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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

You Matter Here: Examining Black and Latine Student Sense of Belonging in a Community College Cinema/TV Department Using TikTok

by

Krystle Klein

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2023

You Matter Here: Examining Black and Latine Student Sense of Belonging

in a Community College Cinema/TV Department Using TikTok

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by

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This dissertation written by Krystle Klein, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

27/September/2023

Date

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This work would not have been possible without the collective, as we cannot survive or thrive without each other. Words on a page can never do enough to show how grateful I am for the people who contributed to this study, and those who held me up throughout this entire experience.

First and foremost, my students–past, present, and future. You are always shining your light and I am honored to hold that mirror up so that you feel your own brightness. You are brave, honest, and ambitious. Witnessing your growth and learning as you step into your light brings me the greatest joy and fulfillment. You are the reason I embarked on this journey, and the reason that I will never stop working to ensure your voices are heard.

This work was brought to life by my participants. The four of you brought eagerness, excitement, truth, and love to this project. Because of you, this entire study became the authentic, living, breathing work that it was meant to be. You were the key to unlocking what I hoped to find–honest, tangible ways to help you and your peers find your voices, feel uplifted, and embark on your own courageous journeys. I am forever grateful for the brave students who shared their own thoughts and experiences that added so much rich data to the study. Your words will help to empower many students to come. Because of your willingness to bring us into your world, you paved the way for more engagement, more dialogue, more difficult and necessary conversations to be had, in order to continue to evolve the educational and entertainment spaces so that more diverse stories are not only shared but celebrated.

My chair, Dr. Ernesto Colín, guided me through the process and reminded me of the joy and impact this work can bring. My committee members, Dr. Rebecca Stephenson, Dr. Blaine Simmons, provided unlimited support and guidance to ensure this work was being done at its best so that students can benefit from its discoveries.

My incredible daughter, you were there for every moment of this journey, and I would not have had it any other way. You are the most incredible human, and I am so grateful every day that I get to be your Mom. My parents, who taught me and continued to show unconditional love. Aunt Elaine and Uncle Gordon, thank you for being there with advice at the ready through this entire journey, and the ones before, and the ones yet to come. My entire family, and my friends who are family, thank you for your unending love and support. It was seen and felt throughout this experience.

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LMU EDU Cohort 18–the ability to experience this together has been imperative to this success. Our constant uplifting of each other, celebrating each milestone for every individual, wholeheartedly has created a soul shift in the way I have come to understand how this critical work can be done. It has been an honor to learn and grow with you all: change-makers filled with love, talent, and ambition, making a difference in each scholar's unique part of the world.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my daughter Ananya. During this entire process, you grew from a spirited, creative, and joyful toddler and into a curious, hilarious, clever kid. You went from bouncing on my lap during class to pretending you were writing your own dissertation while I worked. The two of us did this, together, during the global pandemic and through the transition to the new and different collective life we all experienced. You were by my side through it all, both enjoying class time as you knew you would receive more snacks, and encouraging me to write sitting next to you after I tucked you in at night, the sound of the keyboard clicks lulling you to sleep. My incredible baby, may you continue to stand up for good, to use your light to shine on what is right. We can live in a just world, and I know this because when I look at you, I see hope.

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ABSTRACT

You Matter Here: Examining Black and Latine Student Sense of Belonging in a Community College Cinema/TV Department Using TikTok

by

Krystle Klein

The lower retention and success rates of Black and Latine students in the Cinema/TV Department at a Hollywood-based community college reflect a broader diversity issue in the entertainment industry. This qualitative, arts-based study focused on student voice and the power of counternarratives by utilizing participatory action research to determine Black and Latine student sense of belonging. Four participants engaged 19 of their fellow students in dialogues using the social media platform TikTok to discover what their lived experiences were in the department, and what those narratives revealed about their sense of belonging and support systems. The resulting 54 TikTok videos and participant interviews revealed that Black and Latine students did feel a sense of belonging in the department when it came to peer acceptance and resources, but their belonging could be greatly increased with more diverse curriculum and faculty, and more opportunities to create community. Findings demonstrated that centering student voice in the classroom is key to creating safe and inclusive spaces for Black and Latine students, who might then feel a greater sense of belonging, which in turn can increase their retention and success rates in the department and lead to greater opportunities for employment in the film and television industry, further diversifying the media landscape.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The media we consume as a society is still largely created by White men (Hunt & Ramón, 2022). Although we are seeing growing diversity on screen in the form of actors of color, White men still continue to profit as they hold a majority of the decision-making, high-earning roles in entertainment. There is a great opportunity to shift this dynamic by looking to community college film and television programs that educate minoritized/global-majority students.

Community colleges can be places of spirit murdering for students of color (Wilson, 2021) or spirit healing (Boatswain, 2021); the latter leading to greater retention and success rates for minoritized students when they feel that they belong (Strayhorn, 2012). At Los Angeles City College (LACC) in California, Black students in particular have the lowest retention and success rates, and although Latine students are the majority in the classroom, they still do not have as high retention rates as their White and Asian peers (Office of Institutional Effectiveness [OIE], 2023). We then continue to see this disparity on and behind our screens.

When more Black and Latine students can successfully complete their education and secure jobs in the entertainment industry, we will in turn begin to see more authentic stories from diverse perspectives. As the media has the power to form bias, it has the power to dispel bias.

More can be done in community college film and television programs to ensure Black and Latine students feel that they belong in the classroom, so that they graduate and continue that belonging in the media landscape. When the diversity in front of and behind movie and TV

cameras matches the diversity of the community college classroom, true change will occur in our nation.

Background

Located in East Hollywood, California, LACC's Cinema and Television Department offers affordable, comprehensive, industry-standard hands-on skill training and creative guidance to prepare its students for careers in the entertainment industry. The department offers courses in basic and advanced film, video, and television studio production. Through these courses, students are provided camera equipment, sound stages, editing labs, television studios, screening rooms, and many other audio and video post systems. Many students who complete this program go on to careers in the film and television industry.

The Cinema/TV Department operates within the structure and mission of LACC, which was determined as the sixth best community college in the nation by Forbes based on academic influence (Nietzel, 2021). LACC's mission is to:

> Empower students from the diverse communities it serves to achieve their educational and career goals by providing pathways to support their completion of associate degrees, certificates, transfer requirements, career and technical education, and foundational skills programs. (LACC, n.d., para. 1)

The Cinema/TV Department has the added responsibilities of upholding the mission and empowering student academic goals. These could lead to pathways to the entertainment industry, which is still lacking diverse voices (Hunt & Ramón, 2022). By closing equity gaps in the

Cinema/TV Department and increasing retention and success rates for Black and Latine[1] students, more entertainment industry positions might be filled by Black and Latine creatives, which may lead to shifting the media culture, and portray genuinely diverse content both spearheaded and produced by Black and Latine creators.

As a minority serving institution, LACC's student body of 15,000 enrolled students is 55% Hispanic/Latine, 18% White, 8.5% African American, 13% Asian Pacific Islander, 3.4% are two or more races, .2% Indigenous American, and 2.2% unknown (Gasman & Conrad, 2022; OIE, 2023). The Cinema/TV Department reflects the campus demographics with its 1,200 students, and holds an overall retention rate of 84% and success rate of 70% as of Spring 2023. When disaggregated by race, success rates for Black students fall to 60%, and Latine to 66%. Asian students had higher success rates at 81% and White students at 80% (OIE, 2023). Success rates are defined by students completing their coursework with C grade or higher. Retention rates indicate the student completed the class with a grade ranging from A-F, along with "pass," "no pass," or "incomplete."

The entertainment industry the students in the Cinema/TV Department at LACC are working toward is 66% White, 14.5% Hispanic or Latine, 8% Black or African American, 6.4% Asian, and 5.6% unknown (Sottini, 2021). These demographic breakdowns oppose what we see in the classroom at LACC. If Hollywood diversity is to ever mirror the diversity found in higher education film and media programs, Black and Latine retention and success must be addressed.

[1]The term Latine will be used to describe those from Latin American descent. Previous terms used in government documents and datasets include Hispanic; civil rights era scholarship: Chicano/Chicana and Latino/Latina to Latinx. Using Latine in this work attempts to put the power back into the very people to whom we are speaking; a term that has come from this population to be more gender-inclusive and accepting as a whole, and adds to emerging scholarly work that currently uses this terminology.

Because LACC is geographically situated within Hollywood, the Cinema/TV Department is uniquely positioned to educate students in the art of storytelling for film and television, and provide pathways to employment through its partnerships with studios, networks, production companies, and non-profit organizations. Through these initiatives, including ones focused on diversity, LACC's Cinema/TV Department helps students apply for and secure internships and entry level positions within the entertainment industry. As a department, these endeavors have not yet reached a level of fluidity and autonomy that allows for a consistent pipeline, but students who take the initiative to apply and seek help and mentorship from faculty often find themselves in "foot-in-the-door" positions. A 2015 department survey indicated that 65% of recent graduates had secured a career in the industry, from pre-production work such as development roles and producer assistants, through production work such as below-the-line crew (camera operators, line producers, equipment rental houses), and post-production such as editing, visual effects, and color correction (Varner, 2015). The data was not disaggregated by race or ethnicity.

The goal of the Cinema/TV Department to ensure the closing of equity gaps is not unique to LACC. LACC is one of nine community colleges within the Los Angeles Community College District, which is the largest in the country, and one of the largest in the world, educating an average of 205,000 students per year (OIE, 2023). Students who enter California community colleges often do so with less college preparedness compared to students who enter four-year institutions, and low income, first generation, and racially minoritized students are more likely to enroll in community colleges (Felix & Castro, 2018). In California, two-thirds of all first time Black and Latine students studying for their undergraduate degrees are enrolled in community college, and in the Los Angeles Community College District, 68% of students are Latine or

Black (Felix & Castro, 2018). Scholars affirm the need for California's community colleges to create and evolve campus climate initiatives that help Black and Latine students succeed (Bush & Bush, 2010).

Although community colleges began as all-White institutions in 1901, they are currently much more accessible to students from a variety of backgrounds, and Black and Latine students choose community college more than any other option post high school (Wilson, 2021). Community colleges do not require extensive admission requirements, and offer low to no-cost tuition, which brings educational opportunities to larger groups of students and provides them with more accessible education. Yet Black and Latine contributions are largely absent from the curriculum, and Black and Latine students have lower retention and success rates than their White peers (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The skills certificates and associate degrees for transfer or career provide Black and Latine students with what Emdin (2022) described as "cultural currency." For students entering the entertainment industry, that currency proves to be even more valuable when the degrees also demonstrate their abilities to conduct the hands-on skills required for film and television positions. Students in the department gain these skills along with practical and theoretical knowledge from faculty with decades of entertainment industry experience, along with state-of-the-art equipment and pathways and connections into the industry. This combination of practical and theoretical knowledge and access has opened doors to dream careers in storytelling without the high cost of university.

The "dream" career many students in the Cinema/TV Department at LACC work toward is earning a living wage as a creative in the film and television industry. In that industry, Black and Latine actors are four times more represented on screen than ten years ago, yet the behind-

the-scenes work such as writing, directing, and executive producing are decision-making positions primarily still held by White men (Hunt & Ramón, 2022). Increasing diversity on screen has proven to be beneficial for the entertainment business, yet those in positions of creative power are still mostly White and are profiting from greater on-screen representation (Adams et al., 2022).

LACC's Cinema/TV Department prepares students primarily for behind-the-camera work, which helps to set them on a path toward more decision-making roles such as director, producer, and writer, while also training hands on in cinematography, grip, and editing. Students can obtain specific skill certificates in focused areas of interest, which demonstrate their firm understanding of that particular film or TV department. The degrees also demonstrate that knowledge and set students up to either obtain employment directly into the entertainment industry or transfer to a four-year university to continue their education.

Just as the community college system began as an all-White institution (Wilson, 2021), so did the film industry. With White financiers, directors, and all White cast and crew, Black folks were represented by White actors in blackface all the way up into the 1950s (Abramovitch, 2019). One of the first feature length Hollywood films that is revered to this day for its groundbreaking cinematic techniques was so racist that it is attributed to reinvigorating the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Griffith's (1915) *Birth of a Nation* glorified the KKK, held them as 'heroes' while reinforcing Black stereotypes. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was so moved by the film that he had a special screening at the White House that further cemented the film's relevancy while touting blatant propaganda against Black people (Hunt & Ramón, 2022).

As far as some believe to have come as a society, our last President, Donald Trump, promoted similar views of racism toward minoritized groups and continued to glorify the KKK and like-minded individuals prone to violence in order to try and maintain dominance as a White race. Although diversity in media was growing according to Hunt and Ramón (2022), I believe much of it is performative, as most of the executive level positions where all of the critical decisions are made are still majority White (Hunt & Ramón, 2022).

The idea of sense of belonging has been shown to drastically increase success and retention rates for Black and Latine community college students (Strayhorn, 2012). By creating a greater sense of belonging in an industry preparation department such as LACC's, we can increase success and retention rates for Black and Latine students and send greater diversity into cinema and television where those students can work their way up to tell their stories in an authentic way.

Problem of Practice

A recent equity audit in the Cinema/TV Department at LACC and supportive research (Bush & Bush, 2010; Klein, 2021) showed that Black males, more than any other race or ethnic group, had the lowest retention rate in gaining advancement through the Cinema/TV program. Despite being the majority, Latine students have a lower retention rate than their White peers. As a minority-serving institution, there is a responsibility to ensure student cultural needs are being met (Jones & Sáenz, 2020). Furthermore, as a gateway program into the entertainment industry with Black and Latine representation issues both in front of and behind the camera, it is critical to foster a true sense of belonging within the college department in order to increase retention and success rates.

As of 2023, no research had addressed what community college film programs could do to increase diverse representation in the entertainment industry via a focus on retention and success rates for marginalized students. During that same time frame, there was limited scholarship on community college film departments, their demographic makeup, and what was being done to help Black and Latine students (in particular) gain access and entrance into the entertainment industry.

Furthermore, although a majority of students consume content through social media, as of 2023, there was little research and understanding as to how that can be utilized to engage them in educational contexts and enhancements in their learning and experiences. Torphy et al. (2020) point to the need for future research exploring student learning perceptions and experiences by using social media to bridge the gap between student experience and advocacy in a democratic digital space.

Research Questions

In order to understand the lived experience of Black and Latine students to help determine a sense of belonging, the following research questions guide this arts-based study. The outcomes can help develop implications for policy, practice, pedagogy, and curriculum shifts for the Cinema/TV Department and the college as a whole.

1. What are the lived experiences of Black and/or Latine students in the Cinema/TV Department at this community college?
2. What do Black and Latine student narratives reveal about the sense of belonging and support systems at this community college's Cinema/TV Department?

Purpose of the Study

By engaging Black and Latine students to be active participants in exploring the research questions, the resulting findings can significantly impact the experience of Black and Latine students earning their Cinema/TV certificates and degrees. Everyone is an expert of their own experience, and we are living history (Jenkins, 2022). By providing a place for Black and Latine students to share their stories and experiences, the resulting data can guide the department to action items that will in turn foster greater sense of belonging in the classroom and overall department for Black and Latine students. With a greater sense of belonging, retention and success rates should increase, and equity gaps decrease, which will further contribute to the diversity of the entertainment industry which desperately lacks Black and Latine voices, creations, and decision making.

This study addressed the gap in literature that needed to be filled with community college film and media departments working as gateways of diversity into the film industry. There was also a need for more innovative methodologies, as this study used the social media platform TikTok to both engage students and empower them to use their voices, making the data accessible and relevant to implement change. This study had the potential to impact curriculum and pedagogical practices to include student voice in the classroom and foster greater sense of self and identity that can in turn inform practices to be more inclusive. In doing so, the lived experiences of students can be improved as they feel belonging, and potentially increase their chances of success.

Significance of the Study

The media we consume as a society has a direct impact on perceptions of others, and has the power to create and sustain bias, or to dismantle bias (Bramlett-Solomon & Carstarphen, 2014). By discovering ways to support Black and Latine students in a cinema and television program so that they can enter the industry, we are contributing to the increasing diversity of the media landscape, which can help to diffuse prejudice, and create a more just society.

This body of work could significantly add to the educational scholarly landscape in how Cinema and TV departments at community colleges can utilize the very work that they are teaching students to help engage and encourage them to tell their stories. This in turn can help inform the departments as to how they are creating a sense of belonging or hindering a sense of belonging particularly for their Black and Latine students.

Furthermore, this work helped to answer the call from Ball and Gilligan (2010) that more visual methodologies were needed in order to deeply explore the experience of racism. Newman et al. (2015) also pointed to the need for more qualitative research that gives Black and Latine students in community college a voice. This work built upon Card's (2017) ethnographic film *Tidepools* and subsequent 2021 analysis (Card, 2021). That film empowered Black and Latino male students to use their voices and share their lived experience in community college. This study built upon these critical narratives by examining the Black and Latine experience through the same mediums that participants and students were learning to engage with for their own professions such as filming, editing, sound, but uploaded to social media. The use of TikTok (www.tiktok.com) which was already in student hands, had the potential to expand

representation and student voice in both scholarly and media landscapes and create more accessible data for policy, pedagogical, and curriculum change.

Theoretical Frameworks

The conceptual framework used in this study was sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018), which helped to guide the research questions, dialogue prompts, and debrief interview questions. This framework placed findings into tangible, measurable action. In the college context, Strayhorn (2018) defined sense of belonging to be "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community" (p. 3).

Research showed that a sense of belonging had a positive effect on student achievement and retention rates, particularly with minoritized/global majority students. The opposite was also true in that when students did not feel a sense of belonging, their chances of success in college diminished (Strayhorn, 2018). Therefore, it was critical that educators worked to find where a sense of belonging was lacking in our institutions, and what remedies there may be to increase retention and success rates. Sense of belonging was identified as a basic a human need that came just after physiological and safety needs on Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, and when it was fostered in a community college setting through empowering student voice, more students of color showed to have potential to succeed and continue on into living wage careers.

The study relied on Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) to help provide a foundation of critique into the entertainment industry and helped to support the power of student voice. Counternarratives were essential to this work in order to hear the stories of the very students that we were working to empower, rather than conducting research on them that was assumptive and

exploitative (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Counternarratives were looked at as resistance which put marginalized peoples' stories at the center (L. A. Bell, 2016).

Research Design

This study relied on participatory action research (PAR), which was a research methodology that elicited complex personal experiences that informed situated action. PAR drew from participant-focused methodologies such as oral history, but focused specifically on authentic perspectives through the sharing of lived experiences in a collective way (Kurtz, 2014). By engaging students in the process, we were able to create a deliberate disruption in the fundamental ways schools have potentially failed them, and shifted the antiquated hierarchical structure of education to empower students to become agents for change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Student participants were educated in the research process, engaged in dialogue with fellow students, posted the conversations on TikTok, and were interviewed by the researcher. In this study, the participants were empowered to create their own dialogue prompts with the ability to ask follow-up questions in a semi-structured design, and captured the conversations in a creative way that reflected their learning. In this way, Black and Latine students engaged in dialogue with fellow Black and Latine participants, which enabled a safe and comfortable space that allowed them to authentically share their experiences.

Due to the nature of this cinema and television program, students had a foundational knowledge of producing, filming, and editing videos. That creative base allowed for this participatory action research study to be arts-based as students gathered data by filming student response and uploading to the social media platform TikTok. Student participants worked with the researcher to capture their own stories and the experiences of their peers. To break the typical

academic structure of a written work, participants relied on social media—TikTok specifically—which was already in the hands of community college students. Using this familiar modality helped further engage them in new ways and enabled them to continue to home in on their own creative craft of storytelling. This arts-based approach was inspired by contemporary research designs that utilized media to tell stories, most notably Card's (2017) documentary research film *Tidepools*. Growing from that work, participants in this study created and curated the dialogues that they felt most accurately reflected the lived experience of their fellow student peers as well as themselves. That led to more authentic and credible data because it came directly from students.

Not only was TikTok the most downloaded and used social media platform for college students at the time of the study, it was the first to rely on a televisual feed as its main functionality (Guinaudeau et al., 2020). In this study, participants created visual stories of their fellow students and their experiences, which resulted in a creative and powerful living data set which could be absorbed by policy makers, change agents, more students, faculty, and staff. By utilizing a televisual medium, the creators could better communicate and garner emotional responses, because video utilizes cognitive capabilities to process both visual and verbal stimuli (Guinaudeau et al., 2020).

This methodology demonstrated the impact of film and video as an educational tool to execute an arts-based research project that empowered student participants, resulting in discovery of student experience and their needs in order to meet their educational goals within the Cinema/TV Department. The researcher was able to teach students how to conduct documentary research, and in turn they informed, created, told stories, and gathered data that

could potentially help the Cinema/TV Department find ways to create greater sense of belonging for them. This engagement created a voluminous and varied data set that Torphy et al. (2020) referred to as essential to policy discourse and resources specific to education. The qualitative data was then coded by the researcher using a-priori, in-vivo, and action coding, which led to clear findings that guided action and policy.

Definition of Terms

These terms were developed by the researcher to connect how she viewed each of these items based on her own experience with social media and the entertainment industry.

TikTok. A short-form video hosting social media application where users captured audio and video and edit within the application itself utilizing effects, music, and various forms of media to create engaging content that is shared publicly for consumption and engagement (https://www.tiktok.com).

Social Media. Various platforms that served to provide the ability to create and share information, entertainment, ideas, commentary, all through private or public channels for consumption, response, and sharing.

Film or Cinema Industry/Entertainment Industry/Media/Hollywood. These terms were used interchangeably, and within this work primarily refer to the United States cinema and television industry which was responsible for creating the largest revenue for filmmaking and television consumption.

Production Assistant. An entry-level position, a PA is responsible for anything asked of them on a film or TV set, tasks ranging from but not limited to: driving talent to and from set to

the parking lot or to locations, making copies, replacing walkie talkie batteries, picking up coffee and food, distributing items to crew.

Producers. Specific roles and duties vary depending on production company, budget, studio, etc. But typically producers are responsible for the overall creation of TV shows and films, from hiring, acquiring, scheduling, budgeting, creative, and distribution.

Executives/Executive Producers. Typically responsible for the overall funding of a project, either obtaining or providing finances, and/or overseeing the entire creative process and making finalized decisions before airing or distributing.

Above-the-Line. A term to indicate roles of a film or TV show that deal with the creation of the work and the creative decision-making processes, such as writer, director, producer, and actors.

Below-the-Line. This term referred to the crew who works in production on set such as camera operators, production managers, art directors, grip, and hundreds of other positions. This also includes post-production positions such as editor, visual effects, sound editor, and anything dealing with putting the picture together after it is filmed.

Pre-Production. This is the phase of filmmaking and TV that happens before the work is filmed, such as development of script, scheduling the production, creating the budget, securing creative rights, and much more.

Production (or Principal Photography). Referred to the actual filming of the movie or TV show where cast and crew are on set or location filming scenes and capturing on camera.

Post-Production. This is the final phase of the creation process where editors piece together what was filmed in production to create the story, and positions such as visual effects, color correction, sound editing all work together to put the entire work together.

Positionality

It is important to note that as the researcher, I come from a position of privilege as a White cisgender middle class woman in the United States. I ground myself in Bogotch's (2002) definition of positionality to be "a deliberate intervention that requires the moral use of power" (p. 2) and examines social justice work that "challenge unequal power relationships based on gender, social class, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, language, and other systems of oppression" (p. 2). I have benefitted from centuries of oppression to others, and I am here to use that agency to address issues of social justice and inequity. I have the ability to use that power to change these oppressive structures because I want to exist in a just society.

I am a descendant of Finnish, French, and English settlers/colonizers who made their way to Detroit before America became what it is. My DNA is shared with Finnish miners from Michigan's Upper Peninsula down to English and French settlers/colonizers who credited themselves with founding Detroit, Michigan, by displacing Indigenous peoples: the Ojibwe, Ottawa, and Potawatomi (Redix, 2017; Ryerson, 2020) and enslaving and trading Africans, Indigenous, and Mixed-Race people (Miles, 2017). The wounds that my ancestors created may never be healed, but I can work toward undoing some of that harm moving forward by using my position to empower and uplift once silenced voices.

I continue to see my own history and racial makeup overrepresented in the media and our culture, and have been granted safe passage in most spaces. I am deeply concerned that many do

not have that same experience as a direct result of the societal upholding of White supremacy. I believe that, as a White person, it is my responsibility to work toward dismantling these structures, face the truth of the past, and find ways to create a just world, by focusing on the places I can do the most work to bring about change.

I have always taught in diverse schools and witnessed some of my minoritized/global majority students struggle with factors that some of my White students did not have to deal with. I find that this work here can be helpful to uplift more student voices of color so that they can further be heard, seen, and provided just as much a sense of belonging as anyone else already embedded in the fabric of our complex society. The work is not limited to uplifting student voice, but expands to truly hearing their experiences and needs, and implementing action plans to ensure that their lived experiences continue to improve.

In addition to teaching, I have worked for twenty years in the entertainment industry, which leads me to a perspective that is grounded on what I have seen and experienced throughout my time as a radio DJ, a TV and film producer, editor, and director. I have been in studios, on film and television sets, in post-production houses, and have not seen the diversity that I see in the classroom reflected in those professional spaces.

I believe that my life's work is to leverage these parts of me to help the whole of my students. I try to model what it looks like to be inclusive and honest, self-reflective and critical. As an educator, it is crucial that I avoid living in a "shadow of [my] own complacency" by neglecting the unique needs of my Black and Latine students (Méndez-Morse et al., 2015, p. 135). In my position, I have been in both diverse spaces and primarily White spaces, and have witnessed what a community looks like that does not work to help create an inclusive

environment, and how easy it was to continue to perpetuate that oppression. From my positionality, I can challenge those systems from that perspective, and in turn continue to serve my students on a deeper level. I believe my strength lies in recognizing my own privilege and understanding how many roadblocks were removed from my journey because of my race and upbringing, and looking for ways to identify and remove those blocks from my students' journeys. I want to continue to support and empower students of color to express themselves, help gain the necessary skills and knowledge needed for the entertainment industry, and help to remove blocks for them to achieve their dreams and tell their stories.

Organization of Study

The study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the reader to the study by contextualizing the Cinema/TV Department and demographics, the overall campus and district attributes, and entertainment industry statistics, which led to the problem of practice, research design and questions, and the purpose and significance of the study. Chapter 2 examines the literature organized by thought: equity gaps in the film industry and equity gaps in community college, then to student cultural experience in community college with a focus on Black and Latine experiences. Next the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory and the conceptual framework of sense of belonging is examined, followed by studies that have shown progress in closing equity gaps. Those studies are then narrowed to reflect programs who utilized media specifically to increase student success. Finally, the literature looks to the power of social media, as the study will be using the social media platform TikTok as the medium to explore student narrative. Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the work, the analytical plan, limitations, and delimitations. Chapter 4 explores the findings of the study which are organized by datasets: the

TikTok videos, debrief interviews with participants, roundtable discussions, and comments/likes on the TikTok videos. Chapter 5 provides implications, recommendations for the department based on student voice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to examine Black and Latine student sense of belonging in the Cinema/TV Department at LACC using TikTok. These diverse students were working toward degrees and certificates that could help them gain employment in the entertainment industry, where they were vastly underrepresented. The literature review begins with statistics about equity gaps in community colleges and lack of representation in the film and television industry. Within these equity gaps was a prevalent theme of deficit reporting when it came to minoritized groups, which leads to the next section that addresses that issue by focusing on best practices that worked toward positive outcomes for Black and Latine students. The theoretical framework for the study was Critical Race Theory, particularly focused on the tenet of counternarratives, and the conceptual framework in which the study was grounded; sense of belonging. The literature then brings us to studies that highlight ways to empower Black and Latine students in community colleges, specifically via counternarratives, then moves to even more focused media-based counternarrative studies. This literature was relevant to this study as it informed best practices that focus on closing achievement gaps, grounded the study in its theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and highlighted methodologies that aligned with this study which relied on a visual media component to discover what students needed in order to experience a true sense of belonging.

Shifting from Text to Visual Modalities

As we collectively experienced a more visual society through the use of social media and streaming video on demand services, it seemed only natural for research to also lean into the idea

of visualization as a methodology in order to provide greater depth of understanding to the data. Ball and Gilligan (2010) encouraged more researchers to utilize visual methodologies to further discover student experience in regards to race as they found it useful in their study about migration and social division. Harris and Wood's (2013) study about Black male success rates at community college called for more emphasis to be put on the voices of the marginalized themselves, moving away from deficit thinking and in turn empowering those in the studies to honor and uplift their voices. Card (2017) answered that call by creating a documentary film called *Tidepools*, which examined Black and Latino students' experiences in their community college. This work gave voice to Black and Latino students and used their imagery as well to further empower and understand their authentic lived experiences.

Through on-camera interviews with Black and Latino community college students, Card (2017) discovered several ways that students felt a sense of belonging, primarily and most often noted was positive interactions with faculty. Faculty who validated and took the time to engage with Black and Latino students to show them they truly cared about their success had a significant impact on student participant experiences in community college. Actions such as telling them that they were proud of them and encouraging them to see the course through made students feel that they mattered. The faculty who authentically showed love for students and saw them for who they really were changed students' entire view of college for the better. The participants all responded to the importance of having a faculty member of color as a teacher and/or mentor, who integrated their identities into the curriculum, furthering their sense of belonging.

Card (2017) made these discoveries through visualization in a documentary film modality. Card (2021) believed words alone could not fully encompass the lived experience of marginalized youth, and that, by incorporating the camera, truth could be revealed. Film had the power to take us beyond our own cognitive abilities and engage in emotion, memory, and experience where new thoughts and ideas can be openly formed (Card, 2021). This methodology allowed for a reimagining of world views for both participants and viewers. The current study took this call and expounded further, not only implementing the power of visual and audio but bringing in social media to place the conversation on an even larger landscape.

Equity Gaps in the Film Industry

The United States population as a whole was becoming more diverse as of 2023, with White folks projected to be a minority by 2045 (Punti & Dingel, 2021). According to Hunt and Ramón (2022), the White population decreased from 85% in 1960 to 57.3% in 2021, and was projected to be 47% in 2050. Whereas minority folks accounted for 15% in 1960, then 42.7% in 2021, and were projected to be 53% in 2050. These numbers also reflected the film and television audiences, where minoritized audiences were growing along with the population, and the younger generation of White viewers 18-49 also preferred diverse content (Hunt & Ramón, 2022).

As the audience grew in diversity and expresses a need for diversity, so did the actors on screen. In 2021 people of color were much more prevalent as actors in film leads in front of the camera, quadrupling their representation since 2011. However, as we witnessed actors gradually becoming more diverse, when it came to roles such as writer and director, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) accounted for less than 30%. In 2021, 70% of Hollywood directors

were White, and roles such as executive producer were mostly taken up by White men (Hunt & Ramón, 2022). That was important to note, as executive producers are the people who make the decisions about what stories are told, how they are told, and they make the greatest profit off of those stories.

BIPOC directors typically had more diverse casts than those directed by White men, and usually had smaller budgets. Sixty-seven percent of films that were directed by BIPOC had budgets less than 20 million, whereas 52% of films directed by White folks had budgets less than 20 million. In other words, women and BIPOC were limited to directing only content with women and BIPOC themed content, and with smaller budgets. When there was a White director and a lead of color, 48% of the films had budgets smaller than 20 million, but when there was a director of color and a lead who was White, 63% had budgets that were smaller than 20 million (Hunt & Ramón, 2022). These numbers showed that power still lies with White directors as they had larger budgets than directors of color, even if optically the cast was diverse. Overall this data showed that although diversity was increasing in front of the camera, much work needed to be done to ensure representation and funding for BIPOC creators, directors, and decision making roles.

Equity Gaps in Community College

Research showed that in community colleges, there was a significant gap between White students and their Black and Latine classmates in achievements such as grades and consistent enrollment (Levin et al., 2010). Black and Latine students were more likely to be first-generation college students, more likely to be unprepared for college level instruction, and faced more pressures for finding financial assistance (Greene et al., 2008). Black males in the United States

had an even larger achievement gap, as fewer than 46% of Black males who began high school made it through to graduation in four years (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011). Through their study, Zalaquett and Lopez (2006) found that there was significant inequity for Black students in graduation rates compared to White students. Black students were 23% less likely to graduate compared to their White classmates. Zalaquett and Lopez (2006) factored in economic class; they found that regardless of income, the disparities between races were still prevalent. In the same study, every minoritized group was found to have a significantly lower likelihood of degree completion compared to White women with high incomes. Even high-earning Black men were still 30% less likely to attain a degree compared to their White high-earning counterparts, yet almost equal to low-income White men.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, there were seven barriers that stood in the way of student success in college. Those were: earning a GED or not finishing high school, putting off enrolling for college, not having financial support from parents, being a single parent, having a spouse but also dependents, having to work full-time, and only being able to attend school part-time (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). In 2000, all undergraduates averaged having 2.2 of these obstacles, whereas Black Americans and Latines averaged a higher rate of obstacles, at 2.7. The study showed that any student with risk factors over two only had a 25% likelihood of earning a degree or certificate, and African-American students were even more likely to be unprepared when they entered community college than their classmates due to the inequities of these obstacles (Greene et al., 2008).

As of 2023, Latine folks made up the largest minoritized group in the United States, yet represented only 12% of enrollment in post-secondary institutions, and were less likely to earn

their degrees than White and Asian students (Strayhorn, 2012). These findings showed just how uneven the playing field was in terms of race, and how many more obstacles Black and Latine students faced in order to achieve the same success rates as their White classmates. In order for Black and Latine students to be able to secure employment in the entertainment industry, it was critical for them to feel a sense of belonging in their college so that they complete their courses and degrees. Higher education had the power to provide this space for Black and Latine students, and offer critical skills in order for them to feel a sense of belonging, but college could also preserve systems of oppression (Strayhorn, 2012).

Cultural Experience in Community College

Schooling too often forced youth to reject their own cultural values and adapt to the dominant culture. Wilson (2021) described the absence of BIPOC cultural and lived experiences in the community college curriculum and classroom as "spirit murdering." This was the active act against students of color when they felt their humanity diminished. When a deeply ingrained Eurocentric curriculum was at the forefront (Tachine et al., 2017), duplicated and replicated from the beginning of last century, Black and Latine students in particular missed out on the fully lived experience of belonging. Students identified themselves with both their own sense of self and how others saw them (Gardenshire-Crooks et al., 2010), and when they did not see themselves represented in learning they experienced a psychological effect called psychic disequilibrium. This phenomenon was exacerbated when a teacher described the world and they were not in it, creating a feeling of invisibility (Jenkins, 2022).

Schools are the places where this "spirit murdering" occurs, therefore schools must be where spirits can be healed (Boatswain, 2021). When schools celebrate cultural pride, students

gain cultural integrity and are more likely to succeed because they feel validated and do not have to abandon a part of themselves in order to do so. But this did not often happen, and instead schools subtly promoted the hegemony by validating behaviors and protocols that were aligned with the ideologies of the dominant class, and devalued everyone else (Jayakumar et al., 2013).

Black Student Experience

In California community colleges specifically, Black men were disproportionately underachieving in academic outcomes such as amount of degrees earned, GPA, and persistence and transfer rates (Bush & Bush, 2010). When it came to the lived experience of Black men in community college, Gardenshire-Crooks et al. (2010) found that race was central to their everyday interactions, and they often felt like they were judged as "violent thugs." The men in the study talked about how racism was inescapable in their everyday lives on campus, as one respondent said: "Nobody lives like a Black man. Nobody. It's like everything's designed for us to fail" (Gardenshire-Crooks et al., 2010, p. 22). One of the participants discussed feeling as though there were two strikes against him—one for being young, and the second for being Black, and that he had to work ten times harder not to get the third strike, which usually resulted in jail. In order to escape this, the men in the study chose higher education in hopes of breaking that cycle. They came into the community college aware of the low expectations and stereotypes, which motivated them to dispel those by acquiring the knowledge—what Emdin (2022) called "currency"—to break away from stereotypes and gain cultural capital. For some Black men in Strayhorn's (2012) study, the only choices for belonging were gangs or college, making college a chance to rise above and in some cases, escape death.

Newman et al. (2015) found that Black men in community college adapted to their college environment using a "bicultural" strategy that involved combining street smarts with book smarts in order to navigate their experience. Faced with racism which often came in the form of microaggressions from students, faculty, and staff, the Black men in the study discussed using their survival skills to avoid bad situations. Solórzano et al. (2000) described microaggression as subtle digs toward people of color, which can be quite damaging as they accumulate over time. Participants in the study used examples such as when faculty questioned their academic ability. The subtlety of the microaggressions made it harder for the victim to express the damage done, and in some cases, these microaggressions put the onus on the victim to identify each injustice and justify it, furthering the pain that remains. The need for survival often led to the men isolating, or seeking out other support, which in many cases took the form of religious or spiritual support linked to their communities.

Boatswain (2021) pointed out that colleges can be places where hegemonic structures of White supremacy prevail, harming women of color most of all. Black women discussed experiences of racism via microaggressions in Willis's (2015) study. One woman participant described being the only Black student in her college's study abroad program as a "black dot on a white piece of paper" (Willis, 2015, p. 217). She was not alone—all 19 of the participants in the study also reported experiencing microaggressions.

Bush and Bush (2010) found one of the most effective ways to close these equity gaps between Black and Latine students and White students was higher faculty engagement outside of the classroom. Strayhorn (2012) concurred, noting that positive interactions with faculty and peers drastically increased their sense of belonging. But in order for Black and Latine males to

want to engage with faculty, they had to trust that the campus climate was supportive of them, which many did not.

Wood and Turner (2010) corroborated that notion in their study where they discovered the four key elements that gave Black male students a great chance of success. The four elements were friendly faculty engagement, faculty reminding students of upcoming due dates and checking in on them, listening to students when they have concerns, and authentically championing students to succeed. Yet just as Bush and Bush (2010) discovered, some students revealed that they were afraid of being perceived as unintelligent by their professors and therefore avoided reaching out for help.

Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) found that Black women enrollment had significantly increased since 2000, and that Black women were more likely to be satisfied with their experience in community college when they were engaged with faculty and meaningful educational experiences. Yet results also showed that women, more than men, had greater obligations to family, which was the main reason that Black women could not persist. Those reasons differed from Black men, who did not persist because of the culture of the school itself (Bush & Bush, 2010). Another key difference between Black women's motivations for enrolling in college versus Black men was to gain upward mobility, whereas the Black men cited in the Gardenshire-Crooks et al. (2010) study discussed survival as being the key motivator in enrolling in community college.

Latine Student Experience

Latine men in the Gardenshire-Crooks et al. (2010) study discussed stereotypes against them having to do with socioeconomic class, and the perception that their race suggested they

were less than, and had less, than their peers. Strayhorn's (2012) respondents talked about being both Latine and first-generation, and how that affected their experience in the classroom. The respondents elaborated that other students who were not first-generation had generational experience and knowledge of higher education processes passed down to them, which gave them an advantage. When other non-first-generation students had parents to assist them with financial aid, finding test banks, and study resources, it gave them a head start, leaving first-generation students to figure it out themselves. Participants also discussed the difficulties of financial stress and having to work multiple jobs in addition to full time coursework, which is one of the ways that Strayhorn (2012) found diminished Latine students' sense of belonging.

Through Moreno's (2015) participatory action research involving Hispanic community college students, the adult learners and co-producers reflected on their education, much of which involved feeling marginalized, othered, and victims of racism. Students discussed instances where they were made to feel less-than, with assumptions placed on them that they were not transferring to a university, or that they were in a gang. They felt their culture was made to be erased as Eurocentric culture was emphasized in their schooling. When the students and co-producers shared their experiences with each other, they felt less alone, and united in their experiences. Those dialogues helped them cope with the contradictions and racism they had endured, particularly when they refused to assimilate to the dominant cultural norms (Moreno, 2015).

Martinez-Vogt (2015) explored Latina community college student experiences and discovered many challenges they faced in the institutions. Every Latina in the study had experienced racism, judgment, and stereotyping, which all led to feelings of fear, loneliness,

sadness, and embarrassment. In order to survive, the participants in the study chose to be silent, or felt forced to be silent, both of which led to feelings of protection and a coping mechanism (Martinez-Vogt, 2015). This led to Latina students virtually hiding themselves in order to avoid further assaults to their being.

Corroborating Bush and Bush's (2010) study, Alcantar and Hernandez (2020) found positive faculty interactions with Latine students at community colleges increased Latine student sense of belonging. That feeling of belonging grew when faculty took further steps to show Latine students that they were cared for, such as providing students with resources, assisting them through difficult times, and acknowledging and supporting students' academic and personal challenges and growth in the community college experience (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020). Conversely, when faculty were negative, condescending, or cold, Latine students experienced the opposite effect and were more likely to drop out of school (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020).

Acevedo et al. (2021) found Latina community college students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) felt a sense of belonging on their campus when they sought out fellow peers and faculty who could relate to and support them. Prior to that work, they experienced microaggressions, stereotypes, and questioned their belonging. When the Latina students were validated, particularly by faculty, they felt encouraged to continue their programs and experienced positive feelings toward their studies. Even though they did not have Latine faculty to demonstrate evidence of their own potential success, the faculty that they did have provided enough acknowledgement to their strengths and encouragement to be their authentic selves. That led to their re-engagement with the work and built their confidence in incorporating their culture into their college experience.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This study relied on the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (D. A. Bell, 1976; Crenshaw, 1989) in order to deeply examine the interwoven racism that permeated U.S. society, including both the education system and the entertainment industry. CRT also highlighted the importance of counternarratives, as this study amplified student voice in order to identify the best practices to implement to further their sense of belonging. Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging was the conceptual framework that guided the research questions and potential best practice solutions so that students on campus could feel connected, respected, cared about, and safe to express themselves and contribute to their campus community.

Counternarratives in Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory was born from legal and civil rights scholars as a way to expose and confront racism that was deeply embedded into the fabric of society (Milner & Howard, 2013). The work of D. A. Bell (1976) in examining school desegregation provided the groundwork for CRT scholars to apply the tenets as the base of their work, which Solórzano and Yosso (2002) laid out as:

1. Race and racism as an undeniable and deeply woven, permanent fixture in U.S. society, intersecting with gender, class, language, immigrant status, class, and culture.
2. The impossibility of objectivity, as "color-blindness" and "equality" only serve to detract from the power structures that are historically in place to continue dominant ideology and the marginalization of People of Color.
3. That civil liberties and rights are only granted to People of Color when it also serves in the best interest of White folks.

4. The theory of critical race extends beyond law, civil rights, and education, and permeates disciplines that include but are not limited to sociology, history, psychology, women's studies, and ethnic studies.
5. Counter narratives in research are key to understanding the lived experience of the marginalized, and gives credit and value to those stories. Counter narratives are a critical part of understanding, explaining, and ultimately shifting the way researchers talk about injustices.

The fifth tenet of CRT used in this study was key to unlocking the answers to the research questions, as to what the student experience was for Black and Latine prospective filmmakers at the community college. Critical Race Theory denied other theoretical models that worked to explain inequality yet support majoritarian stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Power lies in counter-story, which is a tool that can face off against the status quo and knock down complacency, centering the narrative on those who have been left out of the conversation for far too long. Projects that put power in the hands of minoritized youth take on the hegemonic structures that attempt to define them in a negative way as a "problem" and instead look at them as partners in solving the problem (Conner & Rosen, 2016). Critical Race Theory grounded this study in the power of counternarratives, and criticized gaps in higher education and the entertainment industry.

Counternarratives have been used in research as a form of resistance that centralized marginalized peoples' stories (Jayakumar et al., 2013). In addition to the fifth tenet of CRT, this study focused on the first tenet as well—that racism was inextricably interwoven and undeniable as a part of U.S. society. This critical lens helped to shape and guide how the data was collected

and analyzed, and helped to recognize the deeper complexities that were occurring under the surface, both in the educational context as well as the entertainment industry. Lopez-Littleton et al. (2018) expanded on this theory not only as a theoretical framework, but as a tool for social justice, in that it challenged the status quo and colonial structures of institutions, and examined the various levels within systems that were set up to create these disparities. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, the institutional barriers on campuses that were non-inclusive, negative or lacking faculty-student relationships, and Eurocentric classroom practices that excluded minoritized students could be accurately dissected (Greene et al., 2008). Furthermore, by using Critical Race Theory, scholarship could be both political and transparent in the outcome; true justice and equality in all intersections—race, ethnicity, class, gender, and socioeconomic structures (Lopez-Littleton et al., 2018).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) designed critical race methodology based on Critical Race Theory as a grounded design that centered race and racism in every part of the research. This methodology confronted traditional research designs and turned to the experience of students of color to inform the data, which saw these narratives as strength. By utilizing this theoretical framework, scholars challenged traditional ways of conducting educational research by admitting that educational institutions upheld oppressive practices and marginalized BIPOC. By shifting what was deficit-informed research on people of color, this put the microphone in their hands—literally and figuratively—so that their experiences became the data. In this way, the commitment to social justice that this theory upholds helped to work toward ridding of racism and empowering minoritized groups by recognizing that their experience was central to

knowledge. That understanding was legitimate and critical to understand how institutions could shift to a place where minoritized youth could thrive (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Counter stories contributed to four functions: first, to build community among marginalized students who saw themselves reflected in educational research. Second, to challenge the knowledge created thus far by the majority by providing a context meant to second guess dominant belief systems. Third, to show new possibilities for minoritized students. Finally, to teach others that by integrating marginalized voices, we can create a richer, more vibrant and complex world than the one we are living in now (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Developing a Sense of Belonging

Hurtado and Carter (1997) defined "sense of belonging" as the social integration of students of color into the college landscape. The concept of sense of belonging focused specifically on students so that they felt they could be their authentic self and belong just as they were, without feeling as though they needed to conform to the institutions' norms, which often follow a Eurocentric hegemonic structure. Strayhorn (2012) identified seven core elements that made up a sense of belonging. The first was to feel that one belongs is a basic human need, which was magnified in a college setting as the very chance of students' success relied on it. The second was a sense of belonging was a motive that drove humans to make decisions and take action. Third, a sense of belonging was even more important in certain situations and times, such as in the classroom, which yielded relative outcomes. Fourth, humans wanted to feel like they matter, and a sense of belonging directly related to the need for students to know that they were cared about. The fifth element focused on how one's cultural identity affected a college student's sense of belonging. Sixth was when a sense of belonging was achieved, it unlocked further well-

being and happiness. And finally, sense of belonging was evolving and shifting as situations changed. All of these elements spoke to the importance of a community college to instill a sense of belonging in order for its students to succeed.

Martinez and Munsch (2019) found that when a student felt connected, accepted, cared about, valued and important, they experienced belonging. This belonging helped minoritized students in particular with retention rates and completion. In order for belonging to occur, faculty and staff needed to be culturally competent, and know about student heritages and communities. Training was critical in this arena. The five strategies that Martinez and Munsch proposed to create belonging based on their research were:

1. Training new faculty and staff to understand student needs, resources, and cultural contexts.
2. Developing cohort models for students including orientation.
3. Utilizing social media for student engagement and connection.
4. Encouraging students to join clubs and sports.
5. Having each department hold its own orientation, meetings, and special events.

Many scholars supported these findings. Gardenshire-Crooks et al. (2010) found social and academic engagement were fundamental to student success. Research showed that students who were engaged with faculty, fellow peers, counselors, or resource programs were more likely to succeed academically to completion. Specifically, higher retention rates were found when faculty showed respect for students and their individualism, and proved their concern for their students by sharing their own vulnerabilities. Another element that helped was having a place to

socialize and relax, like basketball courts, a field to throw a ball around, or informal sports teams to engage with each other and the campus community (Gardenshire-Crooks et al., 2010).

Measuring a sense of belonging could be subjective, but Allen et al. (2021) synthesized belonging research and found four components that helped to determine if an individual felt a true sense of belonging, which they defined as the potent feeling that emerges when the following intertwined components were met. Those were:

1. The person's abilities to belong (skills to relate to others, develop their own identity, and connect to their environment, which can all be learned and developed).
2. The person's opportunities to belong (available resources, groups, spaces that enable belonging).
3. A person's motivation to belong (when the person feels they can seek out connections and engage).
4. The person's perceived sense of belonging (when the first three components are met, does the person still subjectively feel that they matter).

Sense of belonging was not only imperative for student success, but to one's own physical and mental health. Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015) found that social isolation, the opposite of sense of belonging, could lead to health risks equal to smoking 15 cigarettes per day.

Sense of belonging went beyond academics and data. When students felt safe to connect themselves to campus, and be their authentic selves, they had a greater chance to complete the program and better their lives (Pardede et al., 2021). In the case of this study, students had potential to contribute to the changing landscape of the entertainment industry by adding their unique and needed voices. Critical Race Theory empowered student voice at the research level,

and by aligning with the models for sense of belonging, the outcome could help point to specific needs of the cinema students so that they had a greater chance to complete the program. Wilson (2021) recognized that much scholarly work put Black and Latine student voices at the forefront as data. Their study continued that work and showed how Black and Latine students have resisted oppressive institutional barriers and forged a sense of belonging. This study added to that work by utilizing Critical Race Theory and sense of belonging as frameworks.

Promising Practices

The literature turns to practices researchers have found that instilled a greater sense of belonging in college students. Studies showed that when minoritized students felt the permanence of sense of belonging, they experienced positive academic success (Allen et al., 2021). That sense of belonging even had the potential to last beyond the academic setting and into student careers and transfer opportunities, setting them on a continued path of success.

Educators as Co-Conspirators

Wilson (2021) believed that community colleges could shift from maintaining the status quo to helping to create career pathways for students of color. In order to do this, their study pointed to empowering students to be their authentic selves. They found that through this lens, a sense of belonging came through the formation of student clubs, and engaging with faculty who taught from love and put emphasis on the authentic exploration of Black and Brown student experiences, lives, and culture (Wilson, 2021). When educators were what Love (2019) described as co-conspirators, they had the ability to help to identify and tear down oppressive structures and create pathways to equality for students of color. Educators who were engaged in building a community of learning together and truly believing that everyone should be their

authentic selves were already engaged in this concept and work. Love (2021) gave an example of a co-conspirator versus an ally in an anecdote. Bree Newsome was the young Black woman who had climbed up a flagpole to take down the racist confederate flag in front of a building in the U.S. South. Police were ready to tase the pole, which would have reached Newsome, causing her to fall. To prevent this, James Tyson, who was White, went to the pole and kept his hand wrapped around it to protect Newsome, who was still high up on the pole, knowing that the police would not tase it while he held on. That was a co-conspirator—using privilege to help others.

Educators could be co-conspirators when they shifted mindsets as Freire (1970/2017) reminded us—the role of teacher was to help guide students to becoming their full authentic selves. Education needed to shift away from "banking methods," which was merely filling students with knowledge from those in power who saw students as empty vessels. We can work to identify the conditions of oppression to in turn challenge those conditions, which is the key to emancipation (Freire, 1970/2017). Marley (1980) concurs, when he wistfully crooned, "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds" (1:14).

Punti and Dingel (2021) said, "When theories and assessments of cultural competence do not address issues of racial privilege, inequality, and power, they embody a White Eurocentric focus that results in a hierarchical view of the 'rightness' of dominant culture" (p. 3). This allowance of the status quo continued to lead to a blockage in creating a true sense of belonging. When a campus engaged in authentic cultural engagement, students had higher self-confidence and sense of belonging, for BIPOC and White students alike. So long as this belonging was presented and executed in a way that did not just allow White students to grow and learn without

the understanding that minoritized students have a much different experience and may feel forced to assimilate into the dominant culture (Punti & Dingel, 2021). In other words, belonging applied to all students, but educators must be careful that it does not become White "wokeness" at the expense of the experience of BIPOC students.

With research-backed suggestions, several studies have implemented changes within institutions to document growth. Cate and Russ-Eft (2020) used a post-colonial approach to help bridge these inequities by bringing Latin American learning characteristics to community colleges in the United States. They found that utilizing "service learning" strategies helped to engage the Latine community by incorporating their own culture and community into the learning process, which in turn helped to create an anti-colonial structure in and out of the classroom. The results showed that breaking the individualistic societal mindset and incorporating a more collectivist cultural norm may have helped bridge the divide and feeling of otherness in Latine communities. Strayhorn (2012) found that Latine students with frequent interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds increased their sense of belonging.

Faculty Engagement

More than 81% of Black males in California who were attending college were doing so at the community college level (Bush & Bush, 2010). With this knowledge comes responsibility to ensure students are engaged in a sense of belonging on campus. Bush and Bush (2010) found that the strongest indicator of satisfaction for students was faculty interaction. Students who engaged with faculty were more likely to feel satisfied with their overall experience in the institution. Through their study, Bush and Bush created a list of recommendations for

community college practices that could provide greater success for Black men, which can also apply to Black women and Latine students:

1. Develop programs that directly target Black male students.
2. Create mentorship programs with faculty.
3. Engage students in an orientation program with specific Black needs addressed.
4. Hire more Black faculty.
5. Create Black learning communities and cohorts.
6. Utilize Black representation in coursework.
7. Engage in campus activities that engage Black men in the school culture.
8. Create a peer program pairing Black males with second and third year students.

Community colleges already offered many support systems, but one of the issues could have been student lack of awareness about their existence (Gardenshire-Crooks et al., 2010). In their study, Gardenshire-Crooks et al. (2010) found that creating and implementing mandatory new student orientation programs helped to engage students in a sense of belonging on campus. Other solutions found in the study involved student success courses put on by counselors. The counselors conducted workshops where students learned to deal with stress, improve test taking and study habits, set goals, and learn about campus resources like the library and tutoring centers. Gardenshire-Crooks et al. further suggested creating "learning communities" where students moved together through coursework and established relationships, which was a key method to persistence.

Another solution that aligned with much of the research was mentoring from faculty, which demonstrated positive social and cognitive skill growth. The mentor served as an advocate

and role model for students as they navigated the college landscape. Training mentors to better understand their roles and provide further support was also key (Gardenshire-Crooks et al., 2010). As was having places on campus for Black men in particular to be able to unwind and connect, such as fitness centers, athletic fields, and sports teams to rally behind. Yet another suggestion was to have an open forum where students, faculty, and staff could talk about racism on campus, which raised awareness of the pain and frustration BIPOC students experienced, and helped to uncover ways to help students feel more welcome (Gardenshire-Crooks et al., 2010).

Levin et al. (2010) found promising practices that included committed faculty willing to be active participants in student learning in and out of the classroom, as well as their development of group solidarity mindset that was implemented from the beginning of the learning experience. Greene et al. (2008) also found that this active engagement helped bridge the equity gap. When engagement from teachers with students increased, particularly with Black and Latine students, they succeeded academically at greater levels than their White classmates. Engagement included academic preparation, mental stimulation, and tailored class assignments. Although the levels of engagement from Black students may also suggest the result of having to put in even more energy to compensate for racial barriers, the research demonstrated that engagement was critical (Greene et al., 2008).

This promising practice of faculty engagement was extended further to include the industry to which the students were working to belong. In their study, Levin et al. (2010) found that these bridges from faculty and program to the industry and potential employers both helped students to gain employment but also gave recognition to the program itself, furthering the

credibility of its students. These interactions helped solidify learning and gave students a better understanding of how their work applied directly to their future, and built their confidence.

Community college practitioners in Baldwin et al. (2011) were open to learning and shifting their own methods and had a desire to be change agents. Researchers found that this inherent desire to create change by the practitioners served as a solid base line, which led to the most important component to change they discovered, which was continued dialogue. Baldwin et al. (2011) asserted that it was imperative that faculty engage in difficult but crucial discussions throughout the disciplines in order to find new ways to help students. From there, they suggested college leaders should continue these discussions on a national level to help grow their own college's mission and discover new strategies that can help close the achievement gaps at their own institutions. "Change happens in a classroom, not a boardroom. Faculty and staff must be key players in the dialogue on student success and be empowered to address barriers to success. Campus culture must be transformed to one where the community truly believes in the right to succeed" (Baldwin et al., 2011, p. 86).

Basic Skills Courses

Much of the research suggested the implementation of basic skills courses to help bridge the achievement gap. Greene et al. (2008) found that 60% of students in community college needed at least one year of basic course work. Of those, African Americans were twice as likely as White students to enroll in these developmental courses, and almost 40% less likely to complete their degrees. These developmental courses included what Cate and Russ-Eft (2020) found to be the most effective skills: communication, leadership, language, and public speaking.

These empowering skills helped students become advocates for themselves, and led them to a greater engagement in the learning process.

Not only did developmental courses help bridge the gap, but they also gave students much needed confidence and self-worth. Levin et al. (2010) recognized that some Latine students in particular needed assistance to gain belief in themselves. Basic skills courses, in a scaffolded sequence, proved to be one of the most helpful practices in bridging equity gaps and helping students gain critical self-confidence in themselves and the learning process. Beginning with the assessment of student need, then proper placement into these basic skills courses, with trained faculty, showed tremendous outcomes. The delivery of the courses ranged from short term modules, entire courses, supplemental or group instruction. The basic skills courses could be decentralized so that faculty in one department could teach basic skills courses along with the college-level courses they were already trained to instruct (Jeffcoat et al., 2014).

Community college students who completed developmental courses were more than 11% more likely to earn their degree compared with those who did not take the remedial courses (Jeffcoat et al., 2014). Furthermore, the creation of a "success center" on a community college campus alleviated confusion and extra work on the students' end by providing centralized courses, and made the course roadmap achievable and consistent. This development of cohesion, cooperation, connection, and consistency allowed disadvantaged students to overcome adversity and thrive (Levin et al., 2010).

Counternarratives Using Media

Empowering students to create their own narratives using media is an act of power and justice. Creating media is a tool for students to challenge and counter the imagery they often see

of themselves in mainstream media (Conner & Rosen, 2016). Students can engage in creating their own narratives, and the very work of creation grants them skills of collaboration, producing, filming, editing, music, and more (Conner & Rosen, 2016).

Film and media focused research have shown that active change agents who utilized various forms of media helped to close the achievement gap. By using film as a method of instruction for urban teachers, Sealey-Ruiz (2011) found that participants were more engaged, more willing to contribute to discussion, and felt more connected to their own experiences. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, Sealey-Ruiz was able to examine the counter narratives prevalent in a particular documentary called *Beyond the Bricks.* These counter narratives were crucial to help challenge the status quo and break down racist ideologies. The participants noted that just by viewing one documentary, it challenged their ways of thinking when it came to educating Black youth.

Alemán and Alemán (2016) found these counter stories through media as highly effective tools in transforming culture and closing the equity gap. They found that in the process of creating a documentary film and a student newspaper, Chicano/a students were able to create spaces that allowed them to find their identities, feel a sense of belonging, and reclaim their voices, their history, and their culture. Critical Race Theory was the foundation for their film *Stolen Education*, which gave voice to students who experienced disadvantaged schooling practices. By using the powerful medium of film, students were able to demonstrate activism and leadership. The impact of the film was two-fold: students found resilience through the creation of the film, and then each screening of the film created teaching and healing opportunities to all of those in the audience (Alemán & Alemán, 2016). These screenings created space and place for

difficult and complex dialogue, and provided a common ground, which resulted in healing and understanding. Williams (2019) confirmed the power of visual storytelling in their work with students in a communication English course that relied on visuals to cement their learning. They found that the students valued visual projects at the college level just as much if not more than typical published works.

Tynan and Loew (2010) looked at The Tribal Youth Science Initiative (TYSI) as an innovative way to use media as a learning and connectivity tool. Students from the Lac Courte Oreilles Indian Reservation aged nine to 14 learned how to create videos at a community college. In those videos, the students interviewed community elders with traditional knowledge of the land to learn about the science of the wildlife that surrounded them. Students were able to gain video production skills, learn culturally relevant science, and engage their own culture and community all through media. The students found the project empowering, as they were able to use their native language, and explored ways that the environment affected their own culture and experience. The students in turn saw themselves as activists and change agents. This all developed from the construction of the videos, the process of the videos themselves, and the viewing and sharing of the videos with their community (Tynan & Loew, 2010).

Conner and Rosen (2016) studied the Presenting our Perspective on Philly Youth News (POPPYN) program that created much needed space and resources for youth to challenge the negative representations they saw in their media. Through this initiative, students put the power in their own hands to create videos that showed them in a brighter light. By engaging students in their own creations, they in turn felt seen, valued, and safe in being who they truly are in line with their identities, which was key to fostering a sense of belonging. Barley and Russell (2019)

added that visual data created by students empowered them by having complete control over how their identities and cultures were represented, and that data became richer, unexpected, and engaging for participants and receivers of information.

Goldman et al. (2008) looked at a youth media arts organization grounded in social justice. Students created documentaries to discuss their own experiences in certain contexts, leading researchers to conclude that in doing so, students gained power, rights, and organization skills; all things that they were denied before participating in media production. They posited that this kind of learning engaged youth in ways that the classroom alone could not provide.

Finally, Charmaraman (2013) focused on an after-school media production program that helped minoritized students see themselves as active change agents within their community. Their social and cultural capital grew as they worked together to create as a group, they felt safe and a sense of belonging to fully express their authentic selves, and they formed and felt a part of a diverse community. These were all well founded examples of how student-based media can challenge and shift away from damaging hegemonic effects that the media created by engaging students to be their own authors of how they wanted to be portrayed.

The Power of TikTok

Social media applications such as Facebook (https://www.facebook.com), Instagram (https://www.instagram.com), TikTok, and Twitter (https://www.twitter.com) became the main source of information regarding racial inequity and institutional oppression, even more so than mainstream news and academia (Daly et al., 2019; Qiyang & Heekyoung, 2019). This powerful modality cannot be overlooked as a tool to empower students to engage with each other and society, especially considering that as of 2023, over 96% of all adults ages 18-64 access the

internet on a regular basis, and that age groups 15-25 and 25-35 made up the majority of Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter users (Fielden et al., 2018). Discourse surrounding racial inequity continued to grow, and students were already relying on social media to express themselves beyond the classroom (Cook et al., 2020; Daly et al., 2019; Khalifa et al., 2016; Shields, 2010).

Social media had exponentially evolved and became democratized at a rapid pace. The *New York Times* referred to TikTok as how young people got their cable news (Guinaudeau et al., 2020). Political pundits and professionals who once relied on YouTube to engage in political dialogues were using TikTok to reach an even broader audience, suggesting that TikTok had become professionalized in a democratic space (Guinaudeau et al., 2020).

Since its debut in 2017 by Chinese media company ByteDance, TikTok was the most downloaded application on the Apple App Store by 2020 (Guinaudeau et al., 2020), and was used primarily by college students; 46% were 18-24 (Hayes et al., 2020). The popularity of TikTok could be attributed to its ability to engage in collaborative dialogue and learning, providing more interactive experiences than other platforms, particularly with its ability to create on a multitude of levels (Qiyang & Heekyoung, 2019). It was the only application that synthesized the four most impactful elements of social media: a feed, a televisual medium, fine-tuned algorithms, and an interface that works best through mobile phones (Guinaudeau et al., 2020).

Hayes et al. (2020) looked at a TikTok account created by undergraduate students called "The Chemistry Collective" which consisted of 16 videos with 8,500 views. After surveying viewers, researchers found that most viewers agreed strongly that they had learned something

new about chemistry after watching the TikToks, and had an increased interest in chemistry. This demonstrated that TikTok could be an effective tool to engage the students involved in capturing the content and the public alike, bringing education to an entirely new level.

Based on the findings of their study, Escamilla-Fajardo et al. (2021) concluded that TikTok was uniquely positioned to be an effective teaching-learning tool as it allowed expression through imagery and music. In their mixed method approach, they analyzed the effect of TikTok on students. They found that students were motivated, engaged in learning, and developed skills of curiosity and creativity. They argued that with social media already being in the hands of youth, it was critical for educational institutions to embrace, learn, and utilize these methods to further engagement and inspiration.

The skills learned by creating TikToks as a pedagogical tool also helped contribute to student success and belonging in the media industry. Chan et al. (2017) determined that students could engage in meaningful learning by utilizing digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool. Through TikTok, students learned the art and skills of video production, such as filming, editing, voiceover recording, graphics, and music (all while conducting research). Students could find their voice, express themselves, and be heard, all in an authentic and meaningful way (Chan et al., 2017).

TikTok could foster a sense of belonging as it allowed the user to engage with a diverse audience in ways it might not in a face-to-face setting (Edwards, 2021). Although engagement through comments and responses on social media were not always immediate, the messaging was still just as relevant (Edwards, 2021). Further, Edwards (2021) found that the very use of social media encouraged self-efficacy in students as they felt empowered to utilize a platform

with which they are already comfortable and engaged. Edwards pointed to the power of social media to influence public discourse, which took the conversation from the confines of academia and opened it to the world outside, just as this current study aimed to accomplish.

In Closing

Community colleges showed significant and consistent equity gaps in achievement when it came to Black and Latine students. The research showed that when students of color had faculty who cared, basic skills courses and access to resources, community colleges could be places for healing, building cultural and economic capital, career and personal growth. The media landscape could be another place for marginalized/global majority students to feel oppressed, but when it was used to amplify their voices and stories in studies using counternarratives, they felt empowered. Promising practices that focused on student sense of belonging could increase success and retention rates for students of color. Utilizing media to inform educators and policy makers, particularly visual mediums, can work toward further dismantling antiquated power structures, give voice to students, and create change. The undeniable power of social media was beginning to play a part in education, and this study expanded on this concept to create a qualitative, arts-based, participatory action research study, which is explained in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The scholarly literature presented in the previous chapter enumerated several promising practices that can help students achieve a sense of belonging in community college. One of the most prevalent of those was faculty engagement, followed by opportunities to form communities such as orientation or mentorship programs. Before implementing practices based on literature alone, this study served to bridge the gap in literature where it lacked a focus on community college film programs specifically, and in turn utilized visual methodology to discover the true student experience and degrees of a sense of belonging.

LACC's Cinema and Television Department operated within LACC, which was one of nine campuses in the Los Angeles Community College District—the largest in the country and as of 2023, one of the largest in the world. LACC was located in East Hollywood, California, with the iconic Hollywood sign beaming above. The Cinema/TV Department offered affordable, comprehensive, industry standard hands-on skill training and creative guidance to prepare its students for careers in the entertainment industry. The department provided courses in basic and advanced film and television production, covering aspects such as screenwriting, producing, cinematography, directing, sound, editing, and color correction. The coursework could lead to focused certificates of achievement or Associate of Art degrees that students could use to help gain employment in the entertainment industry or transfer to four-year universities.

LACC was a minority serving institution, and as of 2023, Latine students accounted for 55% of the population. However, Latine students were experiencing a lower retention rate than those of their White and/or Asian peers (Gasman & Conrad, 2022; OIE, 2023). A 2021 equity

audit and supportive research (Bush & Bush, 2010; Klein, 2021) showed that Black males, more than any other race or ethnic group, had the lowest retention rate in gaining advancement through the Cinema/TV program.

The LACC Cinema/TV Department was uniquely positioned to create a culture of belonging in that it can offer accessible hands-on training that fosters inclusive learning environments and nurtures creativity and self-expression, and, if done well, can increase retention rates for those who have been marginalized, resulting in greater diverse representation in the media industry to which the students are working to belong. This was shown through the district-wide data that indicated the Cinema/TV Department at LACC had a 6% higher success rate for every ethnic breakdown from 2018-2023. During winter semesters during that time, the department showed success rates up to 14% higher than the campus average (OIE, 2023).

As of 2023, there was no research that demonstrated what community college film programs can do to increase diverse representation in the entertainment industry by focusing on retention and success rates for marginalized students. There was very limited scholarship on community college film departments, their demographic makeup, and what was being done to help Black and Latine students in particular gain access and entrance into the entertainment industry. This study began to fill that gap in literature while working to discover what the Cinema/TV Department was doing to show the 6% increase (OIE, 2023) in success compared to the rest of campus, as well as what could be done to further the retention and success rates for Black and Latine students by characterizing their experiences and sense of belonging. This arts-based study relied on participatory action research (PAR) and utilized the social media platform TikTok to help to answer the research questions in a creative and accessible way.

Research Questions

In order to explore the lived experience and sense of belonging of Black and Latine students, the following research questions guided this arts-based study. The outcomes could help develop implications for policy, practice, pedagogy, and curriculum shifts for the Cinema/TV Department and the college as a whole.

1. What are the lived experiences of Black and/or Latine students in the Cinema/TV Department at this community college?
2. What do Black and Latine student narratives reveal about their sense of belonging and support systems at this community college's Cinema/TV Department?

The second chapter provided literature that pointed to ideas in support of a greater sense of belonging, such as the five strategies that Martinez and Munsch (2019) proposed:

1. Training new faculty and staff to understand student needs, resources, and cultural contexts.
2. Developing cohort models for students including orientation.
3. Utilizing social media for student engagement and connection.
4. Encouraging students to join clubs and sports.
5. Having each department hold its own orientation, meetings, and special events.

Bush and Bush (2010) also developed ideas to foster belonging based on their research which included:

1. Develop programs that directly target Black male students.
2. Create mentorship programs with faculty.
3. Engage students in an orientation program with specific Black needs addressed.

4. Hire more Black faculty.
5. Create Black learning communities and cohorts.
6. Utilize Black representation in coursework.
7. Engage in Campus activities that engage Black men in the school culture.
8. Create a Peer program pairing Black males with second and third year students.

This study relied on the conceptual framework of sense of belonging. (Strayhorn, 2012) and was grounded in Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989). The literature provided a method to gauge whether or not the aforementioned action items were desired by students specifically in the Cinema/TV Department at LACC. Examining Black and Latine student sense of belonging by engaging them in dialogues about their experiences and feelings allowed this study to inform ways in which the department and campus as a whole can shift to create an even greater sense of belonging that could in turn increase retention and success rates.

Method

This participatory action research (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014) study took place during the course of one spring semester on the campus of LACC, in the Cinema/TV Department. Following a qualitative approach, the four research participants conducted semi-structured dialogues (Seidman, 2006) with prompts that they formulated. The objective of each prompt was to guide the research participant closer to understanding whether or not students felt a sense of belonging and support in the Cinema/TV Department, and what factors contributed to their sense of belonging or the lack thereof. By using the discussions with student respondents and follow-up debrief interviews with participants as data, the researcher was able to examine in greater depth the nuances that went into the student experience and humanize the results. This

qualitative, counternarrative participatory action research methodology used an arts-based approach through the social media platform TikTok, which led to tangible recommendations for promising practices to increase student sense of belonging.

Modality

The study incorporated art into the data gathering by using the social media forum TikTok as the modality. This concept followed closely along Card's (2017) narrative inquiry collaboration work on the documentary film *Tidepools*, where Black and Latine community college students reflected on their community college experiences in front of camera. The deliberate choice to use TikTok furthers the visual methodology by serving as a bridge from academia into the public sphere, which welcomed further thought and conversation, and allowed for more decision makers and students alike to better understand the student experience. This approach also enabled productive conversations with decision makers such as faculty and administration who could help establish a stronger sense of belonging in higher education.

The modality of TikTok allowed for participants to upload each dialogue prompt response as a video. Participants relied on the creative freedom the application allows such as utilizing the in-app music library, filters, effects, emojis, and the ability to edit within the application itself (Guinaudeau et al., 2020). The resulting data was available on a public TikTok page titled @youmatterhereatlacc for viewing and engagement. Views, likes and comments from TikTok users were also taken into account as a data set, which brought even more perspective to the study.

Counternarratives Through PAR

The focus on counternarratives (L. A. Bell, 2016) helped empower participants and validated their valuable stories, which created broader awareness of their experiences. This dynamic research approach allowed audiences to see students in a new light and challenged deficit framings. By hearing and seeing participants' narratives, and witnessing their experience, a deeper data set emerged in order to find best practices for student sense of belonging.

The counternarratives in this study were documented by utilizing participatory action research (PAR). PAR tradition is steeped in social justice, as it evolved during the civil rights era in order to empower marginalized people, often at the intersection of minoritized groups based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and disability (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). This methodology proved critical for this study because it generated more authenticity when dialogues were had by and with students who looked like each other and were from similar backgrounds, versus being interviewed by the primary researcher, who was their White professor.

The study drew on inspiration from prior PAR works, such as Romero et al.'s (2008) study that engaged Latine students to create video documentaries and newsletters in order to showcase their research findings on segregation in their Arizona schools. That work, like this one, used visual methods to bridge the gap between academia and into practice, making it accessible for stakeholders to absorb and make decisions toward social justice.

This paradigm shift in turning students into active participants in the construction of knowledge (Barley & Russell, 2019) continued in Moreno's (2015) participatory action research study. By destabilizing power dynamics and shifting the meaning to student experience, Moreno was able to authentically address their feelings of alienation in the community college classroom.

These feelings became known as the participants were given space and time to engage in dialogue about their experience in their community college mathematics courses. Those voices, typically suppressed, were elevated and thematically observed by Moreno, who then used the findings to restructure pedagogy and curriculum to be more inclusive.

Riina-Ferrie (2020) worked primarily in a youth participatory action research program called Cyphers for Justice, where he engaged with students to utilize media to express themselves. Students were given the autonomy to create their own videos that allowed them to talk about and act out their frustration at antiquated power dynamics in their schools. By engaging in the study, students were able to feel centered in their experiences and rebel against what once felt like oppressive classroom spaces (Riina-Ferrie, 2020).

Fine et al. (2007) took PAR a step further and utilized student voice in a class action lawsuit against the state of California. In the lawsuit that was settled in 2004, students from a working-class school district sued the state for inadequate schools; from their structures to teachers (California Department of Education, n.d.). Fine was asked to testify as an expert, but was only willing to do so once the students themselves were heard. Students testified to their experiences, and won their case (Fine et al., 2007).

PAR was developed using Critical Race Theory as the foundation, and holds educational institutions responsible for addressing inequity by engaging students in analysis of power structures (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). PAR gives students the opportunity to work against these oppressive structures by using their voices to critically analyze and comment on their worlds (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). The actual act of listening to students is crucial to create policies and practices aimed toward social justice (Warren & Marciano, 2018). This study

provided that space and allowed for the necessary dialogue from students in order to make integral changes within the department and campus to begin to build the world in which they want to thrive. Student narratives helped create a catalyst for department wide action plans, policy and pedagogical changes. PAR showed them that change is attainable and that they themselves had the power to change it (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). As Freire (1982) put it:

> The silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world. In this context research becomes a means of moving them beyond silence into a quest to proclaim the world. (p. 30)

Procedures

Participatory action research was key for this study. As Ozer (2017) discovered in their study, by drawing on the expertise of the students, researchers were able to identify more accurately what the genuine needs of the students were. Critical to the process was the constant examining of the racial and power dynamics between the primary researcher and participants, as evidenced by Vakil and Ayers (2019). The focus was continuously put on the students and their experiences, and not the researcher's own potential ingrained bias or beliefs. The institutional leaders relied heavily on research for decision making and program creation and had positive beliefs in research (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017). Therefore engaging in a hands-on, mixed method approach proved to be valuable in creating student-centered ways to close equity gaps in the department.

Participants

Terminology Used to Describe Key Players in the Study

To make clear the moving parts of this study, the following terminologies are defined:

Researcher. The primary researcher who conceptualized, implemented, wrote, and coded the study.

Participant. The four Cinema/TV students selected to carry out the study and gather data by engaging their fellow student peers using TikTok. They were responsible for the dialogue prompts, the filming of engagement with students, and editing and uploading the responses to TikTok.

Student or Student Respondent. The Cinema/TV students that the participants engaged in dialogue with and filmed using TikTok. Their names were not used.

Recruitment of Participants

In order to recruit participants, the study relied on convenience sampling (Etikan et al., 2016). As a professor in the Cinema/TV Department that was studied, the primary researcher had access to students in the classroom and throughout the department through email blasts and department social media. The primary researcher presented the study in each of the courses that they teach, announced the study on Instagram, and added the information to the weekly department blasts leading up to the study. These announcements described the study in detail as well as criteria for participants, which were as follows: Identify as Black and/or Latine, be a full-time or part-time currently enrolled student in the Cinema/TV Department, at least 18 years of age at the time of the study, have the capability to record and upload to TikTok, be willing to

commit to two to four hours per week for four weeks, and willing to be interviewed and filmed. Those who were first interested and met the criteria were selected.

Participants Selected

The recruitment process led to the selection of four research participants who met the criteria and were interested in the study. Ritab identified as a Black/American female aged 56. Cecilia was Honduran and female, age 26. Francis was as Latino/Brazilian and was a 39-year-old male. Jeje identified as a Black female, age 35.

Orientation

The primary researcher engaged the four participants in an orientation to teach them research fundamentals, the mechanics of engaging in dialogues, and a review of capturing audio and video using TikTok. The researcher and participants carefully examined the research questions of the study, as well as the conceptual framework of sense of belonging. From there, the researcher and participants worked together to determine the interview prompts that they would each use when engaging with fellow students.

Participants were given the bill of rights that clearly described the study, the study's consent form, and the appearance release for them to consider. Appearance releases gave participants the right to use student likeness on TikTok. Participants were given blank appearance releases for each student who appeared on camera to sign.

The researcher demonstrated how to approach fellow students, explain the study, check criteria, and gauge their interest in engaging in dialogue. Once students signed the appearance release, they were ready to discuss their own thoughts and experiences as Black and/or Latine

students in the Cinema/TV Department. The participants immediately understood the assignment and were excited to begin.

Measures

Creation of Dialogue Prompts

Each dialogue prompt was carefully designed by the participants with feedback from the primary researcher in a collaborative space. The prompts were written based on the conceptual framework of sense of belonging, in a semi-structured format that allowed for participants to ask follow-up and probing questions. The resulting questions were formed, along with examples of follow up questions that the researcher provided:

1. Do you feel safe to express who you authentically are when you are here in the Cinema/TV Department? (Follow-up questions "Why or why not?" and "Can you give an example of a time that you did or didn't feel that way?")
2. Do you feel you have enough support and resources to succeed based on your educational background and needs? (Such as your own academic experience, access to equipment, help with writing, faculty mentorship, etc.)
3. Do you see yourself reflected in the classroom from faculty? (Follow-up question "Do you see yourself represented in the curriculum? (Class lectures, assignments).")
4. Do you feel socially accepted with your peers in the Cinema Department?
5. What do you suggest can be done to make you and your peers feel more accepted in the Cinema Department community?
6. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Engaging Fellow Students

Each of the four participants conducted dialogues with at least three students in the Cinema/TV Department. Most of the participants chose to upload each dialogue prompt response as its own separate TikTok video, while others uploaded one student answering all of the prompts as one full video. This structure brought the total number of TikTok dialogue data sets to 54 videos featuring 19 unique student voices.

The latest data report from spring semester 2023 indicated total enrollment in the Cinema/TV Department to be 1,219 students. Of those, 564 identified as Hispanic and 156 as Black (OIE, 2023). Therefore, students from those two racial demographics made up over 60% of the department's students. The 19 TikTok voices plus the four participants brought a total of 23 students in this study who represented 3% of the department's Black and Latine student population. Identifying as Black and/or Latine was one of the requirements to engage in the study, as well as being a current full-time or part-time student in the Cinema/TV Department, at least 18 years of age, and willing to be interviewed and filmed.

Participants used convenience sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) because they had access to the student population via one of the shared requirements, which was to be an actively enrolled student in the Cinema/TV Department. Participants spent time in the common areas of the department as well as announced the study in their respective cinema classes. Those students who met the criteria engaged in dialogues with participants, who then recorded and uploaded the conversations to TikTok. The student volunteers were given the overview of the study, what was expected of them, and the study's procedures. Students signed the appearance releases, allowing their likeness to be filmed.

TikTok Dialogues With Students

The participants developed six dialogue prompts based on the research questions and the framework of sense of belonging. The participants then filmed each dialogue using the six prompts, with a semi-structured format which gave them the ability and freedom to ask follow-up and probing questions when needed. Each participant recorded the dialogues using the application TikTok on their phones and were given autonomy to film it in any creative fashion they chose, such as providing more "slice of life" moments from the students, utilizing non-traditional camera angles, incorporating music, graphics, voiceover, and editing as they saw fit. Each dialogue recording session took approximately 20 minutes total.

The participants created several TikToks within those 20 minutes. Each TikTok averaged two minutes, so with each new dialogue prompt, a new TikTok was made, resulting in an average of five TikToks per dialogue session. Some videos included answers to several prompts all together. Students who wanted to share more personal experiences that they did not want uploaded to TikTok were given the option to record themselves responding to the prompts using audio only, and those recordings would be given directly to the primary researcher solely for data collection purposes, and were not made public. None of the students who engaged in dialogue indicated a need for that option and all were willing to speak openly on TikTok about their experiences. Each participant edited and uploaded the TikToks to the page titled @youmatterhereatlacc which resulted in 54 videos from 19 unique student voices.

The primary researcher monitored and mentored the data collection and provided feedback as the study progressed over the course of four weeks. Feedback consisted of encouraging more follow up dialogue prompts to get to the "why." For example, if a student said

they did feel accepted by their peers, we wanted to continue that conversation and discover why that was, and if they did not, we wanted to know why. Participants heeded the feedback and their engagement with fellow students continued to evolve.

Participant Debriefs

Once all videos were uploaded to TikTok, the primary researcher interviewed each of the four participants separately using the software program Zoom (https://www.zoom.us). Zoom allowed for automatic transcription which the researcher then used for coding. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and focused on what the participants learned during the process. Participant observations, thoughts, reflections, and feedback were all used as data. Questions asked of the participants were as follows:

1. What was this experience like for you?
2. What did you discover about your and your fellow students' sense of belonging in the Cinema/TV Department?
3. What do you wish you could have done differently?
4. What did you learn overall?
5. What feedback do you have about the study?
6. What feedback do you have about how the department fosters or does not foster a sense of belonging for you and your peers?

The researcher then reflected on the findings of the TikTok data with participants. All of the participants agreed with preliminary findings and contributed extended analysis based on their experiences as students in the department. During the one-on-one dialogues, participants provided their own reasoning behind some of the student feelings that emerged in the data. These

insights from the debrief interviews further contextualized the data and led to the next phase of the research.

Roundtable

During the participant debrief interviews, two of the participants—Jeje and Cecilia—each asked the researcher if they could take the study one step further. They both expressed delight in having the space and time to explore commonality of experience with their fellow students, and believed that by creating a larger, group-based space, they could glean even more from their fellow peers. This led to the creation of a roundtable discussion, similar to a focus group, that brought both students they had already spoken with and new ones to have an even deeper conversation about their experiences.

The researcher met with Jeje and Cecilia to work on the logistics of the new modality. Together, the researcher and participants developed follow up questions to the original prompts, and used the data already gathered from the TikToks as a launching point for the next round of dialogue. In this way, the original prompts remained, but the qualitative nature of the study allowed for further inquiry based on the prompts. The participants were given the freedom to utilize the prompts they had developed but asked follow-up questions as the students engaged in dialogue. As for the output, the consensus was that since the original data set already lived on TikTok, so too should the roundtable discussion.

Jeje and Cecilia reserved a television studio within the department for the roundtable, made fliers for Instagram and posted them around the building, and purchased snacks financed by the primary researcher. Jeje led the dialogue prompts and follow up, while Cecilia filmed the

experience with her phone. Cecilia then edited each prompt as its own TikTok video, then uploaded to the study's TikTok page.

In total, six participants engaged in community-based dialogue for two hours, where they supported each other's thoughts, jumped in to help others when they struggled to find the words, and built upon each other's responses. The result was just as Jeje and Cecilia had hoped for, which was an even deeper exploration of the dialogue prompts they had created, and a safe space for students to engage with each other and realize that they were not alone in their experiences.

Analysis

The study engaged participants and students in three meaningful ways: dialogues, debriefs, and the roundtable discussion. Each resulted in data that was carefully coded using inductive coding with a-priori codes from Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging framework. In vivo coding was also used to respect the voice of participants (Saldaña, 2016), and process or "action" coding, due to the nature of this study that led to action based on emotional experience (Saldaña, 2016). Each type of coding was applied, one pass at a time, followed by a final pass which looked for a triangulation of quotes, as student voice was paramount to the study. The resulting data that emerged is discussed at length in Chapter 4.

Dialogue Responses on TikTok

The dialogue responses were coded by the primary researcher utilizing inductive coding with a-priori codes from Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging framework. These a-priori codes were as follows: community experience, social support, feeling connected, feeling important and valued to the department. The debrief from participants was coded as well with the same a-priori codes. Just as Moreno's (2015) study emphasized, the work was not set out to solely solve

problems a priori, but instead form a community where the life patterns that appeared could be studied while current and new ideas were created simultaneously.

Debrief With Participants

Each participant was interviewed for 30 to 60 minutes over the software application Zoom. The transcriptions were carefully analyzed and coded using the same a-priori codes as the TikTok dialogues, as well as in-vivo codes and action coding. In-vivo coding was of utmost importance and student voice was used as much as possible to express ideas, thoughts, concerns, and to help inform what their experience was within the department. These codings led to another round of action coding that looked at what efforts the department engaged in that were already creating a sense of belonging, and where the department could improve a sense of belonging for its Black and/or Latine students. This rich and multitudinous data set provided constructive feedback that led to action plans to incorporate a better sense of belonging for Black and Latine students in the Cinema/TV Department.

Roundtable Discussion

The roundtable discussion was also analyzed in the same way as the TikTok videos and debriefs. This particular data set proved to be incredibly rich because students opened up even more about their feelings and experiences, and it was clear that they felt safe as they supported each other in the talk. The very act of providing safe space for this dialogue to take place was in and of itself a data point.

The resulting TikTok videos were transcribed by the primary researcher and analyzed using primarily in-vivo codes to highlight student voice, ensuring direct quotes were the focus so that there was no room for misinterpretation. Students provided action items based on their

experience to help change pedagogical and policy practices within the department and campus as a whole.

TikTok Views, Comments, and Likes

In addition to the dialogue responses and debrief data, the public TikTok comments that were made on the videos provided some discourse. TikTok relied on its algorithm to put the most recommended video in front of users, regardless if they have "followed" or "liked" an account (Guinaudeau et al., 2020). The researcher also developed hashtags in order for the relevant content to show up in peoples' "for you" (homepage) such as #youmatterhere, #inclusionmatters, #diversitymatters, #pocfilmmakers, #studentsmatter, #educationtiktok, #communitycollege, #cinema, #tv, #socialjustice, and #filmprogram. In this way, public users who were already engaged in democratic viewing of topics relating to education, social justice, PAR research, and film programs might have witnessed the data without having to search for the page itself. There were not enough comments at the time of analysis to code, but the views, comments, and likes were of note, and discussed in Chapter 4.

Although the participants expressed a desire to make the videos "go viral," meaning incredibly widespread, the researcher informed them that virality was beyond the scope of the study, and the act of placing data in the public space was a step in the right direction. Due to this not being a study on social media itself and rather using it as a modality, there was a limit to the depth of this particular analysis.

Limitations

The study relied on four participants, who each engaged in dialogue with between three to five students, which resulted in 19 unique student engagements. The participants were also

interviewed by the primary researcher, bringing the total counternarrative discourse to 23 students. Due to the nature of an arts-based project, a larger sample could yield even more results, but time and resources limited this particular study to 23, which represented about 3% of the overall department's Black and/or Latine students. In addition, as we continued to break traditional approaches to data gathering by incorporating filming ethnographies and using social media, the recording of dialogues could have limited what students wanted to say, leading to partial results.

Delimitations

Because the study was grounded in local counternarrative and ethnography, the scope was smaller. The resulting data however provided a greater depth to understanding the lived experience of students in the program in order to make decisions that better serve them and work toward greater senses of belonging. The very act of engaging students in safe spaces for dialogue itself yielded a greater comprehension of student experience that led to action items to increase their sense of belonging.

Conclusion

This participatory action research study followed a qualitative approach with semi-structured dialogue prompts (Seidman, 2006). The nature of participatory action research led to a collaboration between the primary researcher and participants to formulate the dialogue prompts and led to an authentic and engaging data set. Nineteen students engaged in the dialogue prompts, and the four participants answered interview questions, in order to help the researcher identify Black and/or Latine student sense of belonging in the Cinema/TV Department at LACC.

As an arts-based study, the primary data gathering tool used was the social media forum TikTok. Using social media to convey the data served as a bridge to productive conversations regarding action steps to ensure a sense of belonging in the department and allowed for student voices to be heard. It also served to further the work of visual narratives as research.

The study relied on counternarratives (D. A. Bell, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989) to empower participants to share their valuable stories, creating broader awareness of their experiences. This dynamic research approach allowed audiences to see students in a new light and challenged deficit framings. By hearing and seeing participants' narratives, and witnessing their experience in real time, a deeper data set emerged in order to find best practices for student sense of belonging.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This research study empowered students to be the generators of knowledge in an exploration of sense of belonging at a community college. Black and Latine student voices were elevated so that the researcher and subsequent change makers could characterize their sense of belonging in the Cinema/TV Department. Strayhorn (2012) made it clear that a sense of belonging was critical to the success of college students, in particular students of color. Retention and success rates were lower for Black and Latine students in this Cinema/TV Department, so by focusing specifically on their sense of belonging or lack thereof, the resulting data led to action items that can in turn increase sense of belonging, which will increase retention and success rates for Black and Latine Cinema/TV students. As this particular department served as a gateway into the entertainment industry, closing these equity gaps can mean even greater representation in film and television, which were critical places that are in need of more diverse voices.

Focused on sense of belonging, the research questions that guided this study were: What is the lived experience of Black and Latine students in the Cinema/TV Department at LACC? What do Black and Latine student narratives reveal about their sense of belonging and support systems at this community college's Cinema/TV Department?

This arts-based participatory action study utilized the social media platform TikTok which resulted in authentic findings that relied on student participants to engage with each other in truthful, thought-provoking dialogue. This chapter examines Black and Latine student accounts of their sense of belonging, and is organized according to each method used and the resulting themes that emerged.

Four methods of engagement contributed to the data for this study. To begin, four Black and/or Latine participants engaged with and recorded fellow Black and/or Latine students in dialogue, then uploaded the responses using the social media video platform TikTok. The dialogue prompts used were constructed by the participants' alignment with the aforementioned research questions. Those dialogue prompts were noted in the TikTok section of Chapter 3. Then, the primary researcher interviewed the four participants to learn more about their own sense of belonging, their experience with the study, and to summarize the results of the TikToks. Those interviews revealed two of the four researchers desired a "deeper dive" into the data and opened up the TikToks from a one-on-one format to a roundtable discussion, which gave them more space and freedom to ask the dialogue prompts again. During the roundtable section, participants relied on a semi-structured interview style that enabled them to ask more follow up questions to their prompts and provide a space for Black and/or Latine students to engage with each other about their experiences. Finally, the views, comments, and likes from the public view of the TikTok page were analyzed for any further data points.

The researcher coded each modality using a-priori codes (Strayhorn, 2012), in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016), and process or "action" coding (Saldaña, 2016). All of the data was coded using each type of coding, one pass at a time. A final pass allowed for relevant and meaningful quotes to be pulled. Because the study was focused on student voice, direct quotes from students were paramount to the findings.

The concept of using counternarratives was supported by Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT grounded the lived experience of the marginalized as key to greater understanding and gave credit and value to those stories. Counternarratives were a critical part of comprehending,

explaining, and ultimately shifting the way researchers talked about injustices. The only way to truly understand the Black and Latine student experience and find ways to increase their sense of belonging was to hear them. The results of this engagement are discussed in this chapter.

The chapter is organized into four major subsections which guide the reader through each of the four modalities: TikTok videos with anonymous student respondents, participant debriefs, roundtable discussions, and TikTok views, comments, and likes. Within each subsection, the major themes that emerged are indicated along with in vivo quotes and supportive data and insight. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of the themes into three overall actionable items to enhance sense of belonging in this Cinema/TV Department: community, classroom content, and communication.

TikTok Videos

In this qualitative, participatory action arts-based study, the four participants engaged with a total of 19 students in the Cinema/TV Department resulting in 54 TikTok video uploads. Each dialogue prompt was carefully curated by the participants based on Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging framework. The research questions stood at the forefront to be answered using the following prompts:

1. Do you feel safe to be who you authentically are while in the Cinema/TV Department?
2. Do you feel you have enough support and resources to succeed based on your educational background and needs? (academic support, equipment, writing, etc.)
3. Do you see yourself reflected in the classroom from faculty and the curriculum?
4. Do you feel socially accepted by your peers in the Cinema/TV Department?

5. What do you suggest can be done for you and your peers to feel more accepted in the Cinema/TV Department?

The prompts were given in a semi-structured format so that participants could encourage students with follow up questions to further engage with them as to their experiences in the department. The participants often chose to upload each dialogue prompt response as its own separate video, which meant several videos would feature the same student answering different prompts. In a few cases, participants decided to upload all of a student's responses as one video.

The statistics at the onset of this study showed that the Cinema/TV Department specifically had a 6% greater success rate in every ethnic disaggregation compared to the rest of campus on average over the past five years that led up to the study, and up to 14% higher success rates during winter semesters during that time (OIE, 2023). The results from the TikToks found that overall the sense of belonging in this department was particularly strong in areas of peer acceptance, support, and resources, all of which contributed to the greater department retention rates. Findings also revealed specific places where a sense of belonging could increase. The themes that emerged from these dialogues are organized below.

Peer Acceptance

A key tenet in Strayhorn's (2012) framework of sense of belonging pointed to the safety that students felt to be their authentic selves and not need to conform to the institutions' norms in order to be accepted by their peers (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). The first prompt of "Do you feel safe to be who you authentically are while in the Cinema/TV Department?" was organically merged with the fourth prompt: "Do you feel socially accepted by your peers in the Cinema/TV Department?" Students involved in the dialogues except for one revealed they felt safe to express

who they authentically are while in the Cinema/TV Department because they felt accepted by their peers. One student respondent reflected by stating, “I wear what I want, express myself, don’t feel judged. However I feel that day is accepted.” Another student noted: “All of my ideas and proposals are respected. The department has a welcoming environment for Latinos. I’ve always been supported by the Cinema Department.” One student discussed how he felt kinship with those also “not from the best neighborhood and [I see] that in people who want to do good and come here to succeed and do better in life.”

There was only one student who did not feel accepted by his peers, and his reasonings also included his accent and sexual orientation:

> People see a brown skinned gay Hispanic person with an accent, people don’t think of you as someone who can be a director. People think of you as a dishwasher, someone to clean bathrooms. It’s been challenging, I don’t really feel safe. There’s always this risk of having my self-esteem thrown to the floor whenever people push aside my opinion because of what they see.

Another student noted that, although he felt safe to be who he was, he did express concern with how others perceived him for his Latin accent.

Yet the majority of students who did express a safety of belonging pointed to being socially accepted by peers. One student responded clarified that point by saying:

> I’ve met so many different people with so many different backgrounds which felt good and gave me an opportunity to exchange culturally speaking opinions. They are very accepting of me as a Black man and a Haitian man. I feel welcome.

Several students in the TikToks discussed the diversity among their peers in ethnic backgrounds and ages. One student admitted he "wasn't expecting so much honesty and openness in the community and I can express myself. It's a very accepting school and I would recommend it to anyone wanting to go to a diverse school."

Some students attributed the nature of the Cinema/TV Department being group-based to enhancing peer acceptance. As many faculty told their students, films and television shows were not created in a vacuum. It takes dozens, sometimes hundreds of people to come together to make films and TV shows. Since the Cinema/TV Department prided itself on hands-on, industry-forward learning, much of the courses were designed for students to work together to tell stories. As such, group-based work has encouraged people from a variety of backgrounds to connect to each other to achieve the common goal of storytelling and creating, and as one student said, "That's been amazing."

Department Resources

Students overwhelmingly responded positively to the prompt: "Do you feel you have enough support and resources to succeed based on your educational background and needs?" The Cinema/TV Department provided several means of support to students. One mode of support was free equipment rental from an area known as the "cage." The cage loaned students cameras, lighting, and sound equipment, laptops and more, all free of charge. Most students felt they had support from the department in terms of equipment rental and usage, saying "Everyone on staff is nice, and equipment access has been a lifesaver," and that it was "helpful to be able to check out a camera since I don't have one." Students expressed satisfaction with the cage, particularly

with the high costs of quality film resources: “Having equipment available has been so helpful because it’s so expensive otherwise.”

The department also offered free edit labs and color grading computers, which were open daily with paid teachers’ assistants on hand, and a full state-of-the-art multi-camera television studio. A student discussed how he has had “great academic opportunities like when he was commissioned to make a short film and was able to edit thanks to his skills learned in the department.” Two other students noted the ease of filming and editing their projects at no cost. Many of the projects students created in the department were used for their portfolios when applying to transfer to four year universities’ cinema programs, to use as evidence of their storytelling abilities when seeking employment, or to submit to film festivals which helped students continue to network and establish themselves as serious filmmakers in the industry.

One of the most pivotal resources the department provides was access to scholarships and internship opportunities. One student talked about the scholarships they received, with which they “got things done I could have never imagined.” Another student added, “This experience has been great…lots of hands-on experience and opportunities, a lot of help, programs, food opportunities, they just help students as much as they can.” A student responded that the department provided “all sorts of grants, and are constantly putting out information for students to get internships, get jobs, competitions. If you’re struggling financially there’s always information for you.”

The campus also provided basic needs support in the form of food giveaways, help in finding housing and jobs, career and transfer guidance. One of the students referred to the Resource Center for its help in providing such amenities, and another to the Transfer Center

where a student “worked on goals outside of LACC financially and academically.” Although the responses were overwhelmingly positive in that students felt they had many opportunities for basic needs assistance, financial help, and internship opportunities, two students asked for more internship opportunities, one specifically asked for “even more of a pipeline between the department and the industry.”

At the time of the study, the Cinema/TV department relied on three methods of resource information delivery: a weekly department email wide blast, Canvas announcements, and social media–primarily an Instagram account. All of those methods relied on individual faculty to provide students with the link to sign up for the email blast, to take information they themselves have or receive from the department chair or fellow faculty and post on their course Canvas pages, and to guide students to follow the department’s Instagram page.

The weekly blasts came directly from the department chair’s office and included relevant and timely information regarding scholarships, workshops, networking events, internships, jobs, screenings and more. The blasts required students to sign up to engage in the list, which was provided by faculty to students at the beginning of each semester. The reach of the email blast was reliant upon faculty engagement in order for students to receive, understand, and take action to sign up for and monitor the blasts.

The campus utilized the educational platform Canvas as a learning management system to either supplement in-person learning, or to fully engage in online teaching for those classes that were offered online or a hybrid of online and in-person. The announcements feature allowed for the faculty to make virtual announcements when they received information from the

department chair, their own contacts, or fellow faculty members in terms of jobs, workshops, events, and more.

The department had its own Instagram page, which was another resource used to get information and resources to students. It also relied on faculty engagement to inform students of the page, and encouraged them to follow and engage in order to get the information in yet another way. The page was primarily run by the department chair and one other faculty member.

Faculty Support and Representation

The prompt, "Do you see yourself reflected in the classroom from faculty and the curriculum?" brought students to two different trajectories of thought. The first part of the prompt led to dialogue regarding the need for more diverse faculty. Students were encouraged by having female faculty and overall felt supported by faculty, but expressed the need to see more faculty who reflected themselves. The second part of the prompt discussed how the classroom curriculum needed to be much more diverse, which is discussed in the next section.

At the time of this study, the Cinema/TV Department consisted of four full-time faculty; three of which were White, one White/Chinese, and fifteen adjunct faculty which consisted of two Black instructors, one Hispanic instructor, and twelve White instructors. Although the faculty was not yet as diverse as the students needed, students expressed satisfaction in having female professors who acted as inspiration as they also worked in the male-dominated entertainment industry. "All of the professors I've had are White. But it's cool to have a woman professor, but I haven't seen anyone of my ethnicity." And another who said, "I don't see ethnic diversity but I'm happy to see many female faculty who also work in the industry."

Students said that most of the professors were open and accepting, and one pointed to an example such as a writing professor who encouraged students to write their screenplays based on student experience and cultural background. Another student added, “Professors could be anywhere but they choose to be here to teach us. They are very supportive.” Another student agreed, saying “Everyone has their own journey and to have people around who take the time to listen to you; professors are open minded and tolerant.” A student noted that they get the “quickest response from professors when I ask questions and they are always friendly and supportive,” and another mentioned that the “process to enroll and communicate with professors about any issues that arise before or during the course of the semester is tier one.”

Although these responses were overwhelmingly positive toward the faculty who were “open to the rest of us which opens up our experience too,” ultimately students wanted to see more Black and Brown faculty to reflect themselves, and noted that having more Black and Brown faculty would have a positive impact on their learning. One student reflected on how an adjunct faculty member who was Black could “make references that a lot of other teachers didn’t. She exposed a lot of things that pertained to students of color, but that was the only time.” The student who did not feel accepted by his peers also contributed dissatisfaction with the lack of diverse faculty by stating, “Where are my people? Is this the right place for me?”

Students emphasized their need to “have more teachers that reflect students of color and who are able to share a different type of media that they have learned in their culture,” and that “we need more Black instructors. It would be great to see one of us reflected in the Cinema Department because even though we are supported by all faculty, we still don’t see a reflection of us there.” One student put it this way:

> Even though we have the Morgan Freeman theater, we don't have a Morgan Freeman type professor. We don't have anyone Brown that's permanent that we can see regularly here. I don't know if it's a lack of people applying but that would be a really great thing to see.

(Actor Morgan Freeman attended LACC, and the Cinema/TV Department named their theater after him.) The literature also demonstrated the importance of having diverse faculty, and even more crucial was faculty from any background who showed that they genuinely cared for student success (Acevedo et al., 2021; Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020; Bush & Bush, 2010; Card, 2021; Strayhorn, 2012; Wood & Turner, 2010).

By the time this study reached publication, a shift had occurred. Two more full-time faculty positions opened in the Cinema/TV Department. The first new professor hired was a White man, the second was a Black man. Although the topic of faculty diversity relies on studies focused in that arena as it speaks to racist roots of both education and entertainment, the full-time faculty in the Cinema/TV department slowly began to diversify, which was exactly what students in this study were asking for.

Classroom Content

In addition to the need for more diverse faculty, students overwhelmingly asked for a more inclusive curriculum, particularly in the introduction classes. These introduction courses were the prerequisites for most of the advanced level courses in the department. They consisted of Cinema 001: Introduction to Motion Picture Production, Cinema 002: Beginning Motion Picture Workshop, Cinema 003: History of Motion Pictures, Cinema 004: History of the Documentary Film, and/or Cinema 018: Introduction to Film Genres. When a Cinema/TV

student began their journey in the department, they were required to take the introduction courses before continuing on to more specific pathways such as directing, producing, cinematography, editing, sound, and more. As those were the gateway courses into the rest of the students' journeys through the department, their sense of belonging needed to engage immediately, which would set them up on a positive trajectory. Strayhorn (2012) explained that a sense of belonging is even more important in certain situations and times, such as in the classroom, which yields relative outcomes. One student expressed his thoughts in this way:

> I would expect to have more Black names in the cinema world for instance Oscar Micheaux; they contributed a lot in the cinema world and a lot of that is missing and I would like to see more of that.

Another student agreed by saying:

> I don't see any of me in the teachings of these classes. They teach us a lot of things but none of those are about me. And I get it I'm not from here I don't belong here. But it would be nice to see something that represents who I am, makes me feel welcome, and makes me feel understood.

A student wished for "more examples from the curriculum that aren't European based so we could understand a wider variety of films from more places, especially Spanish based" and another who said there is a great need for "more content in the curriculum with Black creators, Black cinematographers, Black actors. People that look like me that I actually look up to."

Unlike the ask for more faculty of color, which lends to a deeper exploration of systemic racism in both the institution of education and the entertainment industry, the ability to incorporate more examples from people of color who have worked in film and television was a

practical and tangible fix. This adjustment could have a profoundly positive impact on Black and Latine students' sense of belonging, and could be incorporated into curriculum practices immediately. This act breaks the long history of mostly White instructors teaching mostly White curriculum to students who become faculty and continue to teach the same thing, continuously excluding people of color.

Community

A commonality in humans is that we want to feel like we matter, and a sense of belonging directly relates to the need for students to know that they are cared about. The final prompt, "What do you suggest can be done for you and your peers to feel more accepted in the Cinema/TV Department?" led to almost all students asking for more opportunities to engage as a community. Department-wide engagement throughout the semester, such as "having more workshops like PA [production assistant] bootcamps, work skill environments, creating resumes, emails to reach out to production companies," were suggested to improve belonging. And, particularly since students did not have access to diverse faculty, "workshops with people of color who have made it in the industry and do question and answer forums."

In addition to workshops that could add even more skills and industry knowledge to students' repositories, students requested "more functions that can bring us together so that they can work on their movies together," to have 'meet and greets' with faculty, counselors, and fellow students at the beginning of the year. Students also called for those counselors to be specific to the Cinema/TV Department. Some students also mentioned the need to have more "things like film club; places to learn outside of the classroom."

All of the TikTok narratives from student respondents provided insight into the student experience in the Cinema/TV department. Although students felt safe to express who they were and supported by the department and faculty, their sense of belonging could increase by seeing themselves better represented in faculty and classroom curriculum, and to have had more opportunities for peer engagement and outside of class learning, particularly from Black and Brown experts in the field.

Participant Debrief

In this arts-based participatory action study, four research participants were responsible for engaging in dialogue with students respondents using the prompts they had developed. The four participants then uploaded the dialogues to the specific TikTok page created for the study. Once all 54 TikToks were uploaded from engagement with 19 different students, the primary researcher then interviewed each participant to reflect on the data collection process as well as themselves. During the participant debrief, the TikTok responses were member checked, and participants were asked for their own interpretation of the data. During this portion of data collection, participants contributed their own experiences in the department and with the study, and provided insight into what else was said during the student dialogues. Participants had their own suggestions that could help improve the Cinema/TV Department's sense of belonging.

The four participants were active students in the Cinema/TV Department, over 18 years of age, and identified as Black and/or Latine. Ritab, 56, identified as a Black/American female. Cecilia; Honduran and female, age 26. Francis identified as Latino/Brazilian, male, age 39, and Jeje; Black, female, age 35. All four participants were enthusiastic about the study from the

onset, deeply engaged in the work, and successfully engaged their fellow students in the department in dialogue.

The follow-up debrief interviews took the responses from the original TikToks and worked to measure sense of belonging. Allen et al. (2021) synthesized four components of sense of belonging in order to determine if an individual felt a true sense of belonging. These components served as a guidepost to what the participants experienced in gathering the data, along with their own interpretations of data and personal experiences within the department. The debriefs focused on ability to belong, opportunities to belong, motivation, and each person's own perceived sense of belonging.

Reflection

All four of the participants indicated their excitement to be a part of the study, as it allowed them to have a space to share their experiences and open that up to fellow students. They felt empowered, and believed they were doing work that could help their peers have an even richer experience. The work allowed them to imagine a future where students could follow their footsteps and continue to reflect and change their experiences. It also provided a place for participants to look inward. As Jeje stated:

> I was excited about it. I like the fact that you were doing this and that you cared enough to kind of base your whole dissertation around it. So the first thought was like, really intrigued and like. Oh, this is nice and nice to be a part of it, and then it also made me have to kind of like, sit and think about my experience as just a Black student in this space. I noticed that I think I need to stay in this space of just like helping people be aware of the Black experience, because I can't be in this space and not be Black. That's

> one thing that I can't do, and I'm hella Black like. So it just showed me, I think, the way to not feel so overwhelmed by it is to be a part like, be the change you want to see – as cliche as it is, but it just tells me that I should work on this in my career. I really just want to, I don't know but what I'm not going to do is just be Black and uncomfortable. I know that's what I'm not gonna do.

Each participant had a similar realization that they were typically not given space neither in the classroom or in their own lives, to pause and reflect on who they were, what the conditions around them were like, and how their backgrounds played a role in their educational experiences. Cecilia mentioned how empowering it was to be able to reflect on her identity in spaces that were mostly White versus spaces like the department that are mostly Latine, and how that shifted her own behavior and comfort level:

> I feel like a lot of immigrant students like me, for example, like I have no real sense of identity. Because I didn't have a community, I feel like I behave more Mexican because all my friends growing up were Mexican. But how do I become American? And it's like in order to be American, you have to learn how to speak White. Be White, you know what I mean, like. Like our ethnicities can't poke out, you know, if we want to be taken seriously. Because even when I see the student productions, we're all like a mixture of people of color, and yet a lot of it feels pretty White.

Francis reflected on the fact that although he is Latino, he looks White, and he believed he benefited from that. Yet because of his thick Brazilian accent, he said he often still felt judged.

In addition to having space to reflect, the study also provided participants with the feeling that they were not alone in their thoughts and observations. Ritab noted:

> Just to know that you're not the only one feeling a certain kind of way about a school or a class, it eases your mind, because you'd be like, okay I thought I was the only one who felt like that. So I think that that helped a whole lot.

Those ideas spoke to the first two measurements of sense of belonging in a person's ability and opportunity to belong as enhanced and learned by developing their identity, connecting to their environment, and having space to nurture that growth (Allen et al., 2021). By engaging in more community as suggested by the TikToks, these tenets could be achieved to enhance a sense of belonging. There were also spaces not just in the department events, but for individual faculty to create within their own classrooms, as part of activities, dialogues, assignments, and creations, that gave students these same kinds of safe spaces to explore themselves.

Classroom Content

Participants unanimously indicated that the curriculum was in need of Black and Brown creator content, particularly in the introduction courses, as students were first learning about the art of storytelling and acclimating to the department. Some were entering college for the first time, so this introductory space proved even more critical in order to engage and retain students. The need for more diverse classroom content reflected what was said in the TikToks as well. Jeje elaborated on how she would like to see more Black and Brown representation in the classroom curriculum by learning about Blacksploitation films, and seeing Black directors and Black cinematographers used as examples in the explanation of ideas and techniques:

> When we are in these classes, especially this history classes, or even in any class when they do these videos when they show us videos of experiences, or like really good shots, or something like that, hardly any of them are Black, so it's like all right, just find some good Black ones, you know, why they all gotta be so White?

Jeje further explained the pain that came from incorporating examples that had to deal with the teaching of certain films that were also historically racist, such as Griffith's (1915) *Birth of a Nation*. While filmmakers noted that the film was groundbreaking in its scale of production, editing and overall storytelling techniques, it would be amiss to leave out the fact that the film was incredibly racist in how it portrayed Black people in an incredibly discriminating light, and glorified the KKK to the point that it is attributed to their rebirth (Hunt & Ramón, 2022). Jeje said:

> I mean, when we're talking about extremely racist bodies of work, I know that they may be famous, and I know they may be like critically acclaimed. But we should really just have some consideration that, like some of America's greatest films are actually slaps in the fucking faces to the students that we have to hear the history about. So consider that when instructing, just like a little bit of sensitivity when it comes to those sort of things. I think those few things will go a long, long way.

In addition to lectures, Cecilia discussed how helpful it had been and would continue to be for professors to encourage students to tell stories about who they were and what they knew in assignments, rather than try to assimilate to the status quo:

> I remember when I was taking a screenwriting class, not only myself was writing my characters White, but I remember, like there was this one Indian transfer international

> student who was writing like these James Bond kind of things, but they were all White, too, and like, when you're reading the script, and it's so strange to see that. So how do we encourage them to write stories from our communities, but without making them, you know, gangsters and like prostitutes, you know like, especially if you're queer like. Why do they have to be a prostitute with a golden heart? You know what I mean?

A powerful shift then would be for faculty to actively empower students to examine themselves, and in turn tell their stories, or stories about people who look, feel, and act like them, without perpetuating stereotypes. That kind of work could help foster a sense of belonging and teach students that their experiences matter. Furthermore, as Black and Latine students worked toward being change makers in the entertainment industry, their stories were what was still missing and greatly needed in film and television. This kind of engagement can be measured by Allen et al.'s (2021) third tenet that spoke to their motivation to engage. Having faculty and the department provide encouragement to tell their stories could motivate them to engage in their own narratives which would further their sense of belonging.

Faculty Diversity

All four research participants elaborated on their need for more faculty of color. This reflected what most of the TikTok respondents wished for as well. Jeje said:

> I would love to see a Black or Latin on full time staff. You know somebody walking the streets. Because there's an experience that I can't connect with any of my instructors on, and certain things that will happen in workspaces that just nobody would understand. So to be able to speak to instructors that have had that experience and how to maneuver through those situations. That would be really, really, really nice.

Cecilia too discussed the need for faculty of color, citing an example from when a White professor may not have realized the implications of their class content:

> I never saw people of color, you know, like teaching our courses and stuff like that. I took the history of documentary, and I was just like my god, it's so, you know, and I hate to say this is so White. And it's so fixated on male achievements. We only talked about one female filmmaker, and it turns out she was Hitler's favorite filmmaker, and she made his biopic documentary, and I was like I don't know how to feel.

Cecilia expressed hope that no matter the race or ethnicity of the professor, that they try to understand what students may have gone through from a societal perspective.

> What's been happening for me, and I know that there's some other students that don't feel like they have a really great relationship with the professors or they feel intimidated. But I think it's more so that it's a defense mechanism that they just don't feel like they're going to make adequate work. And so they just put the blame on the professors. Because I think a lot of people, and I think this is a huge emphasis on being Brown and Black is that we never felt encouraged to take a risk, and so procrastinating is a huge factor on a lot of us like me. Oh, it's so bad, you know, and so we don't risk it. We don't do it because we don't want to fail, because we feel like we've been failing so long in the system.

Allen et al.'s (2021) fourth tenet of measurement relied on a student's perceived sense of belonging. When students did not see themselves reflected in those who are teaching them, their perception of themselves would not be as positive, and they may not feel as included as those who do see themselves in the faculty. The process of hiring new faculty relied on many factors

deeply rooted in systemic racism, such as access to education, an almost 70% White entertainment industry, budget decisions that were beyond department control, and much needed data and exploration. The department needed to find ways to help counter the lack of diverse faculty so that student perception of self can grow, which would increase sense of belonging. The TikToks suggested that by adding more diverse representation in faculty lectures and assignments would help. The participant interviews showed that even though not diverse, White faculty needed to be more aware of cultural differences and how their teaching of certain subjects can have a dire effect on students of color. Further, faculty should have gained a better understanding of the psychological element of being a student of color and how that affects some learning outcomes that might not align with a privileged view of the educational system.

Community

All of the participants indicated the need for the department to provide more opportunities for students to meet each other and connect. This idea addressed all four of Allen et al.'s (2021) measurements of sense of belonging. Suggestions came in the form of department-hosted student mingles, workshops, industry preparation meet ups and networking practice, counselor connections, college basics classes, and of course, film screenings. This kind of community building would benefit Black and Latine students on many levels, particularly in what Cecilia describes a way to improve "group psyche." She added that it would be helpful to see how diverse fellow students were so that she felt like she "didn't have to act White."

That kind of re-grounding of identity by connecting with fellow students would also build confidence as Jeje noted, and provide inspiration. Ritab talked about how the very act of

conducting this study connected her with students she would not have otherwise met, and gave her access to the school since all of her classes at that point had been online:

> That community is inspiring. To walk around [the department] and see so many great movies and learn that some of the movies that I really like were actually filmed by LACC students was overwhelming, and it just shows you that you can do it. You can do it because these people came from the same spot that you're in.

That kind of motivation was reflected in Jeje's response as well. She too put emphasis on the importance of meet and greets with fellow peers, so that:

> People can see that we're actually a very, very diverse department, you know, in terms of like ethnic background, gender identity, sexuality. Maybe that would help a lot of people who don't encourage themselves. We need that group morale—if they can do it, maybe I can do it.

Not only would more community engagement provide confidence and inspiration, but participants also indicated that it would help students feel connected even though they did not see most faculty representing them. Cecilia noted that even though the faculty are not as diverse, it became even more helpful for her to have diverse peers.

> When I just started taking filmmaking [at another college] it was primarily White boys. And so I had to start talking a certain way. So now when I started taking classes at LACC it's a lot of Latinos, and I would find myself talking like how I used to in high school. I hung out primarily with Mexicans, I didn't realize that I was always trying to fit in. It's a lot easier here at school, you know, because we're so diverse.

Department-wide meetups would also help with a mental health aspect of student growth and connection. As Cecilia said:

> Meeting with like-minded people, and hearing how they've learned how to strategize, to create that kind of community for students, so that they don't feel like they're the only ones that aren't doing well in their classes, because they feel overwhelmed by certain deadlines and stuff like that. There's definitely some sort of therapy-meet-academics that could really boost up morale.

As the participants pointed out, some of that insecurity came from a lack of college readiness, which could be tackled by having opportunities for students to engage in a basic college skills course or workshop. Cecilia provided an example from her previous college that was taught by the college counselors:

> They brought us in as a summer before our semester started. and they started teaching us how to study, how to write an essay, stuff like that. And having a huge group of people learning at the same pace as you totally helped me.

Gardenshire-Crooks et al. (2010) also found in their study that students found success when counselors provided courses where students learned to deal with stress, improve test taking and study habits, set goals, and learn about campus resources like the library and tutoring centers.

Cecilia elaborated on how those skills workshops could lead to industry preparation workshops:

> Maybe even incorporating an instructor, or a volunteer, maybe once a month. Meetings or zoom lectures kind of thing where they teach you like: if you're trying to get into this

[entertainment industry] department, this is how your resume should look, or if you know we're going to be freelancers, so what are some tips?

The Cinema/TV Department hosted "best of" screenings each semester to celebrate student films, and an annual TV Awards show that operated in an Oscars-style structure to recognize student work. Throughout the semester the department hosted various workshops, career panels, and networking events. It partnered with programs such as Disney's General Entertainment to provide access to Disney internships. In addition to this work, more consistent meet ups and screenings throughout the semester for students to mingle with each other would enhance belonging, as well as even better communication to students when the events take place.

Intersectionality

The theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory as the grounding and guiding force throughout the study surfaced in the way Solórzano and Yosso (2002) synthesized the work of D. A. Bell (1976) and Crenshaw (1989) by pointing to the first tenet: race and racism as an undeniable and deeply woven, permanent fixture in U.S. society, intersecting with gender, class, language, immigrant status, class, and culture. The study focused on Black and/or Latine students specifically, but it would have been impossible not to intersect with multiple other identities, races, gender, disability, and more.

The TikTok responses were summarized back to participants, and although all participants were pleasantly surprised by how many students in the department felt safe to be who they are, and indicated need for more diverse faculty and curriculum, the negative responses came from an intersection of race, sexual orientation, immigration status and gender. Francis

shared how he resonated with the student who talked about being judged for having an accent, which had Francis reflect on his own safety to express himself:

> When I heard his answers, I had to dig deep inside of me to think about [my own experience]. I think it's mostly because of the accent. Because I don't look really Black or Latino but if I'm in a room that was new, like, for example, it's a new class, I feel a little blocked to talk because I always think that people are not understand me, or you know they're gonna make fun of something that I say wrong.

Cecilia reflected on the student who said in the TikTok that he did not feel he belonged because of his accent and sexuality:

> I think when we meet students that are feeling that, [it might be because] they're not being socialized within their peers. Maybe they're bringing in their experiences from other places. He looked young, so I think he just came out of high school, and I think it was definitely like a lot of bullying issues, or you know, and I don't think he's met the right people just yet or he hasn't brought down his walls in order to feel accepted.

The study focused specifically on Black and/or Latine voices as Latine students made up a majority of the students, and along with Black students had the lowest retention and success rates. Therefore, it was crucial to examine their experiences to discover the best practices to enhance their sense of belonging which statistically would enhance retention and success. Due to the limitation of one study, the intersections of age, sexual identity and orientation, immigration status, and disability could not be examined in depth, but those were all significant factors in the complex fabric of human existence, and faculty should also be aware of how those intersections could deeply affect the experience of students.

Wanting More

The overall revelations that emerged from the participant debriefs were that having a safe space to explore themselves was helpful, and that more engagement with each other as a community, and more ways to see themselves reflected in the faculty and the material would help foster greater sense of belonging. The feeling was that the Cinema/TV Department was relatively neutral in its approach to belonging. Some things worked, some things did not. Jeje put it this way:

> Our department doesn't do anything that makes us feel unwelcome, but we don't have anything that makes us feel welcome either. No high, no low. You're not slapping us, but you're not hugging us either.

Ritab agreed, stating:

> I think they're just kind of unaware. So I think that this [study] will bring awareness to them where they will understand like, okay, so this has to be done. And this what we need to improve. We can make students feel this kind of way. You don't have to baby them in and cater exactly to them, but at least let them know, like we are working on it, getting it to be better, and that we hear you guys' feedback. We know what we need to work on as instructors and as a department here to make it better. But overall I think it's a pretty good department.

Francis noted how happy he was with how the department was visibly working toward inclusion, which "not all universities are concerned about" and that realistically "it's a culture process that's gonna take a while for it to be totally accepted and train people to understand. But I think it already seems to be on the way, especially the answers we got."

Ritab discussed a desire to do the entire study again and include more racial and ethnic groups. She also wanted to engage more gender and sexual identities, as well as broaden the scope to include more departments on campus. Cecilia said "The questions we asked were good, but I feel like there's so much more. Maybe I just want more of it."

All four participants discussed their satisfaction with the outcome of their student engagement dialogues, but two participants in particular, Cecilia and Jeje, indicated a strong desire to delve deeper into the experiences of their fellow students. In keeping with the arts-based, qualitative semi-structured methodology, those two participants created the idea and opportunity for a student roundtable discussion. They invited the students who had engaged in the TikToks as well as students who had not yet voiced their opinions to an open forum style dialogue. Using the same prompts that they had developed, they encouraged their peers to expand on their answers to think about what other factors impact their sense of belonging. The results of those impactful discussions are discussed below.

Roundtable Discussion

Cecilia and Jeje engaged with four more students for two hours, which resulted in a safe and open space for supportive dialogue that was guided by the participants' dialogue prompts to dive deeper into the data. When these students were given a safe space to sit down and further reflect and share their experiences, themes of mental health and basic needs emerged, as well as a better understanding of the positive impact that community development and diverse curriculum would bring. They also offered suggestions to remedy the lack of diverse faculty. These themes are explained in more depth here.

Mental Health

Strayhorn (2012) identified a sense of belonging as a basic human need, just like mental health, which students pointed to as they dove deeper into their experiences. During the roundtable discussion, one student identified himself as a Hispanic immigrant with a little college experience and that he was in need of emotional support:

> I didn't come to this country for a vacation. I am running away from persecution and a lot of traumatic experiences. So emotional support like talking to a therapist or something would be really good because I have to deal with those things all day every day.

Another student who identified as half Salvadorian and half Hawaiian opened up about needing therapy, or at the very least easier access to information to get resources. He discussed how he struggled with many obstacles, and although he felt privileged to have parents to support him, moving back in with them to pursue education proved to be a "really damaging environment. It's really hard to push through your education while mentally you are falling apart."

One of the tenets of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) was that it extended beyond law, civil rights, and education, and permeated disciplines that included but were not limited to sociology, history, psychology, women's studies, and ethnic studies. The roundtable discussion brought the focus of psychology to the center, which was discussed in the participant debriefs as well. Students expressed that there was a collective historical pain and trauma that could not go unaddressed when discovering ways to help them feel they belong. Students indicated that the trauma and pain had not been healed, and had left open wounds and fresh scabs that needed to be treated with all the salve that students themselves recommended to be provided for them.

Department Resources

Students indicated a need for department resources that ranged from typical college assistance such as writing labs and tutors, to fundamental human needs such as housing and jobs. Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs indicated that a sense of belonging cannot be achieved until the first two levels are gained, which were physiological and safety. Physiological needs included breathing, food, water, shelter, clothing, and sleep. Safety needs included health, employment, property, family, and social ability. The more intimate and safe space that the participants created allowed students to divulge that they were in need of those resources first and foremost:

> I would love to have some type of income; it is not easy to find jobs as an immigrant. I struggle a lot because I didn't speak English. I've been living in shelters and can't find a stable place. I really want to go to school but I also have to work, and I also have to deal with immigration issues. Instead of worrying about everything else if I had to pick one thing, I would love to have a place where I can call home.

Another student added that he would like to see more information for people with criminal backgrounds who cannot obtain jobs as easily.

Many of the needs that students were asking for, from standard college resources such as writing or editing labs, to mental health resources, were offered in the department and on campus, respectively. That meant that the information regarding when and how to access resources was lacking. A student indicated she received help from one of her instructors to polish her resume, but that kind of resource needed to be more accessible for all. The literature mentioned that community colleges already offered many support systems, but one of the issues

could have been students' lack of awareness about them (Gardenshire-Crooks et al., 2010). In their study, Gardenshire-Crooks et al. (2010) found that creating new student orientation programs and making them mandatory helped to engage students in a sense of belonging on campus from the onset.

Another student identified as a Black man whose father was African American, and his mother was from Grenada. He held a degree in accounting and got it "out of fear," but did not want to be an accountant, which was why he found himself taking classes in the Cinema/TV Department. He believed that his perspective was different from his peers because he was older and had completed a four-year degree. He believed that "the department resources are decent, professors are knowledgeable and work in entertainment, so they have real world industry experience." He went on to clarify that in his experience, "professors do email us stuff, but if there was more effort to get festivals, workshops, screenings, info like that to students and put it in our face. We have a responsibility to find that info but it would be helpful."

Many of the resources that students asked for in the roundtable discussion and the TikTok videos were available within the department and the campus. It was clear that better communication was needed from faculty to connect students with the resources they were needing. When it came to more sensitive needs such as mental health or housing, faculty could make the information readily available so that students need not ask for it. That could look like posting it clearly on the syllabus and course website, announcing at the beginning of the semester and reminding throughout, and creating safe spaces in the classroom and offices for students to be able to ask for help when needed.

Community

Students elaborated on their need for community, particularly with fellow Black and/or Latine peers. A student who identified as Mexican American discussed what could really improve the program for her community was having:

> Spaces like the one we are having right now are very helpful. I specifically feel the need to to be connecting with other BIPOC students within the department. I feel like that's the greatest resource we can have talking with other people that share similar experiences.

Another student who identified as Black agreed, and opened that thought up to dialogues that include not just Black and/or Latine, but everyone in order to have a better understanding of each other:

> Discussions like this should happen with groups within your culture but we also need to talk about our experiences with other cultures, so they can get an understanding on how we feel and we can get an understanding on how they feel, and then we can't forget about the White people they need to know our experiences because a lot of times they don't know. And I know you're probably tired from talking about it but if they don't know, if they're ignorant to whatever it is, more spaces where we can learn about each other, like a certain night where we screen films from different cultures where students get to see and care about something that's completely different from you.

Students had ideas that ranged from sitting around a room as they were for the study just talking about how they felt to events that were specifically geared toward student engagement and focusing on experiences to "make our voices heard."

While some students in the room believed that it was their responsibility to seek out opportunities and engage with each other, others felt that it was the college's job, as one student stated:

> I heavily believe that it's the institution's responsibility to provide a space that is safe for all of their students, especially for Black and Latine students. And not just cinema; all departments.

Certainly more can be done to enhance these communities. In the higher education system, learning objectives need to be met, syllabi and schedules followed. Building in these spaces within the classroom, as projects or activities, and incorporating other classes and the department as a whole could prove to create a greater sense of belonging. The need for community was the most common answer from the TikToks, the participant debrief, and the roundtable. That aligned with Moreno's (2015) findings, that when the students and co-producers shared their experiences with each other, they felt less alone, and united in their experiences and the contradictions and racism they had endured, particularly when they refused to assimilate to the status quo.

Faculty Diversity

Each department on the campus was allotted a certain amount of full-time faculty based on a number of factors including budget and student to faculty ratio. The Cinema/TV Department at the time of research consisted of four full-time faculty. At the time of publication, two more faculty members were hired; one Black man and one White man. The primary researcher informed the two leading participants as to the long complex road to gain a new full time hire within the department. The roundtable discussion offered an opportunity for a follow-

up question to address the lack of diverse faculty to find options that can help Black and/or Latine students find meaningful belonging:

> If you don't have the profs that can represent other minorities it'd be cool if there were workshops incorporated into the classes where POC industry professionals can be a guest lecturer, which can be insightful for everyone to learn about. A couple of lectures here or there.

Another student agreed, and pointed to the importance of having:

> Access to people who are already in the industry and are from our backgrounds, if they could come to speak and tell us how they did and give us advice. Because it can be very intimidating when you're a person of color and you see all the professionals in the industry and they happen to be White it can be intimidating. There is a familiarity and comfort if we could see other people like us also being successful.

Most students in the room agreed with having more folks "through the doors from a variety of backgrounds." One student suggested having a consultant to ensure every ethnicity is represented. Another reiterated "What we want to see is people who look like us who work and know and can identify with these situations."

One of the students noted the fleeting nature of guest lecturers and events and offered further elaboration into the need for diversity into the classroom curriculum. This sentiment was gleaned from the TikToks as well. The student recommended:

> Incorporate examples into lecture or theme from POC. Expose students a little bit here and there. Events people will just go home, but incorporating that into lectures is a good way for students to be exposed and can't avoid it because it's in their face. Maybe have a

small discussion about “Hey what did you think about this theme?” “What did you think about this character?” “What did you like, or were you aware of this problem before?” Another student agreed with the emphasis to put more diversity into curriculum, and got a little help expressing himself when he stated:

> Every person who works in the Cinema Department tries their best to be as inclusive as possible, but I noticed that things they talk about, films, actors, it’s no one that looks, talks [everyone chimed in to help by exclaiming “They’re White!” to which the student laughed and nodded] if they want to be more inclusive they can.

Hiring diverse faculty was the only component that the study could not immediately implement an action item on, other than strong recommendations to find more access to wider pools of applicants for future openings. It could also recommend further study into that incredibly important and needed topic which would greatly impact a sense of belonging for students of color. The roundtable discussion opened a dialogue to engage students in ways to think about what would still help them in a situation that could not yet be changed, and those suggestions could be immediately implemented, unlike full-time hiring processes which were mostly out of the department’s control.

Student Stories

The data revealed that students needed to be heard, seen, and to have a place to tell their stories. The students in this study were uniquely situated to already be in a cinema and TV program where they were actively learning the powerful tools of storytelling through film and television. Students wanted not only to learn the skills and knowledge needed, but to be empowered to tell stories through those mediums that are about them, and that matter to them.

Students were clear that they did not want to tell stories that had to be adapted to White culture in order to be relevant. Many of the students at the roundtable believed that the department had a responsibility to ensure that there was a space, "an incubator, for our stories and our experiences."

> If you're providing education, the education that you provide and the resources that you provide should reflect your students. Obviously there is a long illustrious history of lack of representation in the industry that we want to be in. So you have to identify that and we need to provide an inclusive space because there are stories out there; Black, Native American, Hispanic, women, men, trans, who have stories that need to be told, and this is the foundation of that. You learn your tools and you find resources to get your story told.

And that incubation period could lead to the hatching of great ideas, and new agents of change in the industry:

> These cinema students are going to go off and make decisions on projects and influence to some degree things that people watch. If you ignore making these points and creating these inclusive spaces for students, then I feel like when they go into the industry, they're not going to understand that these spaces should be available and how to respect other people, especially marginalized people, and take into consideration their experiences and how society views them and how to incorporate that into the industry.

A student built on that momentum by saying:

> For anything to be accepted it has to be considered real. Specific to our Black and Hispanic students to be considered real we must show who we are. Speak truth to ourselves and tell the stories we want to tell. Their stories and point of view are as

> important as the White folks, but the thing is nobody knows their stories. We have to show who we are, we have to show those films with our stories, with our point of view, with our faces on screen so people know who we are so they know we exist so we become accepted. I know it's hard, every time I write something I doubt it. I change my mind time after time because I'm like, does this fit the stereotypical, the White view? Every time I write something personal that's very me, I change it and try to make it fitting with what's considered accepted, normal. Follow your heart, tell your story, no matter what, no matter who.

Another student pointed out that the responsibility to create inclusion was wider than the institution alone:

> It's not just the faculty's job to create these spaces, it's up to students. If I want to create an inclusive space, I need to show up, speak up, tell people my story so I can feel included. No one's going to create an inclusive space for me, and only I know what it means to be inclusive to me, so I think it starts with me, being brave, speaking up, telling my story. It's a balance, everyone should provide an inclusive space. I love stories, and I'm tired of the same story being told time after time with the same type of people. I want to see *us*.

Student voice is powerful, impactful, and when the classroom teaching becomes perfunctory, regurgitating the same ideals, stories, and histories, students lose out, society loses out. Not only is it imperative for faculty and the department to create these safe spaces for students to express themselves, but they also have to be reminded that their stories, their being,

matters, they matter, just as the slogan for LACC stated, “You matter here.” It is the college’s responsibility and everyone in it to ensure that that statement is true.

Views, Comments, and Likes on TikToks

The 54 TikToks that were uploaded to the page @youmatterhereatlacc garnered a total of 33 followers and 1,786 page likes. The study relied on the visual and audio modality of TikTok as a creative way to share data results and uplift student voice. By placing student voice as data at the forefront, students felt seen and heard. Allowing the study to exist in a public space opened up room for further engagement and dialogue, and an ease of accessibility for stakeholders, decision makers, faculty, staff, and students to engage in the study and witness student experience first-hand. The analysis of TikTok algorithms and creating “viral” content extended beyond the scope of the study, but the following sections point to the noteworthy engagement that did exist during the course of this work.

Views

Each video garnered a significant difference in the number of views it received. All videos utilized hashtags such as #youmatterhere, #inclusionmatters, #diversitymatters, #pocfilmmakers, #studentsmatter, #educationtiktok, #communitycollege, #cinema, #tv, #socialjustice, and #filmprogram in order to engage more viewers in content that was of interest to them. The first video posted had 918 views, while the following three videos had an average of 60. View counts averaged 250 for the next ten videos, then dropped to an average of 40 views for the four that followed. This pattern continued, with an average of 250 for a batch of about five videos, then down to an average of 40 for the next batch.

Then there was an anomaly; a video that had 4,261 views. This particular video happened to be the most negative response of any of the videos, where a student asked “Where are my people? Is this the right place for me?” He expressed that he felt he did not see anyone who looked like him in any of his classes, but persisted because he loved filmmaking. This particular student was also the anomaly as indicated in the participant debriefs during the member-checking, as he was the only student that did not feel accepted by his peers in the Cinema/TV Department.

The second-most viewed video had 2,343 views, which featured a student talking about how comfortable he was to be himself in the department, and when the participant asked a follow up question in regard to that comfort, he thought further and discussed how his accent did deter him sometimes from contributing to classroom discussion. The dialogue continued as he considered if having a Latine teacher was in class who could better understand him he would feel more comfortable. The video contained footage of the student walking around the Cinema/TV Department and engaging with fellow students.

Comments

Engagement in the form of comments was particularly low on the TikTok videos, even though there was an ask in the caption of each video to engage. The only video that had comments featured the same student who had the most views. In this video, that student discussed not feeling safe to be himself. The comments showed support toward the student, as one person wrote, “It’s time for change. I believe you can be a director.” Another said, “My husband has a strong Colombian accent and struggles with the same issue.” Three more people commented in similar ways, sharing their own experiences of feeling discriminated against for

having a Latin accent. The comment section ended with: “You’re doing important work. Latinos stand up!”

Likes

It was one thing for viewers to watch a video, but another for them to click on the heart icon, indicating they “like” the video. The video that had the most likes featured a student who discussed how positive his experience had been in the Cinema/TV Department in regard to feeling completely safe to be himself. He felt happy to have the department as part of his filmmaking journey, and could not think of a time he ever felt unsafe. That video had 219 likes.

As this was a living and ongoing piece of work, looking at views, comments, and likes served as preliminary and emerging observations. The views and comments did not contribute significant data to the study, but were worth some thought, as this modality was a new way to present data. If a future study relied on public comment as data, then more focus would need to be put on marketing strategies and algorithms to ensure that a large amount of people were engaging. For this study, it was interesting to note which TikToks received the most views, likes, and comments, but further analysis or reach for a larger scale was beyond the scope of this study.

Summary

These rich datasets emerged from the prompts that were created by the four researchers based on the framework of sense of belonging in the TikTok videos and roundtable discussion. Each prompt was answered throughout the TikTok dialogues, the participant debriefs, and the roundtable discussions. The data revealed that most students felt safe to be who they authentically were and felt accepted by their peers, who were diverse. There were many support systems within the department, but more could be done more readily to engage students together

in community. Events to create community needed to be shared more blatantly and frequently for students to ensure they received the information. Safe spaces needed to be created within the classroom, curriculum, and department so students could share their experiences with each other. Students could benefit greatly from being encouraged to tell their authentic stories. Students did not see themselves reflected in the faculty nor the curriculum, and much work can be done to incorporate diverse voices into lectures, assignments, and activities. Although diverse faculty hires were a larger problem, much could be done to help students of color see themselves reflected in industry professionals by having them come in to share their experiences.

The TikTok dialogues provided answers to the research questions that will be discussed at length in Chapter 5. The dialogues were in alignment with Strayhorn's (2012) seven core elements that made up sense of belonging. The first element was that a sense of belonging is a basic human need, which was magnified in a college setting as the very chance of students' success relied on it. Students expressed this need in how they felt safe when they felt accepted, and disconnected from themselves when they did not. The second was that a sense of belonging was a motive that drives humans to make decisions and take action. When students felt safe and supported in the department, they did not question their place or path. When students did not feel safe, they questioned their safety and their belonging which led to uncertainty. Third, a sense of belonging was even more important in certain situations and times, such as in the classroom, which yielded relative outcomes. Much of the dialogues with students showed the need for representative content in the classroom, which would greatly affect their feeling of belonging. Fourth, humans wanted to feel like we matter, and a sense of belonging directly related to the need for students to know that they are cared about. When the department can implement the

suggestions made by students such as more community engagement, more awareness of resources, more diverse faculty and curriculum, it could all enhance their feeling that they matter. The fifth element was how one's identity affected a college student's sense of belonging. Students felt safe to be who they were, and thrived in spaces where they could reflect on their own identities. Sixth was that when a sense of belonging was achieved, it unlocked further well-being and happiness, which was the goal, particularly because research showed that this feeling of belonging can stay with students well beyond their academic experience. Yet, Strayhorn (2012) finalized the elements by noting that sense of belonging was evolving and shifting as situations changed.

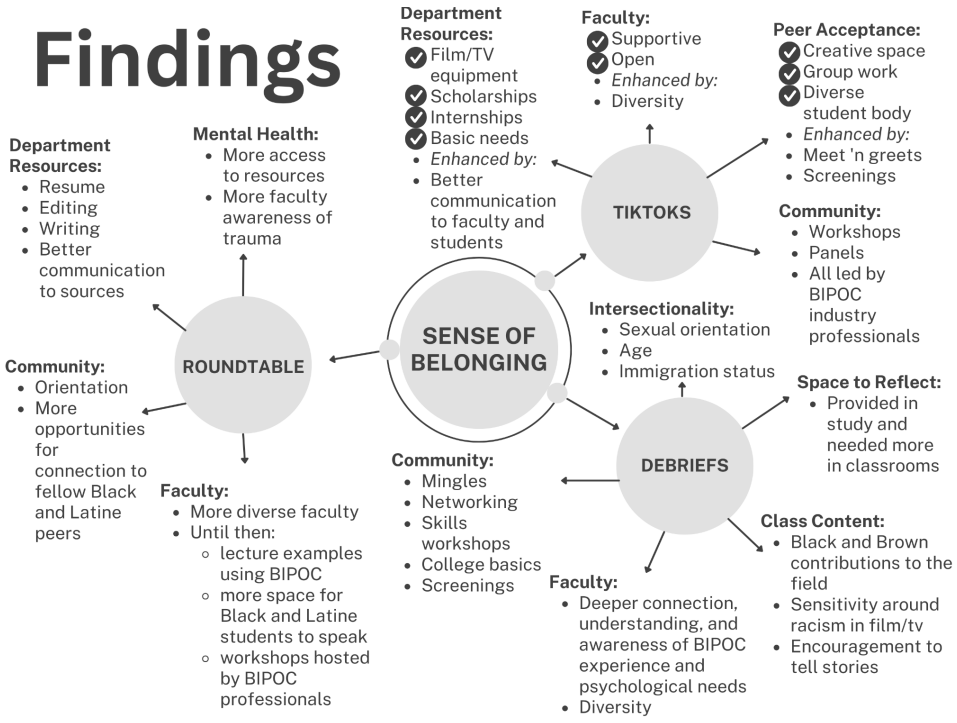
The debrief interviews with participants provided a measurement that was created by Allen et al. (2021), who synthesized components of sense of belonging. The four components that emerged to help to determine if an individual felt a true sense of belonging were as follows. First, the person's abilities to belong, including their skills to relate to others and the development of their own identity. Second, the person's opportunities to belong with available resources and engagements in the classroom and department. Third, a person's motivation to belong when they feel safe to seek out connections. And fourth, the person's perceived sense of belonging once all of these abilities had been achieved.

The measurements and outcomes of this study can help develop implications for policy, practice, pedagogy, and curriculum shifts for the Cinema/TV Department and the college as a whole. Critical Race Theory (D. A. Bell, 1976; Crenshaw, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) provided the lens through which outcomes were analyzed to empower student voices and acknowledge race and racism as inextricably linked entities within the institution and society as a

whole. CRT also pointed to the impossibility of objectivity, as the ideas of color-blindness and equality only served to detract from the power structures that were historically in place to continue dominant ideology and the marginalization of people of color. The study also acknowledged that historically civil liberties and rights have only been granted to people of color when it also served in the best interest of White folks. This study relied on and believed in the tenet of CRT that counternarratives in research were key to understanding the lived experience of the marginalized, and gave credit and value to those stories. Counter narratives were a critical part of understanding, explaining, and ultimately shifting the way researchers talk about injustices. Figure 1 depicts these findings from each modality. The implications of these counternarratives are discussed in the following chapter.

Figure 1

Diagrammatic Presentation of the Findings



CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to characterize the experiences of Black and Latine students in the Cinema/TV Department at LACC. The data gathered can help inform courses of action that will increase their sense of belonging. The conceptual framework of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012) guided the study as its research has shown a strong connection between sense of belonging and greater success and retention rates particularly for marginalized college students.

A recent equity audit in the Cinema/TV Department at LACC and supportive research (Bush & Bush, 2010; Klein, 2021) showed that Black males had the lowest retention and success rates in the Cinema/TV program. And although Latine students made up 55% of the student population at LACC (Gasman & Conrad, 2022; OIE, 2023), they showed a lower retention rate than their White and Asian peers. The Cinema/TV Department at this minority-serving institution (Jones & Sáenz, 2020) served as a gateway into the entertainment industry which was vastly underrepresented by Black and Latine roles both in front of and behind the camera. Therefore it was the department's responsibility to instill a sense of belonging for the students who needed the greatest retention and success rate increase, which would in turn place them into the entertainment industry and help to create more diverse narratives. When more authentic stories can be told from Black and Latine experiences through the media, more understanding can permeate throughout society, and biases can decrease toward these groups.

This arts-based, qualitative study relied on the participatory action research (PAR) methodology, supported by the emphasis on the strength of counternarratives as posited by

Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989). Four participants were recruited who identified as Black and/or Latine, were active students in the Cinema/TV Department, and over 18 years of age. Those four participants were empowered to engage in dialogue with fellow students to help answer the study's research questions:

1. What is the lived experience of Black and/or Latine students in the Cinema/TV Department at LACC?
2. What do Black and/or Latine student narratives reveal about their sense of belonging and support systems at this community college's Cinema/TV Department?

After an orientation on the research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, the four participants decided which prompts would best help them discover their fellow peers' sense of belonging. Participants then engaged in dialogue with fellow students using the prompts, and recorded and uploaded their findings to the social media platform TikTok. The Tiktok page was created by the researcher specifically for this study. The handle youmatterhere@lacc hosted 54 videos that featured 19 different students who responded to the dialogue prompts that were decided on by the participants. The 19 students who engaged with participants had to meet the same specific research criteria as the participants who were leading the discussions, which were: identify as Black and/or Latine, be at least 18 years old, be a registered and active student in the Cinema/TV Department, and willing to be filmed. Those 19 students discussed their experiences within the department, and indicated specific needs that would greatly increase their sense of belonging. Students also pointed to systems and practices that currently aid in certain aspects of sense of belonging already in place.

This chapter examines the results of these dialogues in order to answer the research questions about the experiences of Black and/or Latine students and the resulting implications. The first section serves as a reminder of the methodology used in the study. The next section presents themes that emerged from the participant and student dialogues on TikTok, participant interviews, and roundtable discussion. This leads to a discussion on implications for classroom, department, and campus practice, as well as policy shifts. The chapter concludes with recommendations based on the findings of the study followed by suggestions for future research.

Empowering Student Voice

Research that places student voice and perspective as the source of data leads to authentic results that can elicit change. The focus on counternarratives (L. A. Bell, 2016) helped empower participants and the students with whom they engaged to share and validate their experiences. This dynamic research approach allows audiences to see students in a new light and challenge deficit framings. By hearing and seeing participants' narratives, and witnessing their experience, a deeper data set emerged in order to find best practices for student sense of belonging.

Participatory action research (PAR) was developed using Critical Race Theory as the foundation, and holds educational institutions responsible for addressing inequity by engaging students in analysis of power structures (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). PAR gave students the opportunity to work against these oppressive structures by using their voices to critically analyze and comment on their worlds (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). This modality broke barriers by empowering participants with the autonomy to discover truth about themselves and their fellow peers using a social media platform (TikTok) that was already familiar to them. The

messaging of this empowerment to them was that their voice mattered, they were seen and heard, and change would come based on what they needed.

The four research participants each engaged with fellow students in the Cinema/TV Department in dialogue using the agreed upon prompts. The conversations were recorded and posted to the TikTok account youmatterhere@lacc. It was crucial to ensure that the participants all identified as Black and/or Latine and spoke with students who also identified as Black and/or Latine. Relying on the PAR, as its tradition was steeped in social justice, allowed for a safer dialogue to take place (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). By removing the researcher—who was also a White professor in the department—allowed for a more authentic data set as dialogues were had by and with students who looked like each other and were from similar backgrounds.

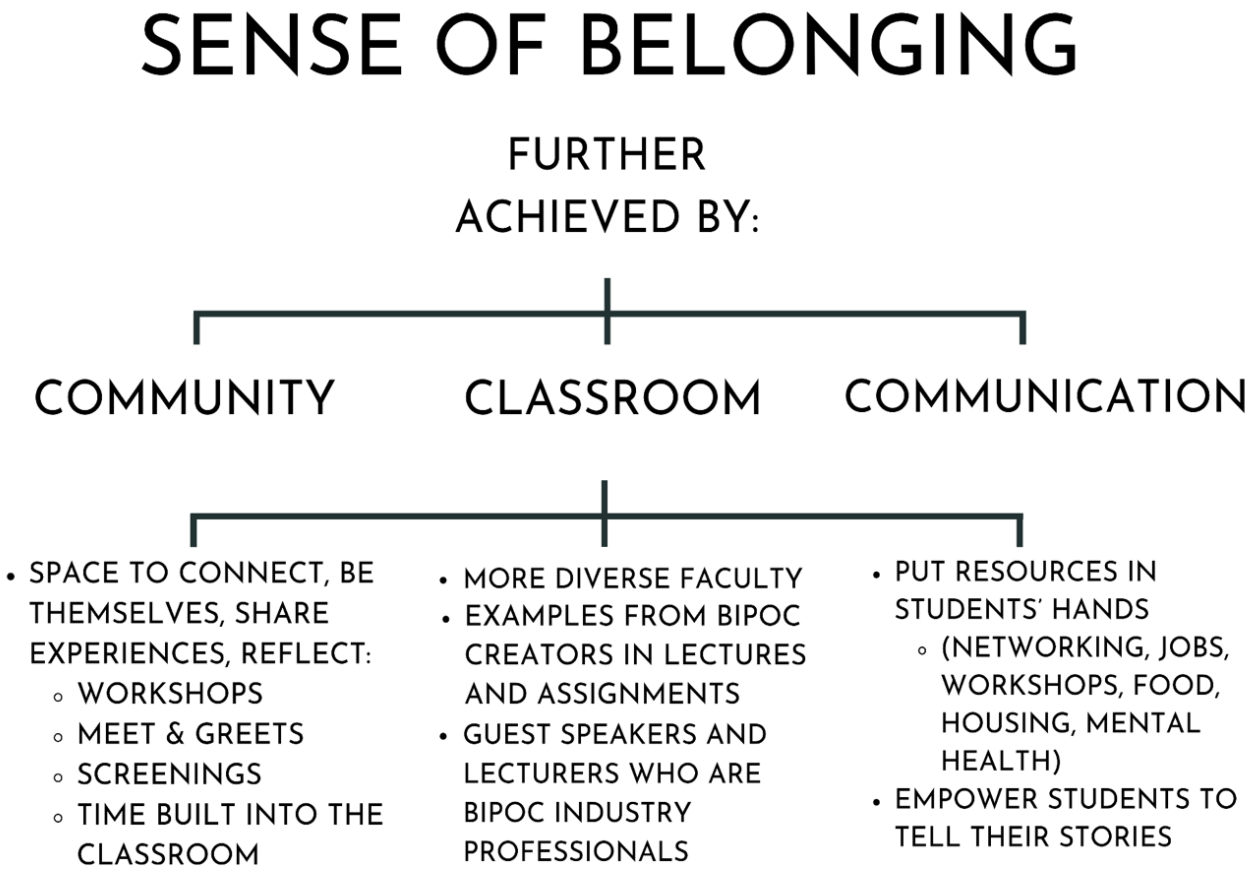
Once the TikToks were posted, the researcher interviewed each of the four participants who reflected on their experience in the study and within the department. The TikTok data was member checked to ensure the validity and understanding of the findings. During these interviews, two of the four participants requested to bring the data further by engaging students in a roundtable style to ask the prompts again but within the safety of a Black and/or Latine student discussion.

The two participants invited four more students to engage in a roundtable discussion. The six students dove deeper into the dialogue prompts, and the two lead participants encouraged more dialogue by asking follow-up questions. Students responded to each other and affirmed each other's experiences. The entire discussion lasted approximately two hours, and the results were posted to the same research study TikTok account.

The themes that emerged from coding the TikToks, the participant debriefs, and the roundtable discussion were presented in depth in Chapter 4 and shown in Figure 1. With these findings, three specific action items emerged that can be implemented into the department. All of the themes that lead to the action items are grouped into three major categories: community, classroom, and communication. These are synthesized as "The Three Cs" in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Themes



Community

The most common response as to what the department can do to help foster a sense of belonging was to provide spaces for students to connect. In these safe spaces, similar to what was created in the roundtable portion of this study, students could continue to feel safe to be themselves, seek out support and understanding from fellow students, and reflect on their experiences both in and outside of the department. Educators can help foster these spaces by being what Love (2019) described as co-conspirators, and engage in building a community of learning together by truly believing that everyone should be their authentic selves. In doing so, students and educators can identify and tear down oppressive structures. This idea was supported by the literature where Gardenshire-Crooks et al. (2010) proposed a forum where students, faculty, and staff talked about racism on campus, which raised awareness of the pain and frustration BIPOC students experienced, and helped to uncover ways to help students feel more welcome.

Students in this study offered department-specific suggestions for these kinds of spaces to be in the form of "meet and greets" with each other, workshops and panel discussions where they can learn more about specific entertainment industry practices, and weekly or monthly screenings that can have different themes in regard to people, ideas, and cultures. In these spaces, they could learn from each other as they connect.

The community spaces can serve as an opportunity for further learning, and students in this study indicated that because there were no Black nor Latine full-time faculty, having guest speakers, panelists, and workshop leaders who were Black and/or Latine and worked in the entertainment industry would positively impact Black and/or Latine students. For them,

witnessing BIPOC success stories could help to encourage them to continue, and help counter not seeing themselves in the faculty. Levin et al. (2010) found that these bridges from faculty and program to the industry and potential employers both helped students to gain employment but also gave recognition to the program itself, furthering the credibility of its students. These interactions helped solidify learning and gave students a better understanding of how their work applied directly to their future, and built their confidence.

At the time of the study, the Cinema/TV Department presented two staple end-of-semester activities. One was the TV Awards Show, where students submitted their short films, TV productions, and screenplays for possible nominations for awards. Those awards were presented to winners for Best Director, Best Short Film, Best Editing, Best Screenplay, and so on, as voted on by a panel of judges made up of students, industry professionals, and faculty. The show was streamed live and created a feeling of community. As one of the students who also happened to engage in this study announced during his acceptance speech as Best Director, "I finally feel I belong."

The other foundational activity the Cinema/TV Department hosted each semester was a two-hour screening typically held in the Morgan Freeman theater. This "Best of Semester" screening showcased the top three films from the beginning and advanced production classes, as voted on by students in each class. The filmmakers brought their families, friends, and fellow classmates to watch and support each other. Food was provided before the screening, and the feeling of community was created.

These two examples are part of what the department was already doing to help foster student belonging, which was one reason the Cinema/TV Department may have a 6% greater

success rate compared to the rest of the campus. The student responses in this study and the literature pointed to this kind of experience helping, but students needed this kind of collective experience at the beginning of the semester, not just at the end. Students in the study also requested more of these events throughout the semester. Bush and Bush (2010) and Martinez and Munsch (2019) all found through their studies that an orientation at the beginning of each semester or school year, specifically focused on the needs of Black and/or Latine students, can greatly increase belonging and set the stage for a more inclusive semester. In their study, Gardenshire-Crooks et al. (2010) found that creating new student orientation programs and making them mandatory helped to engage students in a sense of belonging on campus from the onset.

If the Cinema/TV Department can offer an orientation to begin the semester, host weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly activities such as workshops led by BIPOC industry leaders, meet and greets, and screenings, culminating with the two major events already in place that celebrate student creations, a sense of belonging for Black and/or Latine students can greatly increase.

Classroom

Almost all of the students involved in dialogue expressed a great need for more diverse representation in faculty and curriculum. Since there were no full-time faculty of color at the onset of the study, it was even more imperative for the current faculty to ensure they were including examples both historically and contemporarily from BIPOC creators in their curriculum. Bush and Bush (2010) found that the strongest indicator of belonging for marginalized students was faculty interaction. Their research led to one of the most critical ways to do that which was to utilize Black representation in coursework so that students saw

themselves in the curriculum. This reflected precisely what students in this study called for in almost every dialogue.

Faculty also needed to have a better understanding of students' backgrounds and how those played into their way of learning. Martinez and Munsch (2019) proposed the idea of training new faculty and staff to better understand student needs, resources, and cultural contexts, which would greatly enhance a sense of belonging. Greene et al. (2008) also found that this active engagement helped to bridge the equity gap. In that study, when engagement from teachers with students increased, particularly with Black and Latine students, they succeeded academically at greater levels than their White classmates. Engagement included academic preparation, mental stimulation, and tailored class assignments. Wilson (2021) found that Black and Brown student sense of belonging increased when they engaged with faculty who taught from love and put emphasis on the authentic exploration of Black and Brown student experiences, lives, and culture.

The Cinema/TV Department had the advantage of built-in media training, which the literature showed to be an incredible tool to empower students to challenge and counter the imagery they often see of themselves in mainstream media (Conner & Rosen, 2016). The tools and skills learned in creating media while using it as a channel for the telling of their own stories was twofold in creating a sense of belonging. By using film as a method of instruction to urban teachers, Sealey-Ruiz (2011) found that participants were more engaged, more willing to contribute to discussion, and felt more connected to their own experiences. Alemán and Alemán (2016) found these counter stories through media as highly effective tools in transforming culture and closing the equity gap.

By incorporating Black and Latine voices into lectures, activities, and assignments, and empowering students with the skills to create media utilizing their own voices, the Cinema/TV Department can build on what it is currently doing by adding these critical pieces to its current work. These ideas can be incorporated within each class, and will need to be communicated to faculty and emphasized as paramount to increase sense of belonging.

Communication

Students discussed how their lives can be overwhelming; between full course schedules, responsibilities at home, and their jobs, it was easy for them to miss opportunities through the current channels of communication. Students said they need the information to be more "in their face." The department offered many opportunities throughout each semester for networking, jobs, workshops, help with food and housing, scholarships, and mental health services, but students did not always receive the information. As Gardenshire-Crooks et al. (2010) found in their research, community colleges already offered many support systems, but one of the issues could be student lack of awareness about them.

The department can increase a sense of belonging by finding ways to get the information in front of students more aggressively and consistently. It already posted opportunities on its Instagram page and through email blasts, but much of that information was contingent upon individual faculty to lead students to the department's Instagram page and the email blast sign up, and to announce each opportunity individually either in live class or on an announcement page online. Getting professors on the same page, engaging in more social media outlets, posting signage around the building, and consistent follow up to ensure these items are being relayed to students will all help to bring these opportunities to students in the department.

Students in this study emphasized the most important piece for them to feel they belong, and that was to be empowered to tell their stories. Faculty and the department as a whole can work to support and encourage students to tell their stories by providing space and time to explore themselves while they are learning entertainment industry skill sets. The literature reflected this need, as Wilson (2021) believed that community colleges can shift from maintaining the status quo to helping to create career pathways for students of color by helping them find their power from their authentic selves. Levin et al. (2010) agreed in their recognition that some Latine students in particular needed assistance to gain belief in themselves.

Faculty can encourage Black and/or Latine students to consider themselves as creators of stories, while empowering them with the knowledge and skills to tell those stories through media. This powerful combination can greatly increase their sense of belonging, inspire them to stay through the Cinema/TV program, and use those skills and sense of self to gain access and employment in the entertainment industry where they can tell their stories on an even larger scale.

The Right Tools

This study in and of itself gave the four participants and their fellow students a safe place to reflect, share, see themselves, and feel valued—all of which created a sense of belonging. The research design, including the modality of TikTok, the methodology of arts-based participatory action research, and the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, all aligned to make this exploration of sense of belonging successful and impactful. The very act of engaging students in dialogue about their experiences proved to be a much needed and missing component of their experience, and in turn, an opportunity to continually improve pedagogical and policy practices

that can increase their sense of belonging, which may heighten their retention and success rates, and close equity gaps for the Cinema/TV Department and the campus of LACC.

TikTok as a Modality

TikTok proved to be the right avenue to collect and share data as it served as a visual medium to extend knowledge beyond academia. It demonstrated to participants the power of their voice, and helped them to feel seen. Students were already engaging with TikTok, so it made sense to meet them where they were and use the social media application to amplify their voices and allow for an even greater dialogue with public engagement. One of the participants showed excitement to see the amount of views the videos she made, and realized that her work was being seen. Although there was not much commentary on the videos, which would rely on marketing tools beyond the scope of the study, having an accessible place for student thoughts and feelings to be expressed helped participants and students feel that they mattered.

The physical and virtual spaces where the dialogues took place proved fulfilling and encouraging to the participants, who expressed a wish to replicate the study in other departments throughout the campus, and to have their own TikTok page to have a place to share how they were feeling. This aligned with the Martinez and Munsch (2019) findings of utilizing social media for student engagement and connection to increase sense of belonging. The literature agreed, as Edwards (2021) pointed out that social media itself, including TikTok, can foster a sense of belonging as it allows the user to engage with a diverse audience in ways it might not in a face to face setting. Beyond the classroom, these social media spaces are where much of this kind of dialogue is taking place, as the social media landscape becomes more democratized, and educators need to be engaged in and absorbing this information to have a greater awareness of

student experience when it comes to race in the classroom (Cook et al., 2020; Daly et al., 2019; Khalifa et al., 2016; Shields, 2010).

Escamilla-Fajardo et al. (2021) concluded from their study that TikTok is recommended and uniquely positioned to be an effective teaching-learning tool as it allowed expression through imagery and music. Students in this study were able to implement the media making skills they are learning in the department such as video, audio, editing, while simultaneously empowering themselves and each other to share their experiences. The assurance that their voices would not be lost in an academic journal but rather posted in spaces that can be seen in real time, was a profound culmination of the study.

With over 150 million United States users as of 2023, TikTok was the third-most downloaded app in the world (Davis, 2023). TikTok can be a tremendous tool for change. The short but impactful videos allowed for greater connection between students, faculty, and decision-makers. Students in this study were excited to be able to use a modality that they were familiar with, but in a new and empowering way. The TikToks themselves became digestible, immediate, slice-of-life glimpses of student experience. With these videos in the public sphere, student voice and their suggestions for change become undeniable, and could create a greater impact on policy and pedagogy changes. This fully accessible knowledge generated by students can help put pressure on stakeholders to create true shifts in educational practice, as the data is presented to these changemakers in real time.

Sense of Belonging

The framework of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012) proved to be a helpful guide throughout this study. The seven components of belonging that Strayhorn (2012) laid out kept

the researcher and participants focused on what aspects of the dialogues and interviews would be most relevant to help answer the research questions. Those components attributed a sense of belonging to being a basic human need, which is magnified in a college setting as the very chance of student success relies on it. Sense of belonging is a motive that drives humans to make decisions and take action, and is even more important in certain situations and times, such as in the classroom, which yields relative outcomes. Sense of belonging relies on the idea that humans want to feel like we matter, and directly relates to the need for students to know that they are cared about. One's identity affects a college student's sense of belonging, and although it can evolve and change, once a sense of belonging is achieved, it unlocks further well-being and happiness.

The very motto of LACC was "You matter here." By focusing on the framework that envelops that same ideology, this study was able to demonstrate that the motto did hold truth. There was a sense of belonging for Black and/or Latine students in this college's Cinema/TV Department, but even more can be done to greatly increase the feeling that they matter. Research showed that a sense of belonging can greatly increase retention and completion rates for minoritized students (Martinez & Munsch, 2019). Therefore, this is a critical component to ensure Black and Latine students at LACC feel they truly belong.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) further defined "sense of belonging" as the social integration of students of color into the college landscape. With this study grounded in the idea and goal of a sense of belonging, the participants were able to focus their dialogue prompts so that they led to conversations about belonging specifically. The resulting data was coded according to this foundational understanding of sense of belonging. The action items that emerged can help to

build on the sense of belonging that already existed in the department to include areas that are in need of improvement: more spaces to build community, more diverse curriculum, and more open communication from faculty to students both in keeping them privy to opportunities, and encouraging them to tell their authentic stories.

Critical Race Theory

The use of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) worked to justify, validate, and express the need for student voice and the power of counternarratives. This theoretical framework served as a guide to bring context and understanding of the inextricable link of racism with educational institutions and the entertainment industry from inception to contemporary practice. This foundation contextualized student narratives as they discussed their experiences within the classroom and the department. Although they did not point to blatant racism, it flowed as an undercurrent throughout their experience, and emerged in the form of the result of systemic racism that led to their feelings of exclusion. This was seen in instances where instructors who had gone through a primarily Eurocentric experience and continued that ideology, in the lack of diverse faculty, and in students needing encouragement, permission even, to express themselves fully in their creations.

Operating within two historically racist entities: higher education and the entertainment industry, resulted in precisely what students discussed experiencing—not seeing themselves in the work. Although students talked about their faculty being supportive, Black students in the study discussed their feeling more connected when they had a Black faculty member teaching their course. Direct implications as discussed below can lead to more diverse representation in the curriculum by adding more creators of color as examples, and encouraging students to share

their own stories in their work. But until there is a profound shift in both industries to include more Black and Latine voices, the results will continue to prove Critical Race Theory correct: that racism is a permanent fixture in United States society.

Participatory Action Research

Enacting participatory action research (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014) for this study was paramount to engage in the counternarratives needed for authentic results. By placing students at the center in creating dialogue prompts and using those to converse with each other resulted not only in honest, tangible data that can be implemented, but helped students discover more about themselves and each other. The dialogues with each other gave them a space that they typically did not get a chance to create themselves nor were given during their educational journey.

Implications for Praxis

Examining implications for praxis brought the results of the study into meaningful, purposeful action. The foundation of this study was to break from traditional research and use modalities and frameworks that will not just repeat or create new theories but use what was learned from students for action-based educational practice that will increase their sense of belonging.

Within the Department

The Cinema/TV Department showed a 6% greater success rate for all ethnic groups compared to the rest of the campus (OIE, 2023). The amount of support that it provided: free filmmaking equipment, opportunities for basic needs, further skill sets, and industry jobs,

supportive faculty, and the inherent nature of filmmaking to create spaces where students work in groups and connect with each other all contributed to that number.

That success and retention rate number can grow, particularly with Black and Latine students, when the department expands its ability to create safe spaces for students to connect, to ensure that when hosting workshops, panels, and guest speakers, that Black and Latine content creators are invited to lead. The department can host orientations, consistent screenings and meet ups for students that are built into the semester schedule, and to communicate those opportunities consistently and frequently.

Within the Classroom

The department can communicate with its faculty to ensure that they are including creators of color into their own lectures, class activities, and assignments. Faculty need to build awareness of the Eurocentric lens they may have, and actively work to shift that to a broader world view.

In addition to faculty incorporating more diverse voices into their curriculum, they can also work to provide space and time for students to talk about their thoughts, ideas, journeys, and experiences. That space and time could be scheduled into the syllabus, and tied into class activities and assignments. Faculty need to be willing to adjust how the classroom is run from one semester to the next based on the needs of students, who would have a safe space and voice to express those needs. Faculty can contribute to Black and Latine student retention and success rates by helping them to see themselves as valuable contributors to the classroom and ultimately to the entertainment industry.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, and as a practitioner-scholar who teaches full time in this Cinema/TV Department, as well as a researcher engaged in doctorate level investigation of educational practice, I recommend the following action items to be implemented within the department to further the sense of belonging for its Black and/or Latine students:

1. Host a beginning of fall semester orientation that encourages community.
2. Plan weekly, bi-weekly or monthly activities that are built into the department schedule that include: themed screenings, meet and greets, and workshops.
3. Ensure the workshops, panel discussions, and guest speakers include and highlight People of Color who are working in the entertainment industry.
4. Include diverse representation in the classroom curriculum. Lectures need to have Black and Latine creators used as examples–both behind and in front of the camera. History and production classes need to mention and understand diverse voices and not be so Eurocentric.
5. White faculty need to be aware of the kind of examples, activities, and assignments that they are providing that are not a repetition of the Eurocentric education that they themselves received. They need to take the time to learn about and include Black and Latine voices to their teaching, and understand how Black and Latine students might learn and experience education differently.
6. Faculty need to continue to encourage students to express themselves and tell stories that are true to themselves, to honor themselves, their experiences, their cultures, and reflect that however they see fit within their own work.

7. Faculty and the department as a whole can benefit greatly from making time and space to listen to students of color. This time and space can be built into the schedule to ask the questions such as, “What do you think about that?” “How do you feel about that?” “What would you like to share?”
8. Continue to offer support such as workshops, basic needs, scholarships, internships and jobs, but ensure that the modality and frequency are amplified.

Further Research

Diverse Faculty

The only theme that could not be directly addressed as a result of this study was the need for more faculty of color. In order to examine this need, more research must be conducted. Historical racism and the resulting biases and exclusion that has led to a majority White entertainment industry needs to be explored, along with the deeply racist foundation of the community college system as an all-White institution that has led to a lack of diverse educators. This structural and institutionalized issue goes beyond the scope of this study, particularly when the requirements for employment as a full-time faculty pull from two racist sources: higher education and entertainment. Minimum qualifications need to be examined and determined to be equitable based on the subject matter, and more Black and/or Latine students should be encouraged to pursue higher education to one day fill those roles.

Diversity in Film and TV College Departments

This study helped contribute to the scholarly work of identifying the experience of Black and Latine students in community college, and action items that can help their sense of belonging. However, it was one of the first to demonstrate specifically what community college

film programs can do to increase diverse representation in the entertainment industry by focusing on retention and success rates for marginalized students. There is very limited scholarship on community college film departments, their demographic makeup, and what is being done to help Black and Latine students in particular gain access and entrance into the entertainment industry. More research in this focused area can yield even greater results that can have an exponential effect not only in success rates at the college level for Black and Latine students, but help secure their path into the entertainment industry that lacks diverse voices. With greater representation in the entertainment industry, more media content that is made by Black and Latine voices will work to reduce biases and stigmas associated with content being currently created by mostly White decision-makers.

Social Media in Education

This study added to a small but powerful growing number of scholarly works that analyzes or utilizes social media as a tool for learning and growth. Although a majority of students consume content through social media, there is still very little research and understanding as to how that can be utilized to engage them in educational contexts and enhancements in their learning and experiences. Torphy et al. (2020) point to the need for future research to explore student learning perceptions and experiences by using social media in order to bridge the gap between student experience and advocacy in a democratic digital space. This study showed that students get excited about and can thrive in these social media spaces in which they are already engaged. By turning to them as content creators, they see themselves as worthy of sharing their experiences, empowered to contribute to the creative space, all while enhancing their media-making skills, which the literature showed to instill further confidence and ability.

Research Questions

The research questions were answered clearly. Black and/or Latine experience a sense of belonging in the Cinema/TV Department within their peers, and from department resources and supportive faculty. However, their sense of belonging needs to be increased by providing a space for Black and/or Latine students to reflect on their own experiences, further connect with each other, and express themselves in sharing their own stories in the classroom and the department. Students find commonality in each other, and with most classes being group based due to the nature of the film and TV industry, they had positive experiences engaging with a diverse group. They wished for more of that, department wide, both formally and informally.

Strayhorn (2012) defined a sense of belonging to be "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community" (p. 3). Black and Latine student experience revealed that in order to increase sense of belonging further, they needed to see themselves reflected in class content such as lectures, examples given, activities and assignments. They also need to see themselves reflected in the faculty. Students noted that when professors provide examples of films and techniques, they were almost always from White folks. Only when Black and Latine students had adjunct faculty that look like them and share common experiences could they relate and feel seen. However, although mostly White, the faculty did support students to the point that they did not feel discriminated against nor invisible, but they desired more classroom instruction that related to them and gave them more space to explore their own lived experiences.

Conclusion

The very act of creating this study and giving it over to participants to engage in dialogue opened up space that as an educator I had not given enough of to students nor myself. The syllabus is copied and pasted, dates are adjusted, and it takes time to consider what might be missing. The questions of "How are you really doing right now?" and "What do you need?" do not make it into the schedule when there is so much to learn and do. Yet that is the very foundation that needs to be established before true learning and creating can exist. Just by creating and implementing this study showed students that they mattered.

The relief that came over the participants in this study when they were given permission and purpose to look inward was profound. In the classroom, all of us, faculty and students alike, feel like we are working against time. With everyone coming into class from a world of experiences outside, it is even more crucial to create the space to decompress, to reflect, and to share. Those safe spaces in turn will help in the gaining of skills, knowledge, and inform their own creative practices, and encourage Black and Latine students to not only stay with their studies, but to succeed.

With so much time and money spent on diversity, equity, and inclusion work on campus such as hiring consultants, or hosting faculty training—which not all faculty attend—the most important work we can do is to listen to students. To provide space for them to explore and express their authentic experiences. This very act will help them to see themselves as valued, to apply their contexts to their learning and to their creations. That feeling of belonging, of mattering, can help them through retention and towards success, and ultimately gain employment

in the entertainment industry where they can tell their stories, break stigmas and biases, and help society see a more accurate and diverse view of the world.

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