions and recommendations.

**Table 1 Themes and Definitions**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Sense of Belonging	Things that contribute to Black and Latinx students feeling comfortable on campus.	Racism, microaggressions, faculty & staff representation
Lack of Support	Things that provide academic, emotional, or financial support.	Need for support and guidance from mentors, family, financial, academic
Lack of Knowledge	Lack of awareness of process, skills, and abilities that all college students need to be successful.	Applying, financial aid, study skills, time management skills, networking skills, student rights.

This chapter will explain the findings of the research study that sought to answer these research questions.

(R1): How knowledgeable are Black and Latinx students about the higher education process of applying, retaining, and graduating?

(R2): How aware are Black and Latinx students of the services provided by college?

(R3): How do Black and Latinx students feel supported/ comfortable on campus?

(R4): How does being informed and feeling supported contribute to self-efficacy?

Attempting to answer these research questions will lead to determining what factors best hinder and support the retention and graduation rates of Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College.

### **4.3 Sense of Belonging**

Institutions around the country have begun to make “sense of belonging for underrepresented students” a part of the strategic planning process (Strayhorn, 2018). Part of these

plans include how to make the campus climate more welcoming and comfortable for all students. This is particularly important in a community such as the Lehigh Valley where the population is predominately white, and the college's main campus is in a rural area. As Tinto (2016) stated it is the responsibility of the institution to ensure that students feel welcomed on campus, by creating an inclusive culture and providing opportunities for diverse students to interact. As an open enrollment institution, the college cannot and should not take a student's sense of belonging for granted because they choose to attend (Supiano, 2018). Two areas that can contribute to a student's sense of belonging are the campus climate and representation within the faculty, staff, and student body. Students should feel comfortable when learning and engaging on campus. Students should see themselves in both the student population and in the faculty and staff population. Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College lack a sense of belonging due to instances of racism, the lack of opportunities to engage with other students from similar backgrounds and culture, and the lack of representation among students, faculty, and staff.

#### **4.3.1 Campus Climate**

Campus climate is defined as the context that includes community members attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and expectations around issues of race, ethnicity, and diversity (Hurtado et al. 2008). For this study, campus climate is simply defined as how Black and Latinx students feel they are treated and perceived on the campus of Lehigh Carbon Community College. Based on the responses of students participating in this study, the climate on the campus of Lehigh Carbon Community College is not conducive to a positive learning environment for Black and Latinx students.

When asked about the campus climate and the biggest challenges Black and Latinx students face at Lehigh Carbon Community College via survey and through discussions, themes of racism and microaggressions came to the forefront. A study participant who is a woman from the Dominican Republic explained the microaggressions she has experienced on campus, “professors say I speak so eloquent and are often shocked at my level of intellect when discovering I am from the Dominican Republic.” A Latino participant shared a story of how he was treated at the financial aid office on campus stating, “my mother does not speak English very well and the lady at the office became very rude towards her because of the language barrier.” These examples of microaggressions represent the lack of cultural awareness on campus and is a contributing factor to Black and Latinx students feeling uncomfortable on campus. It also shows why representation among faculty and staff is key to the success of these students.

Participants indicated that they experienced these same levels of racism and microaggressions during their K-12 experience. A Latina participant who transferred out of the college (only to return a year later) after her first two weeks on campus stated, “I couldn’t deal with the closed mindedness and racism from peers on campus, it was like high school.” Participants who identified during focus groups and interviews as being from other countries felt the racism in the K-12 system and at the college was intensified, because they had not experienced it previously in their country. A woman participant from the Dominican Republic explained this dynamic.

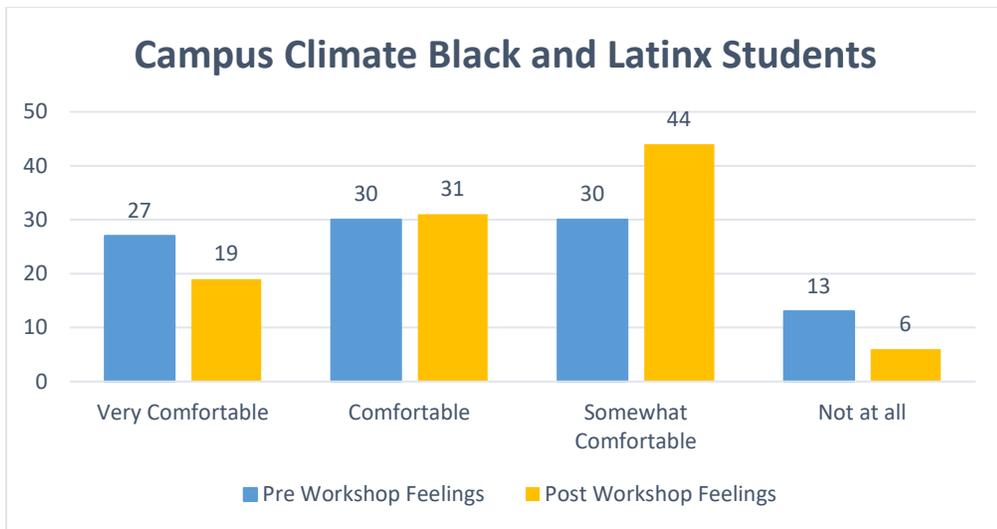
“In the DR everyone looks like me maybe a little lighter or darker, there is racism in the DR, but it is more like colorism or classism, but I did not expect to be discriminated so extremely here. I came to Schuylkill county in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and it was awful, not the best place to start. My family biggest worry was I would get into drugs, because in their mind the US can do no wrong, they did not understand the racism portion.”

Many of the participants dealt with microaggression and racism growing up in the local schools, these experiences make them feel isolated in school and on campus, likely impacting their desire to engage on campus and succeed academically.

When asked about cultural identity and how it has contributed to the educational journey, a Latina participant shared that as a ten-year-old new to the country she had been placed alone in a room at school because she spoke Spanish. She said, “twenty years ago when I came here it was not as popular for people to speak Spanish, they had no idea what to do with me or how to teach me which made me feel dumb.” Another Latina student shared her experience in school “I was labeled as Puerto Rican or Dominican although I was from Columbia. With this label came the stereotypes and microaggressions that my family must be drug dealers, on welfare and dumb.” A study participant who is Black male said, “I never really faced racism in school, but was always made to feel like I wasn’t going to graduate or go to college, the teachers didn’t really motivate or support you.” Participants made it clear these experiences during their K-12 years alienated them from school. While it will not undo these experiences, it is imperative for the college to be more intentional in its efforts to make Black and Latinx students not only feel more welcomed on campus, but to deliberately cultivate connections between their racial and cultural identities and their academic belonging.

During and at the conclusion of the workshops, participants discussed campus climate and how to navigate microaggressions and acts of racism. Following the workshops, 75% of the participants indicated that they are now more aware of the campus climate. Throughout both workshops and focus group discussions campus climate and its contributing factors was discussed a great deal. Many participants were unaware of the factors that impact the campus climate which causes the shift in the data. Furthermore, some of the students had similar experiences during their

K-12 journey and may have become numb to the climate at Lehigh Carbon. As shown in Figure 7, when asked in the pre-survey if the campus climate feels comfortable and welcoming, 43% of participants felt the climate was somewhat comfortable or not comfortable at all. When the same question was asked in the post-survey 50% of students indicated that the campus climate was somewhat uncomfortable or not at all comfortable. Figure 7 also shows that the percentage of those who are very comfortable on campus also decreased from 27% to 19% and those who felt comfortable remained relatively the same after the workshops and discussions. Because Black and Latinx students expressed experiencing microaggressions and racism during their K-12 years it may have gone unnoticed when faced at the college, however when discussed it heightened the level of awareness among the participants. Although a small sample size of students if 19% of the Black and Latinx students feel very uncomfortable campus it is something that needs to be addressed by the college.



**Figure 7 Opinions of Campus Climate for Black and Latinx Students**

### 4.3.2 Representation

Although there has been a 2% increase in Black students and a 13% increase in Latinx students over the last twenty years at Lehigh Carbon Community College participants still indicate not feeling as if they are represented in the student population (Lehigh Carbon Community College [LCCC] Fall Fact Book, 2010, LCCC Fall Fact Book, 2019). When asked about the barriers that students face on campus, a Black woman participating in the study stated, “I started at the main campus but did not like it because there was no one that looked like me. I transferred to another community college which felt more comfortable, but the cost and commute was too much.” Since returning to Lehigh Carbon Community College this student has only taken online classes and indicates more satisfaction with the experience. A male participant who identifies as both Black and Latino said, “I choose to participate in this program because there are not many activities directed towards Black and Latino students on campus.” As King and Howard-Hamilton (2000) stated it is essential that Black and Latinx students can participate in clubs and activities that they can culturally identify with on campus. When asked in the pre-survey, how knowledgeable are you about the support services offered on campus none of the participants were familiar with or mentioned the student life office. The two support services that participants indicated as using most often were tutoring and counseling. The college has twenty-seven active clubs on campus, but none are specifically for Black and Latinx students. Without any offices or departments on campus responsible for racially minoritized or underrepresented students, it is difficult to provide targeted programming.

Participants were assigned a task after the first workshop to attend a student club meeting, student life activity or request a meeting with the student life director to discuss opportunities to participate. Among the group there was hesitancy, and only 12 of the 30 participants completed

the task. Those who had success visiting with a club felt it was easier when they had a friend who was already a part of the group or activity. These types of networks are what Black and Latinx students are missing at Lehigh Carbon Community College. Prior to COVID-19 and virtual activities a few participants also stated they felt reluctant to go to activities and clubs because of the lack of Black and Latinx student representation in them. A Black woman participant said, “I just didn’t feel comfortable sometimes walking into meetings where I was the only Black person and there are no clubs just for us.”

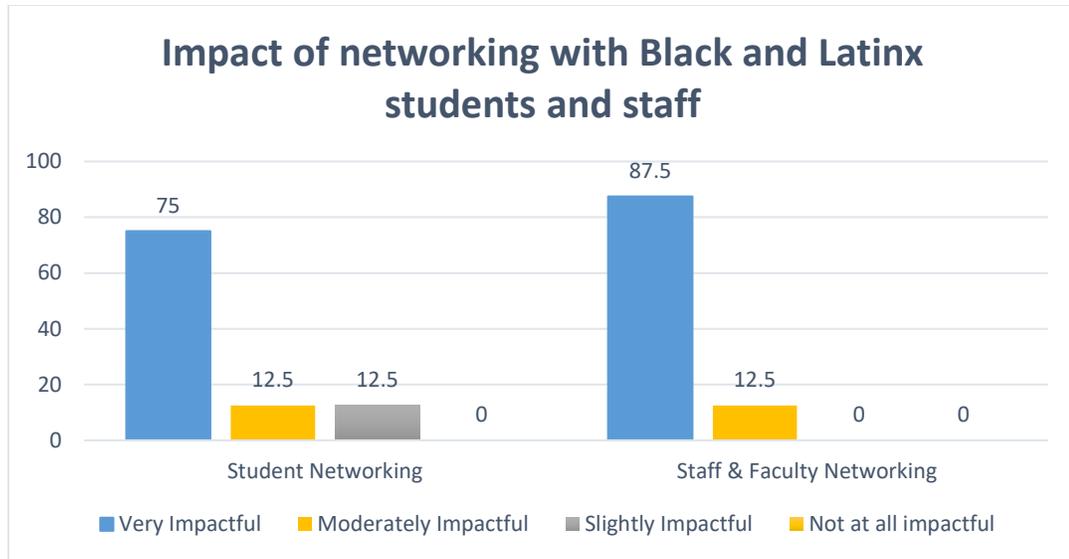
It is imperative that the college puts more effort into creating spaces for Black and Latinx students to engage in with each other. It is also critical to provide culturally relevant programming. Part of this process includes hiring and retaining a faculty and staff that mirrors its changing student population. One of the biggest challenges for the college that participants addressed in discussion about campus climate is the need to see other people on campus who look like them. When asked about the composition of the classrooms one male Black participant said, “It’s mostly white kids in my classes.” A Black woman participant said, “being the only Black girl in the class was discouraging at times and it made me feel nervous and like I had to try extra hard.” Being the only Black or Latinx student in the classroom can be intimidating and provide a level of stress leading to a decrease in focus and academic performance.

When addressing the relationship with faculty and staff, 61% of the participants found it difficult to identify with the faculty and staff racially and culturally. When asked on the post-survey what was the number one thing the college could do to support Black and Latinx students, half of the group stated hire more Black and Latinx faculty and staff. A young Black woman participant shared her thoughts on this “sometimes it just seems the professors don’t understand us and where we are coming from.” A Black male participant said, “these teachers at the college

are the same as in high school, they don't really try to help you." As stated by J. Luke Wood (2019), white faculty can have success teaching students of Color however it is important for students to see faculty and staff who look like them during their academic careers. For the students in this study, it was particularly seen as an important part of supporting their sense of belonging.

### **4.3.3 Networking**

Networking with students, faculty and staff from similar cultural backgrounds proves invaluable for Black and Latinx students. Even within the virtual environment participants still felt the value of engaging with other Black and Latinx students and with a staff member from a similar background. Although the college's Black and Latinx student enrollment has increased, it is not noticeable to the students who are often the only Black or Latinx student in their classes. When asked in the post-survey; How impactful was it to see, network and build relationships with other students and with a college administrator from a similar cultural racial background participant indicated that it was very impactful. This data is shown in Figure 8 where 75% percent of participants felt it was very impactful to network and engage with other students who were Black and Latinx, with 12.5% expressing it was moderately and slightly impactful. More importantly 88% felt it was very impactful to network with a staff member from a similar background while 12.5% felt it was moderately impactful. These types of opportunities to engage increase the chances of informal and formal mentorship.



**Figure 8 Impact of Networking with Black and Latinx Student and Staff**

#### 4.3.4 Conclusion

Social integration is a big part of a student's sense of belonging on campus and occurs when students can network outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1993). Due to racism and microaggressions, Black and Latinx students find it difficult to feel included at Lehigh Carbon Community College. Students indicated that these experiences are not necessarily new to them, as the same issues were present during their K-12 experience. Furthermore, when on campus, students did not see peers or faculty and staff with whom they could identify with culturally which serves as a demotivating factor. Tovar & Simon (2010) confirmed through a study that a student's sense of belonging is a positive influence on a student's persistence and academic achievement.

## **4.4 Lack of Support**

Support comes in many forms as Black and Latinx students face barriers that their White counterparts may not, which may contribute to them being pushed out (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010 & Salinitri, 2005). The support can come from a variety of places including friends, family, faculty, and staff. Often it is family and mentors, both formal and informal who provide these supports to students. Regarding the participants in this study the support needed came in three categories academic, emotional, and financial. These types of support are lacking for Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College.

### **4.4.1 Mentoring**

Mentoring is an essential aspect of a successful and positive college experience, however due to the barriers that many Black and Latinx students face it is imperative that they receive some form of mentoring during their academic career (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Among the thirty participants in the Black and Latinx Empowerment and Support Workshop, nineteen students identified as a first-generation student. When exploring this dynamic, it was discovered that of the family members who attended college, most were siblings who were currently in school or did not complete a degree. Only three of the participants identified both parents as attending college.

There is a positive relationship and higher levels of satisfaction when mentors are matched with someone from a similar cultural background (Allen & Eby, 2007 & Dahlvig, 2010). The lack of mentoring opportunities available for Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College plays an important role in their academic success. When asked if mentoring is needed at the college a Black woman participating in the study simply stated “YES, I was lost and did not

know where to turn or how to find someone to provide guidance.” Another common theme among participants when asked why they choose to participate in this program was the desire to find someone or something to help navigate the college process. A Black male participant who has a mentor on campus said “it was extremely helpful especially as a new student, my mentor told me the real deal about LCCC, the good and the bad. He also let me know that I could come see him at any time if I needed anything. Just knowing I had somewhere to go made me feel comfortable.” Fortunately, that student was a member of the men’s basketball team where his coach provided mentorship but for others it is not that easy to find mentors.

As Komarraju et al. (2010) affirmed, mentoring relationships among students and faculty can enhance student motivation and achievement, institutions must foster opportunities for both formal and informal contacts. A survey conducted by the Strada Education Network and Gallup group of over 5000 college graduates in 2018 also exemplifies the importance of faculty mentoring of students. The survey shows that 47% of first generation and minority respondents reported having a trusted mentor relationship with a faculty member compared to 75% of White students. Respondents to this survey also recommended that institutions focus on hiring and retaining a diverse faculty as minority students are likely to seek mentors from their own background or culture.

Participants were asked if they felt all Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College should participate in this type of program and 100% said yes. A Latina participant suggested doing this as a summer orientation program, another expressed the need to implement into the urban high schools. Lack of support or mentors for Black and Latinx students and faculty staff representation were the top two things that participants expressed as the biggest challenges that Lehigh Carbon Community College faces. This will continue to be a challenge as

five percent of the faculty and staff is Black and Latinx and 40% of the student population identifies as nonwhite (Lehigh Carbon Fall Fact Book, 2020).

#### **4.4.2 Family**

Students have increasingly relied on their families to provide support during their college experiences, and these relationships influence the student's decision-making processes and functionality (Glaser, n.d.). Marquez (2017) discussed the importance for institutions to provide opportunities for families to engage and learn how to better support their student's success, as they must be prepared to provide an array of support. According to study responses, Lehigh Carbon Community College does not do enough to engage family members during the students onboarding process. Furthermore, the college has done away with the traditional new student orientation sessions where parents were regular participants. A Latino participant stated, "the school does financial aid sessions at the high schools where parents are invited but nothing that talks about college life." Similarly, a Black woman participant shared her unique perspective;

"my daughter was enrolled here as a freshman; I was not sure how to support or guide her through situations during her first year and ultimately, she dropped out. Fast forward a year and now I am enrolled as a full-time student, and I understand what the process is like and what her needs were. With the little bit of knowledge, I have now I can guide her and direct her."

Through this experience she has now encouraged her daughter to re-enroll. The families of Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College are less likely to have the lived experiences as a college student, therefore not having the ability to share wisdom and provide the necessary supports. This shows the significance for the college to provide Black and Latinx

students the opportunity to be mentored on campus and/ or involve the families in families in the onboarding process of students.

Currently about 25% of community colleges in the United States offer on-campus housing and more are beginning to follow this trend, with numbers dramatically increasing since 2000 (Barrington, 2020). Living on campus allows for students to fully engage in the college experience by remaining on campus after classes thus limiting the responsibilities they face at home (Chen, 2020). At Lehigh Carbon Community College, all the students are commuters and are called on to juggle both the life of a student as well as family life. One Black male participant discussed the difficulty of studying at home with his young siblings. “After class I have to pick up my little brothers from school and take care of them, by the time they go to bed I’m too tired to study.” Others shared the sentiment of finding space and time to study due to younger siblings at home or elderly family members they care for.

In addition to sibling care, the need to contribute to the family and demands placed on students by parents was a common theme among participants. A Black woman participant stated, “My parents just don’t understand what I need as a college student, the schedule that I have to lead going to and from campus for class, to study, and to attend activities.” Participants expressed a similar feeling of being in high school where their parents relied on them to perform household duties. A Latino participant shares that Latino families are very close, “I serve many roles in my household, I am the translator and driver for my grandparents who don’t speak English. I have to take them to their doctors’ appointments and help them run other errands.” This same student also works to help support his family locally and back home in the Dominican Republic. COVID-19 further impacted some students as parents and other family members lost jobs, they had to pick up additional work to help financially support the families.

A part of the workshop was a presentation and discussion on “Finding Your Why”, participants were tasked with determining what was their why. Why were they attending college, why did they set the goal of earning a college degree? Almost overwhelming each participant shared that their family, or a member of their family was their why. Reasons such as to make amends for the sacrifices that family made for them, to support their parents financially, or to simply make the family proud. It is apparent that this struggle between family life and being a college student has an impact on the success of Black and Latinx students and it is necessary for colleges to support this dynamic by engaging with and providing support to families.

#### **4.4.3 Finances**

Community Colleges are an inexpensive educational option, however financial issues remain the number one reason that students drop out of school. The lack of money or the need to work to cover cost can lead to stressors (Aston, 2018). The need for financial support continues to be a concern for the Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College. The majority of the Black and Latinx students who attend the college live in Allentown, which is the largest city in the Lehigh Valley, Allentown also has a 25.7% poverty rate (United States Census, 2019). Research makes clear that students from impoverished backgrounds are less likely to complete college. As Taylor (2017) argued attending college really is not a part of the plan for many of these students and if they manage to get there, they lack the skills necessary to be successful; even with Pell Grants and other forms of financial aid available that rarely covers the cost of their needs.

This argument was expressed repeatedly by the participants, who stated that they needed to work while attending school to contribute to family cost and to pay for school. This was even more prevalent during COVID-19 due to other members of the family losing jobs or having hours

cut. One student even discussed how COVID-19 allowed him to pick up more hours at work because classes were online. He was able to attend classes while working which allowed him to earn additional income, however it had a negative impact on his academic success.

Some are paying for school out of pocket because they do not want to use student loans due to a fear of debt accumulating understanding this may be needed when transferring to a four-year college. Even those who are receiving financial aid which may cover the cost of tuition, need to work because the aid does not contribute to the living expenses. “I wish I didn’t have to work, but I have no choice” one Latina participant stated. It is also important to note that the jobs these students are holding are not supportive of their academic success or in line with their future career goals. They are working demanding hourly jobs in local factories, restaurants, or retail with inconsistent schedules that do not allow for appropriate times for schoolwork. Working these demanding jobs also does not allow for students to participate in other campus activities.

#### **4.4.4 Conclusion**

A lack of support among Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College is negatively impacting their academic success. Students’ express needs for emotional support, academic support, and financial support. Particularly students want to have someone to turn to when they have questions, a mentor who can guide them through the process. It is becoming increasingly important for institutions to create and encourage the development of these relationships. Racial and Cultural representation among faculty, staff and students play a major role in the mentorship of Black and Latinx students. The number of Black and Latinx faculty of color does not correspond with the increasing numbers of students on campus, as these students naturally seek mentors from their own cultural and racial backgrounds.

Parents or other family members could play a role in this, but they are often ill equipped to do so. Many Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College are first generation students but it is important to note that not all first-generation students at Lehigh Carbon are Black and Latinx. The parents and families of these students do not have the lived experience to provide the necessary support, furthermore many of these students come from other cultures and their parents and families are unfamiliar with the education system in the United States. Also attending a commuter school requires the student to feel the pressure to support their own families financially and emotionally which can put stress on their education. This lack of overall support attributes to a lack of knowledge. Black and Latinx students come to college with less knowledge and struggle to acquire the necessary knowledge to be successful.

#### **4.5 Lack of Outreach and Orientation**

Lehigh Carbon Community College does not provide a venue for students to gain and or develop the knowledge and skills that are necessary to attain a college degree. This is particularly important for Black and Latinx students who are more likely to be first generation students.

Black and Latinx students lack the knowledge of the enrollment processes which includes searching for and applying to a college and the financial aid process. As an open access college, all students who apply are accepted however there are several steps in the process that can cause confusion. Particularly the financial aid process can cause stress and grief for those who are unfamiliar with the process.

If students can overcome the barriers of enrolling and applying for financial aid, they face a new set of barriers once they begin classes. Once enrolled and on campus many students lack the

knowledge and skills that it takes to be successful academically and this is especially evident for the Black and Latinx students who are more likely to be first generation students and lack the support and guidance that many of their white counterparts are privy to.

#### **4.5.1 Enrollment Process**

Before a student can enroll in college, they must go through the process of identifying schools that they would like to attend which requires one to know what they are looking for in an institution. When asked in the pre-survey about the familiarity of the college search process 50% of the participants expressed that they were slightly or not familiar with the process and unaware of what they should be looking for. As part of Workshop I, we discussed the search process, things to look for and how to use what was learned as a student at Lehigh Carbon Community College as a guide when searching for transfer school. Considering areas such as class size, student statistics, programs offered, job placement rates and extracurricular activities and how those things can contribute to a positive campus experience. Participants reflected on this process and thought it was helpful for the future. A Latina participant stated, “this would have been so helpful two years ago, I went to a four-year school right out of high school but had no idea what it was like which is why I ended up here.”

Many of the participants expressed not visiting campus prior to enrolling, which does not allow them to get a good feel of the campus climate. Many participants also expressed that they applied because their guidance counselor advised them to apply as a fallback option. These students did not engage in a process of learning about the college, its campus, and the programs that it could offer. One Black male participant stated, “I thought the Donley Center was the main

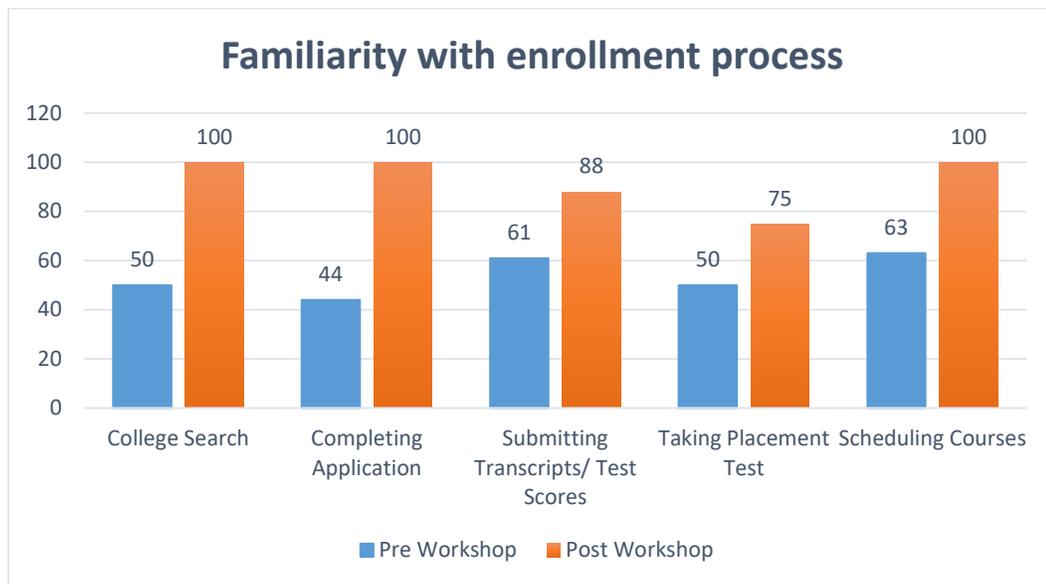
campus.” The Donley Center is the small branch campus located in downtown Allentown that lacks staffing and resources but enrolls 60% of the college Black and Latinx student population.

Both student participant responses and my own experience make it clear that the enrollment process at Lehigh Carbon Community College, is convoluted and not well organized. Due to COVID-19 athletics was canceled for the 2020-21 academic year. During this time, I was reassigned to the admissions department where I was the Director of Special Recruitment. In this role, I was able to assess the current enrollment process and determined that there are too many touch points along the way and a lack of communication between the college and prospective students, which makes it even more difficult for Black and Latinx students who again are more likely to be first generation students and unfamiliar with how to navigate higher education. The process consists of applying, submitting test scores and transcripts (if applicable), placement testing (if necessary), registering for New Student Orientation and scheduling of courses. These steps are not always clearly defined, are not the same for everyone, and sometimes relies on the students to initiate contact. In each of these processes the students are responsible for registering or submitting items themselves and there are four different departments involved in the process which can lead to inconsistencies. These processes make it difficult for Black and Latinx students who are also likely to be first generation students and lack the awareness and knowledge to navigate these processes. It regularly presents opportunities for students to fall through the cracks.

When asked about the familiarity of these processes it was common for participants to feel frustrated or neglected throughout. Participants stated that a lack of communication from the college during the process caused a lot of frustration. Common themes were not knowing where to send information, not being clear about placement testing, and not knowing how to schedule classes. A first-year Black male participant said, “after applying to the college I didn’t receive and

information or confirmation about next steps until I called a month later.” Another Black male participant said, “the process was frustrating because it was hard to figure out who to contact for things.” Throughout the enrollment process the onus is placed on the applicant to move through the funnel. It is important for this process to be clear and for students to receive feedback and or guidance along the way from the college.

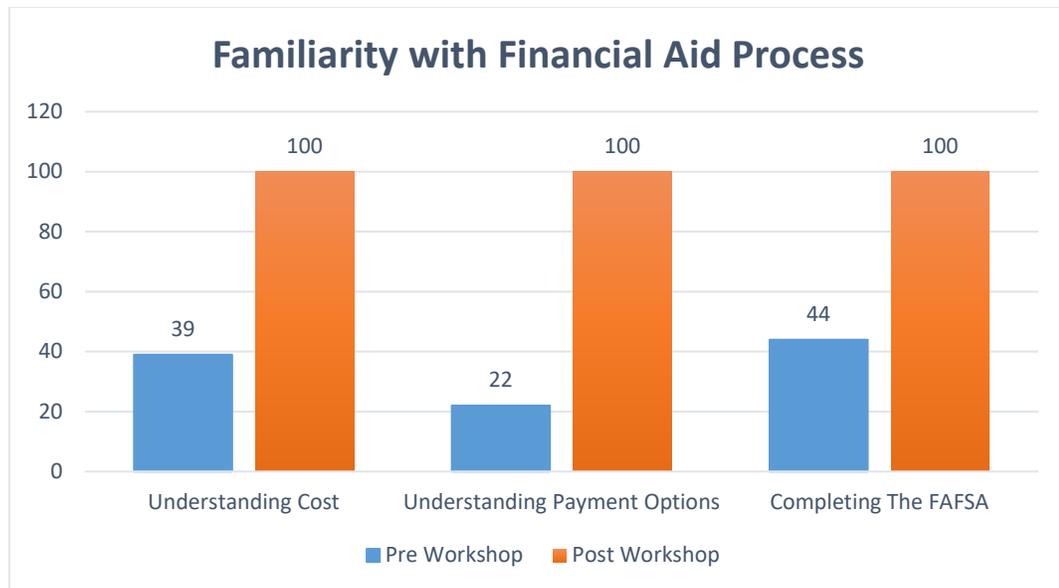
The knowledge gained about the enrollment process from Workshop I was clear as displayed in Figure 9 which shows a significant increase in familiarity over each of the areas of college search, completing the application, submitting transcripts/ test scores, placement testing and scheduling courses. Regarding the college search process familiarity rose from 50% to 100%, completing the application rose from 44% to 100%, submitting documents rose from 61% to 88%, placement testing rose from 50% to 75% and finally scheduling courses rose from 63% to 100%.



**Figure 9 Familiarity with the Enrollment Process**

#### **4.5.2 Financial Aid Process**

Applying for financial aid is another part of the enrollment process and perhaps the most significant. Financial aid plays an important role in a student's ability to have academic success. Long (2010) examined the research that shows a positive correlation between financial aid and persistence of students, especially in community colleges. Although the cost of community colleges is significantly lower; community college students also have many other costs associated with attending including lost wages (Long, 2010). A lack of knowledge or familiarity about the financial aid process and cost was evident among participants, the knowledge gained in workshop I was enough to increase the familiarity of these processes. When asked about the familiarity of these process in the pre-survey and post-survey Figure 10 shows significant increases in the knowledge and awareness. A familiarity with understanding the cost of college increased from that 39% to 100%, while understanding how to complete the Free Application of Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) increased from 44% to 100%. Perhaps the most telling statistic is that only 22% of the participants were familiar with the payment options, thinking that the tuition bill is due at once not understanding deadlines and realizing that there are payment plans, grants and student loans that could be utilized. The level of familiarity with payment options also increased to 100%. This low level of financial awareness about aid and cost was illustrated by a poll conducted by the Sallie Mae Fund, (2003) which found that two-thirds of prospective college families did not name grants as a possible source of funds when asked about types of financial aid and was more prevalent among low-income students. Financial aid knowledge has extensive implications for the enrollment and continuation process for students.



**Figure 10 Familiarity with the Financial Aid Process**

Participants expressed the most frustration with completing the FAFSA, finding it difficult to complete the application. A Latino participant shared that “because of my age I had to provide my parents financial information but that is difficult because they do not live in this country”, he also stated that he basically lives on his own here in Allentown. Another Latino participant said that his family “did not feel comfortable providing certain information.” Also, not understanding the deadlines for being considered for grants played a major role in the aid received. Many students missed deadlines for aid and verification because of the college’s notification process, which is to post messages in the student portal which most incoming students do not access regularly.

The most disheartening part of the financial aid process is the lack of customer service, microaggressions and even some instances of racism that students faced from the financial aid office. “The people in the financial aid office are mean, they speak down to you” one Black male participant stated. This reflection along with the previously quoted Latino participant who shared

a story of how he and his mother were treated in the financial aid office due to a language barrier shows that the financial aid office at Lehigh Carbon Community College lacks cultural awareness and customer service skills when working with underrepresented student populations. These experiences can also contribute to the lack of knowledge and awareness of the financial aid process, as it would be this office that would have to participate in the outreach and education process for Black and Latinx students.

#### **4.5.3 Expected Knowledge and Skills**

Being a college student requires a particular set of skills which students are expected to have or possess the ability to develop with limited to no support. Many community college students enter with little awareness of expectations or a clear understanding for how make effective decisions and how to be successful academically. Institutions typically utilize new student orientation or success courses to assist in developing these critical skills (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 2012). At Lehigh Carbon Community College, we do not offer a traditional new student orientation or any required student success courses.

A large portion of the time in the 2 workshops were used to empower students to take control of their educational journey which included developing the necessary skills and knowledge needed to succeed academically. When asked in the pre-survey how well prepared, they were for college, 60% of participants expressed that they were not well prepared for college when they first enrolled. Some lacked the academic foundation while others lacked the ability to adjust to the college life. When asked in the post-survey if all Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College should participate in this workshop or a similar program 88% said yes while the other 12% said maybe.

In the workshop's participants were presented insight into and learned study skills, time management skills and talked about the differences between high school and college expectations. They also talked about the importance of getting involved on campus to build a network, support system and to create mentoring opportunities. More importantly they learned about their rights as students, how to find information, seek assistance and effectively communicate with faculty and staff. In each workshop 100% of the participants expressed that all or some of the information presented was new to them. Furthermore 100% of the participants felt comfortable implementing the tips and recommendations given.

The most impactful information shared with participants was on their rights as students and how to communicate with faculty and staff. A woman from the Dominican Republic said, "in high school we were not allowed to ask questions outside of class or email teachers, so we are not used to that concept." Students come into college not understanding how to build relationships with faculty and staff through communication and that they have the right to challenge or ask questions. Many participants found an email template shared (See Appendix G) to be useful. When asked about key things learned during the workshops one Black male student stated, "I learned how to communicate better with professors, the email template was extremely helpful." Participants were given the task of emailing a professor about an issue or to schedule a meeting. After reflecting on the assigned task, a Black woman participant stated, "I hadn't realized how hard of a time I had contacting my professor until we got the email template, now I feel like I use it at least once a week." A Latino participant stated, "I didn't find the task of reaching out to a professor difficult, but I learned that I do not reach out enough, I need to work on building those relationships." An older Black adult female student was dealing with a professor who she labeled disrespectful, "I was excited to use the email template as a way to build credibility with my professor." After taking

the placement test this student had placed into MAT 105, but the professor did not think she was up to that level and told the student she should go back to remedial math, or she would have to spend 15 hours per week to have a chance at passing the course. The student felt that the professor was not giving her a chance and was discouraged to the point that she wanted to drop out. She stated, “The workshop taught me about my right to withdraw from a class which is what I ultimately did, no one has told us about that before.”

Participants were also unaware of their rights as a student and often feel that they must do whatever they are told and not challenge anything. The workshops gave guidance on how to use the syllabus to hold faculty accountable, where to file a complaint, how to challenge grades. We also reviewed processes that students should be aware of such as registering for classes, appealing financial aid, requesting an incomplete grade or withdraw as opposed to taking an F.

When talking with participants about the process of registering for classes there was not a clear consensus on the process, but what was clear was that the students were not in control of what they took each semester. The workshops made them aware of where to find the degree plans for their major and how-to self-register. One Latina participant expressed frustration of taking classes she did not need which set her back a semester from graduation, “the advisor who always seemed burdened when meeting with me didn’t take the time to understand what I wanted my major to be.”

College and Universities have policies and procedures, and there are also skills that are necessary for students to have success. The issue is all students are not made aware of these things prior to enrolling in college or during their time as students. Lehigh Carbon Community College does not offer a traditional orientation program or student success course, furthermore student lack opportunities to engage with mentors to enhance their academic skills and awareness of the higher

education system. If students come to college at a disadvantage often, they remain at a disadvantage, and unfortunately it is the Black and Latinx who are also more likely to be first generation students.

## 5.0 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify what factors hindered or supported the retention and graduation rates for Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College. This chapter will review key information about the significance of this study, the research questions, the findings as well as future recommendations for the next iteration, the researcher, and the field of higher education. This study is crucial to Lehigh Carbon Community College because the enrollment of Black and Latinx students continues to grow, but the retention and graduation rates are not improving which contributes to an overall graduation rate that is 8% points below the national average of 28% (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). As a Black man, first generation college graduate from a low socio-economic status who holds a leadership role on campus I felt I could have an impact on the students by relating to them culturally. As one of two Black or Latinx administrators on campus it is incumbent on me to take on these roles informally and formally.

Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College had little to no knowledge of the processes of higher education from applying to graduating. Once on campus they experience microaggressions and racism which leads to the lack of a sense of belonging. They also exhibited little to no knowledge of the support services offered on campus and are hesitant to make connections with other students and faculty and staff due to a lack of racial and cultural representation. Being both informed and supported unquestionably contributes to students' feelings of self-efficacy. As the students gained more knowledge, skills, and feelings of connectedness they began to feel as if they belonged on campus which contributed to their desire to persist.

## 5.1 Findings

My theory of improvement focused on understanding whether targeted supports (as outlined in the driver diagram) to Black and Latinx students, would increase their sense of belonging in turn improving their semesterly retention and graduation rates (See Appendix B). Specifically, the types of direct supports should include creating student groups, mentorship programs and conducting outreach. This theory of change was supported by the research study as the three themes of lack of sense of belonging, lack of support and lack of knowledge emerged in the data.

My theory of change was that Black and Latinx students were not being made aware of important information that is needed to be successful, nor do they receive the necessary support to help navigate the processes of higher education thus increased awareness and support would help retention. The findings that will be addressed answered the research questions and supported the assertion that targeted supports are necessary for Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College to close the gap in degree attainment when compared to white students. The research questions that were addressed are:

(R1): How knowledgeable are Black and Latinx students about the higher education process of applying, retaining, and graduating?

(R2): How aware are Black and Latinx students of the services provided by college?

(R3): How do Black and Latinx students feel supported/ comfortable on campus?

(R4): How does being informed and feeling supported contribute to self-efficacy?

The areas that must be addressed by the college in order to close this gap are (a) improving the campus climate for Black and Latinx students, (b) increase cultural and racial representation among faculty and staff, (c) create more opportunities for students to engage in culturally relevant

activities, (d) provide opportunities for Black and Latinx students to receive mentoring, (e) engage families of students in the college process, (f) conduct more outreach to provide knowledge and skills to new Black and Latinx students who are more likely to be first generation students and lack opportunities to engage with a mentor on campus.

#### **5.1.1.1 Improving the Campus Climate**

Like many predominately white institutions Lehigh Carbon Community College does not offer a supportive climate that fosters belonging for Black and Latinx students. Lehigh Carbon Community College's main campus is in rural Schnecksville which is in a predominately White community. The majority of Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College come from Allentown where the population is 67% Black and Latinx (US. Census, 2019). The findings of this study illustrate that that the campus climate at Lehigh Carbon Community College is not conducive to a positive learning environment for Black and Latinx students.

The student experiences that led to this conclusion come from peer-to-peer interactions, interactions with faculty in the classroom and with staff on campus. Several examples were shared where students faced microaggressions and racism. Study participants also shared that these same instances are occurring within the K-12 setting as well, thus students are coming to the college having already experienced microaggressions and racism. Because of this it is imperative the college focuses on alleviating these feelings and cultivating an inclusive climate for students from the beginning of their academic careers. Many students were unaware of the campus climate due to these past experiences in education but when discussed and assessed in the post-survey half of the participants expressed that the campus climate is somewhat uncomfortable or not comfortable.

### **5.1.1.2 Increase Cultural and Racial Representation**

Another way for Black and Latinx students to feel they belong is for them to have the chance to see, network and engage with faculty and staff with whom they can relate racially or culturally. The lack of faculty and staff representation for Black and Latinx students impacts their feelings of belonging. The enrollment numbers for Black and Latinx students have increased over the last decade at Lehigh Carbon Community College however the faculty and staff does not resemble these demographic changes with 5% of the full-time faculty at the college being Black or Latinx, furthermore there are only two people of color serving in a leadership role on campus. There are limited opportunities for students to network and build relationships with faculty with whom they could culturally relate to.

When discussing the relationships with faculty and staff 61% of the participants found it difficult to identify with their faculty and staff culturally. Participants also agreed that the number one thing the college could do to support Black and Latinx students is to hire more Black and Latinx faculty and staff. This dynamic was evident in Figure 8 which shows that 88% of the participants felt it was very impactful to network with a staff member from a similar racial and cultural background.

### **5.1.1.3 Provide Mentoring Opportunities for Black and Latinx Students**

Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College face many barriers that their white counterparts may not, as they are also more likely to be low income and/or first-generation students which can contribute to them dropping out (Salinitri, 2005 & Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College could benefit from mentoring and it is crucial that they receive some form of mentoring preferably from someone

in a similar cultural or racial background as this leads to higher levels of satisfaction and success (Allen & Eby, 2007, Dahlvig, 2010, Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010).

There was an overall lack of awareness, knowledge, and feelings of support among participants which is typically the role of a mentor. These opportunities are missing at Lehigh Carbon Community College, participants emphatically agreed that mentoring is needed to help guide students through the process. Having more mentors for Black and Latinx students was one of the things participants expressed when asked about the biggest challenge the college faces. Having someone to go to for guidance was key for a participant who did express having a mentor relationship on campus. Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College find it difficult to relate to faculty and staff and build mentoring relationship which is shown to contribute to a student's academic success (Komarraju et al., 2010).

#### **5.1.1.4 Create Culturally Relevant Engagement Opportunities**

Tinto (1993) stated the importance of social integration to a student's sense of belonging. A research study showed that a student's sense of belonging has a positive impact on academic success (Tovar & Simon, 2010). Campus climate and faculty engagement plays a significant role in a student's experience however the ability to engage with a diverse student population in culturally relevant activities can also impact sense of belonging. When the chilly campus climate is paired with the disparities in enrollment numbers of Black and Latinx students compared to white students it could make being on campus a daunting task to overcome. As Strayhorn (2018) and Tinto (2016) declared sense of belonging for underrepresented students should be a part of the strategic planning process as it is the responsibility of institutions to ensure students feel welcome on campus by providing opportunities for diverse students to interact and engage.

Participants stated it was unlikely for them to be in a classroom with other students from the same race and cultural background. They also expressed choosing to participate in this program because it was one of the few programs targeting Black and Latinx students. The college does not provide enough opportunities for students to engage in culturally relevant activities which is essential to the success of Black and Latinx students (King & Howard-Hamilton, 2000). There are no active clubs for Black and Latinx students and they expressed hesitancy to join because of the lack of representation. Furthermore, the participants conveyed an unfamiliarity with the student life office when asked about student support services they have utilized.

#### **5.1.1.5 Engage Families of Students in the College Process**

Families play a vital role in the life of college students and help to influence the decision-making process and the ability to function effectively (Glaser, n.d.). Family members can provide emotional and financial support to students. Lehigh Carbon Community College does not engage family members enough during the students onboarding process. For Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College who are more likely to be low income and first-generation student's family plays a significant role in their academic journey. Families must be prepared to provide a variety of supports for students but often are unaware and unfamiliar with the processes. A common theme among participants was that their families, particularly their parents just did not understand what they were going through as a student. There is also an expectation to continue to contribute to the household by working and or caring for other family members. As a commuter college these students are balancing living at home and being a student.

Financial support is also an important factor in a college students' life, and it is typically family members who can provide this type of support. Although community colleges are an inexpensive option for college the need for financial support remain a concern for Black and Latinx

students at Lehigh Carbon Community College. Tuition may be relatively low but the need to cover tuition cost and life expenses can lead to stressors (Aston, 2018). Coming from low-income households' students are often working to pay for school, support their families and themselves. There are even instances where they are relied upon to take care of family in other countries. Participants agreed that they need to work to pay for school and contribute to family expenses, which was more prevalent during Covid-19. A lack of knowledge and awareness about the financial aid process also contributed to financial frustrations. Many students were unaware of the types of aid available, deadlines to meet and missed out on opportunities to receive grants and other financial aid.

#### **5.1.1.6 Conduct More Outreach to Provide Support, Knowledge and Skills**

Black and Latinx students feel as if they were unprepared when they began college, as stated by 60% of the participants. Being unaware of the enrollment and financial aid process are the first barrier that many faces but more importantly they lack the knowledge in skills that are necessary to be successful in college including time management skills, study skills, knowing their rights as a student and how to effectively communicate with faculty and staff.

A large portion of the workshops focused on how to manage time and study effectively, but a focus was also placed on empowering students to take control of their educational journey by knowing their rights and communicating effectively with faculty and staff. Many students were unaware that the syllabus is a guide to the semester but also list policies and procedure for the class. We also shared with the students their rights to question a faculty or staff member and how to file a complaint.

Perhaps the most impactful portion of the workshops was the session on communicating with a faculty or staff member. Many were shocked when they learned that they were able to communicate with a faculty and staff member. I wanted to be sure they knew how to do this in an appropriate manner. Many students used the communication tips and email template shared in (See Appendix G) immediately and had positive results.

## **6.0 Implications**

A review of literature showed that a sense of belonging is crucial to the success of Black and Latinx college students. The definitions and frameworks developed by Terrell Strayhorn and Vince Tinto on campus climate and sense of belonging guide this research. Tinto talks about the responsibilities on institutions to create an inclusive campus environment, while Strayhorn gives guidance on how underrepresented students experience campus culture and the importance of their sense of belonging.

Using the works of Strayhorn and Tinto as a guide the three themes of out-of-class learning experiences, mentorship programs, and faculty representation emerged from the literature. The findings of this study are consistent with the existing research and literature, Black and Latinx students need targeted and structured supports. In this section I will discuss how campus climate, a lack of support and a lack of knowledge fit into the themes of out of class learning experiences, mentorship programs and faculty representation which were reviewed in Chapter II.

### **6.1 Out of Class Learning**

Students who participate in clubs and activities develop a greater sense of belonging to their institution (Strayhorn, 2012). Huang & Chang (2004) and Trolan (2019) stated that student who participate in clubs and organizations develop both leadership skills, communication skills and soft skills that contribute to confidence and overall, wellbeing of students which can contribute to increase in student's ability to persist.

The results of the study showed that Lehigh Carbon Community College does not offer enough opportunities for Black and Latinx students to engage in out of class learning experiences. Overall, there was a lack of awareness of the student life department, clubs, and activities. One of the reasons that participants stated for joining this research study was because it targeted Black and Latinx students. King & Howard-Hamilton (2000) attested that having the opportunity to participate in culturally relevant clubs and activities enhances sense of belonging and contributes to the academic success of Black and Latinx students.

The campus climate is a part of the out of class learning experience as students look to engage with each other, faculty, and staff on and off campus. Tinto (1993) stated that social integration is an important part of a student's sense of belonging and occurs when student can network outside of the classroom. The chilly campus climate where students have faced microaggression and racism has contributed to the inability of Black and Latinx students to get engaged on campus. The participants in the study shared that one of the biggest challenges Lehigh Carbon Community College faces is the campus climate, as many shared instances of dealing with microaggressions and racism on campus. These experiences came from students as well as faculty and staff leading to 50% of the participants feeling uncomfortable on campus as shown in Table 3.

Surprisingly, it was discovered that students faced these same experiences of microaggressions and racism during their years attending the local grammar and secondary schools. Students come to the college with the baggage of dealing with these issues. Therefore, it is incumbent on the college to ensure all students feel welcome on campus by creating opportunities for diverse students to engage (Tinto, 2016). The data in Figure 8 showed the impact that networking and engaging with students of the same cultural background means. Out of class

learning experiences such as student clubs and activities allow for mentoring relationships to form organically or inorganically.

## **6.2 Mentoring Programs**

The value of mentoring relationships for Black and Latinx students is unmatched in higher education. There is no more important aspect in the life of a college student than that of a mentor. Black and Latinx students benefit significantly from these relationships because of the barriers they face before and during their academic career which may prevent them from persisting towards a degree (Salinitri, 2005 & Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Mentors act as counselors providing support, advice, and guidance about academics as well as career goals (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007).

The findings of the study showed that indeed Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College lack the support of a mentor. Findings also show that there is a need for Black and Latinx students to receive mentoring. Among the participant group 63% identified as first generation, furthermore many are low-income students from the city of Allentown which is where 64% of the Black and Latinx population in the county resides has a 25.7% poverty rate (United States Census, 2019).

The data gathered showed that 60 % of the participants felt they were unprepared for college and were unfamiliar with the colleges support services and enrollment processes as evident in tables 5 and 6. Students stated that they had a desire to find someone who could help them navigate these college processes or turn to for guidance. Participants also agreed that mentoring for Black and Latinx students at the college is needed and felt all Black and Latinx students should

participate in this type of program. When asked of the biggest challenges that the college faces when working with Black and Latinx students, a lack of support and mentoring was one of them.

There are many challenges that the college faces when providing mentoring opportunities, however. The student population is rapidly changing and becoming more diverse, but the faculty and staff does not mirror this. We know that there is a positive relationship and higher levels of satisfaction when mentors are matched with someone from a similar cultural background (Allen & Eby, 2007 & Dahlvig, 2010).

### **6.3 Faculty Representation**

Black and Latinx faculty can better serve students of a similar cultural or racial background due to shared values, interest, and understanding; furthermore, they also act as a source of social capital on campus which is critical on a predominately white campus (Capers, 2019). Having a faculty and staff population that mirrors the rapidly changing student demographics on campus give the students a chance to seek mentors and it also enhances student learning experiences and sense of belonging (Apprey, Hill, Mcgrann, Taylor & Wang, 2010 & Chiles, 2016). Hagedorn (2007) added that retention and graduation rates rise for Black and Latinx students, the higher the level of faculty representation.

Participants expressed dealing with microaggressions and racism from faculty and staff on campus. Data also showed that 61% of the participants found it difficult to identify with faculty and staff culturally. The data shared in Figure 8 shows 88% of participants thought it was very impactful to network with a staff member who they could relate to racially and culturally. Furthermore, when asked on the post-survey about the number one thing the college could do to

support Black and Latinx students' participants stated to hire more Black and Latinx faculty and staff.

#### **6.4 Student Representation**

Black and Latinx students desire to see others on campus who look like them. Figure 8 shows that 75% of the participants felt it was very impactful to engage and network with other Black and Latinx student during the workshops. These chances to engage can also lead to peer mentoring opportunities, which can contribute to persistence and a sense of belonging (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). Participation in peer mentoring programs students develop relationships that foster positive student growth and development which has been reported to leading to positive outcomes for students particularly first-generation students (Flores & Estudillo, 2018). In the research study conducted by Flores & Estudillo (2018) 63% of mentees attributed their decision to remain on campus the following semester was influenced by their mentor, furthermore 86% of the participants expressed that having a mentor helped to improve their overall college experience.

Although the enrollment numbers show an increase in both Black and Latinx students over the last twenty years students sill express a lack of representation within the student population, which is likely due to lack of engagement opportunities. Students express feeling uncomfortable on campus, attending clubs and meetings because they do not see others who look like them. These same feelings are also in the classroom as students shared, they are often the only Black or Latinx students in their classes which contribute to being discouraged.

## **6.5 Implications on Research and Practice**

The research done in this study does not bring about any new methods or theories, but it does reaffirm what many theorists and scholars have already stated. The work in this study however does address the importance of institutions being intentional in their efforts. To reaffirm the frameworks of Strayhorn and Tinto, the work of supporting underrepresented students and ensuring they feel welcomed and comfortable on campus is the responsibility of the institutions and needs to be a part of the strategic planning process (Strayhorn, 2018 & Tinto, 2016).

This work can be done by getting to know your local demographics as well as your student population. The success of all students but specifically the Black and Latinx students must be at the forefront of the strategic plan and institutions must be willing to change and adapt to the needs of the students. Every institution will be different depending on their population current strategic plan and infrastructure. This study contributes to future research by showing intentionality. The Black and Latinx workshop was specific to the needs of the Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College, because I was familiar with the student population, the local area, and the college. This approach cannot be a one size fits all, so I encourage future researchers to study their colleges situation intently and look at how their students can best be supported.

This program and research can be utilized by those who work on colleges campuses where underrepresented students are not achieving academic success at the same rate as their counterparts or where institutions lack the resources to properly support these students. It could also be brought to secondary education level where it was found that students are experiences the same types of issues as our first generation, low income and Black and Latinx students. It would be exciting to

see this work being done at the level which would better prepare students for college and help close the achievement gap among college graduates.

This research should guide Lehigh Carbon Community College into the next phase of improving the retention and graduation rates. The next steps will be to continue with this program for both new and returning Black and Latinx students as suggested by the participants to continue to engage them and provide support and mentoring opportunities. I would like to implement it as an ongoing series or perhaps as summer orientation program. The college must continue to learn what hinders it is Black and Latinx students and implement efforts to support them into the strategic plan.

## 7.0 Limitations

Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College need opportunities to engage with peers, faculty, and staff which they can identify with racially and culturally. When determining what change idea was needed to solve my problem of practice, I was both intentional and excited about this chance to work with the students. However, Covid-19 impacted my research significantly with the need to pivot to a remote format as the college went into a fully remote learning format throughout the 2021-22 academic year.

The biggest limitation was the inability to recruit students on campus in person by meeting them where they are. Recruiting took place via the electronic means of social media and email which limited the reach of the program. In person I would have been able to speak directly to students and build a rapport while also likely providing incentives of food and giveaways. The virtual format also impacted the modality which I could deliver the program. It was difficult at times to engage and receive feedback from participants via zoom. In the virtual environment it was also considerably tougher to get a hold of the participants for follow up, whereas if we were on campus, I could find them easier. I believe if done in person there would have been more participants and more data collected albeit consistent.

Another limitation to the research is the demographics of the participants. There were significantly more females and Latinx students who participated, in each case it was 19 of the 30. I discussed this phenomenon with participants but was unable to gather why this was the case except that it is consistent with the enrollment demographics for the college. I would be excited to see what changes in the data would occur if there was more balance. I also think a more balanced sample would assist in presenting findings to the college and seeking improvements.

## **8.0 Recommendations**

### **8.1 Future Research**

Institutional definitions and classifications of race and culture were utilized for this study, but more specific designations could better serve the purpose of this research and the students at Lehigh Carbon Community College. Recommendations for future research would include a balanced sample size as well as a separate sample singling out specific cultural groups and racial groups will allow for more direct findings which will allow for the creation of more targeted and strategic initiatives.

It was also discovered during the research that Black and Latinx students experienced some of the same issues they were facing in college during their K-12 experience, I think it would be prudent as researchers and educators to connect the two levels of education to better support students and create positive outcomes. Particularly in the community college sector where the colleges are more closely tied to their local school districts.

### **8.2 Future for Lehigh Carbon Community College**

This work is not institutionalized at Lehigh Carbon Community College, the college needs to strategically plan and to support all underrepresented populations. As an open access college, we tend to serve a diverse population, however this does not mean you are providing equitable opportunities for all students. To do this you must get to know the population you are serving. The

local demographics are rapidly changing and more Black and Latinx students are choosing to attend the college. A climate survey has been rejected by the colleges executive team, but due to this research it is clear that the college needs to hear voices of its students and understand what is needed to support them. Conducting a comprehensive climate survey should be revisited and will be a good start to addressing many the issues discussed in these findings.

Once the climate survey is completed and recommendations are made, the next step should be to hire a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion professional to lead the implementation efforts and ensure that follow up is maintained throughout the process. Currently there is no coordinated or targeted efforts for this population of students. From the research findings three recommendations came about to help improve the campus climate, provide support, and give Black and Latinx students more knowledge: creating a mentoring program, conducting orientation programs and to hire a diverse faculty and staff.

Creating mentoring program for Black and Latinx students is imperative so that Black and Latinx students feel supported and has someone who could provide guidance throughout their educational journey. Any member of the campus community could provide mentoring but to better target this population there needs to be an effort to hire a more diverse faculty and staff that matches the student demographics. Lastly, I recommend implementing a traditional new student orientation program that includes a parent session, so that students can gain knowledge about the skills that are necessary to be successful. Furthermore, the parents need to be involved in this process so that they can better support their students.

Lehigh Carbon Community College should consider institutionalizing this program along with traditional new student orientation, a parent orientation, a required first year experience

course and structured mentoring programs. These activities and programs would benefit all students but particularly the Black and Latinx students on campus.

## 9.0 Conclusion

The institutional data shows that there is a discrepancy in the retention and graduation rates of Black and Latinx students when compared to their white counterparts at Lehigh Carbon Community College. The findings of this study show that Black and Latinx students experience racism and are not properly supported Lehigh Carbon Community College. I am unsure if this study will have an impact on the retention and graduation rates of its participants, however the findings confirmed the need for a targeted support system for this student population.

Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College are not graduating at the same rate as their white counterparts due to a lack of racial and cultural representation among students, faculty, and staff. More impactful is that these students are coming to the college without the necessary support and information to succeed. Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College are more likely to be first generation and low-income students which present several barriers that research shows their white counterparts are more unlikely to face.

The existing literature states how a sense of belonging is paramount to the success of underrepresented students. Many things can contribute to a student's sense of belonging but, out of class learning experience, mentoring and faculty representation came to the forefront of the literature. The findings from this study supported the existing literature as three themes emerged in relation to sense of belonging. The results of this study suggested that there are three themes that impact the lack of academic success of Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College: (a) sense of belonging, (b) lack of support, and (c) a lack of knowledge.

When digging deeper into each of these themes I was able to discover specifically what hinders Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College. When considering their

of lack sense of belonging, campus climate and a lack of racial and cultural representation were the leading factors. Students expressed experiencing microaggressions and racism on campus, furthermore they expressed being uncomfortable in class and participating in activities because they did not see other students or faculty who look like them or that they could relate to.

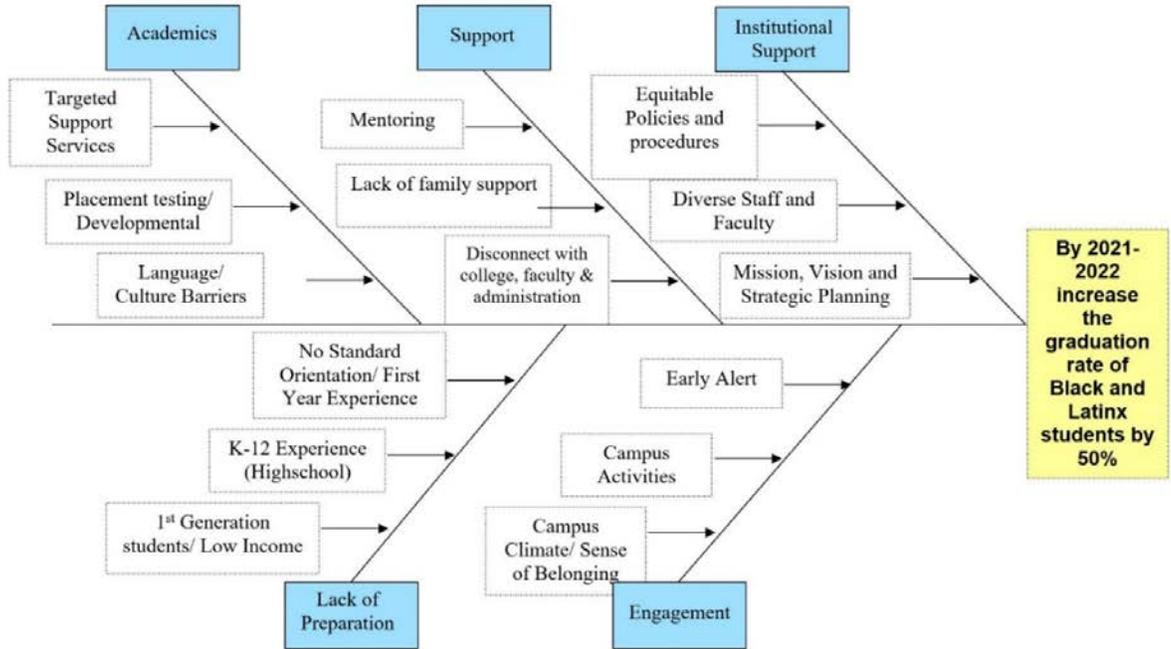
Because Black and Latinx students are more likely to be first generation and low-income students they face a myriad of barriers. A mentor would be a perfect solution to providing support and knowledge to these students as their families are ill prepared to provide the support. There are not many opportunities to seek and engage in a peer or faculty led mentoring relationship due to the lack of representation among students and faculty. Participants also expressed the need for the parents to receive some sort of orientation as well, so they know what to expect of their students.

The system of higher education is difficult to navigate particularly those who are first generation and low-income students. Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon Community College have trouble navigating the enrollment process which poses a barrier for many. They also come to college underprepared academically and lacking the general skills and knowledge to be a successful college student which could be taught in new student orientations, first year experience courses or through mentoring programs.

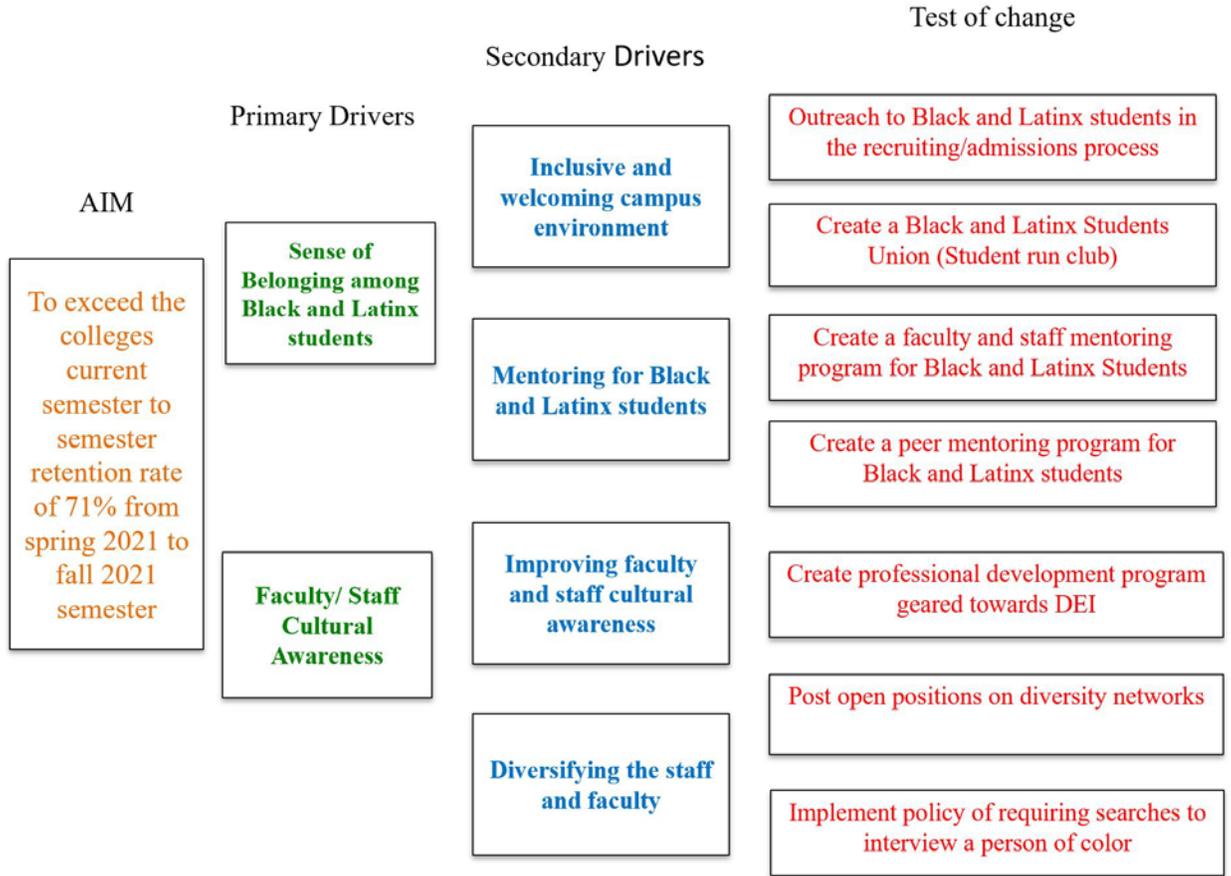
Serving as the Director of Athletics at Lehigh Carbon Community College for six years and in an informal role leading Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts for five years I have witnessed firsthand how Black and Latinx students are struggling to succeed academically. The college has not put the strategic efforts behind ensuring the success of the Black and Latinx students. The existing literature and research findings support the need for institutional commitment to the success of Black and Latinx students by providing opportunities for students to engage with students, staff, and faculty who they can relate to racially and culturally. It also

supports the pressing need to provide these students with the tools to be successful through high impact practices such as mentoring programs, new student orientation and first year experience courses. Hopefully, this study will be the beginning of an intentional effort at the college.

## Appendix A Fishbone Diagram



## Appendix B Driver Diagram



**Appendix C Recruitment flyer for student email and social media**



## Black & Latinx student Empowerment and Support Workshop

*This research project has been approved by the Lehigh Carbon Community College Institutional Review Board (IRB).*

# Research Participants Needed

**Are you at least 18 yrs. old and identify as a Black or Latinx student?**

Participants will receive support, mentoring and academic assistance to help navigate college.

**Participants must attend two 1 ½ hour virtual workshops and be willing to complete pre/post surveys and participate in a focus group.**

**Session I February 9  
Session II February 23  
Focus Groups March 2 & 3  
(afternoon & evening times slots offered)**

If interested in participating or have any questions, please contact  
Director of Athletics (Doctoral Candidate)  
Andrew Johnson  
610-799-1155 or [ajohnson23@lccc.edu](mailto:ajohnson23@lccc.edu)



## Appendix D Important Things to Know

1. Provided tips and open discussion of the differences between high school and college.
2. Provided tips and open discussion of the differences between a professor and a teacher.
3. Provided information and open discussion on what a syllabus.
4. Provided information about how to receive and deliver communication with the college
5. Provided information on the support services available on campus and where to find them.
  - a. Public Safety
  - b. Career Development
  - c. Counseling Center Services
  - d. Food Pantry
  - e. Disability Support
  - f. Educational Support
  - g. First year experience
  - h. Student Life
  - i. Wellness Center/Athletics
6. Provided tips and open discussion on developing time management skills.
7. Provided tips and open discussion on developing good study habits.
8. Discussed the importance of getting involved and ways to network on campus.
9. Provided tips and open discussion on how to navigate campus climate issues.
10. Provided information on how to navigate the financial aid process.
11. Provided information on students' rights and how to find information.

## Appendix E Pre-Survey

Are you 18 years old or older

Yes

No

What race/ethnicity do you identify with?

Black/ African American

Latinx/ Hispanic

Other \_\_\_\_\_

What gender do you identify with?

Male

Female

Other

Do plan to continue at LCCC in the Fall of 2021?

- Yes, full time
- Yes, part time
- Not sure
- No

Do you plan to earn a college degree?

- Yes, an associate's degree
- Yes, a bachelor's degree
- Yes, a masters or doctorate degree
- No

Did any of the following members of your family go to college?

- Mother
- Father
- Sibling
- Grandparent
- Aunt/ Uncle
- Cousin

Why did you choose to participate in this program?

What do you hope to gain from this program?

Prior to enrolling in college how familiar were you with the college application process?

	Very familiar	Moderately familiar	Slightly familiar	Not familiar
Searching for a college	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Completing the application	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Submitting transcripts/ test scores	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Taking placement test if applicable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Prior to enrolling in college how familiar were you with the financial aid process?

	Very familiar	Moderately familiar	Slightly familiar	Not familiar
Understanding the cost of college	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Understanding the payment options	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Completing the FAFSA	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How knowledgeable are you about the support services offered on campus?

	Very knowledgeable	Moderately knowledgeable	Slightly knowledgeable	Not knowledgeable
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

List any support services that you have used on campus either in person or virtually.

If you have used any of the services or office on campus, how impactful was it?

	Very impactful	Moderately impactful	Slightly impactful	Not impactful
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How well prepared were you for college?

	Very well	Moderately well	Slightly well	Not at all
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How well have you adjusted to the college classroom and coursework expectations?

	Very well	Moderately well	Slightly well	Not at all
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How well have you been able to build peer relationships at LCCC?

	Very well	Moderately well	Slightly well	Not at all
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How well have you been able to connect/ communicate with a faculty or staff member at LCCC?

	Very well	Moderately well	Slightly well	Not at all
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Are you able to identify with other students racially or culturally?

	Very well	Moderately well	Slightly well	Not at all
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Are you able to identify with faculty and staff racially or culturally?

	Very well	Moderately well	Slightly well	Not at all
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How often have you participated in extracurricular activities?

	Frequently	Sometimes	Few times	Not at all
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The campus climate feels comfortable and welcoming (including virtually).

	Very comfortable	Comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Not at all
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please feel free to elaborate on any questions or share other thoughts, comments, questions, or concerns.

## Appendix F Post-Survey

Was the title/theme of the workshop appropriate? Black and Latinx Student Empowerment and Support Workshop

Yes

No

Somewhat

Did participation in this workshop change your plans for Fall 2021?

Yes

No

Somewhat

Do plan to register for Fall 2021 classes?

Yes, full time

Yes, part time

Not sure

No

Did participation in this workshop change your plans to earn a college degree?

Yes

No

Somewhat

Do you plan to earn a college degree?

Yes, an associates degree

Yes, a bachelors degree

Yes, a masters or doctorate degree

No

Did you learn or gain what you wanted to from the participation in this workshop?

Yes

No

Somewhat

What are the three biggest challenges that LCCC faces with supporting Black and Latinx students? (select three)

Faculty/ staff representation (more Black and Latinx faculty and staff)

Student representation (more Black and Latinx students)

Campus climate

Lack of support or mentors for Black and Latinx students

Lack of culturally appropriate activities

Lack of culturally relevant curriculum/ classroom experiences

What is the number one thing LCCC can do to support Black and Latinx students?

- Offer more programming and activities that target Black and Latinx students
- Create a more welcoming campus environment
- Provide culturally responsive training for faculty and staff
- Hiring more Black and Latinx faculty and staff
- Create mentoring programs for Black and Latinx students

What part of the program was most helpful?

\_\_\_\_\_ Learning tips on how to be a successful student

\_\_\_\_\_ Learning about the colleges support services

\_\_\_\_\_ Learning about financial aid

\_\_\_\_\_ Learning my rights as a student

\_\_\_\_\_ Learning how to communicate with faculty

\_\_\_\_\_ Learning about networking and planning

What part of the program was most impactful?

\_\_\_\_\_ Statistical data about LCCC enrollment and graduation rates

\_\_\_\_\_ National statistical data about enrollment and graduation rates

\_\_\_\_\_ What is your Why? Video and discussion

\_\_\_\_\_ Taking Control Video and discussion

\_\_\_\_\_ Networking with Andrew Johnson

\_\_\_\_\_ Networking with other students

After participating in the workshop, how familiar are you with the college application process?

	Very familiar	Moderately familiar	Slightly familiar	Not familiar
Searching for a college	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Completing the application	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Submitting transcripts/ test scores	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Taking placement test if applicable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

After participating in the workshop, how familiar are you with the financial aid process?

	Very familiar	Moderately familiar	Slightly familiar	Not familiar
Understanding the cost of college	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Understanding the payment options	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Completing the FAFSA	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

After participating in the workshop, how knowledgeable are you about the support services offered on campus?

	Very knowledgeable	Moderately knowledgeable	Slightly knowledgeable	Not knowledgeable
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

List support services that you have used since participating in the workshops.

Did information learned during the workshop help in seeking out support services?

- Yes
- No
- Somewhat

Since participating in the workshop, if you have used any of the services or office on campus, how impactful was it?

	Very impactful	Moderately impactful	Slightly impactful	Not impactful
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Did participation in this workshop assist in adjusting to the college classroom and coursework expectations?

Yes

No

Somewhat

How impactful was it to see, network and build relationship with other participants who were Black or Latinx?

	Very impactful	Moderately impactful	Slightly impactful	Not at all
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How impactful was it to see network and build a relationship with a college administrator from a similar cultural/ racial background?

	Very impactful	Moderately impactful	Slightly impactful	Not at all
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Since participation in this workshop, have you participated in student groups or extracurricular activities?

	Frequently	Sometimes	Few times	Not at all
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Did information learned during the workshop help in seeking out student groups or extracurricular activities?

Yes

No

Somewhat

Since participation I am more aware of the campus climate (including virtually)

Yes

No

Somewhat

For students who have attended classes/ activities on campus prior to covid-19. The campus climate feels comfortable and welcoming.

	Very comfortable	Comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Not at all
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

For students who have never attended class or activities on campus. The campus climate feels comfortable and welcoming (virtually).

	Very comfortable	Comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Not at all
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If yes to previous question explain how?

Please share your thoughts on how it felt to complete the assigned task during the sessions.

What did you learn about yourself? What did you find difficult?

Do you think all Black and Latinx students at Lehigh Carbon should participate in this workshop or a similar program?

Yes

No

Maybe

If done again in the future, what improvements can be made to this program? What information was missing or should be elaborated on?

Please feel free to share any other thoughts, comments, questions, or concerns.

## **Appendix G Sample email to faculty and staff**

Sample email to faculty

Subject Line: Andrew Johnson – ENG 105- Missed Class

Dear Professor Smith,

I was unable to attend Chemistry class yesterday (Tuesday, August 30). I understand from a classmate that a handout regarding the next lab assignment was distributed. The syllabus indicates that your office hours are between 1:00 - 3:00 pm on Wednesdays. Would you be available in your office this Wednesday so I can receive the lab assignment and ask for clarification on the material presented in class?

I appreciate your time and look forward to speaking with you soon.

Thank you,

Andrew Johnson – ENG 105- L00000000

Tuesday and Thursday 11:00 am - 12:15 pm

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