Perceptions of family support among students of color at a predominantly White university

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Abstract
The challenge of facilitating the retention and persistence of students of color in higher education continues. While research has focused on internal factors of the college environment important to the success of students of color at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), this qualitative study examines an external factor—family support and its interconnectedness with the success and persistence of students of color. More specifically, the findings emphasize the importance of family support for this population attending PWIs. Implications for practice and future research are offered.

While colleges and universities continue to work toward diversifying their student body, the challenge of how higher education understands and supports these diverse populations is an ongoing struggle. For example, research maintains that institutions of higher education, especially predominantly White institutions (PWIs), are still faced with the challenge of retaining students of color through graduation (Harper, 2006; Museus, 2008; Nelson-Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Holmes, 2007). As such, it is critical that college administrators, faculty, and staff at PWIs have a thorough understanding of the various ways that they can facilitate the success of students of color. Indeed, with a few exceptions (e.g., Guiffrida, 2004, 2005, 2006; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Maramba, 2008a; Nora & Cabrera, 1996) the majority of research on the college adjustment and retention of students of color has been limited to studying the internal college environment without considering external factors that influence students’ persistence. For example, research by Guiffrida (2003),
Museus (2008), and Patton (2006) have explored the impact of internal factors (e.g., student engagement in minority student organizations at PWIs) important to the success of students of color. While such research is important, research also has noted the importance of focusing on external factors linked to success. Family support is one such external factor. This study reinforces the importance of family support and its interconnectedness with retention and persistence for students of color at a PWI. Focusing on this topic is beneficial for higher education faculty, administrators, and student affairs practitioners because it can help them develop more effective services to retain students of color at PWIs.

The following sections provide context for our study. First, as a framework for our study, we will review literature on students of color and family support. Subsequently, we will discuss the study’s methodology, followed by the students’ voices, discussion, and recommendations for practice and future research.

Review of the Literature

A number of studies have supported the critical need for students of color to maintain ties with communities that they were connected to before college (Guiffrida, 2006; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maramba, 2008; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993; Tierney, 1992; Tseng, 2004). These researchers recognized that for students of color, a major aspect of their support system lies outside of college. Moreover, scholars have explained that dismantling the support systems outside of the college milieu to encourage full academic and social integration in higher education may pose harm to the retention and persistence of students of color (Guiffrida, 2004, 2005, 2006; Tierney, 1992). An example of such a support system is students’ relationships and connectedness to their families.

Using a social phenomenological approach, Rosas and Hamrick (2002) sought to investigate the phenomenon of interest, structure, and experiences of seven Latina students attending several institutional types of higher education: a public land-grant university, a public state flagship university, a medium-sized private urban university, and a small private liberal arts college. The findings that emerged from this study focused on the role that family played in students’ college choice process and how their families influenced their academic success. In particular, the students indicated that family consistently held high
expectations and frequently voiced the importance of them seeking higher education. Furthermore, participants delineated that students’ families provided frequent support and encouragement, helping them achieve success.

Similarly, Gonzalez (2002), using interpretive design and a concept-modeling, analytical approach, explored the campus culture and experiences of two Chicano students attending a PWI. While Gonzalez found that the students experienced alienation and marginalization, one of the salient factors that played an important role in their experience was the cultural nourishment that they received from friends and family. This cultural nourishment was critical in facilitating their adjustment and persistence.

In addition, in a quantitative study that Nora and Cabrera (1996) conducted on the college adjustment of students of color, they reported the impact families of students of color had on their persistence. In particular, they explained that the students’ educational goals were positively impacted by the support and encouragement they received from family. Furthermore, in a quantitative analysis of 799 minority students, involving African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans at a Midwestern PWI, Elmers and Pike (1996) found that encouragement from family and friends had an important influence on the students’ intentions to persist in college.

Furthermore, in a qualitative study that focused on exploring key contributors to the academic success of 37 Black men at a private Historically Black College or University (HBCU), Ross (1998) delineated several factors instrumental to the participants’ success: (a) relationship with parents, particularly the mother, (b) support from family, (c) access to positive role models, and (d) religious beliefs. Moreover, in a qualitative study that examined the educational and social factors that contributed to the academic success of 11 Black men attending a public HBCU, Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (in press) found that family support played an important role in the participants’ persistence.

In Guillifrida’s (2005) study of 99 Black college students from a midsize PWI, family provided academic, emotional, and financial support throughout the college experience. The first-generation and high-achieving participants attributed their success in college to support that their families provided. In addition, many...
of the participants were motivated to succeed because their families supported them financially, which helped them stay focused on their academics. Similarly, Maramba (2008) studied Filipina American women and the influence of their immigrant families on their college experience. Some of the major findings of this study included the continual negotiation with their home and college culture as well as participants' reference to the important role their families played in helping them succeed in their college life. Specifically, they attributed family support as motivation to do well in school. Delgado Bernal (2001) studied the college experiences of Chicana students and what she labeled as their "pedagogies of the home." These pedagogies are what Delgado Bernal described as "communication, practices, and learning that occur in the home and the community" (p. 624) that helped Chicana students negotiate their educational experiences and their persistence in college. Their connection and support from family also helped Chicanas throughout their educational experience.

Additional literature on the role of family support and college success provides additional context for this current study (Adams, Ryan, & Keating, 2000; Holahan, Valentier, & Moos, 1994; Mounts, 2004; Supple & Small, 2006). For example, Adams, Ryan, and Keating (2000) found that during a student's transition to college, family is an important part of this process. In their two-year study, Holahan, Valentier, and Moos (1994) reported that family support during college was strongly connected to a student's psychological adjustment. Other studies have found that family support and encouragement were related to higher levels of social integration in college (Kenny & Stryker, 1996), and have played a critical role in the persistence of students of color (Barnett, 2004; Gloria, Robinson-Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999).

**Purpose of the Study**

Interestingly, while a strong body of research has documented a positive relationship between academic success for students of color and family support (Adams et al., 2000; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Delgado Bernal, 2001; Eimers & Pike, 1996; Gloria, et al., 1999; Gonzalez, 2002; Hendricks, Smith, Caplow, & Donaldson, 1996; Holahan et. al., 1994; Hurtado et al., 1996; Maramba, 2008; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rendón, et al., 2000; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002), there is much that remains unknown about how family support influences success for students of color (Guilfrida, 2005).
As such, the intent of this study was twofold: (a) to study the importance of family support and its linkage to the academic success of students of color, and (b) to add further insight into the types of support students of color receive from their families to help facilitate their retention and persistence. Data from the current study were extracted from a qualitative investigation that focused on factors facilitating academic success of students of color at a PWI. While several themes emerged from this study, this article focuses on the role of family support in facilitating retention and persistence for students of color.

**Methods**

We conducted this study at a public, midsize, research-intensive PWI located in the Northeast region of the United States. Approximately 12,000 students were enrolled when data were collected. Forty-five percent of students enrolled at this institution are White, and their Asian, Black, Hispanic, and racially/ethnically unknown counterparts comprise 13%, 6%, 7%, and 22%, respectively. Approximately 46% of White students matriculating at this institution complete a baccalaureate degree within six years, whereas that figure is 13% for Asian, 9% for Black and Latina/o students, and 25% for racially/ethnicity unknown students.

Using in-depth interview methods, we sought to explore the academic and social experiences of a particular group of students situated in a particular context (Lincoln, 2002). Thus, the study’s epistemological approach was anchored in the constructivist tradition to construct knowledge, understanding, and meaning through human interactions (Lincoln, 2002). To some extent, tenets of grounded theory strategies were incorporated into the research process. More specifically, these strategies were not confined to the interview process, but rather occurred throughout the entire research process. Specifically, we employed strategies of continuously asking questions, utilizing research notes, exploring hunches, constant comparative analysis, and memo writing (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Participants**

Participants for this current study emerged from a larger study that investigated factors contributing to the academic success of students of color attending a PWI. More specifically, we focused on students of color who were upperclassmen (e.g., juniors and seniors) and had a grade point average of 2.0 or above. We purposefully selected juniors and seniors because we felt they would prove specifically, have had in students who were examining and graduate they served recruited as the process who meet the need.

The sample majority of and five as Asian American 19-23 year were first-generation U.S. Specific Dominican parents were raised in an urban participant.

**Data Collection**

We conducted interviews with participants; these interviews included questions from the academic in...
would provide more contexts about factors that played a role in their success. Specifically, because juniors and seniors have been at the university longer, they have had more time to reflect on their college experience. Moreover, we chose students with a 2.0 grade point average (GPA) because we were interested in examining academic success from the perspective of an average student, not a student classified as high achieving (e.g., 3.0 GPA or higher). We asked staff and graduate students of color to assist in the recruitment process because they served as crucial gatekeepers to gain access to the target population. We recruited additional participants through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is the process of asking those who have participated in the study to refer others who meet the study's criteria (Creswell, 2003).

The sample consisted of nine junior and nine senior students of color. The majority of the students were women. Specifically, the study included 13 women and five men. Eleven participants self-identified as Black, four as Hispanic, two as Asian American, and one as Pakistani. The participants' ages ranged from 19–23 years, and their average GPA was 3.04. Seven students reported that they were first-generation college students and 11 reported that a parent had either graduated from college or attended college but did not graduate. Specifically, two Black, four Latina/o, and one Asian American participants identified as first-generation college students. Many participants had parents who immigrated to the U.S. Specifically, four participants' parents emigrated from Haiti, four from the Dominican Republic, two from China, one from Pakistan, and seven participants' parents were native born. Nine participants were raised in large cities, five were raised in small cities or towns, and four were raised in suburbs. Fifteen of the participants came from two-parent households.

**Data Collection**

We conducted one face-to-face, in-depth interview ranging from 90 to 110 minutes with each participant. As an incentive and recruitment method, all participants received a $10 gift certificate for their participation. Prior to beginning these interviews, participants signed a consent form, completed an open-ended questionnaire, and completed a demographic form. During interviews, we asked participants about their academic and social experiences at the institution. Examples of questions included: (a) What are key factors that you perceive as contributing to your academic success? (b) What were obstacles to your academic success? (c) How did you
overcome those issues? (d) What has been your greatest challenge as a student of color at this institution? and (e) How have you been able to deal with or overcome that challenge? We also conducted follow-up phone interviews with participants to ask them to elaborate on themes discussed or clarify issues that emerged during the interviews. We audi-taped and transcribed verbatim all interviews.

Researchers' positionality. For any qualitative study, it is important to discuss how the position of the researcher influences data collection, analysis, and interpretations (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). A Filipina American woman and a Black male who both are higher education faculty members at a PWI conducted this research. Our research interests focus on the retention and persistence of students of color at various institutional types. Specifically, the Filipina American's research focuses on the academic success and campus climate for students of color at PWIs. Moreover, the Black male's research primarily focuses on the experiences of Black males at HBCUs, but he has conducted research on the experiences of students of color at PWIs. As we were both undergraduate and graduate students of color, our strong familiarity enhances our understanding of the experiences of students of color at PWIs. Both researchers have worked as student affairs practitioners in various capacities and have a wealth of practical knowledge centered on supporting students of color in higher education.

Collectively, we believe our identities and experiences in higher education, particularly as faculty of color, created a unique lens and position to understand the experiences of students of color in a familiar context. While our experiences and research may have helped us to better understand the experiences of students of color at PWIs, they may have biased how we structured the questions and our interpretation of the data. Nevertheless, we allowed the findings to emerge independent of our biases. Member checking and peer debriefers also helped to make certain that the findings were accurately reflective of the participants' voices.

Data Analyses
We used constant comparative analysis on research notes, observations, and interview transcripts to identify recurring or unique topics (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Jones et al. (2006), constant comparative analysis engages the researcher in a process of collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously at "all stages of the data collection and interpretation process, and results in the identification of the data, we re-read and take supplemental notes. Increasingly, qualitative software programs now include codebooks that help organize data which involves line coding all of the data into response categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Refining the categories and focusing discussion of each category has allowed us to maintain the" data. Moreover, the experience of the Credibility and thick description of the data. Moreover, the experience discussed in this article.

To ensure the credibility of the data, returning the transcripts for feedback (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Specific comments on draft of the manuscript were obtained from three peer review and active responses to the feedback. Debiasing these debriefers throughout the qualitative research process and peer debriefers.
the identification of codes" (p. 44). Specifically, as we collected and transcribed the data, we read through our research notes and made self-reflective notes in the margins to help form initial themes. These notes included questions and speculations about the data and themes that emerged. As the data became increasingly voluminous, we used ATLAS ti (5.0), a qualitative data management software program, to organize, manage, and code the data. We used open coding, which involved analyzing the data line by line, to identify themes. The line by line coding allowed for themes to emerge from the data and become aggregated into response patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process continued until the data reached a point of saturation—which is when the data becomes redundant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Furthermore, memo writing allowed us to not only refine the categories, but also to understand the relationships among them. In discussing the findings, we present excerpts from the participants’ responses verbatim to preserve the essence of the participants’ voices. We used pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of each participant.

Credibility and trustworthiness. We employed several techniques presented by Merriam (1998) to ensure credibility of the study. For example, we provided thick description so others interested can draw their own conclusions from the data. Moreover, providing thick description enables the reader to vicariously experience the participants’ social reality at the institution.

To ensure the data’s trustworthiness, we also conducted member checks by returning the transcribed interviews to all participants so they could review transcriptions for accuracy and clarity following the interviews (Jones et al., 2006). Specifically, participants were invited to add, delete, or otherwise comment on the transcriptions. We used their feedback to enhance the integrity and preserve the authenticity of the participants’ voices. Lastly, we used feedback from three peer debriefers, who were well versed in in-depth interview methods and active researchers on the experiences of students of color at PWIs, to ensure credibility. Debriefers were provided with raw transcripts from each participant. These debriefers engaged the researchers in a series of ongoing discussions regarding the tentative meanings made of the participants’ experiences throughout the research process (Jones et al., 2006). When differences of opinions occurred between the researchers and peer debriefers, we talked with peer debriefers to gain a better understanding of their perspectives. When we
were unable to come to a consensus, we used the participants' interpretation of the data so they would be represented as accurately as possible.

Findings

In this section, we summarize three themes that emerged from the interviews. The three themes include: a) family members as sources of motivation, b) family members as role models, and c) family members as critical facilitators to academic success. The first theme includes participants' descriptions of the significant role that family members played in their motivation during their college years. Students noted that their families served as their prime motivation. In addition, the desire to make both their family and community (an extension of their family) feel proud was a topic that many discussed in length. The second theme explores the notion of role modeling. More specifically, participants mentioned the importance of having family members as role models. The last theme is the family as critical facilitators to academic success. This theme focuses on the positive impact that family members have had on the students' nonacademic lives and how this has positively influenced the students' overall success in college. Participants in the study defined family as consisting of their parents and siblings. In addition, the term family was also associated with their home communities and neighborhood. In the following section, we discuss the three themes supported by the students' voices.

Family as a Source of Motivation

Participants discussed family, their mothers and fathers or home communities, as strong motivators in their college experiences. They played a role in motivating them to succeed in college. Students credited family for helping them stay focused and motivated toward academic success, especially during hardships in college. In addition, observing family hardships such as parental unemployment and seeing others struggle in their communities served as impetus for the participants to stay focused on success. These hardships included parents working long hours to financially support the participants' education. As a result of these observations, students saw their parents or people in their community as motivators to work hard in college. For example, Kecia, a 21-year-old senior majoring in political science, talked about family as a priority and discussed at length her observations growing up in a single parent household. She shared the struggles faced by her mother, who worked hard to raise Kecia and her siblings. Kecia's familiarity with this difficult situation motivated her to do well in school and to find ways to manage challenges. Keke keeping the fan

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and to find ways to avoid being in similar circumstances. Despite her family’s challenges, Kecia credited her mother for teaching her a strong work ethic and keeping the family together. She explained:

Just seeing [what] it’s like. ... I don’t want to be in that situation and [I have to figure out] what I’m going to do to try to avoid it. So she [my mom] definitely gave me a lot of motivation. ... She tried to instill some values and ethics, like work ethic in my life that I still use to really make it in life. I think my family is really close knit and we just depend on each other for help.

Similarly, Alicia, a 20-year-old junior English major, shared Kecia’s sentiments of watching her parents work hard to make ends meet for the family. Alicia, whose parents are immigrants, also discussed her parents making a sacrifice of coming to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic to make a better life for their children:

I just want to make them feel like they accomplished what they came here for. Because they already had plans like going back home when we’re all graduated. And so, I think in return it’s like the biggest [thing] I could do for them. So they [my parents] did it for me. They did so much.

Participants also used their concern of not disappointing their parents as another source of motivation. Students mentioned that they did not want to disappoint their parents because their parents financed the students’ college education. Their fear of disappointing parents encouraged some students to do well for their family. This was also a source of guilt for those whose grades were not up to par. Nikita, a 21-year-old senior majoring in political science felt obligated and guilty if she did not do well:

My parents, they were paying for everything, so I felt kind of guilty, in addition to my grades that weren’t too hot. And I was frustrated [with myself] because with them supporting me so much, I felt obligated to them.

Melissa and Barbara, both juniors in nursing, and Mary, a 21-year-old senior majoring in history, felt strongly about not wanting to “let down” their parents. Mary summarized their sentiments: “If I was to not do well, or not succeed, I feel like I’d be letting them down. So that’s my motivation [my family] ... you don’t let your mom down. Everybody’s riding on this.”
While students mentioned they felt pressure by parents to succeed, most students used this pressure as motivation to do well. For example, Lorenzo, a 20-year-old junior English major, shared that he would not hesitate to ask for help because his success is contingent upon seeking support: “I know there’s a bigger picture in front of me. I have to be successful whether it’s for myself or my family. So I have no shame in going out looking for help.” Others also discussed how their parents’ pressure motivated them to succeed. Although similar to students whose parents attended college, first-generation college students were particularly concerned about making their parents proud. Kimberly, a 20-year-old junior majoring in psychology, shared the following:

I was just scared to fail ‘cause I knew if I went home with a bad grade, they would have some words with me, so I didn’t want to go through that. And expectations [are high]. I just don’t want [to be a] disappointment, especially to my mom. She tells me all the time, “The only reason why we came [to the United States] was for you guys” … and I don’t want to disappoint them.

The fear of failure was also extended to how the participants felt toward members of their home communities, also considered to be their family. Students spoke of their communities or neighborhoods as another source of motivation. However, despite their challenges in college, they wanted to make their community proud. Doing well in college was a way of not disappointing their neighborhoods as family. Kelly, a 21-year-old senior biology major who was also a first-generation college student, discussed her desire to make her home community family proud. She discussed at length about the community she left behind and her concerns about doing well. She shared:

Being [the] first person in your family to go to college … it’s pressure but it’s also something to look forward to. Like yeah I’m going to be the first one, I’m gonna make my family proud.

Courtney, a 19-year-old junior management major, discussed her concern of doing well for her home community, which she holds in high regard. In referencing her home community, she mentions more specifically her church. Her community was proud of Courtney attending college; therefore she felt she had to do well. She indicated that it was important not to disappoint her community members who served as a source of motivation, saying, “I think a lot of other people put [and] myself in that category.”

**Family membrane**

The participants which enhance parents as role models of what it means to be a professional and the information they obtained from college as well as from other sources in a household, the family, and putting themselves in the bookshelf of others meant. It meant that one read the books that define the family and their children’s experiences. This, in turn, influenced parents to adopt new forms of parenting. For example, Melissa, a 21-year-old junior business major, shared that her parents wanted her to succeed in college.

She discussed the importance of making a lot of progress in college, which was a new experience for her parents.

While the parents encouraged their children to pursue other forms of education, such as attending community college, they also wanted to see their children succeed in college. Melissa, for instance, felt pressure from her parents to do well in college, as they had high expectations for her. She mentioned that her parents wanted her to succeed because they had not been able to attend college themselves.

In conclusion, parents play a significant role in the lives of their children, and the pressure they exert can have a significant impact on their academic performance. The students who shared their stories emphasized the importance of parents as role models and the pressure they felt to succeed for the sake of their families.
lot of other people look up to me in the church. I feel, I don’t want to let [them and] myself down because I know my potential, and I know what I can do.”

**Family members as role models**

The participants explained how their family members served as role models, which enhanced their college success. Participants specifically mentioned their parents as role models. Role modeling was defined as their parents being role models of hard work and perseverance. For example, those who had parents in professional fields mentioned that their parents role modeled and provided vital information on how to succeed in college. The students whose parents graduated from college often discussed the strong messages and high standards growing up in a household with professional parents. Ramisi, a 21-year-old senior majoring in industrial engineering, mentioned not being allowed to watch television. Instead, he would spend time doing other things such as taking radios apart and putting them back together. At an early age, he would look at his father’s bookshelf of engineering books and started reading them, which eventually led Ramisi to develop an interest in engineering. Specifically, he noted:

> Going to my father’s house and looking at the bookshelf with all those engineering books, I started reading a book that I had no clue what it meant. I tried hard, you know 8th or 9th grade; I had no idea what it meant. But once I got to college, I went back to my father’s house and I read the book and everything made a whole lot of sense. So just stuff like that definitely [got] me to be more successful and focused on what I’m trying to do.

While the parents of first-generation college students were not able to provide their children with information on how to succeed in college, they did impart other forms of support that exhibited a different form of role modeling. For instance, students whose parents worked two jobs discussed their parents’ role modeling of perseverance. Many felt that their parents served as role models for them in terms of determination to succeed and being able to take care of the family among many other responsibilities. Like many of the participants, Melissa, a 21-year-old nursing major, was very aware of the numerous sacrifices that her parents made to continue working to pay for her tuition. Growing up, Melissa watched them work hard to pay the bills and take care of the family. She discussed that through observing her parents work long hours to pay for her
college education, her parents served as role models of strength and fortitude. Melissa shared the following:

They don't say it but I know my parents struggled to pay my tuition ... [they're paying] a mortgage and everything else, their car bills and all the payments. And when the bill is due, they just write the check: "Here's the check, pay your school." And I know that it takes so much out of them, and it's so hard for them to even come up with the $3,000 that it costs to go here. By watching them struggle I was more determined to succeed.

Other students shared their parents' personal stories and family values. Eugene, a 20-year-old junior biochemistry major and first-generation college student, shared what he learned from his father's role modeling of what it takes to be a successful businessman. Despite not having one himself, Eugene's father still stressed to his children the importance of having a college degree. Eugene strongly believed his father served as a role model of perseverance to raise a family. Eugene also shared that he would like to emulate the qualities that his father role modeled as a "hard worker" and what it means to "stick to a goal and be successful." Eugene shared the following:

We learn a lot about life in general. We learned that to be successful you have to be educated. And because my dad comes from a very, very poor family, he pretty much made it on his own. So he has a lot of stories, and whenever I go back home, I actually see the differences between where my dad is now and where his brothers are now. So for me I realized at a very early age that I think studies are very important too.

Role modeling by parents for the majority of the participants was quite prominent. In addition to the above examples of watching their parents work hard in their place of employment, a number of students also had parents who were attending school to obtain a degree. Students mentioned that having a parent attending college was good role modeling for them to further their education. For the participants, seeing a parent attend school was inspirational. Mary, who grew up in a single-parent household, was inspired to persist by recalling how her mother struggled to raise her while going to school at night. Mary reflected: "I figured if she could go through nights in school, all those times with me, with bills, with all that, I mean, all I have is school, I guess I could push forward."

Still, for other students higher education and saw her as a baccalaureate degree as a way to succeed. Lorenza

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Family as critics

Participants discussed the role of family in their determination to succeed. Some students had parents who assisted them in their educational pursuits, while others had to overcome larger life issues, like financial struggles. More specifically, family played an important role in helping students overcome challenges and persist in their studies.

Participants in this study supported their family's efforts, and many shared that although they understood the challenges and paid the price.

I'm from the crowd going I would have...
Still, for other students it was a way of assisting each other with their pursuit of higher education. Lorenzo recalled watching his mother work toward a degree and saw her as a strong role model. In particular, by both working toward their baccalaureate degrees, he felt that they helped each other in their efforts to succeed. Lorenzo shared the following about his mother and working together:

She came here from Haiti in the 80s and she went to school. She got her associate’s degree and she’s been working ever since, and then in the past 5 years she went for her bachelor’s which she just completed. So you know, at her age to be able to go back to school and succeed. … She was writing papers and I was helping her with papers and things like that. So just watching her work ethic influenced my work ethic. I’ve been able to do better because of that … like if she’s getting As, I would like to get an A with her. I was always helping her with her work. You know, it was a dual effort.

**Family as critical facilitators to academic success**

Participants discussed how family, or more specifically their parents or a sibling, assisted them to excel in nonacademic areas of their lives, which impacted their determination to stay in college. When asked about what it means to succeed, all participants not only discussed academic success but also spoke about how larger life issues, rooted in the context of family, facilitated their academic success. More specifically, many discussed nonacademic skills they learned from their family to succeed, such as developing self-confidence and unconditional support. The students pointed to their family members as the most important people contributing to their college success. For some, describing their family members’ impact on their success evoked an emotional response. Family, undoubtedly, played an important role in helping develop confidence for both school and life challenges and provided important support for all of the participants in the study.

Participants in the study spoke of the values of working hard and the moral support their family had provided them. Many articulated that it was their parents who steered them in the right direction and kept them focused. Alicia shared that although she did not fully understand it when she was younger, she now understands how her parents helped her stay on the right track. She noted:

I’m from the city, you know, it wasn’t the greatest area, there’s always those crowds going in the other direction. I mean it’s tough; my parents helped. I would have probably been, I don’t know, God knows where. So they
really had a strong focus, and they were really strict, and you know I used to complain about it when I was young but I see why, now that I'm much older. You know, I used to get mad all the time like, "Why you guys so strict?" I thought I was the noncool kid.

One student, Eugene, discussed how it would have been impossible to have made it as far as he had in school without his family. In this case, he mentioned his sibling and parents when referring to his family. To his family, he attributed his confidence as well as his assertiveness in asking questions when he did not know the answer. For instance, he used to go home every weekend and have discussions and receive encouragement from his sister to build his confidence about college. Although Eugene did not specify the content of his discussions with his sibling, he mentioned that they had a positive impact on him. He believed that these discussions led to the cultivation of instilling more confidence. When he first started college, he had a tremendous fear of college and being unfamiliar with the university environment. His parents and his sister helped him to develop the confidence he needed to make friends at college and feel self-assured to go to offices on campus and ask for assistance. He fondly reflected on his experience about his discussions with his parents and siblings.

I didn't want to find out how to do about and [do] everything. So family [helped me develop confidence]. I noticed that they helped me a lot [and] to understand the full [picture], way, way, way better. Now I know if I have a problem, I know where I'm supposed to go. Before I was just like, "Okay I don't know what's going on." Now all I need to do, if I'm at that office, I just ask someone.

Similarly, Kecia shared that her mom taught her to always ask questions when she did not understand something. She credited her mom for not being afraid to seek assistance when needed. "You seek out anything that's available," her mom advised her. Similarly, Alicia's mom went on to tell her that she needed to seek out people and places for help. Her mom continued, "You know that there are organizations out there to help you." Alicia's mom not only gave her advice but also enabled Alicia to be confident in seeking support from existing services and organizations.

Additionally, all participants in the study felt a sense of unconditional support with their family. Many felt that they could just pick up the phone and let their family know how they are doing and share issues of their struggles and

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Discussion

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triumphs. Tiffany, a 20-year-old junior in industrial engineering, noted that her mom just “listens ... so you know it’s very helpful. When I need to vent, I call my mom.” Barbara, a 20-year-old senior history major also shared Tiffany’s sentiments. She stated, “I know if I’m having a rough week, I’ll call my mom, and then she’ll give me words of encouragement.”

Kelly shared that regardless of his past mistakes, he knows that his father will support him unconditionally:

He still gives me the right advice, and when I still need his support [he is there for anything] ... my dad is more of like the mental support for us. For all of us, including my brother and my sister, he’s done it for each one of us even though we’ve all made stupid mistakes.

In other words, Kelly holds his family in high regard and values the unconditional support that ultimately has led him to persist in college. These participants’ responses demonstrate the nonacademic support provided by family that is intrinsic to their college persistence.

Discussion

The challenge for institutions of higher education is to continue to find ways that increase the likelihood of success for students of color. While research has focused on internal factors promoting college success, the current study focused on an external factor—family support and its relationship with retention and persistence for students of color. The students in the current study discussed three major themes: family as a) sources of motivation, b) role models, and c) critical facilitators of academic success. While the findings of the current study are consistent with research (e.g., Eimers & Pike, 1996; Guiffrida, 2005; Maramba, 2008; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, in press; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002; Ross, 1998) about the critical role that families of students of color play in their success, they provide further insight into how family can be used as an active source to facilitate students’ persistence in college and reinforce the critical influence that family have on the academic success of students of color.
The participants in this study discussed the strong source of motivation that their families provided for them in college. Studies conducted by Fuligni et al. (1999) and Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (1995) have shown that adolescents who had a high level of identification with their families were more likely to have higher academic motivation. All of the participants in this study discussed the role their parents had on their motivation, which positively enhanced their drive for academic success. In particular, they spoke of their families providing the impetus for them to remain academically motivated. One of the prime motivations for the students in this study was that they did not want to disappoint their parents and siblings. Moreover, this motivation also extended to the participants’ home neighborhoods, which meant that being in college was not just for themselves and their families but also for their home communities (e.g., Delgado Bernal, 2001).

The majority of the students had immigrant parents, and they often mentioned that their parents motivated them through stories about the hardships they endured in their countries of origin. This finding coincides with research that discussed the encouragement and value of education that immigrant parents instilled in their first-generation college children. These parents viewed a college education as the best way to advance their children’s lives (Agbayani-Siewert, 1994; Fuligni, Rivera, & Leininger, 2007; Maramba, 2008; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Waters, 1994). Fuligni, Rivera, and Leininger (2007) emphasized that “a sense of obligation to the family is associated with a greater emphasis being placed upon the importance and usefulness of education… A sense of obligation is particularly important for high levels of motivation on the part of immigrant and ethnic minority students” (p. 243). In other words, the students’ obligation to their families motivated them to do well in college.

Research also shows that students of color place high value on family and their support in college (e.g., Fuligni et al., 2007; Guıffrida, 2005; Maramba, 2008; Tseng, 2004). Findings from this current study agree with this research. In particular, many of the students spoke of their parents’ support throughout their college careers. Although some of the participants’ parents did not attend college, their parents were able to support them in other ways. For example, the participants’ parents in the present study supported them financially or by modes of encouragement. For the students in this study, this support system played a vital role in their persistence in college. This finding is noteworthy because it challenges the perception that even though important role as a vital resource from our current important contributions play an important aspect in the current

**Limitations**

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**Implications**

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the perception that college students who come from families lacking a college education are less inclined to succeed in college. For example, this study shows that even though some students were first-generation, their families played an important role in their ability to succeed. This suggests that all families can be used as a vital resource to promote student success in college. Furthermore, the findings from our current study about parents as role models for students of color are an important contribution to the literature. Although research has shown that parents play an important role in providing motivation, the literature has not discussed the important aspect of family members as role models.

Limitations
There were several limitations in this study. First, this study was context bound, conducted at one public PWI with 18 participants of color. Nevertheless, we provided thick descriptions so others can decide the transferability of this study to their institutions. Another limitation was that the primary purpose of the study was to understand factors of student success, not to investigate students' interaction with their families. However, overwhelmingly, rich descriptive narrative emerged from the participants' interviews about how interaction with family contributed to their success. In addition, we conducted this study at a midsize, research intensive PWI. Students of color attending other institutions, such as HBCUs, small liberal arts colleges, or single sex institutions, might have different perspectives on family contributing to their success than the students in the current study.

Implications for Practice and Future Research
A number of implications for practice and research can be gained from the current study. If PWIs are not intentionally involving families to help facilitate academic success for students of color, they might consider implementing or restructuring programmatic initiatives to enhance success in college for students of color. Student affairs offices such as orientation, counseling, student programming, and activities can continue to play an important role in the implementation of services for students of color. For example, student affairs practitioners may incorporate and emphasize the role of family in college adjustment and persistence through various activities during orientation. Parent/family orientations can move beyond informational sessions and integrate more in-depth discussions with parents. While orientation activities often have student panels, it may also be helpful to have parent/family panels.
These panels may facilitate a more comfortable environment for parents and other family members to ask questions and express their concerns. This may be especially helpful for families of first-generation college students. It is also important to continue to keep the connection with family beyond orientation sessions. Therefore, other student services, such as student programming and counseling services, can find ways to include in their discussions the importance of family connectedness and support throughout a students' college career. For example, some student affairs units can extend parent/family interaction beyond orientation and offer activities that incorporate both students and their families throughout the year. This may take the form of including family in planned activities on campus. Student affairs practitioners may also find creative ways that families can be involved in off-campus activities. This, in turn, can also send a number of positive messages to students. First, this tells them that external influences such as family are recognized and valued by the university. Additionally, students may also be more likely to accept advice and support from their family because they know that the university values family input.

It is especially important for agents of higher education (e.g., administrators, staff, and faculty) who have direct interaction with students to understand the role of external factors that influence students' success. Rendón et al. (2000) stress the use of validating agents in institutions of higher education that assist with interpersonal and academic validation. These validating agents include higher education professionals. Understanding family connectedness and the degree to which it has an influence on students and incorporating this understanding in student and academic affairs practice will benefit students who share similar backgrounds and experiences.

Future research needs to focus on additional aspects of support that contribute to the success of students of color. Particularly, communities that students bring with them to college must be further investigated to have a better understanding of their impact on students' college experience. More specifically, further research needs to be conducted on family support and the extended notion of family that includes and explores distinctions among parents, siblings, extended family, and the neighborhood from which students come. Additionally, we need a more detailed understanding of what each of these sources of support entails and how they ultimately impact students' college experience. Although the focus of our study was not specifically on first-generation college students with immigrant

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Parents, about half of our study included first-generation college students. Therefore, it may be helpful for additional studies to focus on the impact of family support on the population of first-generation college students with immigrant parents. In addition, our findings show that whether students came from a one-parent or two-parent household, the themes of family members as motivators, role models, and critical facilitators of academic success appeared to be similar. Nevertheless, further studies should explore differences between single- and two-parent households. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that in addition to family support there may be other factors that contribute to students' success in college. For example, factors such as family socioeconomic status, high school GPA, an inclusive collegiate curriculum, institutional programs, support agents, and noncognitive factors also play an important part in college success. Perhaps examining the intertwining of these factors along with family support may be a future research study. Finally, complementing the current study's qualitative findings with quantitative measurements of the impact of family support on student success will be prove valuable for practitioner and institutional use, especially in terms of allocating resources for program implementation.

Conclusion

Understanding the factors that contribute to student success continues to be a challenge for colleges and universities. As institutions of higher education work toward diversifying their student body, the challenge of how to foster an environment that contributes to all students' success continues. Although it is important to consider the creation of a positive environment within college, it is equally valuable to understand the environment outside of college with which students continue to be connected. Family is one such factor that continues to play an important part in students' lives, particularly for students of color. More specifically, the support that family provides for students of color is an aspect of college success that PWIs must recognize and intentionally incorporate in their services to help facilitate the retention and persistence of their students.

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