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AN EXPLORATION OF DIFFERENCES IN GROUP PERCEPTIONS OF DIVERSITY AND
FACULTY-STUDENT ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND WHITE
AMERICAN, FIRST-TIME STUDENTS ENROLLED IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A Dissertation

School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Education

By

Michelle Talbert-Horsey

August 2015

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Michelle Talbert-Horsey

2015

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP
PROGRAM

Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)

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AN EXPLORATION OF DIFFERENCES IN GROUP PERCEPTIONS OF DIVERSITY AND FACULTY-
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND WHITE AMERICAN, FIRST-TIME
STUDENTS ENROLLED IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

AN EXPLORATION OF DIFFERENCES IN GROUP PERCEPTIONS OF DIVERSITY AND
FACULTY-STUDENT ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND WHITE
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By

Michelle Talbert-Horsey

August 2015

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Ann Marie FitzGerald

Despite progress in access to colleges and student support services, African American students maintain a low community college completion rate, relative to their enrollment. Using critical race theory as a theoretical framework, this quantitative study utilized the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) instrument to explore group differences between African American and White American, first-time students enrolled in Vernell-Paul Jacob Community College (a pseudonym). The study examined students' perceptions as it relates to how the college prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds and their engagement with faculty. Overall, African American, first-time students reported

higher levels of engagement with faculty and diverse cross-racial interactions compared to their White American, first-time counterparts. Where student responses indicated a median difference, the responses were not in direct opposition to each other; rather, most responses were only incrementally different—usually being within one point on Likert-like scales. These findings allowed for the identification of variables that may serve as challenges to program completion and attainment of a certificate or associate degree among African-American, first-time students. As a result, this study began cross-departmental conversations and suggested changes to collegiate practice, process, and service that will serve to engage and empower students—specifically those who are underserved and marginalized—and faculty.

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**CHAPTER I-An Exploration of Differences In Group Perceptions Of Diversity and
Faculty-Student Engagement Between African American and White American, First-Time
Students Enrolled in Community College**

Nationwide, only about one in four, 28 percent, of young black adults have received a college degree. But, we know that African Americans have the highest proportion of adults who have some college but not a degree of any major racial group. Almost 18 percent of African Americans aged 25 years and older—one in five adults—went to college, but left without their degree (Duncan, 2013, “Remarks,” para. 25-26).

In 2012, approximately 49% of African American undergraduates in the United States were enrolled in community colleges (AACC, 2014). In 2013, this number increased to 52% (AACC, 2015). In serving such a large percentage of African American students, community colleges are a significant portal to higher education opportunities. These opportunities may lead not only to a certificate or associate degree, but also bachelor degree attainment and opportunities to increase their earning potential, which may lead to an enhanced quality of life (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Leppel, 2002; Perrakis, 2008; Price, 2004; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Despite increased access to these institutions of higher education, African American students are not completing community college at the same rate as their counterparts (Jones, 2001; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). For example, at Vernell-Paul Jacob Community College¹ (VPJCC), many certificate/associate degree-seeking African American, first-time students are not making it through the pipeline to certificate or associate degree conferral. For instance, of the 756 first-time, full and part-time, certificate/associate degree-

¹Vernell-Paul Jacob Community College is a pseudonym for a large comprehensive community college system in the Mid-Atlantic region.

seeking African American students who were newly admitted in the 2008 fall cohort at VPJCC, only 7% (55 students) completed a program of study and received a certificate or associate degree, as compared to 16% of their White American counterparts (VPJCC, 2013a). This is a significant gap in program completion and certificate/associate degree conferral, which should be addressed to move more of these students forward to the attainment of a certificate or associate degree. Given these data, the college is concerned about how to increase the academic success of African American, first-time students. The VPJCC faculty and staff have struggled to understand this phenomenon especially given the number of programs in place to support students in their transition into postsecondary education and throughout their academic career at the college (discussed in further detail in Chapter II-Literature Review).

This study is premised upon student development, engagement, and retention theories that suggest robust, formal and informal, faculty-student engagement in a welcoming, inclusive, student-centered collegiate climate may be a primary factor in shaping students' persistence toward achieving their short and long-term academic and professional goals (Astin, 1993; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; CCCSE, 2012; Tinto, 1993). Thus, this study focused on differences in group perceptions of students for whom the first year at VPJCC was their first time enrolled in a college. This study defined first-time students as students who have never enrolled in college prior to their matriculation into VPJCC. It is worth noting that all students are potentially "at-risk" for early collegiate departure; notably, the "largest proportion of institutional leaving occurs during the first year and prior to the beginning of the second year" (Tinto, 1993, p. 14).

Researcher Identity and Study Motivation

In my first professional position, as an academic crisis intervention specialist, in a Student Support Services program at a large research institution, I was assigned to develop a retention program for first-year students who were enrolled in the program. I was also assigned to teach a first-year experience course for students in the program. The primary goals of both assignments were to devise a plan to support and retain students and ascertain from students why they were experiencing difficulties meeting the university's requirements.

What I learned from my interaction with my African American, first-time students, both first generation and non-first generation students, was that they were motivated to attend college and attain a degree, but they lacked an understanding of "how college worked." For example, many of the students I worked with did not know that they could talk to their professors outside of class regarding their academic or career interests. I also discovered that students' perceptions of race and other forms of diversity affected their overall level of collegiate engagement. As a result, levels of racial discomfort, compounded with feelings of frustration with the collegiate process, often led to circumstances in which students stopped attending classes or were barely passing courses. Thus, they found themselves facing academic sanctions of some sort. In contrast, White American, first-students with whom I worked were more likely to cite their disinterest in attending the specific institution as their reason for not attending class or wanting to dropout. Specifically, perceptions of race, or how the college engaged race, did not appear to affect White American students' ability to engage the college community.

Moreover, although African American and White American, first-time students expressed frustration with the collegiate process, White American students were more inclined to use their formal and informal network of family, friends, and acquaintances to connect with

faculty and upper level administrators in order to expedite how the college would address their concern. In my current position as Director of Career Services, at the institution that serves as the site of this study, I observed the same pattern occurring with first-time students attending VPJCC. African American, first-time students are entering the college and not completing the academic or program requirements for a certificate or associate degree. In contrast, White American, first-time students used formal and informal connections to assist them in mediating collegiate policy, practice, and process which served to move them through the academic pipeline.

The current study was undertaken as an effort to understand the context in which program incompleteness and the subsequent lack of a collegiate credential (certificate or associate degree) among African American, first-time students attending VPJCC is occurring and to recommend strategies to improve the system and reverse this phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to explore group differences in the collegiate experience and engagement of African American and White American, first-time students attending Vernell-Paul Jacob Community College.

Specifically in the local context, the study sought to:

1. Provide a systemic inquiry into the collegiate experiences of African American and White American, first-time students at VPJCC as they relate to their perceptions of how the college prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds (e.g., faculty, staff, agents of the college, students) and their engagement with faculty.
2. Identify potential barriers (within the aforementioned constructs), which may affect program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment among African American, first-time students.

The significance of the study lies in its potential to:

1. Identify collegiate practices and processes which can be transformed to improve services to students; and
2. Develop a design for action that will serve to improve service to students and increase program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment.

The natural conclusion of this study was the identification of cross-departmental engagement pathways that serve to support and improve academic, career, and social development opportunities for students who intend to complete a certificate or associate degree at VPJCC. It should be noted that community colleges also educate a number of students who seek to transfer to a four-year institution in addition to or in lieu of receiving a collegiate credential from community college. Although student transfer is an important factor to consider, an in-depth study of students who are interested in transferring was not within the purview of the current research study. To this end, the current research study focused primarily on students for whom attainment of a certificate or associate degree, regardless of aspirations to transfer, was identified as their primary goal or reason for attending Vernell-Paul Jacob Community College.

This study used data extracted from VPJCC's 2013 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) to explore differences in perceptions among first-time college students who identified as being a member of one of the two largest racial groups at VPJCC, African American and White American. In addition to contributing to the overall collegiate scholarship on community colleges, this study is valuable to VPJCC because the college has remained in the bottom 10% (in comparison to its peer institutions) with respect to faculty-student engagement for the past four administrations of the CCSSE. As a result, agents of the college have taken a keen interest in increasing all facets of collegiate engagement—especially faculty-student engagement (VPJCC 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2015a, 2015b).

Students' Perceptions: Diversity and Faculty Engagement

The intersection of students' perceptions of how the college has prepared them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds and their engagement with faculty have not been thoroughly researched at VPJCC. This intersection is important because students experiences with racial diversity, as well as other forms of diversity, in the collegiate environment may serve to impact how, or if, they choose to engage agents of the college—especially faculty. Therefore, this research may prove beneficial in assisting the college's leadership in their efforts to graduate more African American, first-time students. This research may provide a different perspective with regard to students' perceptions, which may contribute to low graduation rates among African American students. The current research explores differences between African American and White American, first-time students, therefore, the data extrapolated from White American students are used to make relative comparisons to the African American students under study. Moreover, the primary analysis and plan for changing collegiate practice, process, and services (design for action) may prove to be beneficial for all students even though they are designed to address the needs of African American, first-time students attending VPJCC.

Understanding Context: Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is being employed to provide a context for the results, not to explicitly explain the difference in student responses. Furthermore, a CRT framework was selected to address the observed differences, and in an effort to transform the college system to one that is not only student-centered, but is cognizant and reflective of how their current practice and process serve to inform and empower students—especially those who have been historically (and are currently) marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, etc. The utilization of CRT may lead to the development of policy, practice, and services that serve to support and maintain the college’s overarching social justice mission—to provide open access to all individuals who seek a postsecondary education and support students (at all levels of collegiate preparedness) from enrollment to graduation in achieving their academic and professional goals. Additionally, the use of CRT as a framework in education, particularly in higher education, is still a relatively new theoretical perspective to employ as a framework. However, the use of such a framework allows for the use of CRT in higher education settings (especially community college settings) to become generative in of itself; the research requires the conceptualization of identified patterns and by doing so may call to the fore sub-tenets not previously noted in earlier research (Maxwell & Shammass, 2007).

The framework of critical race theory provided a lens through which to consider how the collegiate structure of VPJCC might serve to, consciously or unconsciously create barriers to student completion (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Patton, McEwen, Rendon, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, Villapando, Delgado Bernal, & Solórzano, 2001). In exploring students’ perceptions of how the institution prepares them to understand and engage with people

of diverse backgrounds, with an emphasis on their engagement with faculty, the following questions guided this study:

1. What are the goals of African American and White American, first-time students attending VPJCC?
2. Are there differences in African American and White American, first-time students' obstacles to attending VPJCC?
3. Are there differences in African American and White American, first-time students' perceptions of how VPJCC prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds?
4. Are there differences in African American and White American, first-time students' perceptions of their engagement with faculty?

This chapter provides support for why exploring differences in group perceptions of how the college prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds and their engagement with faculty is an issue worthy of scholarly inquiry. This chapter also explores the social justice implications of allowing the problem of collegiate program incompleteness and low rates of collegiate credential attainment to continue in its current context, i.e. left unaddressed. In addition to these areas of thought, the study is grounded in the context of campus diversity (as it relates to ethnicity, race, and racism in the collegiate environment), early academic departure, effects of program incompleteness, and faculty-student engagement. These elements combine to provide a context for exploring the problem under study as it relates to African American, first-time students. Finally, the results of the study will generate recommendations on ways that VPJCC may consider restructuring and enhancing its collegiate services to ensure that students—particularly those from underrepresented and marginalized communities—have equitable access

to the tools that allow access to academic and student development services which assist them in their academic and professional pursuits.

Why Do We Need to Address This Issue?

African American students are demographically overrepresented in the community college system, and underrepresented in the number of community college graduates and students who transfer to four-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Nora, 2008). The issue of collegiate incompleteness among African Americans is more than merely gaining access to college and receiving a college degree. There is socioeconomic value that the college credential offers for the holder (Weis, 1985). Thus, there is a significant personal cost incurred when students enroll, but do not complete a program of study and depart college without a postsecondary credential. In addition to the personal cost of lacking a collegiate credential, there is a national cost incurred when students do not complete a program of study and receive a postsecondary credential. As a result, the Obama Administration attempted to address these issues by supporting community colleges in their efforts to increase access to collegiate studies.

Furthermore, by the year 2018, according to Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010) and Maya and Meyer (2010), approximately 63 % of jobs will require, at minimum, a postsecondary education that leads to a certificate or an associate's degree. Thus, lack of a college degree or a certificate among a significant number of citizens may prove to be detrimental to the sustained economic growth of the United States, as these patterns limit the country's ability to compete in global marketplaces (CCCSE, 2012; Carnevale et al., 2010; Maya & Meyer, 2010; White House, 2009). For African Americans, the systemic effects of inequitable learning environments, and limited access to a broad range of learning opportunities, may serve to hinder long-term opportunities to increase their economic and social mobility through the attainment of a college

certificate or degree (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson Billings & Tate, 1995). Furthermore, if systems of education continue to offer only a peripheral understanding and explanation of why students discontinue their collegiate education, appropriate pathways may not be available to move students through the higher education pipeline. As a result, students may not be able to secure higher-level employment or compete in the local, national, and global marketplaces due to a lack of advanced skills and credentials. This dearth of prepared, highly-skilled laborers limits the productivity of the national economy; thus this phenomenon serves to stifle economic advances to for all individuals (Burke & Johnston, 2004; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001-2002).

African American Students: College Completion as Social and Economic Equity

Recently, national attention has focused on community colleges' role in workforce development. The emphasis has been on increasing the attainment of collegiate credentials through the 2009 American Graduation Initiative (AGI) and the 2015 America's College Promise Proposal. These proposals serve as part of a platform that outlines the Obama Administration's policy goals to make community colleges the primary gateway for employment and career re-training and collegiate credential attainment (White House, 2009; White House, 2015). The 2009 American Graduation Initiative seems to have fostered an interest in community colleges, their guiding missions, and their ability to act as a pathway to academic and professional opportunities (Dowd, 2007). This initiative, however, is challenged by the fact that, historically, community colleges have experienced trouble retaining students (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003). The difficulty is exacerbated when one examines the completion rates of students from underserved communities (Brint & Karabel, 1989). There is a national cost that all citizens endure when community college students enroll but do not complete their programs of

study. Schneider and Yin (2011), in studying the cost of student attrition among first-time, full-time students attending community college from the academic year 2004/5 to the academic year 2008/9 asserted that:

- State and local governments appropriated close to \$3 billion to community colleges to help pay for the education of students who did not return for a second year.
- States spent more than \$240 million in student grants to support students who did not return to their community college for a second year.
- The federal government spent approximately \$660 million in student grants to support students who did not return to their community college for a second year.
- In total, almost \$4 billion in federal, state, and local taxpayer monies in appropriations and student grants went to first-year, full-time, community college students who dropped out. (p. 2)

To ensure that Americans will be prepared to meet the requirements of the labor market, the Obama Administration has used the AGI to encourage community colleges to begin closing the employment gap. Specifically, the Administration has asked community colleges to provide access to affordable postsecondary education opportunities and retain enrolled students through the completion of a program of study or training, which will lead to an associate degree or certificate (White House, 2009). This action is anticipated to increase the number of college graduates to an additional 5 million students by the year 2020 (White House, 2009). The goal of AGI to create college graduates, not just attendees, is of particular importance to traditionally underserved and marginalized students, so they can become active, influential contributors to the global workforce. However, to fulfill this goal, the community college system will have to graduate more racial and ethnic minorities (Lee & Ransom, 2011; Lumina, 2014). Therefore, the

needs of the non-white student population must be addressed to ensure that they fully matriculate through the community college system.

In 2015, the Obama Administration presented the America's College Promise Initiative to increase and sustain access to academic and employment opportunities. This initiative is purported to provide a free two-year community college education to students who can maintain a 2.5 GPA and are majoring in programs that lead to the completion of an associate's degree or certificate, or students who will be able to use their entire community college course work to transfer to a four-year institution (White House, 2015). Additionally, if the students are interested in pursuing a bachelor's degree at a four-year college or university, community colleges are being asked to ensure that their academic programs offer opportunities for students to transfer to four-year institutions and be classified as juniors. This means that the students would have to complete all of the requirements needed for their first two years of college. The proposal is still in the developmental stage, so some issues remain unclear (e.g., how this program will be funded and for how long the government will support this initiative).

The proposed initiative may be of particular importance to nontraditional students, who comprise a growing population on college campuses and whose level of collegiate engagement is often limited by their life circumstances (Choy, 2002). Nontraditional students are not defined by age. They are commonly defined by other factors that are related to their life experiences. This population is defined by a variety of factors that include, but are not limited to: (a) working full-time while attending college as a part-time or full-time student, (b) being financially responsible for children or other dependents, (c) being a veteran of the U.S. military, and (d) not attending college directly after completing high school (Choy, 2002; Pelletier, 2010). For the purpose of

the current study, a disaggregation of first-time students by traditional or nontraditional status was not considered while exploring perceptions among African American, first-time students.

Who is Graduating from Community College? A Look at National and Local Data

Obtaining an associate degree and transferring to a four-year institution is frequently cited as the primary goal for students who are entering community college (Bailey & Morest, 2006; CCCSE, 2012). Yet, according to Bailey and Morest (2006):

- 17% of students began their postsecondary education at a community college within 8 years of receiving their high school diploma;
- 15% of those entering earned an associate degree, 6% earned a certificate; and
- 11% transferred to a four-year institution and had not earned a degree (p. 9)

Bailey and Morest (2006) concluded that fewer than half of the students who stated upon entering community college that their academic goal at the college was to receive a certificate or associate degree actually earned that credential within 8 years. Furthermore, the researchers concluded that low-income and minority students, in comparison to their White, middle-income counterparts, were not as likely to earn a certificate or associate degree at the community college level. The Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) (2012) noted that although “79% of entering students reported that they plan to earn an associate degree, but just 45% of full-time students meet that goal within six years” (p. 3). Subsequently, among the 57% of students who stated that a certificate was their goal upon entering community college, fewer than half achieved this goal within 6 years (CCCSE, 2012). The implication is that the longer a student remains in the pipeline, the easier it becomes for the college to lose sight of that student’s academic progress and the student’s motivation to complete requirements for a postsecondary credential may wane.

The National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Systems (NCES/IPEDS)², which maintains statistics on different metrics of academic achievement, observed that only 11.8% of the 2008 cohort of first-time, full-time, certificate/associate degree-seeking African American students enrolled in public two-year institutions obtained their certificate or associate's degree within 150% of the "normal" time (2 years for a certificate and 3 years for an associate degree) compared to 22.8% of White American students (NCES, 2014). In the 2009 cohort of graduates, the percentage dropped slightly to 11.3% for African American, first-time students and 22.5% for White American, first-time students. Although the overall rates of certificate and associate degree conferral at the two-year public community college level have slowly declined among all racial groups after 2000, African American students maintain the lowest overall completion rate—11.3% (NCES, 2014). At VPJCC, however, many certificate or associate degree-seeking African American, first-time students have not been making it through the pipeline to degree conferral. For example, publicly available data analyzing the enrollment and completion data for the college's new admits in the 2008 fall cohort shows that, of the 756 first-time, full and part-time, certificate/associate degree-seeking African American students who enrolled in VPJCC, only 7% (55 students) completed a program of study and received a certificate or associate degree, compared to 16% of their White American counterparts (VPJCC, 2013a).

From the dataset, it is not clear if any of the students who did not complete a certificate or degree at VPJCC transferred to another community college, transferred to a four-year institution,

²This NCES/IPEDS calculation of graduation rates is inclusive of students who began and completed their academic credentials at one institution. These data are inclusive of all two-year postsecondary institutions that participate in Title IV federal financial aid programs.

temporarily discontinued their academic program of study and reenrolled at VPJCC later, or permanently abandoned their college degree aspirations. The dataset also lacks information regarding the services in place that help support students who were struggling to complete course work and the student utilization of available services. It is clear that a significant percentage of first-time, certificate/associate degree-seeking African American students, in the 2008 cohort, did not complete their intended degrees at VPJCC. Furthermore, to date, the college has not released any college-specific or campus-specific data that connects early departure to a specific factor or set of factors.

Although VPJCC collects data on student satisfaction and levels of engagement with faculty, the instruments have not been used to isolate specific variables related to first-time students, students' perceptions of how the college prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds, and their engagement with faculty. As a result, minimal information is available about how VPJCC students experience the college. Knowledge of students' perceptions can serve to inform systemic transformation and evaluation of students' experiences on which best practices may be developed and sustained at both the college-wide and campus level of student and academic service (CCCSE, 2012; Kuh, 2002; Marti, 2009).

Solving this Problem in Context

To begin to develop insight into students' perceptions, this study explored group differences between African American and White American, first-time students' perceptions of how the college prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds and their engagement with faculty as reported on the CCSSE. In identifying and examining these differences, the results of the study were used to identify specific institutional practices, processes and services which may need to be restructured in order to improve student

engagement, retention, program completion, and certificate or associate degree attainment. To do this, the study identified a need for the college to support cross-departmental collaborations. These collaborations are immensely important in that they can be used to assess students' academic needs and challenges to program completion from different perspectives. The different perspectives may lead to further identification of social, cultural, historical, and structural constructs in which students arrive to college (that may serve to as an impediment to program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment), as well as constructs that the college has adopted, but have proven to be inconsistent with the needs of their students.

Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)

The current study used 2013 CCCSE data to build upon VPJCC's knowledge of students' perceptions. Although the CCSSE instrument noted students' racial identification, academic goals, and students' perceptions of the college's emphasis on diversity, as well as faculty-student engagement, it did not connect the variables. Specifically, the CCSSE instrument data does not explicitly link the students' stated reasons for attending VPJCC, to their perceptions of how the college prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds, their engagement with faculty, program completion, and collegiate credential attainment. The instrument was selected, however, because the college uses these data to inform practices, processes, and develop collegiate services used to increase engagement and student success initiatives (which is discussed in depth in Chapter II-Literature Review). Moreover, the CCSSE allows the college to examine collegiate practice and begin cross-departmental conversations on how to improve practice, process, and service so that it is responsive to the needs of the student body by allowing for the identification of potential variables. These variables may impede student engagement and serve as challenges to program completion and credential conferral. The

term “first-time student” does not preclude a student from concurrently being a member of another demographic group. For example, a new student may identify as entering, first-time, first-year, and first-generation in addition to being traditional or nontraditional; each category has distinct characteristics as well as characteristics that overlap. For the purpose of this study, supporting research was inclusive of studies (conducted at two-year and four-year institutions) that addressed African American students and their pathway from college enrollment and program completion to the conferral of a postsecondary credential.

Selected Literature Supporting the Problem Under Study

Student perceptions may contribute to early departure, and the subsequent lack of attaining a certificate or associate degree among African American students (first-time or returning students). Early departure warrants inquiry because, ultimately, the loss of a postsecondary credential limits economic status, and by default, social mobility which is tied to an individual’s level of education attainment (Kane & Rouse, 1995; Lin & Vogt, 1996; Marcotte, Bailey, Borkoski, & Kienzel, 2005). The supporting literature provides a framework for understanding the problem of early departure, perceptions of racial prejudice on campus, issues of race and faculty engagement, and introduces critical race theory as a valuable lens in which to contextualize differences in group perceptions.

Early Departure of African American Students

Retaining students to program completion and certificate or degree conferral is a significant social and economic issue in higher education (Achieving the Dream, 2014; Lumina, 2014; Strayhorn, 2010). It is a daunting task to untangle the complex web of institutional policies that are designed to address the multiple and incongruent areas of focus for community colleges (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Morest, 2006). These policies may

serve to foster barriers to student retention and degree completion (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Morest, 2006).

The current study contended that premature departure from a program of study and the subsequent lack of a certificate or associate degree is not necessarily the result of one factor. Rather, it may be the result of multiple factors, with the intersections of perceptions of racial diversity and faculty-student engagement chief among them. In American life, race and culture, as well as the reality and perception of racism and cultural bias, play key roles in every American social institution, including educational institutions (Chang, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Patterson, Gordon, Groves Price, 2008; Yosso, 2005; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Weis, 1985). Therefore, the role of race in higher education and academic outcomes may not be a question of whether race impacts student perceptions, but how much it may impact the student and in what context. However, in-depth empirical research on race in higher education –specifically on community college campuses– remains limited even though the number of racial and ethnic minorities who enroll in community colleges appears to be increasing (AACC, 2014, 2015; Jones, 2013; Maxwell & Shammass, 2007). Therefore, in order to provide a context for understanding the variables under study, the current research is inclusive of national and local research that focuses on two and four-year institutions.

Perceptions of Race On-Campus: Assessing Campus Racial Climate

Existing research on campus racial climate suggests that student perceptions of racially prejudiced and discriminatory collegiate climates affect African American and White American students' persistence efforts, senses of belonging on campus, and academic outcomes (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Lewis et al., 2000; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rankin & Reason, 2005). The research, however, diverges on the issue of

significance and impact. Specifically, the research can be categorized into two groups: (a) African American students' perceptions of racial discrimination in the campus climate is not the primary factor in shaping their level of academic persistence or goal to complete a collegiate credential; and (b) African American students' perceptions of racial discrimination in the campus climate is the primary factor in shaping their level of academic persistence or goal to complete a collegiate credential. For example, in their research on campus climate and racial microaggressions³, Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) observed that early departure and persistence decisions might be caused by the student's perception of campus climate. The researchers pointed out that student experiences with a campus climate which expresses covert and overt racial microaggressions, may act as a primary variable in the cognitive development, persistence behaviors, and overall academic outcomes of African American, first-time students. In an antithetical argument, Cabrera et al. (1999) contended that African American students' "cognitive outcomes and persistence decisions are not primarily shaped by perceptions of discrimination and prejudice" (p. 152). Thus, because their perceptions are not the primary cause of early student departure, they may not play a significant role in students' efforts to complete a program of study and receive a collegiate credential, as suggested by Allen (1992) and Solórzano et al. (2000). Cabrera et al. (1999) maintained that among African American students, collegiate persistence is "dominated by factors other than perceptions of discrimination and prejudice" (p. 152).

³ Microaggressions, as defined by Solórzano et al. (2000), "are subtle insults (verbal or nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously" (p. 60).

Race and Faculty Student Engagement

Although faculty-student engagement is a fluid concept, and the level of engagement is not a fixed variable, intentional positive faculty-student engagement early in a student's academic career might make a significant impact on the student's self-efficacy, motivation, and persistence, which may serve to shape their academic outcomes (Arum & Roksa, 2010; Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). In an extension of these arguments, Chang (2005) asserted that attendance at new student orientations appeared to increase faculty-student engagement among African-American students. This may be due in part to the fact that on-campus orientations provide students with an opportunity to begin building relationships with faculty and staff, and to experience the environment of the college before the start of classes. Using a different lens to view faculty-student engagement, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2014) and Guiffrida (2005) suggested that, at the core of faculty-student engagement for African American students is the fact that students prefer to work with faculty who are student-centered and are invested in their success. The students in both studies seem to define student-centered faculty as individuals who have gone beyond their duties as instructors to become academic and personal mentors. However, Guiffrida's argument inferred that student-faculty engagement, for African American students, is more than meeting with an instructor. Rather, it involves a higher degree of intimacy, which students may not be able to extract from White American instructors or staff.

Differences in Students' Perceptions Through the Lens of Critical Race Theory

National and local graduation data indicated that African American, first-time students maintain the highest level of degree incompleteness among all racial and ethnic groups. However, the difference is more pronounced when comparing graduation rates of African American and

White American, first-time students. For example, in a comparison of graduation data for VPJCC's 2008 cohort of first-time students, White American students graduated at more than double (16%) the rate of African American students (7%) (VPJCC, 2013a). In a national context, when comparing the 2008 cohorts of first-time students who attended two-year public institutions, White American students graduated at a rate of 22.8% as compared to African American students who graduated at half that rate, at 11.8% (NCES, 2014). Critical race theory as a theoretical lens provides a framework in which to begin to understand the context in which students' perceptual differences are occurring. The framework also provides an opportunity to target what maybe missing in the analysis of student experiences.

In an educational context, critical race theory intentionally challenges “the dominant discourse on race and racism as they relate to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups” (Solórzano , 1998, p. 122). There are five basic tenets of critical race theory in an educational context: (a) “the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination; (b) the challenge to dominant ideology; (c) the commitment to social justice; (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (e) the interdisciplinary perspective” (Solórzano,1998, p. 122-123; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25-26; Yosso et al., 2001, p. 91). This framework was selected because it provides a lens through which to explore the context in which group differences are occurring.

The Dominant Collegiate Narrative

In an effort to be viewed as fair, just, and equitable, systems of higher education often engage the ideology of colorblindness (Lewis et al., 2000; Patterson et al., 2008; Watson et al., 2002) or multiculturalism. VPJCC is not an exception to this rule; their mission statements note that one of their goals is to educate the college community about issues relating to diversity and

multiculturalism (VPJCC, 2015d). According to Watson et al. (2002), “all educational institutions are charged with the creation and maintenance of a multicultural environment” (p. 7); as a result, colorblindness and multiculturalism have become the dominant ideologies for systems of education and other organizations (Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Colorblindness attempts to equalize college climates or cultures by removing race as a factor in academic outcomes. Colorblind ideology, from an assimilationist perspective, ignores the experiences of the non-majority—racial and ethnic minorities (Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009). It intrinsically serves to marginalize and silence the voices of the very people the ideology is supposed to assist, in bringing them from the margins to the forefront—the historically underserved and underrepresented (Yosso, 2005; Yosso et al., 2001; Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004).

Colorblind ideology may serve to support all but the most egregious acts of racial prejudice committed by faculty and staff because students have been “trained” not to recognize race or any issues relating to racism. Thereby, maintaining White privilege⁴ and allows White people the opportunity to ignore the impact of Whiteness on racial and ethnic minorities (Leonardo, 2002; Lewis, 2004; Lewis et al., 2000; Lipsitz, 1998; Yosso et al., 2004). Colorblind ideology maintains a complex networked system of institutional and organizational policy, practice, and process that influences the collegiate experience and engagement of students in the classroom and on campus which may serve to affect their academic outcomes (Lipsitz, 1998; Yosso et al., 2004).

By contrast, multiculturalism attempts to recognize racial and ethnic differences as something to be embraced and appreciated (Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009). Although in a

⁴ White privilege is a system of unearned advantages given to people who identify as White or White American.

collegiate context, multiculturalism seems to support student individuality regarding race or ethnicity while simultaneously requiring students to assimilate into a collegiate environment, which may support values that are not reflective or inclusive of that diversity (Watson et al., 2002). This celebration of differences, however, does not necessarily imply that there is an understanding of what impact race and ethnicity has on the life and life circumstances of both minority and nonminority students. From this perspective, multiculturalism, much like colorblind ideology, does not appear to move beyond surface level differences. Moreover, multiculturalism does not appear to be inclusive of White American students.

For example, as noted by Lewis (2004), Lipsitz (1998), McIntosh (1998), and Watson et al. (2002), even in multicultural environments, White Americans are rarely asked about their experiences with Whiteness and its impact on their lives. Moreover, by ignoring race and marginalizing multicultural experiences, both ideologies inherently suggest that a person's race has minimal impact on their collegiate opportunities and how they are able to engage those opportunities. As such, they serve to maintain systems of White privilege and continued marginalization of racial, ethnic, and perhaps other minorities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Lewis, 2004, Lipsitz, 1998). In challenging dominant social and cultural ideology, critical race theory inherently questions customarily accepted forms of academic scholarship in systems of education (Yosso, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and the assumption that pedagogies are equitable to all groups of students. According to King (1991), these conventionally accepted modes of scholarly work have resulted in the perpetuation of institutional policy, practices, and processes that may repeat racial inequity in the collegiate environment.

Method

The purpose of this social justice-oriented quantitative study was to explore differences in group perceptions of African American and White American, first-time students. The specific perceptions to be assessed were how Vernell-Paul Jacob Community College prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds and their levels of engagement with faculty. In this examination, using SPSS software, the current study analyzed 2013 extant data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) 2005 survey format (http://www.ccsse.org/aboutsurvey/docs/CCSR_2005.pdf).

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement instrument is based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). CCSSE utilizes 55 of the 82 items (approximately 67%) included in the NSSE. The CCSSE has proven to be valid and reliable in assessing student engagement behaviors; specifically, students perceptions of their experience engaging in variety of activities within the collegiate environment (e.g., engaging faculty in and out of the classroom, engaging diverse people). Furthermore, this instrument was selected because the survey results are intended to improve institutional policy, collegiate teaching, and learning through better informed institutional research and practice (CCCSE, 2012; Marti, 2009).

The current study used SPSS software to extrapolate data that identified students entering status, racial identification, gender, age, life circumstance, and the goals of African American and White American, first-time students (research question 1). Using SPSS, a series 2-tailed Mann-Whitney *U* test, with a significance level (alpha level) of .05, were utilized to examine group differences in the student perceptions of their obstacles to attending Vernell-Paul Jacob Community College, (research question 2) students' perceptions that VPJCC has prepared them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds (research question 3), and their

perceptions of their engagement with faculty (research question 4). A calculation for “r” was derived to identify the effect size between the responses of the two groups on all variables in which a significant statistical difference was identified. Cohen’s standard definition for effect size “r” was used to determine the effect as “small (0.1), medium (0.3), or large (0.5) in size” (Cohen, 1988, pp. 79-80).

Research Findings

Regarding the variables under study—students’ perceptions that the college prepares them to understand and engage students of diverse backgrounds and their perception of their engagement with faculty—overall, African American, first-time students reported higher levels of engagement with faculty and diverse cross-racial interactions compared to their White American, first-time, counterparts. In alignment with the potential significance to a student, as previously outlined, the study identified three areas in which the college may want to consider improvement. Although only one recommendation was selected to be the design for action—faculty-student engagement, the current study identified three areas of potential collegiate improvement: (a) analyzing and employing the use of data; (b) engaging inclusive racial and ethnic diversity; and (c) faculty-student engagement.

Essentially, the current research study drilled deeper into the CCSSE data and provided another lens through which to view how the college was using and can use the data to build capacity among administrators, staff, and faculty to improve policy and practice among all areas of the college. The results of the study, therefore, may be used to guide restructuring and improving collegiate policy, practice, process and service at VPJCC.

Creating Systemic Change

As a former community college student who chose to transfer to a four-year institution instead of completing an associate's degree, and now, as Director of the Department of Career Services at the college under study, I had the opportunity to interact with a number of students in formal and informal settings. It has been my experience that African American students, who are first-time enrollees, more so than their White American counterparts, often report feeling overwhelmed academically and disconnected or alienated from the college community, and higher education as a whole. Moreover, they frequently attributed their feelings of alienation to environments that they described as covertly racist or not supportive of their academic and professional goals. Curiously, many of these students reported this feeling of isolation to me, but did not express their concern with White faculty or administrators. Moreover, I am not certain if White faculty or administrators inquired.

In my professional roles as an academic advisor, career counselor, and retention specialist, I felt it was my obligation to help these students to succeed by guiding them to deepen their collegiate engagement. Through this deepened engagement, students would learn the skills necessary to turn unsupportive collegiate interactions into nurturing learning experiences. I contrasted students' narratives, as shared anecdotally in informal conversations, with extant data collected from the college (generally) and my departments (Academic Advising, and later Career Services). Specifically, I was able to re-design career services workshops and presentations to provide high-impact engagement opportunities for students who were enrolled in online courses, as well as for students taking courses on campus. For example, in preparation for a class presentation, I meet with the professor to discuss the specific needs of their students and develop student-specific academic major and career packets for presentation to the students on the day of

the workshop. The success of the aforementioned initiative was due solely to interdepartmental and cross-departmental collaborations and a willingness for each department to provide critical feedback and support to ensure that the program continued to improve student experiences.

This process empowered faculty to disregard their assumptions and engage students on specific career and academic issues. Prior to this engagement, faculty often did not engage in these conversations because they did not have the tools to do so and felt that it would be best handled by student development professionals. In providing students with a tailored packet of information, a foundation of trust began between the Office of Career Services (CS), faculty, and students. In addressing their individual academic goals and professional aspirations, the process acted as a message to students that the college was invested in their success and interests. As a result, students who had never discussed career or academic issues with their instructor, career counselor, or advisor, now had the tools to engage in a meaningful conversation with those individuals. In addition, faculty also had the tools to engage students around these issues as well as to engage and collaborate with other areas of the college. The result was a higher level of sustained engagement between students and faculty as well as collaborations with other departments on-campus to develop panels and symposiums.

This is the type of professional community and cross-departmental collaboration in which VPJCC should begin investing, as it may improve policy, practice, process, and service to students. For example, the descriptive data from the current study is very clear that the primary goal of African American and White American, first-time students attending VPJCC is to attain an associate degree (Chapter IV-Data Analysis and Recommendations). Although African American, first-time students cited that attaining an associate degree was their goal for attending VPJCC, more often than White American, first-time students, they are not reaching that goal.

The college, however, has not explicitly explored the connections between first-time students and their stated goals while attending VPJCC, students' interactions with faculty and advisors with respect to careers, and student enrollment. To address the concern that the institution has regarding the completion of rate of African American students, it may be worthwhile for the college to explore these connections. The current study builds on the VPJCC's CCSSE findings, as well as the national CCSSE data corpus, and provides support for VPJCC to continue researching the connection between these variables in their institutions. Additionally, it also provides opportunities for the college to develop and support cross-departmental collaborations.

I often recall my own experience in community college, and in a four-year institution, in which African American staff, faculty, and administrators actively engaged African American students both in and out of the classroom. It was common to find a faculty member or dean (African American or White American) engaging students in conversations about family and postgraduation plans. Therefore, the presence of engaged faculty, staff, and administrators ensured that the African American students built and maintained a community that: (a) supported each other in our individual, as well as group, endeavors both in and out of class; (b) developed and used our leadership skills; and (c) was connected by a shared understanding that we were in college because of the personal sacrifice of a multitude of African American men and women who had sought a college education. We were, as Maya Angelou (1995) stated, "the hope and the dream of the slave" (p. 7). This level of engagement, which was encouraged and supported by the college, gave me the desire to complete a postsecondary program of study and receive a college degree. When given the opportunity, I choose to provide the same level of support to African American students who are beginning or continuing their journey through postsecondary education.

CHAPTER II-Literature Review

Higher education serves a dual purpose, one part being the collective purpose of the social value of higher education, and the other an individual purpose of improving one's social mobility and economic standing (Leppel, 2002; Price, 2004). Community colleges, by providing postsecondary access to almost half of the college-going population of students of color (Mullin, 2012), appear to provide a significant, if not primary, pathway to employment and certificate or associate degree attainment—especially for African American students (Dowd, 2007; Karen & Dougherty, 2005; Morest, 2013; Perrakis, 2008; Price & Wholford, 2005; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). When analyzing community college completion data, Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) noted that African American students maintain “the lowest community college completion rates among all racial groups” (p. 2), despite their increased access to and enrollment in community college. Seemingly, as a result of this discrepancy, program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment among African American students has remained stagnant, and the reasons are as varied as the aspirations of the students who enroll in community college.

In exploring the context in which program incompleteness and the subsequent lack of a collegiate credential occurs in a local context, this research had the purposes of:

1. Providing a systemic inquiry into the collegiate experiences of African American and White American, first-time students at VPJCC as they relate to their perceptions of how the college prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds (e.g., faculty, staff, agents of the college, students) and their engagement with faculty.
2. Identifying potential barriers (within the aforementioned constructs) that may affect

program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment.

This chapter presents and synthesizes selected literature that explores race and racism in higher education and faculty-student engagement that is being examined through the lens of critical race theory. Furthermore, it is the intention of this literature review to illustrate how these complex variables overlap and interrelate and may possibly serve, individually or in tandem, as a barrier to program completion and degree conferral among African American, first-time students.

Perceptions of Race

African American students' perceptions of a college environment as being welcoming, supportive, and inclusive of students who have different racial or ethnic backgrounds may directly influence their level of engagement. There is a dispute among researchers and scholars of race in higher education on whether race and perceptions of racial inequity on campus act as significant impediments to African American, first-time students. This section will explore race and racial prejudice on campus, racial isolation, and transforming faculty-student engagement.

Race and Racial Prejudice On-Campus

Nora and Cabrera (1996) and Cabrera et al. (1999) contend that the perception of prejudice on a campus affects the collegiate outcomes of all students, regardless of a student's race or ethnicity. Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) and Nora and Cabrera (1996) noted that African American students, more so than White American students, were more likely to perceive a campus environment as being discriminatory or prejudiced. More pointedly, Nora and Cabrera (1996) observed that racial minority students "sensed more racial prejudice on the part of faculty and staff, and were more prone to report negative in-class experiences" (p. 130). Even though the researchers recognized that perceived racial discrimination plays a role in students' overall collegiate experiences, they maintained that it is the level and intensity of perceived

discrimination that has the most significant impact on student commitment to a college or university for all students, especially for African American students. The primary issue, however, is not whether perceived or actual racial discrimination affects students. Rather, the issue seems to be a matter of the frequency and intensity of the behavior that they interpret as racially biased. The researchers also found that although African American students may experience racial bias and discrimination on campus, it had an indirect impact on their level of persistence.

In keeping with this line of thinking, Cabrera et al. (1999) posited that although perceptions of racial discrimination significantly affect the commitment African American students have to their university and may weaken their desire to persist, these perceptions are not the sole determiner of a student's decision to abandon their programs of study or leave their college. Eimers and Pike (1997) supported this view by contending that perceived racial discrimination and prejudicial collegiate climates between African American and White American students resulted in a small, indirect effect on students' intents to persist in their academic studies. From a different perspective, Ancis et al. (2000) noted that White students perceive less discrimination and racial tensions on campus and in the classroom. Moreover, they contended that this limited exposure to racial or ethnic discrimination have also contributed to their limited awareness of and ability to identify discriminatory and biased behavior when it occurs. Essentially, Ancis et al. (2000) called to the fore the concept of White privilege and, in some ways, challenged the arguments of Cabrera, et al. (1999), Eimers and Pike (2007), and Nora and Cabrera (1996) that race is not a primary determiner affecting student levels of collegiate persistence.

Solórzano et al. (2000), however, are unequivocal in their contention that in-class and on-campus climates, specifically racial climates, have a significant influence on African American students' intents to complete a specific academic major, transfer colleges, or, perhaps, drop out of college. More pointedly, they argued that because of racial microaggressions, campus environments become centers of racial discrimination and prejudice that create inhospitable learning environments. Furthermore, "negative faculty attitudes, even if covertly expressed and communicated, may become evident to students and lead to perceptions of a less than welcoming training environment" (Rogers & Molina, 2006, p.144).

According to this view, microaggressions or covert negative faculty attitudes create a collegiate climate in which African American students do not feel a sense of belonging and, in many cases, experience increased feelings of self-doubt and social isolation. More pointedly, inhospitable collegiate environments may cause African American students to not only question their academic abilities, but also the appropriateness of using their community's cultural wealth, or counter narrative which may otherwise help them to manage the challenges of a postsecondary education (Yosso, 2005). Theorists have also recognized that perceptions of racial prejudice and discrimination on college campuses are not unique to African American students (Cabrera et al., 1999; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Lewis et al., 2000; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rankin & Reason, 2005).

In studying how White, Black, and Hispanic students transition to community college, Weissman, Bukalowski, and Jumisko (1998) found that although all students believed that their race-ethnicity and background impacted their perceptions of the community college's environment, White American students noted that race did not affect their experiences at the community college. Yet, they also stated that working and interacting with racially diverse students, in class, helped them to understand racial diversity.

Eimers and Pike (1997) argued that African American students' perceptions of racial prejudice or discrimination on-campus may not have as much impact on students' academic aspirations and outcomes as their perceptions of academic quality. Weis (1985) also inferred that academic quality and student learning was the primary factor in African American students' collegiate engagement, and perhaps program completion and degree conferral. From this point of view, if students feel that their faculty members have little interest in helping them learn, it may serve to influence their decision of whether or not to remain enrolled in a specific course as well as their willingness to engage faculty outside of the classroom or on topics not directly related to the subject matter being taught.

In an extension of their argument, Eimers and Pike (1997) seem to attribute program incompleteness to quality of education and instruction. The researchers maintained that the issue of early departure among African American students may not be an issue of race, racism, or perceptions of racial prejudice. Rather, it is the quality of instruction and education, or students' perceptions that the education they are receiving adequately meets their reason for attending the college, which may serve to drive incompleteness. Furthermore, they argued that quality of education and instruction are stronger predictors of a student's intent to attain and persistence toward completing a certificate or associate's degree, rather than the student's actual academic performance or perceptions of collegiate climate.

Transforming Faculty-Student Engagement

Early research on student persistence in postsecondary education attributed high attrition to what faculty perceived as the individual student's lack of motivation and academic ability which is known as deficit thinking (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2006). Tinto's theories of student success, persistence, and retention suggest that the lack of student success and high attrition and

degree incompleteness are the result of the historic and systematic failure of institutions to recognize and understand that student retention is a matter of ineffective learning environments. Through this viewpoint, attrition is an issue of academic concern, which will determine how faculty and students engage in meaningful learning opportunities (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2006).

Furthermore, Chickering and Gamson (1987) noted five factors of undergraduate policy and practice that directly influence the quality of a student's learning and their educational experiences through intentional collegiate engagement of students on campus and in the classroom: "(a) encouraging student-faculty contact, (b) cooperation among students, (c) encouraging active learning, (d) prompt faculty feedback, (e) communicating high expectations, (f) teaching time management, and (g) recognizing diverse talents and ways of learning" (p. 2). Therefore, curriculum design and instructor engagement of students become integral to student success, because these factors create and support continuous learning through purposeful faculty-student engagement and intentional teaching. This in turn allows students the opportunity to be able to connect in-class theory to outcomes outside of that discipline and to a wider social context (McLaren, 1989; Silva & White, 2013). This connection may serve to keep students engaged and motivated to complete and perhaps support student perceptions of academic quality.

According to Tinto (1993), students' formal and informal interactions with faculty are crucial to the process of student learning, persistence, and retention. Students who feel alienated or isolated in class are not likely to seek out a relationship with their professor outside of the classroom; being unable to connect with the course material may also serve to increase feelings of isolation. Consequently, students who are fully engaged in the classroom environment and what is being taught are more likely to seek out and want to engage a faculty member outside of the classroom (Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Tinto, 1993).

Among African American students, faculty contact at the start of their college careers proves to be important to their academic success and their desire to complete a degree (Chang, 2005). Specifically, the contacts established with faculty appear to help African American students engage in the collegiate environment beyond the orientation sessions in both formal and in-formal settings. According to Chang (2005), African American students seem to engage resources and services provided by the college throughout their collegiate careers. This engagement may occur because they received encouragement and support to do so through making a connection with faculty and staff during the on-campus orientation sessions at the beginning of their academic career.

Some of the most promising information regarding student engagement and persistence can be found in the work of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) faculty who are trying to increase the number of students who graduate and find employment in a STEM field. Vogt's (2008) study on student retention and performance in engineering programs noted that formal and informal faculty-student contacts may be a significant factor in a student's level of academic self-efficacy. As such, faculty members who create distance between themselves and students may foster an unwelcoming environment which may serve to lower a student's academic self-efficacy and academic performance. To address unwelcoming classroom climates and to increase the development of robust faculty-student engagement, Vogt endorsed a reconsideration of traditional collegiate norms regarding teaching and classroom management, to a dynamic where the professor and students are academic collaborators. To change this dynamic, however, faculty may have to modify how they engage difference in their classrooms. For example, students' may enter classes with a variety of educational experiences which may not be aligned with accepted forms of traditional collegiate scholarship. However, their perspectives

may be valuable to the academy, assist students in connecting their learning to tangible application, and serve to increase their levels of engagement with faculty (Cotten & Wilson, 2006; McLaren, 1989; Silva & White, 2013; Tinto, 1993).

Race and Faculty-Student Engagement

In a departure from commonly accepted research on faculty-student engagement, some researchers are exploring the connection between race and student-faculty engagement.

Specifically, they are focused on how the race of faculty and the students they instruct impact faculty-student engagement. To that end, this section explores the connection between the aforementioned variables and their possible influence on African American, first-time students.

Costner, Daniels, and Clark (2010) offered a view of student engagement that shifts the responsibility for faculty-student engagement away from being a variable in which either the faculty or the students are solely responsible. They suggested that the key to faculty-student engagement is behavior and attitude. The researchers provided an integrated approach to student engagement by suggesting that African American students' levels of faculty engagement and integration are dependent upon the students' attitudes about learning, and their motivation to learn. Yet, the researchers also conjectured that learning and motivation among African American students is directly tied to faculty attitudes about teaching them. The researchers seem to suggest that faculty's attitudes toward teaching minority students may be related to the ideologies of colorblindness and multiculturalism, because many White faculty members chose not to recognize or acknowledge African Americans as a distinct cultural group (Costner, Daniels, & Clark, 2010). On the one hand, faculty members surveyed in the research of Costner et al. (2010) recognized the need for compositional diversity. On the other hand, the faculty failed to recognize that, because of their racial and cultural differences, African American

students have differing experiences that may influence their academic success. Essentially, the faculty were saying that ‘yes, diversity is a good thing’, but they did not see its value in traditional collegiate pedagogy and curricula.

Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) posited that faculty-student engagement is affected by race. It is unclear, however, if the researchers are referring to a faculty-student rapport in which the faculty member is White American or of a different race than the student. Later in their research, they noted that the “frequency and quality” of faculty engagement of students of color is imperative to understanding how to help students of color become academically successful (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004).

However, faculty and staff may not be aware of their own biases that hinder student motivation and engagement. For example, when referring to African American students as being “well-spoken and articulate,” the underlying assumption is that African Americans are inherently not “well spoken or articulate.” These comments insinuate that African Americans speak well for African Americans, but that does not necessarily meet the “standard of intelligence” that is used to define middle-class, suburban Whites (hooks, 1994).

This type of engagement still supports traditionally accepted values, which may be used to marginalize minority students, and do not appear to have entertained that multiculturalism is, ideally, to be inclusive of all voices and counternarratives. Moreover, these types of comments challenge the notion of multiculturalism for the instructors appear to uphold the biased hierarchical paradigms that assume the values of one group is the standard by which all individuals should aspire. Equally important, however, is the impact unconscious bias may have on curriculum; student learning assessments and evaluations; peer-to-peer interactions; and faculty-student engagement; all of which may serve as a barrier to program completion and

degree conferral (and other academic outcomes) of African American, first-time students (Costner et al., 2010; Hubbard & Stage, 2009; McLaren, 1989).

Faculty-Student Engagement, African American Faculty, and Collegiate Support

Guiffrida (2005) argued that African American students prefer to work with African American staff and faculty because they feel inherently that these individuals will take on the roles of fictive kin. They believe that African American faculty and staff will engage them on a number of academic, career, and personal issues, which are relevant to their needs and advocate on their behalf and may be in a better position in which to understand the potential barriers that may have encountered (or potentially encounter) in their academic career. Inherent to Guiffrida's argument, as discussed by Weis (1985), is the suggestion that African American faculty appear to have a greater investment in student growth. According to Weis (1985), compared to African American faculty, White American faculty appeared to be invested more so in the camaraderie and professional advancement associated with a career in the professoriate. If African American students perceive that faculty members are not interested in teaching or student learning, then they may disengage from the college (Weis, 1985). Guiffrida's argument inferred that student-faculty engagement, for African American students, is more than meeting with an instructor; rather, it involves a higher degree of intimacy that may lead to an academic or professional mentoring-type relationship between the student and the professor. For example, in his study of African American student engagement, Guiffrida (2005) observed that some African American students felt that African American faculty, more so than non-African American faculty, were willing to go beyond their traditional duties to assist African American students by: (a) demonstrating what was needed to be successful in college, (b) actively engaging their students,

(c) assuring students had the skills and abilities to complete college level work, and (d) providing academic/professional counseling and mentoring (Rogers & Molina, 2006).

Guiffrida's research also revealed that some African American students felt that any additional attention they received from African American faculty did not motivate them. According to Guiffrida (2005), these students felt that adding additional pressure to their circumstances was unwarranted and detrimental to their levels of motivation. The students felt they were being singled out because of their race. They believed that they were being marginalized by members of their own community by being treated as though they were missing important tools or skills to navigate the college. Guiffrida's 2005 study also observed that overall students felt that the most important attribute for faculty (regardless of race) was a willingness to invest in their academic success.

Additionally, studies of student persistence and retention infer that, if faculty and staff look like the students they are teaching, the students will feel a sense of kinship or mentorship with their professor, which may serve to neutralize or alleviate some of the stress associated with negative stereotypes, increase a student's level of academic persistence, and decrease attrition (Fischer, 2007; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Guiffrida, 2005; Umbach, 2006).

Race in The Classroom

The classroom serves as a core component of student engagement, especially for commuter students, as it is one of the only places on campus where social and academic communities merge and can engage faculty in a meaningful conversation (Tinto, 1993,1997; Umbach, 2006). Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2009) asserted that faculty are often unaware of the inequitable interaction patterns in their classrooms, which may inadvertently create an environment that supports inequity, serving to invalidate students points of view and overall

contribution to the class. For example, instructors may not notice the patterns of student-to-student communication. Specifically, they may not pay attention to who students listen to in class and whom they interrupt, all of which potentially act as a microaggression. In addition to this factor, the behavior students exhibit sends nonverbal messages about whose experience students and faculty value as important to their learning, thereby establishing a class hierarchy.

Critical Race Theory in Education

This study used critical race theory as a theoretical framework in which to contextualize students' perceptions of how the VPJCC prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds and their engagement with faculty at VPJCC. Moreover, the study used student engagement data from the 2013 administration of the CCSSE tool to inform collegiate discourse, policy, and practice around issues of student engagement and certificate or associate degree attainment. Critical race theory, in all contexts, "seeks to study and transform the relationship among race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 144). To achieve that goal, critical race theory, in an educational context, embraces several core tenets:

1. The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination,
2. The challenge to dominant ideology,
3. The commitment to social justice,
4. The centrality of experiential knowledge, and
5. The interdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano , 1998, p. 122-123; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25-26; Yosso et al., 2001, p. 91).

It is important to note that the aforementioned list is but a portion of CRT tenets, and not all critical race theorists support the use of all of the tenets in a given circumstance (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Harper et al., 2009). The tenets put forth in support of this research study,

however, represent a core collective of the primary discourse on CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Harper et al., 2009). The tenets are provided here to ground CRT as an appropriate theory for the current study in an effort to begin transforming institutional policies that either hinder or encourage completion among African American, first-time students, who are pursuing a certificate or associate degree at VPJCC (or seeking to transfer to a four-year college or institution from VPJCC).

For the purpose of this study, the tenets of intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination and challenging dominant ideology were used to provide context to the descriptive data and to analyze students' responses to the variable exploring students' perceptions of their engagement with faculty. In the context of higher education, CRT recognizes the concept of "the intercentricity of racialized oppression" (Solórzano & Yosso, p. 25, 2002)—the intersection of race with other factors which may be used to marginalize individuals (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, economic class) (Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Patton et al., 2007). Intercentricity, then, addresses how the intersection of race, gender, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, and national origin (and other categories, individually or combined that serve to distinguish an individual from the majority or standards set by the majority group) is realized in different contexts (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

The tenet challenging dominant ideology, as used in educational settings, challenges the systems of meritocracy, colorblindness, and race neutrality that influence institutional policy and practice. Put simply, "CRT challenges White privilege and refutes the claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity" (Yosso, 2005, p. 73; Yosso, et al., 2004, p. 28). This tenet was used to analyze the variables addressing how the college prepared students to understand and engage

with people of diverse backgrounds and their engagement with faculty (research questions 3 and 4).

The tenet of centrality of experiential knowledge or counternarratives offers that people of color have experiences that differ from those of White Americans and other members of the racial majority. These experiences serve to challenge accepted beliefs and behaviors that serve to marginalize racial minorities. CRT, in an educational context, contests the deeply-rooted channels of traditionally accepted academic pedagogy and scholarship (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Yosso, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This historical structure has marginalized the experiences of African Americans, and consequently supported blind acceptance of the status quo (dysconscious racism) which serves to repeat and maintain racial inequity in the collegiate environment (King, 1991). This tenet was used to analyze the variables addressing how the college prepared students to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds and their engagement with faculty (research questions 3 and 4).

The tenets of a commitment to social justice and interdisciplinary perspective address the undercurrent of this study: to understand the context in which African American, first-time students perceive the collegiate environment at VPJCC and how those perceptions affect their experiences and engagement behaviors. Moreover, these tenets explore how the college can best attend to issues of race and engagement in their educational environment and to do so with the intent to empower students, and work toward the elimination of marginalization and subordination of underrepresented and underserved population.

An Institutional Perspective

To provide a context for understanding the policy, practice, and process of serving African American students in a local setting, the current study offers an overview of the college under study. The college used for this study, Vernell-Paul Jacob, was selected because of its size, academic and non-academic services, student demographics, and its guiding mission to serve students. The current research explores how the college moves students through the collegiate pipeline to program completion and degree conferral, addresses the academic achievement and collegiate credential attainment gap between African American and White American students, and how the college's students may benefit from transforming and enhancing collegiate policy, practice, and process.

Vernell-Paul Jacob Community College is a large, comprehensive, multi-campus community college system in the Mid-Atlantic region. Collectively, the college serves an estimated 48,395 students annually (full-time, part-time, credit, and non-credit), 27% of whom are racial minorities. African American students comprise the majority of the identified racial minority population (17.6 %). The college annually confers 2,069 associate degrees and 714 certificates and diplomas. Approximately 50% of the students are enrolled in career programs and 50% are enrolled in transfer programs. Approximately 57% are women and 43% are men. The average age of the VPJCC student is 27. The college categorizes traditional aged students as those between 18-24; students over the age of 24 are categorized as nontraditional students.

Moving Students Through the Degree Pipeline at VPJCC

According to enrollment and completion policies at VPJCC, students who complete a program of study are not required to apply for graduation. As such, it may appear that the college is not fulfilling its mission to educate students. In fact they may be providing their students with

the academic skills that they need to be successful, but have not impressed upon students the importance of receiving a credential, which certifies their attainment of a specific, high-level knowledge/skill set.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2014), the graduate percentage for first-time, full-time, certificate/associate degree-seeking African American students, in the 2009 cohort enrolled in public two-year postsecondary institutions, and who completed their degree within 150% of normal time was 11.3 %. In the context of VPJCC, the rate of completion was illustrated by considering the progression of 4,972 newly admitted, first-time certificate/associate degree-seeking college students. For example, as illustrated in Table 1, first-time in college, full and part-time, certificate/associate degree-seeking African American students comprised 15.6 % (776 students) of the Fall 2008 cohort of 4,972 newly admitted students at VPJCC. However, enrollment decreased in each subsequent term through the graduate term of 2012. As a result, the percentage of African American students who graduated from VPJCC with an associate's degree or certificate was 7%, the lowest of all the racial/ethnic groups. White American, first-time students had a graduation rate that was double that of African American first-time students. It should be noted that the focus of the 2008 cohort analysis was to track students from enrollment to completion. Specifically, the goal of the analysis was not necessarily to track why students left the college, but to gauge completion rates. Thus, the data set provided in Table 1 is limited to students who entered the college as first-time, degree/certificate seeking students in Fall 2008.

Table 1

Fall 2008 Percentage of First-Time-In-College Students Who Completed a Certificate or Associate's Degree Within Four Years (Spring 2012 Graduation, Fall 2008 Cohort)

	#Entering Students	# Completed Certificate or Degree	% Completed Certificate or Degree
Total	4,972	689	14
Full-Time	2,835	431	15
Part-Time	2,137	258	12
Male	2,320	305	13
Female	2,372	344	15
American Indian/Alaskan Native	29	3	10
Asian	41	10	24
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0	0	0
Black or African American	776	55	7
Hispanic of any race	39	5	13
White, non-Hispanic	3,167	494	16
Other	920	122	13
26 and younger	3,688	501	14
27 and older	1,249	185	15

Note: Vernell-Paul Jacob Community College. (2013a, April). Percentage of first-time-in-college students who completed a certificate or associate's degree within four years (Spring 2012 graduation for Fall 2008 cohort). *Achieving the Dream Newsletter: Focusing on Student Success*, (8), 4. Adapted with permission.

Achieving the Dream: Addressing the Attainment Gap

To address the gap in academic achievement and persistence between African American students and White American students and to increase graduation rates among students from college, VPJCC joined the Achieving the Dream (ATD) initiative in the 2006-2007 school year. ATD is a national program designed to help community colleges transform their institutional paradigms by asking colleges to identify a specific problem or area of concern, collect data from different sources, develop and implement an intervention based on the results of the data, and evaluate the effectiveness of intervention (Achieving the Dream, 2012). ATD is working to

transform how colleges use data to develop and analyze the effectiveness of the respective college's policy and practices, which will in turn work to close the achievement gap and increase program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment among all students, particularly students of color and low-income students.

Consequently, the college has employed a number of academic and student development initiatives designed to prepare students for the rigors of collegiate level work as well as prepare them to complete programs of study and receive a collegiate credential. These new initiatives have created opportunities for students to become active participants in their learning process. The following is not an exhaustive list of programs and services; rather, it is an abbreviated list that provides a foundation for understanding the breadth and depth of VPJCC's commitment to creating numerous opportunities for enhancing student success.

- Employing the Community College Survey of Student Engagement to identify students' perceptions of their experiences, around a number of issues related to collegiate engagement as well as institutional policy and practice. VPJCC surveys their students by using the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) instrument and participating in the benchmarking process to measure how well they are meeting the needs of their students in 5 areas: Active and Collaborative Learning, Student Effort, Academic Challenge, Student-Faculty Interaction, and Support for Learners.
- In the fall of 2009, the college began requiring students whose placement test scores indicated the need for enrollment in the lowest-level developmental courses to enroll in a student development course. In fall 2012, the college extended this requirement to students who placed into three developmental courses (English, Math, and Writing),

regardless of academic level, and were enrolled full-time, with the goal of completing an associate's degree.

- Student success coaches were hired to monitor student progress and provide academic support to targeted student groups (e.g., students who placed into multiple developmental courses).
- All first-time, credential-seeking students are now required to complete a New Student Orientation (NSO).
- The college uses alternative pathways to complete developmental studies coursework (e.g., accelerated developmental studies courses) so that students can move through the sequences faster.
- The college developed an Academic Roadmap for students, the design of which is meant to assist students in completing their degree by explicitly directing students to complete specific activities after earning a specified number of academic credits.

In addition to these implementations, the college instituted The Men of Merit Initiative.

Established in the fall of 2014, the program's mission is to provide academic and social support to African American, male students. Although designed specifically for African American men, any male student may join the group. This program provides students with a link to the college and a way to have a voice and an opportunity to share their experiences which may be counter to the experiences of White Americans students.

Transforming and Enhancing Collegiate Policy, Practice, and Process

Transforming collegiate policy, practice, and process may require expanding who is analyzing the data and for what purpose the data are being used. For example, testing and evaluating small changes with an empirically sound methodology to determine whether the change is an improvement should also be considered. Improvement would look like intentional outreach to students to solicit their participation in college-wide committees or boards, which are responsible for developing and evaluating current collegiate policy, practices and procedures. For example, The Men of Merit Initiative was employed at VPJCC in response to a dearth of African American, male graduates from the college. Implementing this national program on VPJCC campuses is an indicator that VPJCC is cognizant of the completion challenges faced by African American students generally, and African American males specifically. By inviting students to take part in this initiative, the college allows students to find that their voices do have value and can create a significant impact. In addition to this goal, although the program was not developed for this purpose, these students can provide feedback (via focus groups) on their experiences at VPJCC. Even though their feedback and narratives may not be generalizable, they may provide a foundation on which to build upon data extracted from the CCSSE tool; thereby, providing additional depth to the college's understanding of how students experience and engage agents of the college. Using the analysis of student perceptions undertaken in this study (as discussed in Chapter IV-Data Analysis and Recommendations), the concept of transforming collegiate policy, practice, and process will be explored further in Chapter V-Design for Action and Chapter VI-Generative Impacts.

CHAPTER III-Method

The biggest barrier for *educated educators* is that they do tend to assume full responsibility for a dialogue regarding solutions, forgetting that the *less-educated* students and their needs can be a critical resource needed to guide these discussions (Barr & Scheutz, 2008, p. 8).

The purpose of the current study has been two-fold: (a) provide a systemic inquiry into the collegiate experiences of African American and White American, first-time students at VPJCC as they relate to their perceptions of how the college prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds (e.g., faculty, staff, agents of the college, students) and their engagement of faculty; and (b) identify potential barriers (within the aforementioned constructs) that may affect program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment among African American, first-time students. Thus, the significance of the study lies in its potential to: (a) identify collegiate practices and processes that can be transformed to improve services to students; and (b) develop a design for action that will serve to improve service to students and increase program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment. In doing so, the five tenets of critical race theory in an education context: (a) intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination; (b) challenge to dominant ideology; (c) commitment to social justice; (d) centrality of experiential knowledge; (e) and interdisciplinary perspective are being used, not to explicitly explain the difference in student responses, but to provide a context for the results.

As such, the research identified potential cross-departmental engagement pathways that will serve to develop and support academic, career, and social development for students who intend to complete a certificate or associate's degree at VPJCC, and the 2013 Community

College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE, 2005 survey form) was utilized. This chapter addresses why the CCSSE instrument was selected for this research study, the validity and reliability of the survey, the use of the CCSSE to explore student experiences and engagement, the plan for data analysis, limitations of using the CCSSE, and the context of using the CCSSE at Vernell-Paul Jacob Community College.

Using a self-report type survey inherently acknowledges that students are active participants in their educational process, and must be included if colleges wish to understand how their institutional policy and practices serve to hinder or help students to be successful in their academic endeavors. Furthermore, because completing the CCSSE instrument is voluntary, some students may elect not to complete the survey, choose not to answer questions about diversity or faculty-student engagement, or not respond truthfully. As a result, the overall survey results may not be a complete or accurate representation of students' experiences and perceptions. In addition to these caveats, the students' decisions to complete the survey, or not, may serve as an indirect indicator of their level of engagement.

Specifically, this social justice-oriented quantitative study was designed to explore differences in group perceptions between African American and White American, first-time students attending VPJCC. Furthermore, in this examination, the current study analyzed extant data from the 2013 administration of the CCSSE to students enrolled in credit-bearing courses at VPJCC. The extracted data addressed the following research questions, which are paired with a CCSSE instrument item or items that specifically target student perceptions and behaviors:

1. What are the goals of African American and White American, first-time students attending VPJCC?

2. Are there differences in African American and White American, first-time students' obstacles to attending VPJCC?
3. Are there differences in African American and White American, first-time students' perceptions of how VPJCC prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds?
4. Are there differences in African American and White American, first-time students' perceptions of their engagement with faculty?

In addition to these queries, the research study included three demographic questions that helped to contextualize the research: (a) "Did you begin college at this college or elsewhere?"; (b) "What is your racial identification?"; and (c) "What are the goals African American and White American, first-time students for attending VPJCC?". Together, the questions established whether students were first-time students, their racial identification, and purpose for attending the college that forms the primary core of this research study. The CCSSE instrument was employed because, to date, it is the only national instrument (made available to the researcher) that the college uses to assess student perceptions of collegiate experiences and engagement behaviors as it relates to the aforementioned variables. In addition, the CCSSE instrument appears to be the primary instrument through which the VPJCC extracts data to use as a foundation for developing and assessing programs that support academic achievement and degree completion, through intentional engagement.

Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)

In an effort to support student success initiatives through collegiate engagement, VPJCC uses the CCSSE to assess student perceptions of their collegiate experiences. Additionally, the

use of the survey provides a testament to the college's willingness to seek students' feedback and use that information to inform collegiate services.

The CCSSE was designed by the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin. The survey was introduced in 2001 as a two-year community college counterpart to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) which focuses on four-year colleges and universities. CCSSE was designed to respond to the dearth of student engagement instruments that were designed specifically for community colleges and career/technical colleges. The NSSE and CCSSE instruments were developed to assess students' collegiate experience and engagement behaviors, in addition to what the students are learning from that engagement by asking students to report on their collegiate experiences and perceptions. Through the surveys, educators and researchers are able to glean information which is integral in creating robust and engaging collegiate environments that serve to improve the college experience for students (CCCSE, 2012; Kuh, 2002; Marti, 2009) and increase student completion rates.

Data Source Rationale

National data from the Center for Community College Student Engagement suggests that race is an important component to understanding gaps in academic achievement, program completion, and collegiate credential attainment among community college students. This section explores the interaction between racial and ethnic diversity and patterns of faculty-student engagement and academic outcomes. According to national data provided by community colleges that use the CCSSE instrument, students' responses to questions about the importance of race and diversity on campus were mixed (CCCSE, 2014). Specifically, some students reported that race significantly influenced their collegiate experiences; while other respondents felt that race and

diversity play an ancillary role to collegiate experiences. The national CCSSE data corpus indicated that, among all racial groups, African American females are the most engaged of all student groups across all benchmarks, except one: student support. Furthermore, in considering collegiate engagement among male students, CCSSE results indicated that African American students are the most engaged, but have the lowest academic outcomes (CCCSE, 2014). Subsequently, their White American counterparts, who have the lowest or least amount of engagement, have the highest academic outcomes.

Congruent with the national data, African American, first-time students at VPJCC are not graduating at the same level as their White American counterparts (NCES, 2014; Strayhorn, 2014; VPJCC, 2013a). It is uncertain if the aggregated, national data from the CCSSE is representative of VPJCC students' perceptions when viewed in a localized context. The analysis of local content is significant because it determines the types of programs and services that will best match the needs of the students being served by the college. If students' needs are not met, they may elect to leave or not enroll at all because they feel that the services they are receiving do not meet their academic or professional needs. As mentioned earlier, the current study is a step in exploring how VPJCC can begin to assess students' perceptions of those experiences and build upon them.

Patterns of Faculty-Student Engagement

Patterns of engagement and achievement among males have remained consistent among CCSSE benchmarks for more than 10 years (CCCSE, 2014). Upon further research into this issue, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2014) noted in their report—*Aspirations to Achievement: Men of Color and Community Colleges*— that not only is the engagement to outcome ratio concerning, but with respect to race, some students wanted to see

more faculty members who looked like them, as they served as visual encouragement to persist. Other students stated that the racial composition of the faculty corps did not influence their level of engagement if they felt that their teacher cared about their academic success. This perspective appears to support Guiffrida's (2005) research on African American students and African American faculty, which observed a similar mixed result. Some African American students reported that the presence of African American faculty acted as a mechanism for encouraging persistence, as these faculty members became mentors (academic or professional) for students. Still, other African American students indicated that same race faculty were not, necessarily, more helpful to them as they worked to complete a postsecondary degree. Inherent to both perspectives is that students are responsive to faculty, regardless of race or ethnicity, who appear to be genuinely interested in understanding the needs of their students and helping them to reach their goals, which affects students' persistence and efforts as well as their perceptions of college (Guiffrida, 2005; Hurtado, 1992; Jones, 2001; Weis, 1985).

Furthermore, students in the CCCSE (2014) report noted that, when a professor maintained or appeared to maintain lower expectations for students who were racial or ethnic minorities, or students for whom English was a second language, it may have caused the student to question the cultural awareness of faculty members. In questioning the professors' levels of cultural awareness, the students seem to be suggesting that faculty may engage in behavior that is racially biased. Specifically, the students seemed to conjecture that faculty who maintain lower expectations for students who are racial and ethnic minorities, either consciously or unconsciously, assume that these students are academically unprepared or did not enter college with a viable skill set, which may serve to sustain their academic progression through college.

At the core of this argument is that students want faculty to recognize their background and that each student arrives to college with a level of community cultural wealth that can be used to empower, not marginalize or stereotype, them to persist in their academic pursuits, as suggested by Yosso (2005). Community cultural wealth is defined as a set of knowledge, skills, abilities, and networks employed by “Communities of Color in order to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Thus, students are asking faculty to view them as individuals, not as a monolithic group of students, who are destined to fail because of their race or ethnic heritage. The CCCSE reports are very clear in their assertion that, race and ethnicity matter. These factors affect how students process their collegiate experiences and may impact their academic outcomes.

Transforming Collegiate Policy, Practice, and Process

By gaining an understanding of African American, first-time students’ collegiate experiences and patterns of engagement at VPJCC, agents of the college may guide the restructuring and improvement of collegiate services that may then result in an increase in student retention, program completion, and certificate or degree conferral. The researcher discussed the major findings of the current research study, along with recommendations to engage campus and college level diversity and faculty-student initiatives (as outlined in Chapter V-Design for Action), with the CCSSE Project Coordinator and Director of the Achieving the Dream Initiative, the Dean of Student Development at the pilot campus, and the Special Assistant to the President on Diversity and Inclusion. The selected senior-level administrators were chosen because they are leading the college in developing and maintaining collegiate policy, practice, and process that directly impact student engagement within the college, through:

- (a) new student orientation goals;
- (b) course curriculum;
- (c) training and development programs

focused on student engagement, diversity, and retaining African American students; and (d) student and academic services that are designed to assist students in the completion of their collegiate credentials. This research can be used to inform faculty-student engagement issues and diversity initiatives. Additionally, by drilling deeper into the data, the research process provided another lens through which to help the college explore how data can be used to build capacity among administrators and staff, who work directly with students and may have the most influence on their levels of engagement, a point which will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter V-Design for Action.

Validation and Reliability of the Instrument

The CCSSE instrument was developed in response to individual community colleges' need for an instrument to assess student experiences and engagement behaviors on community college campuses. The survey format of the CCSSE instrument that is being used in this study is based on the National Survey of Student Engagement, using 55 of the 82 items (approximately 67%) listed on the NSSE. The NSSE demonstrates satisfactory content and construct validity as well as test-retest reliability (Kuh, 2002; Kuh et al., 2001). Aspects of the instrument's validity and reliability are discussed in more detail on the organization website (<http://nsse.iub.edu/html/validity.cfm>). Further explored in this section is the logistical process of how and when the survey is administered to VPJCC students and the strengths and weaknesses of using the CCSSE.

Administration of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement

The CCSSE instrument is administered every other spring to students enrolled in randomly selected, campus-based courses. Online administration of the instrument to distance learning students is not currently available. In the last administration of the CCSSE in spring of

2013, 110 classes (approximately 1,975 students) were randomly selected by the administrators of the CCSSE to participate in the survey. As instructors are not obligated to participate in the administration of the survey and students are not mandated to complete the survey, 90 sections participated in the survey project, resulting in a sample size of 930 students. Given the study sample and design, the results of the instrument offered a snapshot, rather than an in-depth view, of the collegiate perceptions of African American and White American, first-time students.

In 2013, the CCSSE administration year, according to publicly available data for the county in which VPJCC is located, African Americans comprised 13.3%, and White Americans 81.3% of the county population. In comparison, the racial and ethnic demographic comparison at VPJCC for spring 2013 is estimated at 18.8 % for African American students and 62.2% for White American students. The racial and ethnic demographics for African American and White American students appears to be somewhat on par with student enrollment percentages identified in the CCSSE for spring 2013 administration year: 15% and 72.2% for African American and White American, first-time students, respectively. VPJCC oversamples their student population to ensure adequate representation from the college population. The survey results do not necessarily reflect the racial and ethnic composition on each campus and center. VPJCC administers the CCSSE instrument every other spring to allow time to analyze results, develop an intervention (if necessary), implement changes, and assess the effectiveness or impact of the new changes on the factor(s) being addressed.

To be able to develop and implement initiatives, the VPJCC CCSSE administration adheres to the following schedule every other year: (a) Spring – participating colleges will administer the CCSSE instrument after the college’s spring break; (b) July 31 – survey results/data are sent to the participating colleges; (c) Fall – the college administrative team

analyzes the data and reports the findings to senior level administrators, then to the college community; (d) Spring – based on the survey results, workshops are held to get input on priorities; (e) Summer – committees are formed to develop tools; and (f) Fall – tools are shared to address priorities. The only point missing in this cycle is a plan for implementation, evaluation, and further data sharing.

For the purpose of this research, the CCSSE instrument will be utilized to explore differences in group perceptions as related to the following variables: :

1. What are the goals of African American and White American, first-time students attending VPJCC?
2. Are there differences in African American and White American, first-time students' obstacles to attending VPJCC?
3. Are there differences in African American and White American, first-time students' perceptions of how VPJCC prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds?
4. Are there differences in African American and White American, first-time students' perceptions of their engagement with faculty?

Although not a precise instrument for in-depth study of students' perceptions' as they relate to the guiding research questions, the CCSSE is a valid and reliable tool, which can be used to provide a foundational understanding of students' perceptions of the aforementioned variables. Furthermore, because of the results it provides, the CCSSE can be employed as one of several different methodologies the college can use to launch in-depth examinations of students' perceptions.

Social Justice Oriented-Quantitative Research

To understand how African American and White American, first-time students perceive the collegiate climate at VPJCC, this research study used a social justice lens to examine the 2013 CCSSE instrument data. A quantitative methodology was employed because it provided a framework in which to understand the broad scope of the issue under study, but also provided a lens through which to identify how the issue is being experienced by groups of students, which is particularly important when conducting social justice research intended to transform current inequitable circumstances (Creswell, 2015). Thus, it is equally important to recognize the affects that the issue under study has on groups as well as on individuals.

Quantitative studies and social justice initiatives are often viewed as opposing concepts. Cokley and Awad (2013) indicated that there is a historical mistrust of quantitative research as a tool to assist marginalized communities, because national studies have, in some circumstances, brought more harm than good to these communities. The researchers cited two examples of how quantitative research results can negatively impact disempowered communities: (a) the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment in which 399 poor African American men who were infected with the syphilis virus were told that they were receiving treatment, when, in fact, they were not being treated at all, so that their bodies could be studied postmortem; and (b) the Bell Curve and other studies examining levels of intelligence, or academic ability, among African Americans as compared to White Americans.

Although these studies are decades old, they function as reminders that African Americans may still be considered, by some, to be intellectually inferior to their White American counterparts. As a result, evidence that African-Americans may be deemed marginal human beings, who are expendable can be found in all areas of American social and cultural structures,

including systems that are inclusive of and extend outside of the confines of education. However, inherent in social justice research is the intentional engagement of data to identify and understand issues of inequity that serve to perpetuate marginalization and the use of the data to create and support opportunities, which could serve to empower those individuals. However, a limitation of quantitative research is that it lacks the individual context in which to ground the statistical calculations, and may lend itself to stereotyping large segments of a population under study. As a result, statistical results may be misinterpreted, as they may be difficult to understand without a specific context in which to conceptualize the impact of the issue under study. A social justice-oriented quantitative study offers a broad understanding of the problem under study and offers pathways and connections to broader issues.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Using the CCSSE

The CCSSE is a very valuable tool for community colleges, especially for VPJCC, which actively mines the data to support new initiatives. However, these data can also be used to begin a college wide conversation about the collegiate system and students' perceptions of their experiences within this system. Specifically, the CCSSE instrument can be used to identify areas in which the college can improve collegiate practice, process, and service to students, which may result in a more engaging environment for students. In the circumstance of the CCSSE instrument, the Center for Community College Student Engagement recommends that colleges use the CCSSE as one tool in understanding the attitudes and behaviors of their student population. McCormick and McClenney (2012) maintained that the primary value of the CCSSE instrument is not necessarily in the statistical reports, but through the use of developing a design for action and associated generative impacts, and the inter- and intra-departmental conversations that occur because of the statistics (p. 310).

In addressing the reliability and validity of the CCSSE instrument, McCormick and McClenney (2012) explain that the primary means by which the CCSSE is used is to “make relative comparisons between groups of students” (p. 314). Furthermore, they argue that the key factor in the analysis and use of the CCSSE instrument is not necessarily the frequency of engagement, but how or why certain students (e.g., men versus women, African American versus White American) engage in specific behaviors and others do not (p. 314). Although CCSSE results do not explore “why” students perceive situations in the manner in which they do, it does provide a sound rationale for the institution to employ a variety of methodologies to begin an in-depth analysis of student perceptions of their experiences at the college. The instrument is not designed to provide an in-depth analysis of students’ perceptions of their collegiate experiences and due to the anonymous nature of the VPJCC survey, it is virtually impossible, within this institution, to follow up with specific students or to cross-reference students’ responses on this instrument to their responses on other instruments used by the college to collect data. However, the instrument enables the construction of cross-departmental pathways, which support building professional communities charged with exploring the various iterations of students’ perceptions within the context of diversity and student engagement. The instrument enables institutions to work toward an overall improvement of the collegiate policy, practice, and process that serve to inform services to students.

In the case of this study, the instrument was provided a lens through which to view the problem and possible solutions. In other words, VPJCC has an overall understanding of how they are preparing students to engage in diverse environments and faculty-student engagement among these student populations. As a result, the college will be able to mine the survey data that supports and maintains improvements to campus practice and process.

Data Analysis Plan

The 2013 spring CCSSE dataset was retrieved from VPJCC Community College with permission from the college's Vice President of Student Success and Completion, the Assistant Vice President of Strategic Planning and Institutional Research, and the Director of Learning Outcomes and Achieving the Dream. The data corpus received from VPJCC was cleaned by the Director of Learning Outcomes and Achieving the Dream prior to it being sent on to the researcher via email. Prior to sending data to the college, CCSSE removed students who answered that they had previously taken the survey, indicated that they were under 18 years of age or did not complete a significant number of questions on the survey.

CCSSE calculates an iweight to balance the proportion of full-time and part-time responses so that results make sense for enrollment patterns. CCSSE administrators use IPEDS data to determine proportions since most community college students attend on a part-time basis, but most CCSSE respondents are full-time. All records without an iweight were removed to confirm that the remaining participants (930) matched the adjusted survey count (Director of Learning Outcomes and Achieving the Dream at VPJCC, used with author's permission, Personal Communication, January 26, 2015).

From the existing data, cases were selected that matched the inclusion requirements. These requirements were that the participant selected: "Black or African American, Non-Hispanic" or "White American, Non-Hispanic" as race; the participant did not indicate international student status; and the participant indicated he/she was a first-time college attendee. The analysis only included cases in which the respondents completed data items related to the guiding research questions (i.e., no missing data imputation was completed) and CCSSE survey items (see Appendix A).

The respondents rated their experiences with diversity (ethnic, social, race, economic, and gender—this research focuses on ethnicity and race) and interaction with faculty, and noted what variables or factors would increase the probability that they would withdraw from a class or the college before the completion of their intended academic goal. The findings were disaggregated based on race.

The current study used SPSS software to extrapolate data that identified students: entering status, racial identification, gender, age, life circumstance, and the goals of African American and White American, first-time students (research question 1). Using SPSS, a series 2-tailed Mann-Whitney *U* tests, with a significance level (alpha level) of .05, were utilized to examine group differences in the student perceptions of their obstacles to attending Vernell-Paul Jacob Community College, (research question 2) students' perceptions that VPJCC has prepared them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds (research question 3), and their perceptions of their engagement with faculty (research question 4). A calculation for “*r*” was derived to identify the effect size between the responses of the two groups on all variables in which a significant statistical difference was identified. Cohen's standard definition for effect size “*r*” was used to determine the effect as “small (0.1), medium (0.3), or large (0.5) in size” (Cohen, 1988, pp. 79-80).

As the current study is focused on attaining a foundational understanding of the collegiate experiences of African American, first-time students enrolled in VPJCC, an in-depth analysis (beyond descriptive statistics) of gender, age, marital status, and student enrollment (less than full-time or full-time status), and reason for attending the college, although important to the study of students in higher education, is not within the purview of the current study.

Limitations of the Data Analysis

In using extant data from the 2013 CCSSE instrument, the research identified several limitations to data analysis. Consequently, the identified limitations, to a degree, provided a foundation for the development of recommendations for further use of this instrument in exploring differences in group perceptions of diversity and faculty-student engagement (discussed in Chapter IV-Data Analysis and Recommendations). Furthermore, these recommendations have also identified how the limitations of the instrument can also be used to transform collegiate practice and process which may lead to improved service to students.

First, the results cannot be generalized to all students at VPJCC because the survey is not administered to all students; as the sample survey is selected randomly, the survey is not inclusive of online students, and student participation is not mandatory. Rather, it captured the perception of a sample of students who were enrolled at VPJCC in randomly-selected courses during the spring term of 2013. The process used to select courses was not available to the researcher. Given that students could opt out of taking the survey and not all instructors chose to have the survey administered in their class, the sample of respondents is not necessarily a random sample of students at VPJCC.

Second, at VPJCC, the survey is offered every other year. The college uses the “off year” to employ and evaluate the effectiveness of intervention. Therefore, it is not appropriate to compare data sets across administration years, because the survey is not capturing data from the same students under the same collegiate conditions. Specifically, every survey administration takes place after an intervention or change (of some magnitude) has taken place, thus making semester-to-semester comparison inappropriate.

Finally, the instrument does not provide an in-depth exploration of student perceptions, experience, and behaviors. A broader discussion regarding the use of these data to improve and support a transformation of collegiate practice, process, and service will be found in Chapter IV- Data Analysis and Recommendations.

CHAPTER IV-Data Analysis and Recommendations

As discussed in Chapter II-Literature Review, Vernell-Paul Jacob Community College (VPJCC) has employed several programs and initiatives to support the collegiate engagement and academic achievement of students. Furthermore, in the very near future, VPJCC is planning to launch a campus climate study to assess student experiences and perceptions of VPJCC on a host of variables, which are inclusive of diversity and engagement issues. It is not clear how the resulting data from the proposed climate study will inform the college with regard to increasing program completion, and collegiate credential attainment among students at the college—particularly African American, first-time students. This lack of clarity increases the importance of this study as it serves to provide specific data regarding student goals in attending the institution, their perceptions of the college’s emphasis on diversity and their engagement with faculty at the college.

The results of the current research study are not intended to be generalized to all students who are enrolled in two-year public community colleges. Rather, the results are intended to provide insight into the collegiate experience, perceptions, and engagement behaviors of African American and White American, first-time students enrolled in VPJCC. Furthermore, the lens of critical race theory was used to analyze the results of the analysis in an effort to identify potential barriers to program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment.

The primary goals of this study were to: (a) provide a systemic inquiry into the collegiate experiences of African American and White American, first-time students at VPJCC as they relate to their perceptions of how the college prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds (e.g. faculty, staff, agents of the college, students) and their engagement of faculty; and (b) to identify potential barriers (within the aforementioned

constructs) that may affect program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment among African American, first-time students. The significance of the study is its potential to identify collegiate practices and processes that can be transformed to improve services to students and in the development of a design for action that will serve to improve service to students and increase program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment.

To that end, and more specifically, to provide faculty and staff with an understanding of how students' perceptions of their experiences, along with their goals/reasons for attending college, may influence the institution's ability to help them graduate. To engage these faculty and staff, a thorough understanding of how the college collects and analyzes data is necessary (Dowd, 2005). This is especially true for administrators who are charged with designing, employing, and evaluating services to support student enrollment and academic achievement. Involving agents of the college in a debriefing of the collected data gives the agents an opportunity to fully engage and possibly change collegiate practice (Bensimon, 2004; Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004). Involving them in the extant data discussion also provides a gateway to higher levels of institutional and departmental ownership and accountability.

This chapter summarizes the research analysis and uses the resulting data to support several recommendations, which may serve to transform the collegiate experience of students enrolled in VPJCC. Results from the descriptive and inferential analysis are presented to give context and perspective to the student population at the college and to provide a lens through which to understand student experiences at the college. Additionally, this chapter presents publicly available 2013 CCSSE data, provided by the institution; the institutional data was cross-referenced with the research findings to identify areas of convergence or divergence and to

provide an institutional perspective, as the institutional data was not disaggregated by race or enrollment status (first-time or non-first-time). Finally, all extracted data was used to: (a) develop an overview of the problem under study in the context of VPJCC; (b) use the lens of CRT to identify potential areas in which a transformation of practice, process, and service may be beneficial to students; and (c) develop a list of specific recommendations designed to support the transformation. Using CRT to identify potential areas of change within the VPJCC system provided a lens in which to develop an understanding of student's perspective on what services may have the largest impact on their success. CRT actively challenges dominant ideologies, which may affect student use of and access to services, as well as considering other factors that may intersect with issues of race (intercentricity of race), which may influence student experiences and engagement behaviors.

Descriptive Analysis

A descriptive analysis of African American and White American, first-time students at VPJCC provides a context for understanding the study population at VPJCC. Specifically, this analysis offers a lens through which to view the college from the student's perspective, thus giving students a voice. In addition to this aim, the analysis offers a poignant perspective on who is attending the college and their life circumstance, Table 2, as well as provides reasons why the students are attending VPJCC, Table 3. Some of the responses yielded the same median value between African American and White American, first-time students, yet the distributions of these responses yielded statistically significant results. In these instances, the effect size was small, Table 4 shows the frequency distribution of these student responses.

Demographic Data: Student Status, Race, Age Group, Gender, and Life Circumstance

Among all African American respondents, 73% were first-time students and 27% started college elsewhere. Of the survey respondents, 69.7% of White American students were first-time students and 30.3% started college elsewhere. The 2013 CCSSE analysis was limited to 563 responses, African American and White American, first-time students. The data from other racial and ethnic groups was outside the purview of this study. After limiting the survey responses to African American and White American, first-time students, the responses indicated that 18% ($n = 103$) were African American and 82% ($n = 460$) were White American. Among the first-time students, 23.3% of the African American students and 36.3% of the White American students indicated 18-19 as their age group.

Table 2

Demographic Data for African American and White American, First-Time Respondents on 2013 VPJCC CCSSE

Race	Male (%)	Female (%)	Married (%)	Single (%)	Children (%)	No Children (%)
African American, first-time	32.0	68.0	9.7	90.3	39.8	60.2
White American, first-time	42.3	57.7	8.9	91.1	19.6	80.4

In Table 2, descriptive data about the sample is presented. Two-thirds of the African American, first-time students sampled identified themselves as female. African American, first-time respondents were mostly unmarried. Moreover, 39.8% of African American, first-time students had children living in their households which suggest that child care may be an important reason or barrier for their choice to attend and remain enrolled, in VPJCC. Females comprised just over half of the White American, first-time student sample. Again, similar to the African American, first-time student sample, the majority of the White American sample was

single. However, fewer White American students had children living in the home (19.6%). According to critical race theory, intercentricity is a significant component to understanding student experiences in education. Specifically, this tenet recognizes the centrality of racism as it relates its intersection with other variables that may serve to marginalize students. Although this study did not explore the impact of gender on student experiences and perceptions, the aforementioned demographic data indicate that with such a large percentage of female students attending VPJCC, it may prove prudent in their efforts to understand student experiences, perceptions, and engagement behaviors to investigate the possible influence that gender has on student completion.

In addition, the college may find it fruitful to disaggregate the data in order to examine the impact of the cross-section of race, gender, age, children, and marital status on students. The current data analysis indicates that African American, first-time students, more so than their White American, first-time, counterparts are more likely to have children living in the home. This finding infers that there is greater demand on the time for African American students; thus, reducing the time they may be able to invest in engagement activities outside of class. It is also worth noting that both samples frequently identified as being between 18-19 years of age and being single. In this instance, there are four potential factors that intersect with race that could potentially create a barrier to program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment: gender, having a child, age, and being unmarried. Thus, the challenge for the college, then, is how to isolate those variables and determine which (if any) are affecting student behaviors and address them (within the purview of the college).

Table 3

Primary Goals for African American and White American, First-Time Students Attending VPJCC

Race	Certificate (%)	Associate Degree (%)	Transfer to a four-year Institution (%)
African American	29.6	72.4	53.5
White American	25.2	59.2	57.2

Table 3 shows that the majority of African American and White American, first-time students indicated that receiving an associate’s degree or transferring to a four-year institution was their primary reason for attending VPJCC. Note that the selections of these academic goals are not mutually exclusive; therefore, total group percentages are above 100%.

Obstacles to Attending

On the measure of obstacles to attending, African American, first-time students rated their perceptions of obstacles as more detrimental than White American, first-time students on 3 of 4 measures (caring for dependents, being academically unprepared, and lacking finances). In contrast, there was no significant difference between the two racial groups on the variable of working full-time.

On the measure of working full-time, African American, first-time ($Mdn = 2.00$) and White American, first-time ($Mdn = 2.00$) students believed that they were “somewhat likely” to withdraw from class or from the college if they were working full-time ($N = 562$, $U = 21231.0$, $p = .086$, $r = -.072$). The data analysis did not indicate a significant difference between the two groups. Thus, the need to work full-time appears to affect both groups, and developing strategies to increase support for full-time workers may be worthwhile for VPJCC.

On the measure of caring for dependents, African American, first-time students ($Mdn = 2.00$) indicated that caring for dependents was “somewhat likely” to cause their withdrawal from class or the college. White American, first-time students ($Mdn = 1.00$) indicated that caring for dependents was not likely to cause their withdrawal from class or college ($N = 560$, $U = 19201.0$, $p = .002$, $r = -.133$). The data analysis identified a significant statistical difference, but a small effect size between the two groups. It appears that caring for dependents may influence African American, first-time students’ attendance at VPJCC to a greater degree than White American, first-time students. VPJCC may need to consider how they can support all students, and especially African American, first-time students, who are caring for children or other dependents while attending college, as this may affect current as well as future student enrollment.

On the measure of feeling academically unprepared, African American, first-time students ($Mdn = 2.00$) indicated that it was “somewhat likely” that being academically unprepared would cause them to withdraw from class or the college. White American, first-time students ($Mdn = 1.00$) indicated that being academically unprepared was “not likely” to cause their withdrawal from class or the college ($N = 558$, $U = 19284.5$, $p = .004$, $r = -.121$). The data analysis identified a significant statistical difference, but a small effect size between the two groups. Thus, it appears that African American, first-time students’ perceptions of their academic preparedness may serve to influence their ability to complete course work and remain enrolled in a program of study. Therefore, VPJCC should consider developing or enhancing services or programs that serve to support academic growth and development.

On the measure of the lack of finances question, African American, first-time ($Mdn = 2.00$) and White American, first-time students ($Mdn = 2.00$) both indicated that they were somewhat likely to withdraw from class or from the college due to a lack of finances ($N = 560$, U

= 19400.5, $p = .005$, $r = -.118$). The data analysis identified a significant statistical difference, but a small effect size between the two groups.

Among African American, first-time student respondents ($n=103$), the responses indicated that for 28 of the students (27.5%), it was “not likely” that a lack of finances would cause their withdrawal from class or from the college, 25 (24.5%) indicated that it was “somewhat likely” that a lack of finances would cause their withdrawal from class or from the college, 17 (16.7%) indicated that it was “likely” that a lack of finances would cause their withdrawal from class or from the college, and 32 (31.4%) indicated that it was “very likely” that a lack of finances would cause their withdrawal from class or from the college. With respect to White American, first-time students ($n=460$), the responses indicated that for 178 students (38.9%) it was “not likely” that a lack of finances would cause their withdrawal from class or from the college, 121 (26.4%) indicated that it was “somewhat likely” that a lack of finances would cause their withdrawal from class or from the college, 68 (14.8%) indicated that it was “likely” that a lack of finances would cause their withdrawal from class or from the college, and 91 (19.8%) indicated that it was “very likely” that a lack of finances would cause their withdrawal from class or from the college (Table 4).

Table 4

Frequency Distribution for African American and White-American, First-Time Students on the Variable of Lacking Finances

		African American	White American	African American	White American
Valid Cases	Value	Frequency	Frequency	Valid Percent	Valid Percent
1	Never	28	178	27.5	38.9
2	Sometimes	25	121	24.5	26.4
3	Often	17	68	16.7	14.8
4	Very Often	32	91	31.4	19.8

As illustrated in Table 4, the ability to pay for a program of study appears to affect the enrollment of African American, first-time and White American, first-time students. To this end, the college may need to consider how they are communicating financial aid, grants, and scholarship opportunities to students who are interested in studying at the college.

As described earlier with respect to gender, with respect to obstacles that may serve to impede enrollment, the effect of caring for dependents may directly relate to the number of African American students who have children living in their home. In consideration of the tenets of critical race theory, the tenet of intercentricity addresses the need for agents of the college to recognize the students have many commitments with regards to time and resources, which may serve to place in them social categories that serve to marginalize them in some way. Educators should consider how these demands may serve to place students in positions where they are marginalized, because they may not be able to participate in activities at the same level as students who do not have the same responsibilities. Thus, they may not be able to take full advantage of their college experience in the same fashion as other students. In the case of VPJCC, the majority of other students are White American, first-time students.

Inferential Data Analysis

As an extension of the descriptive data analysis, inferential data analysis provides a tool to contrast the responses of the African American and White American, first-time students. It also provides a foundation for understanding how students with differing backgrounds perceive the college's emphasis on diversity and their engagement of faculty. In addition to these considerations, publicly available CCSSE data analysis for the 2013 VPJCC survey administration was integrated with the current research. The institution's applicable survey results were included to provide a broader institutional perspective. Some of the responses, from the current study, yielded the same median value between African American and White American, first-time students, yet the distributions of these responses yielded statistically significant results. In these instances, the effect size was small, Table 5 shows the frequency distribution of these student responses.

Students' Perceptions of How the College Prepares Them to Understand and Engage with People of Diverse Backgrounds

On the measure of students' perceptions of the college's emphasis on diversity, African American, first-time students rated the college's emphasis on diversity, and their own level of engagement with individuals from different races and ethnicity, as higher and more engaged than their White American, first-time counterparts on 2 of 3 measures—understanding people of other racial backgrounds and engaging in serious conversation with students of a different race or ethnicity other than their own. In contrast, there was no significant difference between the two racial groups on the variable of encouraging contact among different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds.

On the measure of encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds, African American, first-time students ($Mdn = 3.00$) indicated that the college emphasized contact “quite a bit.” White American, first-time students ($Mdn = 2.00$) indicated that the college emphasized contact “some” ($N = 555$, $U = 20515.0$, $p = .067$). The data analysis did not indicate statistically significant differences between the two groups.

Although VPJCC’s diversity initiative is to maintain an inclusive environment through the employment of a multicultural ideology, as discussed in the introduction (Chapter I), White American, first-time students may be lacking opportunities in which to engage the multicultural environment of the college. The lack of engagement opportunities could be occurring because this ideology does not explicitly include Whiteness in the conversation on culture (as discussed in Chapter II-Literature Review). In their analysis of all student respondents to this survey item, VPJCC reported that their average score on this variable was significantly lower (0.26 points) than their peer institution averages, 10% below that of their peer group/institutions’ averages (VPJCC, 2013a, 2013b).

On the measure of understanding people of other racial backgrounds, African American, first-time students ($Mdn = 3.00$) indicated that their experiences at the college helped them to understand people of a different background “quite a bit.” White American, first-time students ($Mdn = 2.00$) indicated that their experience at the college helped them “some” in understanding people of a different background ($N = 552$, $U = 15466.5$, $p = .000$, $r = -.228$). The data analysis identified a significant statistical difference, but a small-medium effect size between the two groups.

In their analysis of all student respondents to this survey item, VPJCC reported that 40% stated that their experience at the college had helped them to understand others from a different

background. However, the college's group average score is 8-9% below peer group averages (VPJCC, 2013c). This finding may indicate that White American, first-time students are not engaging with people of other races and ethnicities to the level VPJCC would prefer, which may suggest that the diversity of initiatives at VPJCC may be a cursory experience for some students. If supported, this finding may have implications with regard to the college's goal for students to be able to effectively communicate and compete in a global economic marketplace with individuals who are racial or ethnically different from themselves. In addition to this concern, there is inference to this question that the term 'people' refers to students. However, it could very well also refer to agents of the college such as faculty, administrators, and staff. From this perspective, the college may find it necessary to investigate the exploration of compositional diversity among faculty and staff, and how much interaction students have with those individuals.

On the measure of having a serious conversation with students of a different race or ethnicity other than their own, African American, first-time students ($Mdn = 3.00$) indicated that they had "often" had conversations with students of a race or ethnicity other than their own. White American, first-time students ($Mdn = 2.00$) indicated that they "sometimes" had conversations with students of a race or ethnicity other than their own ($N = 558$, $U = 20091.0$, $p = .019$, $r = -.099$). The data analysis identified a significant statistical difference, but a small effect size between the two groups.

The results on the last two measures are not surprising as, at the time of the CCSSE administration at VPJCC, among all students registered for credit-bearing courses, African American, first-time students comprised 18.8% of the student population while White American, first-time students comprised 62.0%. The population structure creates a circumstance in which

African American, first-time students have to engage White American students. Consequently, due to this composition of the student body, White American, first-time students may not have as many opportunities to interact with African American students. In contrast, African American students are likely to have to interact with students who are racially or ethnically different from themselves because they are in the minority. Additionally, it may be worthwhile for VPJCC to explore how their diversity initiatives are creating racial or ethnically inclusive environments and determine if those initiatives are simultaneously excluding groups of students; thereby, limiting diverse engagement among students. More importantly, it is important to ascertain if and how those inclusions or exclusions affect student behaviors as it relates to achieving their goals at VPJCC.

In the context of CRT's tenets of challenge to dominant ideology and the centrality of experiential knowledge, the data are clear that the colleges' efforts with respect to diversity, compared to their peer institutions, is not as effective as they may want it to be. It may be worthwhile for the college to analyze the effectiveness of their multicultural diversity initiatives, compared to their peer institutions that are performing at or above par on this measure. VPJCC can identify areas where the college may need to challenge their perceptions of a functional ideology that promotes inclusiveness, but may not necessarily subscribe to the current dominant ideologies of diversity.

Perhaps, more importantly, it may prove beneficial for the college to further explore the impact of Whiteness, as viewed through the lens of multiculturalism, on student perceptions as well as faculty perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. The analysis would be most appropriate regarding faculty's feelings on teaching students from racial or ethnic backgrounds that are different from their own. Essentially, the college may want to explore how multiculturalism is

presenting itself to students both in the classroom and out of the classroom as a valuable, and needed, addition to student learning. Additionally, the college may find it favorable to take steps to investigate the patterns of student and faculty engagement based on race to determine if it coincides with any institutional practices or services that students found to be racially or ethnically discriminatory or prejudicial.

Students' Perceptions of Their Engagement with Faculty

The results from the last research question investigated students' perceptions of their engagement with faculty, and revealed that African American, first-time students rated their perceptions of their engagement of faculty higher than their White American, first-time counterparts on 3 of 7 measures. Significant differences exist between African American and White American, first-time students on the following variables: asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions; discussed grades or assignments with an instructor; and discussed ideas from readings or classes with instructors outside of class. There were no significant differences between the African American, first-time and White American, first-time students on the variables: used e-mail to communicate with an instructor; talked about career plans with an instructor or advisor; worked with instructors on activities other than coursework; and the quality of their relationships with instructors at this college.

On the measure of asking questions in class or contributing to class discussions, African American, first-time ($Mdn = 3.00$) and White American, first-time students ($Mdn = 3.00$) indicated that they had "often" asked questions in class or contributed to in-class instruction ($N = 562$, $U = 20301.0$, $p = .024$, $r = -.095$). The data analysis identified a significant statistical difference, but a small effect size between the two groups.

As indicated in Table 5, among African American, first-time students (n=103), the survey indicated that 0 (0.0%) “never” asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions, 19 (18.6%) students indicated that they “sometimes” asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions, 47 (46.1%) indicated that they “often” asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions, and 36 (35.3%) indicated that they asked questions “very often” in class or contributing to class discussions. With respect to, White American, first-time students (n=460), the survey indicated that 8 (1.7%) “never” asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions, 143 (31.1%) students indicated that they “sometimes” asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions, 169 (36.7%) indicated that they “often” asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions, and 140 (30.4%) indicated that they asked questions “very often” in class or contributed to class discussions.

Table 5

Frequency Distribution for African American and White American, First-Time Students on the Variable of Asking Questions in Class or Contributing to Class Discussions

		African American	White American	African American	White American
Valid Cases	Value	Frequency	Frequency	Valid Percent	Valid Percent
1	Never	0	8	0	1.7
2	Sometimes	19	143	18.6	31.1
3	Often	47	169	46.1	36.7
4	Very Often	36	140	35.3	30.4

As shown in Table 5, asking questions in class or contributing to class discussions appears to be an activity in which African American, first-time and White American, first-time

students are engaged. Yet, given the data on African American, first-time student completion, as well as the academic achievement gap that exists between White American and African American students (Dare, 2013; Price, 2004), VPJCC may need to use other instruments (e.g., focus groups) to explore the quality of the students' contributions to in-class instruction and to establish whether students are learning from class participation. Specifically, the college may want to know if student contributions are reflective of their ability to analyze the assigned material or if student participation reflects a cursory understanding of the material. In either circumstance, understanding the content and context of in-class interactions may serve to help the college identify best practices with respect to student engagement, teaching, pedagogy, and learning, and provide effective professional development for faculty.

On the measure of discussing grades or assignments with an instructor, African American, first-time students ($Mdn = 3.00$) indicated that they “often” discuss their grades or assignments with an instructor. White American, first-time students ($Mdn = 2.00$) indicated that they “sometimes” discuss their grades or assignments with an instructor ($N = 561$, $U = 19766.0$, $p = .008$, $r = -.111$). The data analysis identified a significant statistical difference, but a small effect size between the two groups. VPJCC may find it helpful to explore when students engage with their instructors with respect to grades and what prompted the interaction.

On the measure of discussing ideas from readings or classes with instructors outside of class, African American, first-time ($Mdn = 2.00$) students indicated that they “sometimes” discuss ideas from their readings or classes with instructors outside of class. White American, first-time ($Mdn = 1.00$) students indicated that they “never” discuss ideas from their readings or classes with instructors outside of class ($N = 561$, $U = 20517.0$, $p = .035$, $r = -.089$). The data analysis identified a significant statistical difference, but a small effect size between the two

groups. In support of this finding, VPJCC reported that among all students who completed the 2013 CCSSE instrument, 50% of students reported that they “never” discussed ideas from readings or classes with instructors outside of class (VPJCC, 2015a). This may indicate that students might be using their time with their instructors outside of class to discuss grades, or to discuss the logistics of assignments with instructors. In addition to this possibility, it may be an indication that the students are not engaging with instructors outside of class, because they do not have time to do so or are simply not interested in doing so (because they do not recognize the utility in engaging in this behavior).

On the measure of using e-mail to communicate with an instructor, African American, first-time ($Mdn = 3.00$) and White American, first-time ($Mdn = 3.00$) students indicated that they often use email to communicate with their instructors ($N = 555$, $U = 21915.5$, $p = .464$). The data analysis did not indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Similarly, to conclusions regarding students’ in-class contributions, VPJCC may find it worthwhile to explore why students are communicating with their instructors via email. Given that both groups indicated that they have minimal communication outside of class with their instructors to discuss their ideas about readings assignments or class interactions, and yet they indicated that they email their instructors, it may be of interest to VPJCC to identify what students are communicating to their professors when they engage their instructors over email. It is possible that students are focusing their email discussion on grades and course requirements. The result of such an inquiry may assist the college in identifying student-faculty engagement patterns between academic and career programs and faculty status (full-time vs. part-time). For example, do students have more or less contact with faculty based on the status of the faculty member as full-time or part-time? Moreover, do students engage professors more or less during office

hours? Are there patterns to when (as in the time of day) students are emailing their professors (which may indicate the respective student's status as a full or part-time student)?

On the measure of talking about career plans with an instructor or advisor, African American, first-time ($Mdn = 2.00$) and White American, first-time ($Mdn = 2.00$) students indicated that they “sometimes” talk about career plans with an instructor or advisor ($N = 558$, $U = 21384.5$, $p = .265$). The data analysis did not indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Given that both groups indicated they “sometimes” talk about career plans with an instructor or advisor, VPJCC may find it helpful to assist these students in developing or cementing their career plans by using the previously established Academic Roadmap and firmly establishing a solid connection between the Departments of Academic Advising, Career Counseling, and Career Services to ensure that these services are integrated as core services within the college. In support of this finding, VPJCC reported that among all students who completed the 2013 CCSSE instrument, 39% reported never talking about their career plans with an instructor or advisor (VPJCC, 2015a).

On the measure of working with instructors on activities other than coursework, African American, first-time ($Mdn = 1.00$) and White American, first-time ($Mdn = 1.00$) students indicated that they “never” worked with instructors, during that school year on activities other than coursework ($N = 554$, $U = 22754.0$, $p = .674$). The data analysis did not indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Although African American, first-time and White American, first-time students appear to be engaging with faculty (even if minimally), they are not engaging with faculty on issues other than coursework. The college may want to consider whether engagement with faculty on issues other than coursework is important to the success of their students. If so, then they may need to meet with faculty to discern if this is

a reasonable expectation, given the college's large number of adjunct/part-time faculty, the non-residential nature of the college, and the number of students who maintain employment or are taking care of dependents. If not, then why do students think this is a counterproductive activity for them? All of these variables may influence the feasibility of students and faculty engaging in interactions that are not related to coursework. In support of this finding, VPJCC reported that among all students who completed the 2013 CCSSE instrument, 77% reported "never working" with instructors on activities other than coursework (VPJCC, 2015a).

On the measure of ranking the quality of their relationships with instructors, on a Likert scale of 1-7 where (1) is unavailable, unsupportive, sense of alienation and (7) is available, helpful, and sympathetic, the median score for White American, first-time students ($Mdn = 6.00$) was slightly higher than the median score for African American, first-time students ($Mdn = 5.00$), indicating that their instructors were more helpful, considerate, and flexible, than unavailable, unhelpful, and unsympathetic ($N = 556$, $U = 22611.0$, $p = .796$). The data analysis did not indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups. African American and White American, first-time students rated their relationships with instructors as being closer to helpful, considerate, and flexible; their responses on variables related to engagement indicated that they were not fully engaging their instructors in conversations not related to coursework or regarding their career and academic plans. It may be a worthwhile venture for the college to identify which variables students use to evaluate their instructors with respect to their ability to be helpful, considerate, and helpful to their students. In addition to these avenues of exploration, the college may want to explore what value students place on these factors with respect to their ability to complete the assigned coursework.

From a critical race perspective, this variable can be explored primarily from the perspective of the second and fourth tenets, challenge to dominant ideology and centrality of experiential knowledge. Essentially, these tenets challenge educators to acknowledge that students arrive to educational settings with a set of skills, which may not be reflective of the dominant pedagogy, but remains valuable to the students process of acquiring and applying knowledge and to welcome this “new” narrative as an important component to academic learning for all students. The data from VPJCC, however, is inconclusive as to whether students are able to employ their counter narratives in classes as it relates to the subject matter being taught or in any other collegiate venue. More pointedly, although African American students cited that they frequently ask questions in class and email their instructors, CCSSE data confirms that African American students overall report being more engaged than their White counterparts, but maintain the lowest academic outcomes, especially among African American men (CCCSE, 2014 VPJCC, 2013b); it would seem this finding may provide a sound reason for VPJCC to explore the context of student interactions with their instructors. Specifically, are students being engaged from a perspective that values their experiences and validates their knowledge? As discussed in Chapter II (Literature Review), if students do not feel validated in the classroom, they may not want to engage faculty in conversation that is not directly related to coursework. The challenge for institutions of higher education, especially those that employ multiculturalism or colorblind ideology as their method for interacting with diverse student populations, is ascertaining how or if students’ experiential knowledge or counter narratives, which may be different from what is commonly accepted in academia as a valued experience or knowledge, if accepted, are integrated into the college community, in the classroom or in another forum.

Summary of Data Analysis

The overall results of the current research study seem to support the findings presented by VPJCC. Furthermore, the results of the study also seem to indicate that African American, first-time students, generally, perceive their experiences at VPJCC to be more favorable than White American, first-time students. Median differences in African American and White American, first-time student responses indicated that their responses were typically within one point on a Likert-like scale.

The research questions indicated areas of similarity and difference for African American, first-time and White American, first-time students at VPJCC. Among African American, first-time students, the primary obstacles affecting their potential withdrawal from a class or the college are: being academically unprepared, caring for dependents, and a lack of finances. Working full-time presented similar obstacles for African American and White American, first-time students. African American, first-time students rated their overall interaction with students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds as slightly higher than their White American, first-time counterparts.

Furthermore, in their interaction with faculty, the data from the 2013 VPJCC CCSSE results seem to support the national CCSSE findings that African American students reported being more engaged with faculty than their White American students (CCCSE, 2014). Additionally, the data analysis (which is inclusive of all student respondents) reported by VPJCC (2015a) indicated that:

- In regard to talking about career plans, 39% of students reported never engaging an instructor or advisor regarding their career plans;

- In regard to discussing ideas from readings or classes with instructors outside of class, 50% of students reported never having this discussion; and
- In regard to working with instructors on outside activities other than work for the course, 77% of students reported having never worked with faculty on outside activities. (p. 1)

Approximately 70% of the students included in the VPJCC group analysis were categorized as either full-time traditional aged students (18-24) or part-time nontraditional aged students (students over the age of 25).

Overall, African American, first-time students rated their perceptions of their experiences as higher than or equal to White American, first-time students on several measures. To that end, as noted in the literature review and supported by the research for this study, African American, first-time students reported higher levels of collegiate engagement and diverse cross-racial interactions than their White counterparts. Where student responses indicated a median difference, the responses were not in direct opposition to each other (e.g., never vs. always or from low to high); rather, most responses were incrementally different—usually being within one point on Likert-like scales. Effect size was calculated for each variable where a significant statistical difference was identified. The calculations indicated small (0.1) effect sizes between the responses of African American, first-time students and White American, first-time students on the following variables:

- Caring for dependents;
- Academically unprepared;
- Lack of finances;
- Encouraging contact among different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds;

- Understanding people of other racial backgrounds;
- Asking questions in class or contributing to class discussions;
- Discussing grades or assignments with professors; and
- Discussing ideas from readings or classes with instructors outside of class.

The CCSSE instrument provided a systemic inquiry into the collegiate experience of VPJCC's students as it relates to their perceptions of the college's emphasis on preparing them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds and their engagement with faculty. The analysis of the variables under study identified institutional practices and processes which can be transformed to improve collegiate policy, practice, process, and service to students, which may serve to help them complete programs of study and attain their stated goal for attending VPJCC. Although the instrument did not explicitly link program incompleteness, degree conferral, and students' initial goals for attending the college with specific barriers, it did illuminate potential challenges to completion and cross-departmental engagement pathways. These pathways may serve to support academic, career, and social development for students who intend to transfer to a four-year college or institution or to complete a certificate or associate degree at VPJCC—the survey response data can be leveraged as a gateway to explore the possible relationship between faculty engagement, student race or ethnicity, diversity, program completion, and collegiate credential attainment. For example, in addition to the preceding recommendations, the researcher recommended to college leadership that, based on the descriptive statistical analysis of the sample student population, initiatives that address the needs of women and nontraditional students (as defined by student life circumstances, rather than biological age) may need to be considered.

Moreover, in support of using data from the current study to support college and campus initiatives and to increase the survey sample size to create a robust data pool, the college may consider how to administer the survey with a protocol that would serve to ensure that accurate campus (as well as college) level demographic data are collected. This would be in addition to surveying online or distance students who are beginning to comprise a growing (and significant) portion of the student population. This is an important step in strategic planning at the college-wide and campus-specific levels. These data will provide a clear illustration of students' perceptions, experiences, and behaviors that can be used to identify effective (and ineffective) practices and process used to employ and maintain initiatives. To this end, additional recommendations are being put forth in the proceeding section and in Chapter V-Design for Action.

Recommendations

The primary focus of the current study was to explore student perceptions of diversity and faculty-student engagement on-campus, and from the resulting data analysis, develop a set of recommendations to transform how VPJCC serves its students—especially African American, first-time students. An analysis of the variables under study yielded significant information about students' perceptions of institutional practices and how it informs collegiate process and service. Although only one recommendation was selected to be the design for action—faculty-student engagement—the current study identified three areas of potential collegiate improvement: (a) analyzing and employing the use of data; (b) engaging inclusive racial and ethnic diversity; and (c) faculty-student engagement.

Recommendation 1: Analyzing and Employing the Use of Data

As the core of this research is centered on student responses to institutional practice, it is imperative that lasting change reflects how well administrators collect and understand the data being used to support the development, employment, and assessment of collegiate initiatives (the process). This is a goal of Achieving the Dream (as discussed in Chapter II-Literature Review) initiative. Yet, the culture of collecting, analyzing, and using data to institute and support change appears have excluded mid-level administrators. These administrators more often than not spend more time interacting with students than senior-level administrators. Therefore, this research supports a design for training administrators and faculty on how to extract and interpret data to plan and support effective departmental initiatives. Central to that change in practice is training on how to develop effective departmental program evaluations (quantitative and qualitative) and how to analyze data from current surveys, which may serve to decrease their dependency on anecdotal evidence and to increase data-driven decision making. This is a crucial point because groups are not monolithic; thus, for the college or a department to have a full understanding of their services, as experienced by students, more than one evaluative measure should be used.

The CCSSE instrument, with its focus on student engagement, asks students a battery of questions which are designed to provide insight into students' perceptions of their collegiate experience, and their behavior as it relates to their experience. Of particular importance to this study were students' perceptions of how the college prepares students to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds and their perceptions of their engagement with faculty. Further study is required to explore direct effects of the aforementioned variables on the program completion and collegiate credential attainment rates.

VPJCC employed the use of the CCSSE as part of the college's mission to use data to transform and support practice, process, and service to students. The college may find it worthwhile to cross reference the non-returning student survey designed by VPJCC with the CCSSE instrument results to develop a better understanding of student experiences at the college. This could create a triangulation of data that may serve to create a full and complete picture of the student experience at VPJCC—particularly if the research is followed up by focus groups. It may also prove beneficial to provide campus and center-level context to students' collegiate experiences, and to disaggregate collected data by campus. As a result, this initiative may help campuses to develop policies, practices, process, and services that reflect the needs of the students and the communities they serve. The recommendation is that the college triangulates data from a number of sources (survey, focus group, evaluation, etc.) and mines the data to identify patterns and trends in the students' academic major or certificate/associate degree declaration. For example, a potential model may be developed by using the system for online registration to prompt students to answer a question about academic programs and degree intent before the registration system processes the student's schedule for a given semester. Students will have to answer the questions during every term for which they would like to register for courses. The data extracted from this system may serve a number of purposes; among them would be the ability to monitor program enrollment and course outcomes (grades), and providing agents of the college with in-depth information, which can be used to guide conversations with students with respect to their academic and professional intentions. This process could be on a voluntary basis that avoids issues with confidentiality of student records.

The CCSSE instrument has provided a body of data that has itself spawned a variety of interventions (e.g., a student pocket guide to collegiate services, participation in the Democracy

project, a civic engagement venture) that are designed to improve student engagement in and out of the classroom environment. According to agents of the college, among the most promising new intervention is the Academic Roadmap. The Academic Roadmap was developed by a college-wide interdisciplinary team of faculty, staff, and administrators; it was introduced to the college community in the academic year 2013-2014. This intervention is promising because it provides a specific guideline for students and college agents, who work with students, to move them seamlessly through the academic process by noting specific activities and departments that the students should engage at each credit level in order to ensure that they graduate within their specified time frame (with a post-community college academic or career plan). Essentially, the Academic Roadmap guides students from admission to graduation and beyond. One limitation of the roadmap, however, is that it does not clearly address the needs of part-time students or nontraditional students. Furthermore, the roadmap does not coach students on how to engage faculty, staff, and administrators, which, anecdotally, seem to be an issue among students.

Recommendation 2: Engaging Inclusive Racial and Ethnic Diversity

The CCSSE instrument asks students to respond to questions about diversity in consideration of the fact that racial and ethnic diversity (as well as other forms of diversity), and student perceptions of and responses to that diversity, may influence the student's level of engagement in the college. In the analysis of the diversity variables under study, the data indicated that African American, first-time students found that the college does place an emphasis on diversity and that their experiences at the college help them to understand people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. This result is not surprising because African American, first-time students also noted that they had frequently had conversations with people who are of a different race or nationality. The spring 2013 student enrollment at VPJCC reflected

a student population comprised primarily of White American students (est. 62.0% in spring 2013); African American students comprised an estimated 18.8%. According to the results of the CCSSE analysis complete for this study, White American, first-time students reported that the college places “some” emphasis on diversity, and that they “sometimes” had a serious conversation about race with an individual from a different race or ethnicity other than their own, and that their experiences at the college have helped them “some” in understanding individuals from different backgrounds.

It would appear that the college’s emphasis on and employment of diversity initiatives may have only a cursory impact, or that the CCSSE instrument is not the most effective instrument for measuring student engagement through this lens. According to Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998), “the absence of interracial contact clearly influences students’ views toward others, support for campus initiatives, and educational outcomes” (p. 292); thus, the college may find it worthwhile to interview White American, first-time students to find out why they are not engaging with students of races and ethnicities that may be different from their own. Perhaps more intriguing is how White American, first-time students understand the term ‘diversity’. As indicated by the results put forth in this study, they have some interaction with other students, and these interactions have helped them to understand students of other races and ethnicities. It would behoove the college, in support of measuring the effects of their diversity initiatives on the student population, to understand the content and context of the cross-racial and cross-ethnic interactions in which students are engaging. For example, are students engaging each other outside of class or as part of the natural course of participating in class? What prompts this interaction?

Moreover, African American, first-time students attending predominately White institutions (PWI) are often placed in situations in which they have to fight stereotypes, which may cause higher levels of stress. If African American, first-time students feel that they have to assimilate (“playing the game”) into the predominate racial or ethnic culture of the college (Weis, 1985), or develop a double-consciousness (DuBois, 1903/2013) to be successful in college, it may explain why they rated the college’s emphasis on diversity higher than White American, first-time students. They may not want to be part of race-baiting or playing the “race card” by calling to the fore events they perceive as creating a negative racial climate on campus. Considering this perspective, a possible explanation of the responses to the diversity questions is that African American, first-time students may not have experienced a directly racist incident, and they may be under the assumption that such incidents of racism and prejudice are not occurring in classrooms and on-campus. For example, a professor may ask a student to share the “Black or African American” point of view on a topic. The student, in turn, may respond to the request, not realizing that what is actually occurring may be a racist event—a racial microaggression. Similarly, White American students may witness this exchange and not question the interaction because, again, if students are not witnessing an explicitly racist event, they may not realize that such is occurring. Keeping in mind that CRT asserts that the regularity of race and racism makes it normal; thereby, hiding all but the most egregious forms of racial and ethnic bias and discrimination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). As a result, subtle acts of discrimination and prejudice may go unnoticed, or noticed, but not addressed. In either circumstance, the act, of discrimination and bias, may still affect students.

It is not clear, however, if White American, first-time students’ lower ratings of the college’s emphasis on diversity, or their personal cross-racial interactions, are an indicator of

their perceptions of racial tension. In fact, according to Hurtado (1992), White students' perceptions of the college's "commitment to diversity does not significantly affect their perceptions of racial tension" (p. 558). Hurtado's observation seems to infer that minority students' perceptions of the college's commitment to diversity are significantly affected by their perceptions of racial tension on campus. As stated earlier, these perceptions are slowly becoming difficult to identify as postsecondary institutions move toward colorblind ideology or multiculturalism (Lewis et al., 2000; Patterson et al., 2008).

On the surface, it appears that the college's diversity initiatives are working in terms of providing racially and ethnically inclusive environments for African American, first-time students, and perhaps other racial minorities, at VPJCC. In considering the response of all student respondents on the 2013 CCSSE instrument, however, the institution reported that, with respect to their emphasis on encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds, the college was 10% below that of their peer group/institutions' averages (VPJCC, 2013a). In addition to this point, on the question exploring whether students' experiences at VPJCC contributed to their understanding of people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, the college was 8-9% below the averages for their peer group/institutions (VPJCC, 2013a). Given that White American, first-time students do not appear to engage or find encouragement to engage individuals who are different from themselves, this response may indicate that the college has to reconsider how it defines multiculturalism and inclusiveness.

The college may find it useful to explore how it can provide a plethora of in-class opportunities and out of class exercises (e.g., forming student volunteer or leadership groups that work in communities which reflect a different race or ethnicity other than the student performing

the service) as current opportunities for students to discuss race or ethnicity in a public or open forum is limited. Essentially, the results seem to infer that White American, first-time students at VPJCC may not feel that the college is encouraging a thorough awareness and understanding of race and ethnicity. As a result, VPJCC may consider how its diversity initiatives engage, encourage, and maintain in-depth understanding of all racial and ethnic groups.

Recommendation 3: Faculty-Student Engagement

CCSSE asks students to indicate how frequently they ask questions in class or contribute to class discussions, and about how many times they use email to contact a professor, as one way of gauging student faculty engagement. The survey, however, does not extract how many students voluntarily engage in these behaviors or how many engage in these behaviors because it is a requirement of the given course. The instrument also asks students to rate the quality of their relationship with their instructors. Although the majority of the students rated their relationship as close to helpful, considerate, and flexible, their responses on other questions indicated that they are not engaging their instructors to work on projects or assignments outside of class, or to discuss career plans. However, if students are working and attending college simultaneously, they may not have time to meet with instructors outside of class to work on an assignment that they may deem unessential to their success in the course. It does not, however, preclude students from discussing career plans with their instructor in or out of class (via email) where opportunities for professional and academic-leadership mentoring may arise. It is worth noting that student expectations may be an area that the institution may want to investigate further. More pointedly, the college may find it worthwhile to identify student expectations of the college (generally) and faculty (specifically). As Arum & Roksa (2011) and Astin (1993) noted, formal and informal interactions between students and faculty appear to influence students' levels of

self-efficacy, persistence, and motivation, which may serve to improve student retention.

Furthermore, Tinto (1993) explained that faculty-student interaction or contact, both in and out of the classroom “serves to directly shape learning and persistence” (p. 133).

Moreover, research on faculty-student engagement indicates that face-to-face orientations or semi-social activities with faculty, and perhaps other agents of the college, early in the student’s collegiate career, tend to have positive effects on all students—especially African American, first-time students—because students use the tools introduced in those orientations to help them engage collegiate resources when they need support (Chang, 2005). In an extension of the argument put forth by Chang (2005), Guiffrida (2005) observed that student-faculty engagement, for African American, first-time students, is more than meeting with an instructor; rather, it involves a higher degree of intimacy, which may lead to a mentoring-type relationship between the student and the professor. The current data regarding student behavior and faculty engagement provides the college with an opportunity to explore how to engage faculty and students in conversation about how to connect collegiate experiences with their post-graduate outcomes. The data also provides the college with an opportunity to integrate academic advising, career counseling, and planning. The integration of these services may prove to be significant for VPJCC, given that the majority of first-time students sampled indicated that they are interested in earning an associate degree or transferring to a four-year institution.

Specifically, the college may want to consider how it can effectively engage other agents of the college (e.g., career services, academic advising) to assist faculty members in their engagement of students around issues of career development and academic sustainability; similarly, the same team may consider how to teach students to build relationships with their faculty, as students begin their postsecondary academic careers at the college. Possible options

may include developing an orientation curriculum that can be measured with respect to effectiveness and weaving in concepts introduced in orientations through Student Development Studies (SDS) courses. SDS courses, which are also referred to by the college as student success courses, provide an opportunity for students to interact with a faculty instructor in a small, student-focused environment and begin to address non-academic issues which may otherwise serve to impede their collegiate success.

Currently, VPJCC offers four SDS courses; however, only one course, Academic and Personal Development, is offered via multiple sections every term on each campus and at each center. The primary goal of this course is to provide students with the psychobehavioral skills (self-esteem, coping skills, and self-awareness) necessary to manage the psychological and behavioral challenges that can serve as a barrier to students' successful transitions into college. Specifically, according to the institution's most recent course syllabus, this course was designed to improve students' self-efficacy as it relates to personal and academic growth and achievement. The course goals are achieved by raising students' levels of self-awareness and intrapersonal communication skills. The course also aids students in identifying what academic and personal needs they may have, and connecting them with campus resources. According to VPJCC (VPJCC, 2015b), students who enrolled in the course during the fall 2014 term, and completed the SDS [REDACTED] course, were more likely to have higher QPA's at the end of the term and were more likely to enroll in courses for the proceeding spring term. "African American students [who enrolled in the SDS course] were less successful than students who did not enroll in the SDS [REDACTED] course" (VPJCC, 2015b, p. 5). Cho & Mechur Karp (2013) observed a similar finding in their research, noting that for African American students, courses designed for students' success did not increase their earning of credits (including credits for

developmental courses and non-developmental courses) within their first year of college or re-enrollment in a second year of college, as it did with other groups. In the context of VPJCC and their retention and completion concerns regarding African American, first-time students, the college may want to explore why a seemingly innocuous class presents an obstacle for African American students. One possibility is that this course is not designed as a first year experience.

Although the current course is designed to address academic and personal development, it appears to primarily focus on assisting students in developing skills to manage the psychological components of transitioning to college; this could be considered a deficit model. Thus, African American students may not be responding because the course model is reinforcing psychosocial constructs which have been used to stereotype African American students—especially their behavior—as deviant which in turn may serve to maintain dominant ideologies that uphold the subordination and marginalization of groups (Delpit, 1998; King, 1991; Delpit, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b; Patterson et al, 2008; Yosso, 2005). At VPJCC, the First Year Experience (FYE) course focuses on academic and career planning, cultural awareness, and diverse needs of the workforce, career-decision making, and self-advocacy skills. It is possible that African American, first-time students, may find that this course may provide a better transition to college, as it does not assume that students are missing psychobehavioral and psychosocial skills. The course curriculum is focused on the process of how to access collegiate resources and use their collegiate experiences to build leadership and networking skills in order to move forward in their academic and professional career, which directly addresses their reason for attending the college; this goal, as noted in the data analysis, is the attainment of an associate's degree or certificate. Thus, college administrators may also want to consider and

perhaps begin offering students a choice of enrolling in the Academic and Personal Development or the First Year Experience (FYE) course.

As stated earlier, VPJCC has developed a number of focused student development-type courses (e.g., Career Planning, Leadership, Job Search) as stand-alone courses; however, to date, only the general student academic and personal development (SDS) course has remained consistently active and open to all students. Leadership courses are only open to students who are enrolled in Honors courses. The principles that are covered in the leadership course, and the skills developed through working with these resources, are so valuable that all students could benefit from an opportunity to participate. Furthermore, the added component of service learning assists students in being able to apply what they have learned to “real” world situations.

According to Karp et al. (2012), FYE courses that focus on how in-class learning can be applied may improve long-term effects of FYE courses as they present students with a pathway to immediately apply knowledge and skill sets to another context. This may not be occurring in the context of VPJCC because the academic and personal development course is not necessarily designed to accomplish this goal. As a whole, this concept, although not explicitly noted as such, seems to incorporate the tenets of the adult learning theory (androgogy) proposed by Knowles (1990). An example of the effectiveness of this learning system can be found in the Statway and Quantway project headed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Silva & White, 2013). In using the tenets of adult learning theory, the researchers found that making information applicable to the students within the context of their lives is worthwhile, and they hence remain enrolled in college. It should be noted that the student development course is offered as an elective for students who are interested in the course content, but is not required. A limitation of VPJCC SDS courses, however, is that they are offered at one credit. Moreover, the

course may not transfer to a four-year institution, but students are still required to enroll in the class and pay for the credit. For students who have financial constraints, paying for a one credit course that may not transfer to another institution may appear to be a waste of financial resources. Given the Obama Administration's 2009 American Graduate Initiative, as well as President Obama's proposal for free community college (White House, 2009; White House, 2015), it may prove feasible for the college to offer FYE or student development courses free of cost to students.

In my professional experience, as a former instructor and a developer of freshmen seminars and like-styled courses, I have found that many students do not register for these types of courses because they feel that they understand the process of college and do not need such assistance, or they believe that the course is a form of remediation. If designed and implemented correctly, though, the course could be used to provide supplemental assistance as mentioned earlier, and assist students in understanding how their current academic education connects to their post-graduate outcomes. Enrolled students would also be building a number of skills and competencies (e.g., critical thinking, communication, essential leadership skills) that are necessary to being a successful college student. In my experience designing and teaching first-year experience courses, courses that have a specific focus appear to have better completion outcomes, because the outcomes of the course are tangible.

Regardless of the focus of the course, student development classes—with orientations as a gateway—may act as a bridge for students to identify and solidify their academic and career goals, providing opportunities to be introduced to and engage in dialogues around issues of diversity (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, religious, sexual orientation, etc.). These dialogues, which can occur among students, students and faculty, as well as other groups on campus, also provides

an opportunity to understand how race and racism may intersect with other forms of social and cultural factors that serve to marginalize students and potentially affect their efforts to attain a credential from the college. Moreover, the dialogues invite students to challenge commonly accepted ethos, which may be maintained by the agents of the college, by sharing their experiential knowledge about the topics under discussion.

As a result of the course, students will be given the tools be able to effectively navigate the college process because they have been taught not only why they should perform specific activities and seek out specific departments, but also how to apply what has been taught in class to “real” world situations. Additionally, they gain an understanding of how to engage people who are from a different racial or ethnic group than themselves because they now have tools to facilitate those conversations; they gain the ability to discuss difference and how that difference(s) may serve to impact their experiences and behaviors. Understanding how to engage individuals from backgrounds that are different from ourselves is necessary for teaching students how to network, as the foundation for networking is engagement and the foundation for engagement is understanding people and diverse perspectives. Networking is an important tool for students—particularly African American and other students of color—because by networking with faculty (and other agents of the college), many students find an academic mentor or professional who can assist them through their academic and professional careers. In building these relationships, students may remain enrolled in college because they have a solidified academic plan, set career goals, and built a support network comprised of faculty, administrators, college staff, as well as other students. Subsequently, these activities will help to support students as they move through the collegiate pipeline. The depth of the relationships is where the value is added, not merely through a list of departments and guest speakers.

In the fall of 2015, VPJCC plans to offer a leadership course for students who are enrolled in the Men of Merit Initiative—MMI. Although any student may enroll in MMI, the program is designed to increase the retention and academic success of African American male students. The re-designed leadership course will reflect leadership skills needed to be academically engaged in the collegiate experience and professionally successful. As a result of the current research study, the researcher is engaged in supporting the development of course curriculum for the MMI course. Specifically, the researcher will provide curriculum support related to developing relationships between faculty and students. The researcher will design a “curriculum” for career services to be used during orientations. The primary goal of the curriculum is to assist students in establishing a connection between achieving their academic and professional goals through conscious engagement of faculty and to demonstrate to students how to use the Academic Roadmap in engaging collegiate programs and services. A similar presentation will be developed to help faculty understand how Career Services can help them to begin a conversation with their students that addresses the connection between engagement, academic success, and achieving career goals.

Moving Forward with a Design for Action

As stated earlier, the current study identified three areas of potential collegiate improvement: (a) analyzing and employing the use of data; (b) engaging inclusive racial and ethnic diversity; and (c) faculty-student engagement. Given the researcher's identity as a scholar-practitioner in the area of student affairs, and a former community college student, the proposed design for action integrates services provided through the Office of Career Services with the college's goal of increasing faculty-student engagement. Moreover, the proposed design for action (which is discussed in-depth in Chapter V-Design for Action and Chapter VI-Generative Impacts) was selected because it provides an opportunity for the institution to build cycles of improvement in a department that has been charged with assisting students in connecting their selected program of study with career outcomes. As the data analysis indicated, the vast majority of African American, first-time students enrolling in VPJCC noted that attainment of an associate's degree (72.4%) was their primary goal/reason for attending the institution; for White American, first-time students, 59.2% reported attending the college to obtain an associate's degree. Given these data, the design for action offers faculty, staff, and students numerous opportunities to engage each other on a frequent basis.

CHAPTER V-Design for Action

As indicated by the statistical analysis (see Chapter IV-Data Analysis and Recommendations), the vast majority of African American, first-time students enrolled in VPJCC plan to attain an associate's degree (72.4%) or to transfer to a four-year institution (53.5%). The percentages are somewhat similar for White American, first-time students—59.2% reported attending the college to obtain an associate's degree and 57.2% reported that transferring to a four-year institution was their goal for attending. These data on students' goals for attending VPJCC, combined with my experience as an adjunct instructor, career counselor, and academic advisor, leads me to conclude that the primary goal of first-time students is to attain a degree (or transfer to a four-year institution) for the specific purpose of securing higher-yield employment. Although I have encountered students who chose to pursue an associate degree or a four-year degree solely for the purpose of self-improvement; these cases are atypical.

The analysis of the CCSSE instrument indicated that students are not discussing their career plans with instructors. Given the academic goals, and the communication patterns of VPJCC students with their faculty (Chapter IV-Data Analysis and Recommendations), it is imperative that students be given the tools to engage faculty around career issues. Therefore, the primary goal for the design for action outlined in this chapter is to provide faculty and students with the tools to engage each other around how to connect academic experiences with career aspirations, which enhances the services and support students receive from the college. The Office of Career Services, whose core mission is to help students build pathways between college and career, will use the VPJCC Model of Academic and Career Engagement to teach students how to engage faculty with regard to career topics and teaching faculty how to facilitate such a conversation with their students. The model will provide students with the tools to

identify their academic and career goals, build academic and professional networks and how to connect the aforementioned factors to academic outcomes and professional goals. The under current in this model is teaching students leadership through intentional engagement. Moreover, the CS office will use the model as a foundation for designing engagement-focused presentations to students during new student orientation, new and returning faculty, faculty orientations, departmental meetings, and CS presentations in student development courses. In doing so, this model will intentionally engage the college's Academic Roadmap. The Academic Roadmap is included in this process because it intentionally connects students, faculty, staff, and administrators. The Academic Roadmap is an established college-wide process upon which the proposed model can build capacity. Furthermore, in connecting the model and the Academic Roadmap, the design for action becomes open to cross-departmental collaborations. In addition to using the model as a complement to the Academic Roadmap, it may lead to additional generative impacts serving to inform collegiate practice and process in regard to student engagement and student success initiatives.

Engaging Faculty and Students in Career Conversations

To bridge the gap in student-faculty engagement, Career Services (CS) will take a two-tiered approach. First, CS staff will participate in new faculty and department meetings that take place at the beginning of the academic year. The goal of the CS presentations to faculty will be to help them engage with students about their career goals and how the current coursework can help them to reach their goals. Additionally, this will assist CS in establishing a relationship with faculty that will aid in the development of joint collaborations between academic and student affairs departments. Second, because discussing their academic and career interests with faculty provides students with an opportunity to identify and solidify their academic and professional

goals, these discussions may serve to help them complete their degrees. The CS goal for new student orientation, and subsequent presentations for SDS courses, is to teach students how to identify and communicate their academic and professional interests with their faculty. It is important to note that faculty, many of whom are adjuncts, may not have the time to discuss these topics in class, and may not have an office in which to meet with students one-on-one. Thus, it is not necessarily a question of the faculty not caring or the students not asking. The phenomenon may be better described as faculty lacking the resources to engage in such meetings with students. Moreover, many faculty may not be interested in or comfortable with discussing academic and career options with students. Given that the Department of Career Services at VPJCC is primarily responsible for providing career coaching to students, developing career support and guidance workshops and introducing students to a variety of career pathways associated with the academic and professional majors offered by the college, faculty members often elect to refer students to an academic advisor or to career services to discuss their career questions or concerns.

According to Chang (2005), in-person orientations play a key role in assisting students—especially African American students—in engaging with the college, as well as building relationship with faculty members. The researcher maintained that a possible explanation for this level of increased engagement may be a result of African Americans students getting support and encouragement during orientation sessions to use campus resources. To this end, engagement of faculty may serve as an imperative component to faculty-student engagement in that they may serve as academic or professional mentors. Moreover, when faculty members undertake a role as a mentor early in a student's career, either officially or unofficially, they may provide students with the motivation and support they need to complete their programs of study. This is even

more important given that many first-year students do not have a clear idea of what they are interested in studying. Furthermore, this interaction gives students the opportunity to share their academic and professional needs and concerns, as well as obstacles to achieving those goals with their professors. The interaction also gives students the opportunity to challenge any preconceived notions about their abilities (or lack thereof), motivations for attending college, and willingness to complete a program of study by having a forum in which to share their experiences. For example, the results from the current study indicated that among African-American, first-time students, caring for dependents, academically unprepared, and lack of finances would impact their ability to attend the college. Given these data, if faculty develop an understanding of how the college is affecting students from the students' perspective, cross-departmental collaborations and professional communities could be developed to implement changes within the collegiate system.

**Design for Action: On-Campus New Student Orientation and Student Development Studies
(SDS) Courses**

At VPJCC, very few opportunities exist in which large groups of students assemble at a specific time, other than new student orientation, scheduled instruction time, and commencement. Although recognizing that some students are uncertain of their academic and career goals when they begin their academic careers at VPJCC, it behooves the college to provide first-time students with an introduction to services and other tools they can use to begin focusing their academic and career aspirations. This plan should include a systemic follow-up process. In accordance with VPJCC's current academic and student development initiatives, it may be worthwhile for the college to consider providing first-time students with career and academic assistance during new student orientation. This introduction could be followed up with

in-depth seminars designed to assist students who are registered in the student academic and personal development course. This is especially important given that one of the primary responsibilities of the Career Services department is to assist students and faculty in connecting academic majors and experiences with academic outcomes and potential career options.

In my professional experience, students who register for SDS courses have very few ideas about how their studies in college connect to their career goals, or how to make those connections. Furthermore, the syllabus for this course is designed to improve student experiences by providing common sources of support. Specifically, the topics covered in the course are focused primarily on teaching students productive and appropriate collegiate behavior as well as connecting them to collegiate resources provided by the college. In fact, the course dedicates one unit to career development. Thus, SDS courses provide a meaningful and logical vehicle through which to assist first-time students. From one perspective, a primary challenge to student-faculty engagement behavior is that faculty may not be aware that students do not possess the skill set necessary to articulate their academic interest, career paths, or degree options to faculty members. From another perspective, students may also not realize that asking these questions of faculty is commonplace and appropriate collegiate behavior. In a faculty-student engagement context, the goal for CS is to bridge this gap in communication.

The Current Design of On-Campus New Student Orientation at VPJCC

New student orientation at VPJCC are organized by, and in some instances facilitated by, the Department of Student Life on each campus. The implementation process at VPJCC appears to be different on each campus and orientations vary in length and content. Generally, the orientations are designed to provide students with basic registration information needed to access grades and course information, process student identification cards and parking passes, and

provide information on services available to students with disabilities, as well as campus safety and security protocols. Additionally, on some campuses, information is provided to students regarding where and how to purchase books, the use of ISBN numbers, availability of cell phone signals in the buildings, and how to register for the Career Services' online employment and career support database. However, there does not appear to be a college-wide format for on-campus orientations. For example, some campuses use PowerPoint presentations to connect and familiarize students with college services while others ask department heads to present information about their individual departments.

Students are asked to pre-register for on-campus orientation; however, they may register onsite on the day of orientation if they have completed the online orientation. This flexibility makes regulating the number of students and how much time is allocated to employ the aforementioned activities challenging. For example, some campuses may orient an estimated 60-70 students (between 4-5 sessions) in the fall and 40-50 students (between 2-3 orientation sessions) in the spring. Other campuses may orient more students, or offer more sessions each semester.

Past NSOs, at some campuses, used symposium-style formats in which students and their families met with a student services department for which they wanted additional information. Orientations that employed this format, although providing more opportunities for in-depth engagement with agents of the college, also increased the time required to move all students through the orientation process. Shorter orientation programs are employed on some campuses, in a response to student-orientation evaluations where students expressed that the longer orientations provided too much information and served to overwhelm them, rather than help them to make connections with the college services. As a result of this reaction, students

requested a shorter orientation focused on just what they needed to get started. With VPJCC's recent addition of the Academic Roadmap, orientation facilitators and SDS instructors are encouraged to introduce the roadmap to students. Given the short period of time allotted for presenters (an estimated 10-15 minutes), it is unclear if introducing the Academic Roadmap to students in this venue will be effective. It does raise a question, however, about the purpose and goals of new student orientation at VPJCC, and how they can be used as a foundation on which to help students build stronger faculty-student engagement behaviors.

Design for Action: Engaging Students in New Student Orientation and Student Development Studies (SDS) Courses

The researcher proposes a design for action in which new student orientations develop a specific mission with student engagement as its primary goal. In doing so, this plan extends the orientation process to SDS courses. Orientation would be defined as the initial process by which students begin to establish engagement with the college, through its administrators, faculty, and staff.

The proposed design is supported by recommendation number 3—faculty-student engagement (see Chapter IV-Data Analysis and Recommendations). The initial design for action intentionally engages CS to help students begin connecting to faculty and the college through the introduction and usage of the Academic Roadmap for students in NSO sessions and SDS courses. Initially, however, the SDS curriculum will be tested in the Men of Merit designated section of SDS (as discussed in Chapter IV-Data Analysis and Recommendations), which will be facilitated on the college's largest campus. The college's largest campus was selected to pilot this course because it houses the largest number of MMI registrants; a multi-campus team of administrators and faculty have been involved in the curriculum development for this course.

Due to the leadership focus of the MMI course, the CS presentation will be tailored to discuss the connection between leadership and engagement and pathways to gain greater leadership skills. Furthermore, students who have successfully completed the course will be asked to use their leadership skills and present to incoming first-time students, and students beginning their second year of college at VPJCC. The topic of the presentations will be their experiences at the college and the types of interactions that were the most effective in helping them to complete their programs of study. These presentations will be facilitated by CS staff and be inclusive of a week of engagement events. The CS staff engagement is designed to support students in building the engagement and leadership skills needed to be successful in completing a program of study, locating professional opportunities, and maintaining a career.

Design for Action: Piloting a New Model for Engagement

The Office of Career Services is being selected to deploy and test this change because this office is the unit on campus that is charged with assisting students in connecting their in-class learning to career outcomes. Additionally, this unit has experience coaching students on how to build connections with faculty and other professionals to develop an academic and professional network. Therefore, the design for action proposes that the smallest campus be used as the pilot site to deploy the new approach to the career services component of new student orientation. The goal is to establish an initial awareness of CS and how the office can help students and engage services and agents of the college.

The new design is a layered two-pronged approach: (a) a member of the career services staff will offer a presentation highlighting their services and CS's relationship to helping students reach positive collegiate outcomes and (b) CS will develop a curriculum to present to students in SDS classes during each student's first year in college. It should be noted that, although the pilot

curriculum will be introduced in SDS classes, if an instructor of a non-SDS course is interested in having the material presented to their class, CS would accommodate that request since information is beneficial to all students. At the core of both presentations is the goal of teaching students why and how to connect academic goals to professional outcomes through the engagement of faculty and other agents of the college.

The current career services presentations to SDS classes at the pilot campus are approximately 10-15 minutes in length and are generally focused on providing students with an overview of the services provided by the office and registering them for the online employment and career support database. At times, this process is problematic because students are often not able or ready to complete the registration process. Many students do not know what their major will be or how long it will take them to complete a collegiate credential, and this information is necessary to complete the registration process. The proposed presentation for student orientations will address services provided by CS and how the office can help students achieve their academic and career goals. The in-class presentations may be 50 minutes in length and integrates the tenets of the Academic Roadmap (e.g., how to build career networks, locating an academic or a professional mentor, etc.). As observed in the analysis, African American, first-time students are engaging with faculty during class and via email; however, contact with faculty outside of the formal class environment are minimal. Through the use of CCSSE, the VPJCC has established that all forms of faculty-student engagement are important to moving students through the academic pipeline.

The CS curriculum SDS courses and orientations will be re-designed to reflect student and faculty engagement needs as identified in the current analysis of African American and White American, first-time students' perceptions of the college's emphasis on preparing them to

understand and engage people from diverse backgrounds and their interaction with faculty. In consideration of the tenets of CRT, the model (see Appendix B), which is based on the results of this research study, is designed to help students and faculty make connections between engagement and post-program completion outcomes. Specifically, in the use of centrality of experiential knowledge, the model provides a pathway to eliciting, and at times, challenging students' narratives about college, their ability to complete a program of study, and the value of their collegiate experience compared to their identified career goal. This model, with respect to CRT, challenges agents of the college—specifically faculty—to identify collegiate policies, practices, and processes that might serve to promote biases that affect student program completion and the attainment of a collegiate credential. Moreover, it may also affect the degree to which students feel comfortable with their professors to engage faculty in informal discussions about personal issues (e.g., career aspirations).

Building Capacity

The CS office at the pilot campus has been able to build capacity and create effective long standing college-wide changes in two areas: department outreach to students and job search support services. These changes were accomplished through registering students for the college-wide employment and career support database. The college has employed the database since 1998 and student registration is voluntary. Initially, the college did not have the means for the CS department to engage students via email distribution lists. Moreover, Career Services was not a partner in new student orientations, although the services provided by this office are integral to students' (inferred) purposes for attending VPJCC—seeking a collegiate credential (or transfer) to gain or improve their employment outcomes. After meeting with the Dean of Student Development and the Campus President, there was agreement that students needed to have early

exposure and access to the resources provided by CS. The registration initiative served the campus, the college, and the students by minimizing obstacles to accessing potential employment and career development opportunities. Additionally, it allowed career services to engage more students and make them aware of career events and career support seminars. As a result of the initiative to register students for the employment database, student registration increased from approximately 32 student registrants between 2002-2010 to approximately 1,932 registered students from 2010-2015. Consequently, after increasing the number of registered student users at the pilot campus, other campuses within the college observed the same benefit for the students on their respective campuses and began using new student orientation as a means to outreach to students. Through the use of the database, the pilot campus experienced an increase in student, faculty, and staff interest in services provided by CS. Due to the success of this approach, a similar approach will be employed to integrate the Career Services Academic and Career Engagement Model into the new student orientation sessions. Furthermore, although the instituted change was small, its effectiveness—as illustrated by the increase in students registering on and actively using the system to locate professional events and job opportunities—demonstrated how significantly a small change could impact the post-graduate outcomes of students.

Summary of Action

To move forward with this design for action, it is necessary to build capacity among career services staff, senior-level administrators, and organizers of new student orientation at the pilot campus. This group of stakeholders will be responsible for employing the changes in student orientations and SDS courses. The process for increasing capacity has several facets: (a) using the CCSSE data (presented in this study, as well as data analyzed by the college) to demonstrate the need for students to build relationships with faculty; (b) connecting the new initiatives to the previously established Academic Roadmap; and (c) offering a model that can be used to measure levels of student engagement and academics, as well as career outcomes. Thus, the design for action serves as a catalyst for transforming collegiate policy, practice, process, and service as it relates to student success, particularly faculty-student engagement initiatives.

CHAPTER VI-Generative Impacts

This study provides a sound rationale for VPJCC to make changes to practices and processes that will serve to assist African American, first-time students in their goals to complete a program of study and receive a certificate or associate degree from VPJCC. To that end, the proposed design for action is inclusive of a Career Service Model of Academic and Career Engagement that will be employed to help students and faculty link engagement opportunities to post-collegiate outcomes. A model of this type has not been developed or piloted at VPJCC. This model is unique because it is designed to be responsive to retention and engagement goals and is reflective of students' needs that were identified during the current research study.

Specifically, the analysis indicated that although students rated their experience with their professors as positive, and interact with them in class and via email, they are not interacting with their professors on issues relating to career choices. This interaction is important because the students stated their primary reasons/goals for attending VPJCC was to attain a degree or certificate, which appears to imply that they are thinking about embarking on a career immediately after college, to attain a higher level of employment in their current workplace. In addition, students also noted that transferring to a four-year institution was also a primary goal; thus, having a knowledge of potential career paths may assist students in making informed academic decisions. As a result, this model has the potential to identify areas of improvement regarding collegiate policy, practice, process, and service. According to Jenkins and Cho (2012):

Because the problem of low community college completion rates is systematic, the approach community colleges have typically taken in the past of adopting discrete “best practices” and trying to bring them to scale will not work to improve student completion on a substantial scale. Rather, colleges need to implement a “best process” approach in

which faculty, staff and administrators from across the college work together to review programs, processes, and services at each stage of students' experience with the college. (pp. 3-4)

Thus, inherent to the effectiveness of this model, is the colleges ability to build cross-departmental collaborations and professional communities which are responsible for planning, development, and analysis of the model. The use of professional communities is intentional in that it deliberately engages members of the college community in a conversation about not only college policy and best practices, but processes and services. The goal of such a grouping of individuals, is to incorporate different perspectives, which naturally evolve through a cultivation of view points that can lead to a richer inquiry into and understanding of how the “system” works and how the problem may be best addressed considering a number of viewpoints (Dolle, Gomez, Russell, & Bryk, 2013).

Although CS is taking the lead in the initial development, a diverse body of stakeholders—teams responsible for new student orientation, student engagement and success, faculty, and campus deans—have a role in integrating this model into the culture of the college. The use of a professional community will maximize how the college engages students across departments. The college can, then, begin building its own set of best practices, theories, and processes that are reflective of the needs of its students.

Tracking Improvement in Student Engagement

To monitor the effectiveness of the VPJCC Career Services Model of Academic and Career Engagement on student-faculty engagement, qualitative and quantitative measures may be employed. First, data from future applications of the CCSSE and the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE) can be cross-referenced to identify changes in faculty-student engagement. Changes in engagement levels can then be explored through student and faculty focus groups. The results can be used to develop specific engagement initiatives. Furthermore, changes in engagement can be examined to identify factors that can be reproduced and utilized to support individual departmental engagement initiatives on a college-wide level.

Since CS personnel are introducing this engagement model to faculty members during new faculty orientations and faculty-advisor meetings, a natural follow-up would be a series of “brown bag” lunches or inservice sessions to provide faculty, staff, and administrators an opportunity to provide input and feedback on the new processes and how to ensure that the content is relevant and effective. This model also introduces a cycle of course and service improvements which can be measured through the online tracking of students’ activities from entry to program completion, certificate or degree conferral, transfer to a four-year institution, or dropped enrollment. Moreover, the online tracking process can serve to assist departments in identifying patterns of student behavior over time and making targeted changes to address patterns that identify potential obstacles to completion. For example, as found in the results of this study, the system could: (a) monitor academic preparedness (or lack thereof); (b) when, why, and where (in or out of class) students are interacting with faculty; and (c) when, why, where, and with whom students are engaging with respect to diversity, as this interaction may influence students ability to build leadership skills and networking communities.

Identifying and Tracking Areas of Improvement

To identify areas in which collegiate services may need to be improved upon in order to provide measurable academic and professional support to students enrolled at VPJCC, the institution may also be able to use the aforementioned student engagement tracking mechanism to follow student degree and academic major changes. Specifically, as noted in Chapter IV-Data Analysis and Recommendations and Chapter V-Design for Action, the proposed tracking tool creates opportunities for the college to intentionally engage and interact with a student every time he or she registers for a class.

Specifically, the proposed online tracking system could be attached to the current registration system; when a student registers for a course, online or in-person with an academic advisor, the student will be prompted to verify their academic major, degree plans, and the number of activities that they have engaged in over the term, and to rate those experiences—especially those that are inclusive of diversity, in class faculty engagement, working with faculty on projects outside of class that are not directly related to coursework, and discussing their career plans with faculty. If a student indicates a change in academic major, career program, or degree target, or notes a lack of participation in activities, the system will prompt them to select why they have made such changes or choices. The system then acts as a prompt for the academic advisor to discuss the behavior with the student, or the system submits this notice into the student's e-registration file to be viewed at a later date. Moreover, because the system tracks student race and ethnicity, it will provide another layer of opportunity for the college to study groups of students and how they are engaging with the college.

The tracking system will provide additional data that can be filtered and used immediately to view changes to previous interventions, and perhaps make timely changes to

services. To accomplish this, however, it may require expanding who is analyzing the data and for what purpose the data are being used; it could also include testing and evaluating (with an empirically sound method) small changes to determine whether the change is an improvement. For example, in presenting this concept to the Dean of Student Development at the campus, where the model will be piloted in NSOs, the response was an immediate consideration of how the college can begin to gather some of these data by cross-referencing student enrollment with completion data. In addition to this information, the system will allow the person analyzing the data to track any changes in academic major and certificate or degree declaration. This new plan may require a significant shift in organizational culture and mindset, which shifts the balance of power as information; the information may be easily attained and evenly distributed among senior-level administrators, mid-level administrators, faculty, and staff.

Managing Student Experiences

In consideration of these changes, it may be worthwhile for the college to consider developing a formal position for a FYE and SYE (Second-Year Experience) director or enrollment manager, who is well-versed in the community college system and the diverse needs of the students who enroll in community college. This position may prove to be a positive catalyst in transforming student retention and engagement initiatives. The person in this position will act as a liason between secondary institutions and four-year insitutions, as well as the Departments of Academic Affairs and Student Development at the college, and lead the implementation of multiple goals using the information extracted from the liasonships. Also, this position will serve as the lead in designing and facilitating college-wide NSOs, and perhaps a SYE orientation to prepare students for their final year at VPJCC, in addition to analyzing the data retrieved from the registration system.

Concluding Thoughts

The intent of this study was to provide a systemic inquiry into the collegiate experiences of African American and White American, first-time students at VPJCC. Specifically, the study explored students' perceptions of how the college prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds (e.g., faculty, staff, agents of the college, students) and their engagement with faculty. In addition to providing a systemic inquiry, the second goal was to identify potential barriers (within the aforementioned constructs) that may affect program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment among African American, first-time students.

The results of the data analysis were subsequently reported to administrators at VPJCC. Research findings, as well as subsequent recommendations, and a design for action provided the college with a new perspective on group differences between African American, first-time students, compared to White American, first-time students. For example, overall African American, first-time students rated the college's emphasis on preparing students to understand and engage individuals from race or ethnic backgrounds that are different from their own slightly higher than their White American counterparts. However, given the college's diversity initiatives, the findings suggest that the college may need to consider how their current initiatives are affecting student engagement. Using critical race theory as a theoretical framework, gave a new perspective in which to analyze engagement data that is often viewed through the lens of traditionally accepted theories of student development, engagement, and retention in higher education. In addition, it renewed interest in how cross-departmental collaborations can lead to in-depth scholarly conversations between staff, administrators, and faculty regarding how to address bias (both conscious and unconscious) in an effort to empower our students to be

successful in their time at VPJCC. Also, it peaked interest in developing professional communities that are designed to transform, where knowledge is not siloed in specific departments or units. For example, transforming career services from a cursory service to be used at the end of one's college career into a key role in designing an engagement facilitation model to be used in new student orientation and faculty orientations. Changing this process to engagement inherently established a best practice, but also establishes a change to the system as it transforms how the college, and the department, interacts with students.

In identifying potential variables that may hinder student program completion and certificate or associate degree attainment as it relates to diversity and student-faculty engagement (as discussed in Chapter IV-Data Analysis and Recommendations), the intent of this work and the findings of this study, may serve as a catalyst for improving collegiate policy, practice, process, and service to students—especially African American, first-time students who appear to be experiencing difficulty in completing their studies at the college, by highlighting the factors that serve as barriers to completion of their collegiate credential. However, as illustrated throughout current research study, VPJCC would be best served in using the presented data to follow up with student focus groups and guided discussions with agents of the college in order to build a complete picture of student experiences and perceptions of VPJCC. To this end, the current research supports the college's current initiatives to use data to build creative, measureable, and sustainable changes within the college; it also provides a foundation on which further study may be conducted with respect to how students—especially African American, first-time students—experience VPJCC. By challenging the college to explore other methodologies, this work may lead to a deeper understanding of the students served by VPJCC.

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Appendix A

Guiding Research Questions and CCSSE Survey Items

Guiding Research Question	CCSSE Survey Item Number	Theme
1. What are the goals of African American and White American, first-time students attending VPJCC?	17a, 17b, & 17c	Goal/Reason for Attending
2. Are there differences between African American and White American, first-time students obstacles to attending VPJCC?	14a, 14b, 14c, & 14d	Obstacles to Attending
3. Are there differences in African American and White American, first-time students' perceptions of how VPJCC prepares them to understand and engage with people of diverse backgrounds?	9c, 12k, & 4s	Diversity
4. Are there differences in African American and White American, first-time students' perceptions of their engagement with faculty?	4a, 4k, 4l, 4m, 4n, 4q, & 11b	Faculty-Student Engagement

Appendix B

VPJCC-Career Services Academic and Career Engagement Model

Figure 1. VPJCC Career Services Academic and Career Engagement Model

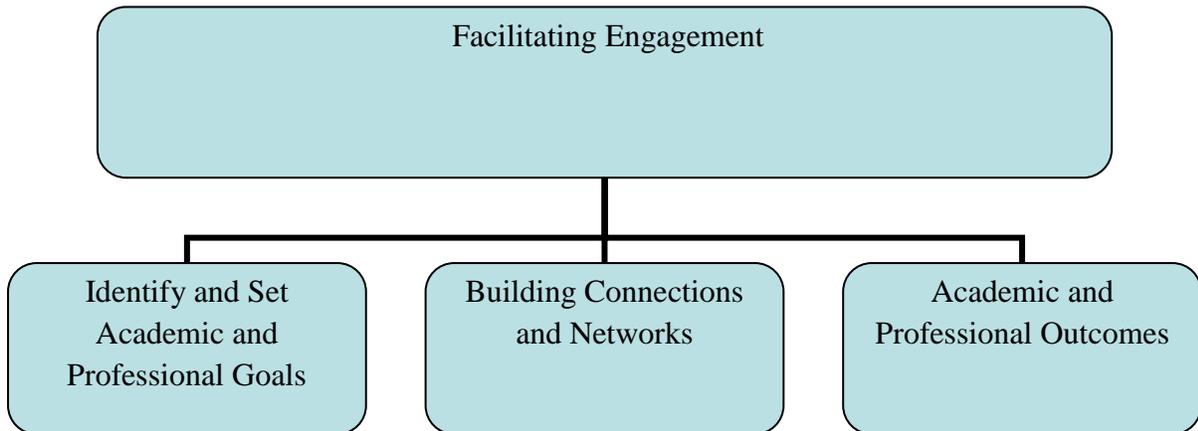


Figure 1. VPJCC Career Services Academic and Career Engagement Model. This figure illustrates the primary components of facilitating a bilateral conversation between students and faculty.