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Delineating the ways that targeted support programs facilitate minority students' access to social networks and development of social capital in college

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# Delineating the Ways that Targeted Support Programs Facilitate Minority Students' Access to Social Networks and Development of Social Capital in College

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## ***Abstract***

*Despite efforts to increase success rates among racial/ethnic minority college student populations, these groups continue to suffer from noticeable disparities in degree attainment. This qualitative examination of targeted support programs is designed to develop a better understanding of the role of such programs in facilitating success among college students of color at three campuses with high and equitable retention and graduation rates among underrepresented racial/ethnic minority college students.<sup>1</sup> Findings illustrate how targeted support programs help those students access social networks and develop social capital by creating a web of early, continuous, and integrated connections with other undergraduates of color.*

Despite ongoing efforts to increase persistence and degree completion rates among racial/ethnic minority college student populations, these groups continue to attain postsecondary degrees at far lower rates than their majority counterparts. In fact, Black and Latino students who begin college at a four-year institution are approximately 25% less likely to complete a bachelor's degree within six years than their White peers (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002). While, in the aggregate, Asian Americans appear to exhibit the highest degree attainment rates among all races, evidence suggests that vast ethnic disparities exist across various ethnic subgroups within the Asian American population, with some of those subgroups—such as Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese Americans—suffering from major racial and ethnic disparities in degree attainment as well (Museus, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Teranishi, 2007).

<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this article, racial/ethnic minority student and student of color are used interchangeably.

Due to these persisting racial and ethnic disparities in educational attainment, it is important that higher education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners understand the various ways in which colleges and universities can and do foster success among racial/ethnic minority college student populations. The purpose of this inquiry is to understand the role of targeted support programs in promoting racial/ethnic minority students' success at predominantly White institutions (PWIs).<sup>2</sup> Specifically, using Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital and the concept of social networks, I aimed to develop a better understanding of how targeted support programs help foster success among college students of color at three PWIs with high and equitable racial/ethnic minority college student retention and graduation rates.

### **Minority Student Connections to Predominantly White Institutions**

One explanation proposed by researchers to explain the low rates of persistence and degree completion among racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented college students is the difficulty they face in establishing meaningful connections to their respective PWIs (Gonzalez, 2003; Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1999; Tinto, 1993). Indeed, higher education researchers highlight the importance of students' early connections to their institutions (Attinasi, 1989; Berger & Milem, 1999). Unfortunately, existing evidence indicates that students of color face serious challenges in connecting to and finding membership in PWIs (Gonzalez, 2003; Hurtado, 1992; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Murguía, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991; Rendón et al., 2000). Lewis et al., for example, interviewed 75 African American, Asian American, and Latino undergraduates at a PWI who reported experiencing significant levels of exclusion and marginality in the campus environment. Moreover, several other studies support the reality of such experiences (e.g., Allen, 1992; Feagin, 1992; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Gonzalez, 2003; Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

When students of color have difficulties connecting to the PWIs in which they are enrolled, they can find smaller support networks to which they can bond

<sup>2</sup>*For the purposes of this investigation, targeted support programs are defined as programs that are aimed at providing support for and enhancing retention among targeted historically marginalized or underrepresented student populations. This includes a wide range of programs intended to help students adjust to, persist through, and graduate from college, by providing a comprehensive array of services that includes basic study skills development, tutoring, mentoring, cultural events, counseling, workshops, English and writing laboratories, and services for handicapped students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).*

within the larger campus environment (Gonzalez, 2003; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus, 2008b; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Racial/ethnic minority and other historically underrepresented students can connect with and become engaged in ethnic minority subcultures, including ethnic student organizations, cultural centers, and academic ethnic studies departments (Gonzalez, 2003; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus, 2008b; Patton, 2006). The connections that students of color build with these subcultures can yield several benefits, including connections to support networks within the college environment. Both Harper and Quaye (2007) and Museus (2008b), for example, found that ethnic student organizations can provide a way to connect with support networks and a vehicle to express cultural and ethnic identities among students of color. While there is a growing body of literature on how subcultures, such as student organizations and ethnic studies programs, influence the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students (Gonzalez, 2003; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus, 2008b), much remains to be learned about how targeted support programs can shape the experiences of students of color.

### **Minority Students' Connections to Social Networks and Social Capital in College**

The importance of connecting to support networks in college is a theme commonly found in research on higher education (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). In a recent study, for example, Museus and Quaye (2009) utilized existing literature (e.g., Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1999), prior perspectives on minority student success, and the voices of 30 students of color to generate an intercultural perspective of racial/ethnic minority student persistence. The authors concluded that the quality and quantity of connections that students of color make with both individuals and organizations on campus determine their likelihood of success. These connections matter because students who effectively build relationships on their campuses can assemble social networks that allow them to gain access to social capital at their institutions (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

For the purposes of this inquiry, social networks are defined as “structures of relationships linking social actors” (Marsden, 2004, p. 2727). Such networks are crucial in building social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). According to Bourdieu, social capital refers to the aggregate resources (e.g., information and support) to which an individual has access as a result of institutionalized relationships, or social networks. Together, the concepts of social networks and social capital can be useful in understanding how the intensity and extensity of students’ connections with various offices, programs, groups, and persons on their campuses can provide access to resources and partially shape those students’ experiences and outcomes. The ability of institutions to foster success among racial/ethnic minority students might therefore, in part, be a function of their capacity to help those students build social networks on their campuses.

### **Minority Students’ Connections to Targeted Support Programs**

One method by which institutions can establish connections between minority college students and support networks on their respective campuses is by offering targeted support programs. Despite the important role of such programs, empirical evidence regarding how they shape the experiences of college students is limited (Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, & Hossler, 2006). In a recent review of literature on campus support and retention programs, Patton et al. found only 16 studies examining the impact of these programs. This small body of research focused on the effects of such programs does indicate that they can increase the likelihood of student persistence and attainment. Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, and Goodwin (1998) reported that participants in comprehensive support and retention programs are 7% more likely to persist into the second year. Other studies indicated that these programs have a positive and statistically significant effect on long-term persistence to completion (Astin, 1993; Somers, 1996). Moreover, researchers found that specialized retention programs are one salient factor that promotes success among students of color at two- and four-year colleges with high racial/ethnic minority success rates (Bailey, Crosta, Lenbach, Marshall, Soonachan, & Van Noy, 2006; Museus & Liverman, in press).

This body of research has contributed a great deal to our understanding of whether various types of support programs influence college student persistence

and degree completion. Much remains to be learned, however, regarding how those programs work. Patton et al. (2006), for example, concluded that assertions are often made with “little or no supporting evidence for the claims made about strategies to enhance persistence” (p. 11). Thus, the absence of a better understanding regarding how various strategies employed by targeted support programs hinder or facilitate the success of racial/ethnic minority students is a critical void in the literature. Filling this gap will provide a better understanding of how targeted support programs can structure and deliver services to most effectively foster success among students of color.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The current examination is part of a larger qualitative collective case study aimed at understanding the factors that contribute to minority student success at three PWIs identified for their ability to Generate Ethnic Minority Success (GEMS)—the GEMS colleges (Museus, 2008a; Museus & Liverman, in press). Specifically, the purpose of the analysis was to increase current levels of knowledge regarding how targeted support programs help foster success among racial/ethnic minority college students by helping them access social networks and acquire social capital in college. This specific analysis was guided by one overarching research question: How do targeted support programs help racial/ethnic minority undergraduates access social networks and acquire social capital in college? Three additional research questions were explored: (1) How, if at all, do targeted support programs increase racial/ethnic minority students’ access to social networks on campus? (2) How, if at all, do targeted support programs increase those students’ access to information in college? (3) How, if at all, do targeted support programs increase those students’ access to support in college?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of social capital and the concept of social networks provided the framework that guided the current inquiry. The framework provided a lens through which to view the impact of targeted support programs in facilitating racial/ethnic minority student success on the GEMS campuses by focusing on the ways in which those programs connect students of color to social networks and help them access increased levels of social capital (e.g., information and support). Bourdieu (1986) defined the concept of social capital in the following way:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a credential which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (p. 248–249)

Bourdieu further asserted that the volume of capital possessed by a social agent was a function of two factors: (1) the size of the social networks to which the agent is connected and (2) the volume of capital possessed by the various people belonging to those networks. This definition suggests that both the quantity and quality of students' connections to social networks on campus determine the extent to which they acquire social capital in college. Thus, it provided a useful lens for understanding the ways in which targeted support programs enhance racial/ethnic minority students' college experiences and foster their success by promoting their cultivation of social networks and, therefore, social capital within their institutional environments.

## **Methods**

As previously mentioned, the data used in this examination were collected as part of a larger qualitative collective case study. Qualitative case studies are explorations of phenomena within real-life contexts; case studies provide a valuable method when the boundaries between the focal phenomenon and its context are not clear (Yin, 2002). When more than one case is examined, it is referred to as a collective case study (Stake, 1995). Because the larger investigation was aimed at understanding the experiences of racial/ethnic minority college students in the context of their broader campus environments, a qualitative collective case study design was employed to collect data for the larger inquiry. For this specific examination of targeted support programs, a thematic analysis was conducted to understand the ways in which targeted support programs contributed to success among students of color at participating colleges.

## **Institution Selection**

Both institutions and participants were selected with the intention of achieving intensity and variation. Intensity refers to the selection of information-rich

cases, while variation focuses on identifying and describing themes that cut across variation in samples (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, institutions most likely to offer insights into how colleges and universities can and do effectively foster minority student persistence and degree completion and that represented a wide range of institutional characteristics were selected. The College Results Online (CRO) database was utilized to select four-year institutions for inclusion in the study. The database permits the comparison of the six-year graduation rates of four-year colleges with the rates of their peer institutions. The CRO database was used to select four-year institutions that exhibited (1) graduation rates among underrepresented racial/ethnic minority (Black, Latina/o, and Native American) students that were appreciably higher than the national average, and (2) graduation rates among underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students that were close to or greater than their White counterparts. Finally, because this inquiry was focused on studying the retention and graduation of minority undergraduates at PWIs, the selection of institutions was limited to colleges at which approximately 50% or more of total enrollees were White college students. One relatively large private doctoral institution, which I will call Research University (RU), and one small public comprehensive state university, which I will refer to as State University (SU), were selected using the CRO database (see Tables 1 and 2 for comparisons of four-year GEMS institutions and their peers).

**TABLE 1** | 2002–2004 Six-Year Graduation Rates and Racial/Ethnic Gaps in 2002–2004 Graduation Rates Among Research University and its Peer Institutions.

Institution	Overall	White grad rate	Underrepresented minority grad rate	Gap
Peer Institution #1	82.6%	82.9%	79.2%	-3.7%
Research University	82.1%	82.2%	78.1%	-4.1%
Peer Institution #2	74.8%	75.0%	69.8%	-5.2%
Peer Institution #3	80.0%	76.1%	70.4%	-5.7%
Peer Institution #4	92.4%	93.7%	86.6%	-7.1%
Peer Institution #5	92.4%	93.6%	85.2%	-8.4%
Peer Institution #6	86.6%	85.8%	76.3%	-9.5%
Peer Institution #7	81.4%	83.3%	71.7%	-11.6%
Peer Institution #8	87.2%	88.9%	77.0%	-11.9%
Peer Institution #9	86.6%	89.5%	71.1%	-18.4%
Total	84.6%	85.1%	76.5%	-8.6%

Source: College Results Online



**TABLE 2** | 2002–2004 Six-Year Graduation Rates and Racial/Ethnic Gaps in 2002–2004 Graduation Rates Among State University and its Peer Institutions

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Overall</b>	<b>White grad rate</b>	<b>Underrepresented minority grad rate</b>	<b>Gap</b>
Peer Institution #1	36.7%	35.3%	46.8%	11.5%
State University	54.3%	51.1%	62.6%	11.5%
Peer Institution #2	45.3%	45.6%	41.4%	-4.2%
Peer Institution #3	61.6%	62.4%	56.0%	-6.4%
Peer Institution #4	42.4%	44.0%	36.5%	-7.5%
Peer Institution #5	49.8%	49.4%	41.8%	-7.6%
Peer Institution #6	62.2%	63.7%	54.0%	-9.7%
Peer Institution #7	64.1%	65.8%	54.6%	-11.2%
Peer Institution #8	65.4%	67.7%	55.0%	-12.7%
Peer Institution #9	50.7%	51.9%	37.8%	-14.1%
Peer Institution #10	62.7%	67.3%	51.0%	-16.3%
Peer Institution #11	61.7%	63.0%	44.4%	-18.6%
Peer Institution #12	57.9%	59.1%	40.0%	-19.1%
Peer Institution #13	63.7%	64.6%	43.6%	-21.0%
Peer Institution #14	61.3%	62.7%	41.7%	-21.0%
Peer Institution #15	56.1%	57.4%	35.0%	-22.4%
Total	56.0%	56.9%	46.4%	-10.6%

Source: College Results Online

Because the CRO database only contains data on four-year colleges and baccalaureate degree attainment rates do not provide an adequate benchmark for success at two-year colleges, an alternative method was used to identify the two-year institution to be included in this study. First, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) was used to identify two-year colleges that exhibited relatively high persistence and graduation rates. Because the identified two-year colleges were in California, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Data Mart was employed to compare those institutions' within-semester retention rates with those of other California community colleges. One community college, which will be referred to as Community College (CC) was selected for inclusion in this study because it exhibited (1) high retention rates among all racial/ethnic groups compared to other California community colleges, and (2) virtually equal retention rates among all major racial groups (Asian, Black, Latina/o, Native American, and White) (see Tables 3 and 4).

**TABLE 3** | Comparison of Retention Rates at Community College and in the California Community College System by Race/Ethnicity During Fall of 2005

Ethnicity	Total enrollment	Total retained	Community College Retention Rate (%)	Statewide Retention Rate (%)
African American	1,215	1,099	90.5	77.0
Asian	2,130	1,969	92.4	83.9
Latino	4,468	4,088	91.5	81.1
White	24,421	22,365	91.6	85.4
Total	36,758	33,642	91.5	82.9

Source: California Community College Chancellor's Office

**TABLE 4** | Comparison of Retention Rates at Community College and in the California Community College System by Race/Ethnicity During Spring of 2006

Ethnicity	Total enrollment	Total retained	Community College Retention Rate (%)	Statewide Retention Rate (%)
African American	1,008	905	89.8	77.3
Asian	1,879	1,759	93.6	83.7
Latino	4,395	4,031	91.7	81.4
White	24,065	22,027	91.5	85.3
Total	35,768	32,701	91.4	83.0

Source: California Community College Chancellor's Office

## The GEMS Colleges

As previously mentioned, the current analysis includes data collected from three institutions, including one private research university, one public comprehensive state university, and one public community college. The following sections describe these three campuses.

**Research University (RU).** RU is a highly selective, extensive, private, nonprofit doctoral university. In 1880, it opened in a city on the West Coast, which had a population of 3,849,378 in 2006 according to the U.S. Census Bureau. When the university first opened, it served 53 students and 10 instructors. Since then, the university has greatly expanded. Today, RU's College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences offers undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degrees in more than 30 academic departments. Seventeen professional schools within RU now offer master's, professional, and doctoral degrees in 139 areas of study.

Extensive research universities offer a wide range of baccalaureate programs and are committed to graduate education, annually conferring 50 or more doctoral degrees in 15 or more disciplines. In 2009, IPEDS reported that RU is home to approximately 33,747 students—including 16,608 undergraduates and 17,139 graduates. According to IPEDS, RU admitted 24% of their total applicants in the fall of 2009. Ninety-six percent of the student body at RU enrolled full time in the same semester. Women and men each made up 50% of total enrollments. White students constituted 47% of the total enrollments at RU in the fall of 2009, while Asian, Black, Latina/o students made up 23%, 5%, and 12% of the student body, respectively. Estimated total cost of attendance (e.g. tuition and fees, books and supplies, and living expenses) for a student living on campus during 2009–10 was over \$53,000.

***State University (SU).*** In 1828, a school for teaching classics was founded in the state of New York; the school focused on providing a liberal education. The institution evolved into a normal school and, in 1947, introduced graduate courses leading to a master's degree. Today, SU is a public master's university in a small rural town located in the state of New York. Master's colleges and universities offer a wide range of four-year degree programs and are committed to graduate education through the awarding of master's degrees, awarding 40 or more master's degrees across three or more programs. SU enrolled 8,205 students—including 6,707 undergraduate students and 1,498 graduate students—in the fall of 2009, and 39% of all applicants were admitted. In 2009, White students comprised 58% of total enrollments, while their Asian, Black, and Latina/o counterparts constituted 3%, 5%, and 9%, respectively. The estimated total cost of attendance for a student attending SU and living on campus during the 2009–10 academic year was approximately \$18,700.

***Community College (CC).*** CC was established in 1968 to extend educational opportunities for residents of rural northern California. Today, the college offers over 80 career programs focused on preparing students for selected vocations and occupations. For these students, CC offers associate degrees, certificates of achievement, and career upgrading and retraining. CC also offers a wide range of transfer degree programs designed to offer students coursework to meet lower general education requirements for four-year colleges in the California State and University of California systems.

CC is designated, according to the Carnegie classification system, as an associate's college. Associate's colleges offer associate degrees and certificate programs, but not baccalaureate degrees. In the fall of 2009, CC enrolled 12,458 undergraduate students under its open enrollment policy. Forty-one percent of the students who enrolled at CC during the fall of 2009 attended full time, while 59% maintained part-time status. Fifty-four percent of the college's students were women and the remaining 46% were men. Of all students who enrolled in the fall of 2005, 65% were White, 6% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 3% were Black, and 13% were Latina/o. Because CC is a commuter campus, total costs of attendance were reported only for residents and nonresidents living off campus. For California residents living off campus, the cost of attendance during the 2009–10 academic year was \$13,514, while the estimated cost of attendance for nonresidents was \$17,834.

### **Participant Selection**

As previously mentioned, purposeful sampling was employed to achieve intensity and variation in the participant sample (Patton, 2002). Selecting participants based on a combination of these two purposes permitted the acquisition of a sample that both provided a wealth of insight into the phenomenon under investigation and a representation of the various individuals who function in a range of environments throughout the three campuses. Accordingly, the faculty, administrators, staff, and minority students who participated in the study were selected for their affiliation with various campus environments and knowledge of the experiences of minority students on their campuses. The final sample consisted of 65 faculty, administrators, staff members, and minority students across the three colleges. The sample included 34 faculty, administrators, and staff members and 31 students of color (9 Asian American, 9 Black, and 13 Latina/o students). White students were excluded from the sample because research suggested that they provided inaccurate assessments of the experiences of their minority counterparts (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Native American students were also excluded from the sample because of the difficulty in acquiring participants from this population, as they compose 0%, 1%, and 3% of students at the three GEMS campuses. Although Asian American graduation rates were not considered in selecting the two four-year institutions, they were included in the sample, given evidence that they share common struggles with their Black and Latina/o peers (Lewis et al., 2000)

and that some Asian American subgroups also suffer from racial/ethnic disparities in college degree attainment (Museus, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Teranishi, 2007).

To identify faculty, administrators and staff for participation in individual interviews, a thorough analysis of each institution's Web site was conducted. First, each homepage served as a starting point to identify faculty, administrator, and staff participants. Each homepage led to Web sites of administrative offices and programs across the three campuses. Then, Web sites linked to each homepage were reviewed until all of the relevant office and program Web sites that could be found were exhausted. This comprehensive review of each of these Web sites permitted the identification of potential faculty, administrators, and staff for participation in the study.

Contact was initiated via e-mail and telephone with administrators at the top of the institution's organizational chart: campus presidents. Then, administrators at the next level of the college's organizational chart, including vice presidents and provosts, were contacted. This process continued until a wide range of faculty, administrators, and staff members who oversee or work in offices and programs across the institutions were asked to participate in the inquiry. The final participant sample included faculty, upper-level student affairs administrators, directors of student activities and student life, directors and assistant directors of cultural centers, directors of support programs, counselors, and academic advisors. Faculty, administrators, and staff who agreed to participate were asked to identify minority students on their campuses. Then, these students were contacted via e-mail and asked to participate in individual interviews. The participants were enrolled in first-year seminars or ethnic studies courses, or participated in cultural centers, mentoring programs, ethnic student organizations, or targeted retention and support programs.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection consisted of two complimentary facets, each focusing on a different method common in case study research (Yin, 2002). Individual interviews constituted the bulk of data collection, while documents were collected to provide context for the interview data. First, 1- to 1.5-hour individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted with faculty, administrators,

staff members, and racial/ethnic minority student participants from each campus until data saturation was reached and no new themes emerged. All participants read and were asked to sign consent forms ensuring confidentiality. The interviews were conducted using a semistructured approach, which ensured that the interview data included information necessary to understand the phenomena under study while providing flexibility for the interviewer to address emergent themes (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). After interviews were completed, they were professionally transcribed verbatim. At the beginning and end of each interview, informative institutional documents pertaining to strategic plans, institutional programs, student activities, and classroom pedagogies were solicited from each faculty, administrator, and staff participant. The documents helped further clarify and refine understanding of themes that emerged during interviews.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

I organized and coded interview data in the NVivo® Qualitative Research Software Package, using open- and axial-coding procedures prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). In Phase I, I analyzed each interview transcript using open-coding techniques. During that process, I identified 26 invariant constituents and clustered them under inductively generated themes, one of which was centered on the influence of targeted support programs. In Phase II, I generated a code report containing data relevant to the targeted support programs theme, and axial-coding procedures were utilized to identify key properties of that theme. Three main subcategories of the targeted support programs theme, describing how those programs foster success among minority students, emerged from this second phase and are discussed in the following sections.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations of the proposed study deserve consideration. First, the findings are context-bound. The sample included only three distinctive institutions with unique cultures and contexts, and the findings of this study, therefore, cannot be generalized to other colleges and universities. A second limitation is the lack of a comparison group, which precluded the contrast of these high-performing institutions with low-performing counterparts. Accordingly, it cannot be concluded that the findings are exclusive to programs

at institutions that have proven effective at retaining minority students. A third limitation is selection bias. Because administrators solicited the participation of students who were involved in various programs and activities, it is possible that disengaged students on the three campuses might express different views than those who participated in this study. Fourth, the qualitative case study approach, in part, predetermined data collection procedures, thereby influencing the nature of the data collected; had an alternative approach (e.g., grounded theory or phenomenology) been used to design and execute data collection and analysis in the larger investigation, the results may have been different. Finally, inherent in qualitative research is the influence of researcher bias (Maxwell, 2005). It is likely that my background characteristics, such as my experiences as a racial/ethnic minority undergraduate at a PWI and knowledge of the previously reviewed literature, shaped my perception and interpretation of the data collected and analyzed in this inquiry. For example, due to my own experiences and knowledge of higher education, I approached the larger collective case study with beliefs that racial disparities in college success are a problem and that institutions of higher education do have the power to create environments conducive to minority student success.

### **Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance**

Whereas internal and external validity are important considerations in the measurement and generalizability of findings in quantitative research, quality assurance in qualitative research is determined by the degree of credibility and transferability of the research findings. Credibility refers to the congruence of the findings with reality, while transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to situations outside of the cases being studied (Merriam, 1998). In this study, I maximized credibility and transferability of the findings using three methods prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1986). First, I triangulated data from administrator and staff interviews, minority student interviews, and documents to verify, modify, and refine emergent themes. Second, discrepant data were sought throughout the analyses. When discrepancies emerged between data sources, I reconciled those discrepancies by modifying and refining emergent themes. I also conducted member checks with nine participants—14% of the total participant sample and 43% of the participant sample that worked with or was involved in the targeted support programs central to the analysis. Finally, I maximized transferability of findings

by ensuring variation in the institution sample. As previously discussed, institutions selected for the study included public and private, two- and four-year, urban and rural, and small and large colleges. The selection of institutions spanning such a wide array of characteristics ensured that the findings of the study can be transferred to the broadest variety of colleges possible.

## Findings

Before presenting the findings, it is important to note that this analysis describes common themes in the ways that targeted support programs promote success among students of color across the GEMS campuses. And, while the targeted support programs function in very different contexts across the three institutions, few salient differences emerged during the analysis. One noticeable difference is that most targeted support programs on the CC and SU campuses consist of administrator and staff offices and do not offer physical space in which students work and socialize. In contrast, at RU, several targeted support programs consist of larger offices that include physical space for students to work and socialize. Second, administrators and staff in targeted support programs at CC and SU focus primarily on addressing economic and academic-skills issues via financial support, academic advising, academic-skills courses, tutoring, and study groups. While some targeted support programs at RU concentrate on financial and academic needs as well, several programs also provide enriching extracurricular opportunities focusing on cultural, social, and intellectual growth. This does not mean, however, that students are not involved in cultural and social activities at CC and SU. Indeed, many students on those campuses organize and run their own student organizations that provide students with opportunities for cultural expression and social support. But, while administrators and staff in targeted support programs at CC and SU are involved with and support these student-run organizations, the targeted support programs on those campuses do not focus on promoting cultural and social activities themselves.

The following sections delineate three ways in which these targeted support programs help students of color access social networks and acquire social capital—in the form of information and support—on the GEMS campuses. Specifically, they describe three types of connections between targeted support programs and students of color that help students gain access to valuable information and support. First, the targeted support programs *cultivate early*



*connections* between racial/ethnic minority students and support networks during the early adjustment period. Second, key agents within the programs *maintain continuous connections* with those students throughout their college experience. Finally, the targeted programs *foster integrated connections* through their own integration into support networks across campus.

Through these three types of connections, the targeted support programs help undergraduate students of color gain access to support networks and social capital on campus and consequently help foster success among racial/ethnic minority students. Moreover, the utility of these findings are not confined to any one theme. Rather, the importance of these three types of connections results in part from their interconnectedness. The programs offer services that facilitate early connections between students of color and support networks on campus, which are led and organized by key agents who maintain relationships with students throughout their college careers. Both early adjustment programs and key social agents within the programs are integrated into larger support networks on campus, which prevents the isolation of the targeted support programs and allows for the integration of these programs and their students into the broader support networks across their respective institutions.

### **Cultivating Early Connections**

First and foremost, the targeted support programs at the three GEMS colleges intentionally establish early connections with the underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students whom they serve. One of the programs most frequently mentioned at SU, for example, espouses a retention strategy explicitly focused on frontloading services to facilitate the adjustment of students in the first year. Among the multiple components of the program that help promote early adjustment are the summer bridge program, which helps students develop important social capital early on by giving them important information and connections to critical support networks, including their peers and academic advisors in the program. A first-year Latina at SU illustrated this point:

Well, we bond especially with each other. During the summer, when we come in for those five days, we interact with each other, only the students involved in the program. And, the last day we stay together and we get to know each other further—only the students involved in the program. So, we formed this great connection and realized we are our own community and we have to stick together.

A third-year Latina, who was involved in this bridge program at SU, discussed the importance of these early connections in students' ability to acquire important social capital in the form of peer support and increased knowledge about how to succeed in college:

The program definitely was helpful. You have to attend a series of five programs each semester. You meet other people that are in the program and it helps you meet so many people and then they're all freshmen. And then, at the end of the semester, you go on a retreat and you do some team-building exercises and it all just helps you cultivate more knowledge about being successful in college.

While many college and university campuses have programs and services designed to facilitate students' adjustment to college, targeted support programs at the GEMS colleges foster early connections that are not implemented as isolated initiatives. Rather, they are linked to other support mechanisms aimed at facilitating early connections in college, resulting in the participation of many racial/ethnic minority students in multiple adjustment programs and developing relationships with the same administrators, staff, and peers. By the end of their first year, participants in one targeted support program at SU engage in the summer bridge course, a first-year seminar, and study groups with the same program participant peers by the end of their first year. A first-year Latino at SU discussed how the first-year seminar and related study groups provide important social capital in the form of knowledge that helps student succeed in college:

They teach you how to study. They teach you how to take notes. They teach you everything. Everything you need to know to do well and so for your first three semesters they teach you and then we also have study groups. So, if you have problems with math or English, they're always going to be there.

As illustrated by this student's comment, a key component of the ways in which targeted support programs create early connections is by offering students opportunities to connect and develop meaningful relationships with their college peers, administrators, counselors, and academic advisors working within those programs early in the adjustment period. As discussed in the next section, the establishment of connections with these institutional agents is critical because they provide students with social capital throughout their college careers in the form of important information and support.

Similarly, one of the most frequently mentioned targeted support programs on the RU campus offers activities that help Black undergraduates become immediately connected to the support networks on their campuses. For example, during the first two weeks of September, in collaboration with the Black Student Assembly and other Black student organizations on campus, one targeted support program offers new and continuing Black students cultural and social programming to help them make the adjustment to college. The director of this program explained the purpose of Black Welcome Week at RU:

One of the big things we do is Black Welcome Week. Black Welcome Week gives students an opportunity to meet new students, reconnect with students if they're a returning student, and just get a fresh start in meeting all the different people and reconnecting. We have barbecues, spades and dominos nights, movie nights, and the African American marketplace that's usually across the street during that time. But it consists of different things to just show everybody "Look, we're here. Black students are here and we're here to help you."

One example of how Black Welcome Week assists students in developing social networks and accumulating social capital early in their college careers is through targeted social networking events and access to information about academic and social opportunities on campus. For instance, at the beginning of the academic year, students participate in a new student, staff, and faculty mixer during which they connect with faculty and staff who will serve as critical resources throughout their college years. Students are also given important information, such as an African American resource handbook that provides information about Black faculty, administrators, organizations, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and culture in the surrounding Black communities. Events and resources like these connect students to other academic and social support networks linked to targeted support programs during the adjustment period. These include academic workshops, a targeted residential community, and an academic monitoring and intervention program through which administrators screen students' progress throughout their first year and look for signs of academic adjustment difficulties.

### **Maintaining Continuous Connections**

In addition to cultivating early connections with racial/ethnic minority students, the targeted support programs at the GEMS colleges maintain those

connections throughout undergraduates' college experiences. The programs have key social agents working within them, who are both involved in creating early connections with students of color and maintaining those connections. A director and an assistant director play this role in some programs, while others have diverse core groups of academic advisors or counselors. Regardless of title, all of these key agents provide ongoing support for students of color throughout the duration of the students' postsecondary experience.

The director of one targeted support program at RU highlighted the importance of key social agents:

I think what helps a student, any student really, but a Black student in particular, is feeling like they belong and knowing that there is a place that they can come if something should go down. Earlier a student came in and talked about her roommate problems. So, now I'm going to have a meeting with both of them to mediate. But the fact that she knew that she could come and talk to me and say "You know what? My roommate thing is not happening. I need your help." I think when a student has a niche on campus like that they feel like they're a part of the fabric.

Similarly, at CC, counselors working in targeted programs provide minority students with continuous support. The director of a program at CC highlighted the importance of this support:

These students need a lot of time and a contact person on campus. They need the structure. They need somebody to talk to. So, our counselors do a lot of academic counseling. . . . So, our counselors are a very important component of the program to keep students plugged into college.

The continuous support maintained by agents working within the targeted support programs at the GEMS colleges is important because it can foster a sense of familiarity and trust between program administrators and staff and racial/ethnic minority college students. One academic counselor at CC highlighted the importance of such familiarity:

I've noticed when I work with students in the Asian Club, they're more able to come up to me, because they know me and if they are having academic problems, I think they will say, "I am not doing very well in school. What should I do?"

I think that if I didn't see those students in the club setting, they wouldn't come to me for help. I think sometimes it's hard for minority students to ask for help, especially the Hmong students.

Not only do administrators and staff across the three campuses recognize the importance of these individuals, but students at the GEMS colleges also affirm their critical role in fostering success among minority students on those campuses. A second-year female Asian American student at CC, for example, discussed how the counselors in the program described above have been a source of social capital because they provide important ongoing support for her and her peers:

They're always there when you need help. They help with classes, transfer, everything for the Asian Club. They're always there.... Whenever we need certain items or support or accessories for a club, they're always there to get it. They're keeping track of everything. Whenever we need a place to do our fundraising activities, they're always loaning us a house. So it's just great.

Therefore, the impact of these targeted support programs on the GEMS campuses results partly from the creation of early connections that are maintained throughout the college experience by key social agents. However, the importance of the connections between targeted support programs and students of color also results from the access these programs provide to the broader social networks on the respective campuses. These integrated connections represent the final emergent theme.

### **Fostering Integrated Connections**

The connections that targeted support programs create with minority students at the GEMS colleges appear to be salient in part because of how those connections link students to broader integrated support networks. For example, at CC, collaborative relationships exist among programs and services throughout the campus as well. The Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) Office maintains a collaborative relationship with the Center for Academic Success (CAS). To promote the development of academic skills, the CAS offers EOPS students supplemental instruction, tutoring, and workshops on an abundance of topics, ranging from time management and stress reduction to writing research papers.

Moreover, administrators and academic counselors working in EOPS also collaborate regularly with the campus's Transfer Center. The Targeting Resources for Underrepresented Students (TRUST) Program is a collaborative effort between EOPS and the Transfer Center designed to focus Transfer Center resources on providing historically underrepresented student populations information about transferring to four-year colleges. The director of the Transfer Center at CC explained the importance of this support program:

Within the TRUST program, a student can sign up with me and that allows them to get much more individualized service. For example, if a student signs up for TRUST, they come in to the Transfer Center and I will have a contract that they enter. Within that contract, it is stated that they have to see me at least twice a semester . . . I will advocate for those students if they are having problems with a professor. They come in and talk to me and I will call up the professor and ask them how we can help this student, because they are in this program. We e-mail those students almost constantly with information about scholarships, classroom visits, and representatives from four-year universities that are going to be on campus.

Thus, students connected to EOPS benefit from the social capital (i.e., information and support) provided by administrators and academic counselors within that program, but they also are beneficiaries of the capital that exists across the social networks—including the information and support provided by CAS and TRUST—to which EOPS is connected.

Targeted support programs at SU create and maintain collaborative efforts across campus. Indeed, the largest targeted support program on this campus makes concerted efforts to integrate its services with the work of other institutional programs, offices, and agents. The director of this program at SU described her philosophy with regard to building an integrated network of programs and services to effectively provide students with social capital:

Over the years, I've changed my idea of what to do to get students to use services. I think I could give you a laundry list of all of our services and they're probably going to look the same as what many other campuses are doing. But the key difference is how we intentionally package them and link them to other things going on around campus or to other things going on in the program.

In addition, the key social agents in the targeted support programs on the GEMS campuses play a critical role in connecting students of color to these

larger support networks. Advisors in the largest targeted support program at SU, for instance, may not have the knowledge and resources to solve all of their students' problems on their own, but their connections with other offices and programs allow them to utilize the necessary resources to assist their students. One academic advisor at SU described how communication and collaboration are a major part of her role in the program:

We're in contact with everyone. You know, we're in contact with the Financial Aid Office to make sure their package is put together. We're in contact with Records and Registration. So, you name it. We're kind of like the middle person that reaches out to everyone with the student of course. Most of us believe that we should be doing these things for the student.

The director of one targeted support program at CC also demonstrated the importance of the role of social agents within these programs when he described his philosophy regarding connecting students to social networks to help them access social capital across campus. In doing so, he explained how he ensures that students who need help are connected to the information and support they need:

If you are new and you need an educational plan and you haven't become part of the TRUST program, then I'll walk you over. When I walk in the office with the student, I am going to get results. When I bring somebody in, they are going, "Hey, David, how are you doing? You got a new student for us?" I say, "Yes, I do. Take care of that individual." There is that relationship there and it only takes me three, or four, maybe five minutes to go over there and make that connection, and that student now has a point of reference.

In sum, the integration of targeted support programs at the GEMS colleges into the larger social and support networks of their respective campuses is a critical factor in their efficacy.

## **Discussion**

Several conclusions can be drawn from this inquiry. First, the findings suggest that targeted support programs are critical to fostering success among racial/ethnic minority students at PWIs. Indeed, most of the participants in this investigation highlighted these programs as a major factor in their institutions' ability to retain and graduate students of color at relatively high rates. This

*Targeted support programs can be a critical vehicle in creating connections between minority undergraduates and campus support networks, helping those students develop increased social capital in college*

finding is consistent with previous research indicating that targeted support programs have a positive impact on persistence and degree completion (Astin, 1993; Bailey et al., 2006; Chaney et al., 1998; Patton et al., 2006; Somers, 1996). This study adds empirical evidence that such programs might be critical in cultivating environments conducive

to high racial/ethnic minority student success rates across a wide range of institutions, including two- and four-year, private and public, and small and large schools.

Second, the findings indicate that targeted support programs can be a critical vehicle in creating connections between minority undergraduates and campus support networks, helping those students develop increased social capital in college. This process can be explained by applying Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of social capital and networks to the experiences of minority students engaged in the targeted support programs. Bourdieu asserted that the volume of social capital an individual possesses is a function of the size of the social network to which that individual is connected and the amount of resources possessed by the social agents connected to that network. This perspective not only suggests that racial/ethnic minority students' connections to individuals and programs on their campuses are critical, but also implies that the amount of social capital possessed by those individuals and programs may be equally important. At the GEMS institutions, the salience of targeted support programs appears to be a function of the connections they create with students of color and the linkages they provide with social networks across their campuses.

Third, the findings of this investigation provide a framework for understanding the important role of different types of connections in helping foster racial/ethnic minority student success at PWIs. Patton et al. (2006) noted that assertions are often made about targeted support programs without actual evidence of what works in those programs' delivery of services. This inquiry



provides a step toward understanding the ways in which targeted support programs foster success among students of color. The findings suggest that activities that facilitate adjustment, ongoing relationships among members of the targeted support programs and students of color, and the intentional integration of those programs into larger campus support networks are all critical factors in those programs' ability to foster minority student success.

Fourth, one of the key ways in which targeted support programs at the GEMS campuses contribute to racial/ethnic minority student success is by cultivating a variety of early connections to facilitate their adjustment. This theme is congruent with previous research that highlights the importance of establishing connections between institutions and students early in their college careers (Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005). This finding, however, adds to extant research by underscoring that targeted support programs contribute to the success of students of color at institutions with high and equitable minority student retention and graduation rates by connecting those students with critical social networks and maximizing their ability to develop social capital early in the college experience.

Fifth, participants highlighted the important role of campus social agents, who not only connected with racial/ethnic minority students in targeted support programs early on, but also maintained those connections throughout students' college careers. This finding is consistent with previous research underscoring the positive impact that institutional agents can have on the experiences of college students of color (Cole & Barber, 2003; Guiffrida, 2005; Hernandez, 2000; Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986; Smith, 2007; Watson, Terrell, Wright, Bonner II, Cuyjet, Gold, et al., 2002). This finding adds evidence that the integration of targeted support programs into the larger support networks of a campus contributes to those programs' ability to provide more holistic support for minority students at institutions with high and equitable racial/ethnic minority student retention and graduation rates.

Finally, the finding that targeted support programs at the GEMS colleges foster minority student success by integrating students into larger campus support networks is consistent with previous research highlighting the

benefits that accrue from integrating multiple aspects of college students' lives. Existing literature, for example, underscores the positive impact that learning communities can have on students' success by increasing engagement through the integration of the academic and social aspects of students' lives (e.g., Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998; Tinto, 1997). Moreover, research on institutional agents suggests that faculty and administrators who go beyond their normal duties to provide students with more holistic support can have a positive impact on the experiences and outcomes of racial/ethnic minority undergraduates (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2005; Smith, 2007). This finding adds evidence that the integration of targeted support programs into the larger support networks of the campus appears to contribute to minority student success at institutions with high and equitable racial/ethnic minority student retention and graduation rates.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

This study has several implications for future research and practice. For purposes of parsimony, I will offer four herein. With regard to research, future inquiries could include qualitative examinations of larger numbers of institutions and targeted support programs, as well as quantitative analyses that examine the relative impact of various types of targeted support programs. While it is sometimes assumed that targeted support programs effectively foster success among underserved populations, this is not necessarily the case. It is reasonable to hypothesize that some targeted support programs are more effective than others as a result of the way they package and deliver services to students. Future research should clarify the ways in which various types of targeted support programs or specific components of such programs hinder or enhance their effectiveness. Such research would do much to inform the creation and improvement of targeted support programs in postsecondary institutions, as well as the work of administrators and staff who work in other offices and programs across college and university campuses.

Future empirical inquiries could also focus on examining the differential impact of targeted support programs on underserved student populations. Indeed, evidence suggests that students with varying demographic characteristics can experience the same environment in very different ways (Harper & Hurtado, 2007) and that the process by which campus environments influence the success of students from different demographic groups varies (Museus, Nichols, &

Lambert, 2008). Since different groups experience similar phenomena in distinct ways, it is important to understand how targeted support programs or the various components of those programs differentially impact disparate underserved student populations. Much remains to be learned, for example, about how low-income, disabled, adult, and other nontraditional students experience and are influenced by the various components of targeted support programs in college. Such research would inform the ways such programs shape services to specific underserved student populations.

Regarding implications for practice, this investigation buttresses the notion that educational policymakers and practitioners should support the implementation and maintenance of support programs targeted at specific underserved student populations. While this implication might seem obvious to some, programs that offer services targeted at specific underserved racial groups have recently come under attack by state legislators (Forde, 2008). It is critical that higher education policymakers and leaders advocate for the maintenance of such programs, and the findings of this inquiry provide support for such advocacy.

Moreover, the three types of connections emerging from the current analysis might provide a useful framework for understanding how educational programs and services can be more effectively designed and aligned. Many institutions have orientation programs to help students adjust to college life, academic advisors who create relationships with their students, and offices that collaborate in these efforts. The findings of this inquiry indicate that the efficacy of those programs is partially dependent upon the extent to which they connect students to campus early, maintain those connections in a continuous way, and integrate those early and continuous connections into the broader support network on campus. Thus, educators should pay particular attention to ensuring that students of color make these three types of connections with their institutions and to what extent the connection types are linked to one another.

The persistent racial disparities in college student success, coupled with the increasing diversification of the student populations entering institutions of higher education, render it critical that postsecondary educators continue to refine their understandings of how they can most effectively foster success among college students of color. Targeted support programs are one tool postsecondary educators can use to help racial/ethnic minority college students

persist to graduation, but much remains to be learned about how they can enhance their effectiveness. This examination contributes to the understanding of targeted support programs by highlighting the three different types of connections that these programs can use to maximize the linkages that students of color have with their institutions and, consequently, those students' success in college. More analysis is imperative to illuminate how support programs can most effectively utilize limited resources to help students of color thrive in college.

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