Understanding Black/African American Students' Experiences at Pasadena City College

Findings and Recommendations from Spring 2024 Student Focus Groups

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Executive Summary

In early 2024, Pasadena City College's Office of Institutional Equity, Diversity, and Justice, in collaboration with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, contracted with The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group) to conduct student focus groups exploring Black/African American students' experiences at the institution. In alignment with the college's 2022-2025 Student Equity Plan goals, this activity sought to inform efforts to develop a more equitable campus climate for Black/African American students and support closing racial equity gaps.

Conversations with more than 50 Black/African American students over three sessions surfaced a range of experiences, which were at times divergent or conflicting. The variability in these students' sense of the college and their interactions inside and outside the classroom points to the **need for a stronger and more intentional institutional strategy for ensuring Black/African American students feel authentically part of the PCC community and supported in achieving their goals**.

Key Findings

Below we share major themes from the focus groups related to the following key areas of inquiry: connection and engagement, the Black Student Success Center, and challenges and supports.

Connection and Engagement with the College

Some Black/African American students experienced PCC as warm and welcoming, noted the institution's positive reputation, and expressed appreciation for its facilities, faculty, and nonacademic services. Several students indicated that relationships with individual professors or peers fostered their sense of belonging at the college.

Other students agreed that PCC lacks a clear culture and did not feel that the institution cultivated their overall engagement. Online students seemed particularly susceptible to an absence of connection to peers and the college, and a lack of awareness of PCC's ethos or resources.

Several participants felt that PCC was geared toward "traditional" students: younger, recent high school graduates. Adult students with work and/or caregiving responsibilities reported feeling left out of programming designed to build community. Many students also felt the institution catered to students and those who identify with racial and ethnic identities other than Black or African American. Several participants described being the only or among the few

Black/African American student(s) in their courses and shared how the absence of representation across the PCC community negatively influenced their relationship with the college.

Many students noted finding positive connections and engagement through special programs, particularly those designed for Black/African American students. Yet, participants indicated the burden of discovering those opportunities fell on the students themselves. They underscored the importance of raising the visibility of these offerings and amplifying their benefits.

Student Challenges in the Classroom and with Counseling and Support Services

The experiences and perspectives of focus group participants also indicated that Black/African American students do not feel systematically and comprehensively supported in achieving success at PCC. In fact, in several cases, students reported that the college's personnel and practices challenged—rather than facilitated—their sense of belonging along with their progress and completion.

Certainly, students reported some bright spots of individual personnel addressing their needs and programs offering useful support as they work to reach their goals. At the same time, several issues surfaced, including those related to unhelpful faculty and instruction, negative counselor interactions, and insufficient access to existing supports. In addition, students described issues completing college-level math early in their PCC journey, a critical milestone for transfer success (Cooper et al., 2022). They also highlighted how these obstacles were particularly acute for those who identified as returning students, working adults, and/or who were primarily taking online courses.

Throughout the focus group sessions, students described how they uniquely experienced these challenges as Black/African American students, including feelings of resignation with their sense of isolation in courses and the lack of representation across the college's people and functions.

Use of the Black Student Success Center (BSSC)

Positively, some students indicated that the Black Student Success Center (BSSC) addressed many of the challenges they encounter at PCC. It provided a primary source of information on opportunities designed specifically for Black/African American students. They felt a sense of kinship and ease and forged impactful connections with peers and college personnel when there. Some students tapped important academic advising and assistance through this network.

At the same time, most students were either unaware of or had not engaged with the BSSC because they did not know where it was, and more importantly, what it offered and/or how its resources and services would uniquely strengthen their achievement. Many participants noted

the absence of broad public information about the center for students attending classes on campus *and* online. When their peers discussed utilizing its resources, those who had not yet used its services or supports expressed interest in and enthusiasm about its possibilities.

However, several participants shared disconcerting experiences in the BSSC. In some cases, participants felt unwelcomed by other students and the staff. Some participants reported unproductive attempts to access counseling and other assistance delivered there. Across all three focus groups, participants noted the importance of proactively increasing awareness of the BSSC, and offering programming that uniquely advanced the success of Black and African American students—both during their time at the college and after graduation.

Recommendations

Taken together, these focus group findings indicate a significant opportunity for PCC to **develop a more intentional, proactive approach to ensuring more Black/African American students feel seen, supported, and successful at the college**. Many Black/African American students are seeking a more engaged and relational experience where their individual identities are honored, their needs are understood and met, and their educational excellence is supported. Given these results, The RP Group recommends PCC:

1. Articulate a clear vision for Black/African American excellence and success at PCC.

2. Create a more intentional strategy for systematically connecting Black/African American students with designated PCC personnel upon entry—or re-entry—at the college.

3. Ensure both instructional and counseling faculty and frontline staff to understand and can approach course and service delivery with an equity mindset.

4. Raise the profile of programs, activities, and resources designed to increase Black/African American students' success.

5. Re-evaluate the approach taken within the Black Student Success Center to ensure it effectively serves all Black/African American students at the college.

6. Recognize that many of PCC's Black/African American students are frequently taking courses while juggling other job and caregiving responsibilities.

7. Proactively foster a sense of belonging among Black/African American students by demonstrating sincere concern for their success.

8. Examine current hiring and employee retention practices to address issues of representation through purposeful hiring of Black/African American faculty and staff.

9. Conduct regular research with Black/African American students for continuous improvement.

Introduction

In early 2024, Pasadena City College's Office of Institutional Equity, Diversity, and Justice, in collaboration with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, contracted with The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group) to conduct student focus groups exploring Black/African American students' experiences at the institution. In alignment with the college's 2022-2025 Student Equity Plan goals, this activity sought to inform efforts to develop a more equitable campus climate for Black/African American students and support closing racial equity gaps.

Presently, PCC's Black/African American students have disproportionately lower rates of success and retention compared to other populations.[1] According to PCC staff, the college's Black Student Success Center (BSSC) can be more utilized. Moreover, while a spring 2022 campus climate survey indicated that, in aggregate, Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color (BIPOC) feel treated with respect in the classroom and by faculty and staff, the survey results offered no specific insight into how Black/African American students uniquely feel at PCC and what challenges or facilitates their access, retention, and completion.[2]

PCC's leadership asked The RP Group to gather Black/African American students' perceptions of the campus climate and experiences at the college. Areas of inquiry included participants'…

- Connection to and engagement with the college
- Challenges impacting their success inside and outside the classroom and the college's response
- Achievement of key metrics known to facilitate Black/African American students' transfer to a four-year institution
- Use of the Black Student Success Center
- Navigation of their racial identity inside and outside the classroom

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[1] Find more information in PCC's Equity Cohort Dashboard: https://pasadena.edu/institutional-effectiveness/equity-reporting/ethnicity-cohort-dashboard.php.
[2] See 2022 Campus Climate Survey results at
https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/office.of.institutional.effectiveness1849/viz/ViewfinderStudentCampusClimateDataSpring22/Introduction.

In This Report

We begin with a high-level overview of our approach to planning and conducting the focus groups. We then provide a summary of findings by area of inquiry, inclusive of student quotes to demonstrate findings in students' own words (in italics). Note that for the sake of clarity and to focus on the most critical issues identified by participants, the order in which topics are presented in the report does not reflect the precise order in which they were discussed during focus group sessions. We conclude with a series of recommendations for PCC leadership based on students' input.

Research Approach

The RP Group worked with PCC's Office of Institutional Equity, Diversity, and Justice (OIEDJ) to recruit student participants, taking a high-touch approach to outreach. OIEDJ collaborated with the college's Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) to connect with students who identified as Black/African American or having Black/African American heritage; were enrolled during the fall 2023, winter 2024, or spring 2024 terms; and did not participate in dual enrollment. The Information Technology department then sent the email invitation crafted by OIEDJ to these students (see Appendix A). The college offered participants a $50 Amazon gift card for attending one of three, 90-minute virtual sessions, scheduled throughout February 2024.

Ultimately, 52 participated. The RP Group's Executive Director, Dr. Darla Cooper, conducted each session. The Zoom platform allowed us to engage students in a variety of ways during the focus groups (i.e., video, phone, chat); record the conversations; and transcribe them for accuracy post-session. Table 1 presents the total number of participants per session.

Table 1. Participation by Session

Session	n
Session 1: February 13, 2024	21
Session 2: February 28, 2024	14
Session 3: February 29, 2024	17
Total	52

During focus group introductions, the facilitator asked participants to share their name, major, length of time at PCC, and future educational and career plans. While not all participants addressed these elements in full, participants roughly split between those who were in their first 1-2 semesters at PCC and those who had attended the college for more than one year. Some students reported "swirling" between colleges, sometimes attending PCC to access a class or two needed to complete a degree at another school (and vice versa). Roughly 20%

indicated they were returning to higher education generally or PCC specifically after some time off.

The greatest proportion of participants indicated an interest in transferring to earn a bachelor's and/or graduate degree, followed by those who identified securing an associate's degree. A smattering of participants expressed an interest in completing a certificate and/or upskilling through courses. The remaining few participants were undecided and/or did not articulate the specific outcome they hoped to achieve.

Among those participants who articulated a major, the range was broad and included:

- Accounting, business, marketing (3)
- Arts (studio art, theater arts, photography) (3)
- Biology, kinesiology
- Child development
- Computer science, cybersecurity (5)
- Cosmetology
- Dental hygiene
- Engineering technology
- English
- Fashion
- Film/media/television (4)
- Graphic design
- Psychology, behavioral science (2)
- Foreign language (Italian, Japanese)
- Journalism/communications
- Library science
- Nursing (3)
- Paralegal
- Political science

Note: the findings and recommendations that follow are based on the perceptions of a limited group of Black/African American students. Their experiences are not meant to be conclusive or representative of all Black/African American students attending PCC. However, these students' experiences are valid and can provide a useful compass for where to go next with institutional efforts to improve campus climate for and support to this priority student population.

Key Findings about Black/African American Students' Experiences at Pasadena City College

The RP Group found that across the student focus groups, Black/African American students had a range of experiences at the college that, at times, diverged and/or conflicted with one another. Of course, we do not expect all Black/African American students to speak with one voice or perspective. However, the variability in their sense of the college and their interactions inside and outside the classroom points to the **need for a more intentional institutional strategy for ensuring Black/African American students feel authentically part of the PCC community and supported in achieving their goals**. We explore their perceptions below.

Connection and Engagement with the College

Students' sense of connection and engagement with college varied widely. When asked how they would describe PCC's culture to a friend or family member, a significant contingent of students reported no strong sense of school identity. Several students agreed with the words of one student: **"What culture?"**

Conversely, other students experienced the college as a warm and supportive place for any student. One participant explained:

> *I would say that PCC is a diverse college where everyone is kind of welcome. It doesn't really matter of your race or your ethnicity.*

Several students noted the **institution's positive reputation** and expressed an **appreciation for its facilities, faculty, and nonacademic services** (e.g., healthcare, mental health support, automotive repair).

participants across all sessions described a tenuous relationship with PCC. Some students who attended in-person courses pointed to the **transitory nature of a community college**, with class time being students' sole link to the campus. One student explained:

> *I did find it a bit harder to make more friends and connect with people on the campus, just because PCC is very much a commuter school.*

When asked what they do on campus between classes, many spoke of studying or hanging out alone. **Online students appeared particularly susceptible to an absence of connection to peers and the institution**, and a lack of awareness of the college's ethos or resources.

In some cases, students did find **meaningful engagement through their professors**. One student shared:

> *All the instructors are super helpful…. They're not there for just the paycheck…. They really want you to succeed and learn. And even when you're done with the class, some of the instructors are still there for you…. So, I would just say that it's a very giving environment, and you do feel very connected to the school.*

At the same time, others noted that **professors alone were not enough to cultivate a broader sense of culture and connection**. One participant said:

> *Most of my professors have gone out of their way to be helpful and share resources. But outside of them, I don't feel connected to my classmates and just the general campus setting.*

Alternatively, some students indicated that professors, counselors, and other college personnel served to discourage their connection to PCC, reporting negative interactions both inside and outside the classroom that turned them off.[3]

Others expressed finding **interactions with their classmates to be their primary tie to PCC**. One online student shared:

> *The professors basically force us into breakout rooms for most of my classes, so it's easier to attach to other students. But the college itself, I definitely do not feel connected.*

A few others noted the value of being in a **smaller major area of study, which helped build community with other students**. One student explained:

> *I think it's because my major is so small; we're a very small community…. Coming back [each] semester and seeing the same people, I was like, "Oh okay, I feel connected! Like … this is my group." So, I would say [I feel connected to classmates], but not the college.*

Several students noted that **PCC is oriented toward more "traditional" college students: younger, recent high school graduates**. Some students perceived the college as an extension of the K-12 system, with one participant sharing:

> *As a lifelong Altadena native, PCC just feels like an expansion of high school.*

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[3] See the next two sections for additional information.

Adult students with work and/or caregiving responsibilities indicated that they felt left out of programming designed to build community. One student stated:

> *A lot of the events take place during times when most of us are at work…. Just saying, how can they engage with their working students on campus?*

Many students reported feeling that the **institution catered to those who identify with racial and ethnic identities other than Black or African American**. One student shared:

> *I would feel connected if I didn't feel like I was like the old person in every class. Not only the older person, but the only Black person in the class. I just feel like I'm around a lot of younger kids who are trying to figure out what they want to do…. It's just the culture … it's catered to [students who are] fresh out of high school, [and] different minorities.*

Many students further underlined the intersection of connection and racial identity. These students described how the **absence of representation across multiple aspects of the PCC community influenced their sense of engagement and belonging**. Like the student above, others described being the **only or among the few Black/African American student(s) in their courses**. In one focus group, several participants "liked" a comment shared by another in the chat:

> *You are a minority unless you are in Black history class.*

Students also spoke to the **impact of having (or not having) African American/Black faculty**, and a dearth of African American/Black college personnel. One participant stated:

> *One of the things for me that I think would help me to feel more connected is if some, if more of the instructors looked like me, meaning if they were Black, if they were female…. I don't think that I have had a Black instructor yet. And that does something to me in terms of creating and deepening a connection.*

Another explained:

> *I guess I felt connected when I had African American teachers. But it was only in gym, and sociology, and African American Studies. And I will say back in the day, the Transfer Center … had representation and community. Lately, I feel like that has completely just been thrown out the window.*

Many students noted finding **positive connection and engagement through special programs, particularly those specifically designed for Black/African American students**. Students

specifically mentioned the ways offerings like Blackademia, Ujima, and the Black Student Success Center (BSSC) deepened their relationship with the institution.[4] One student shared:

> I'm extremely grateful for all of the different programs, specifically Blackademia and the counselors and the Black Student Success Center. They dedicate a lot of their time to making sure that everybody is straight, and so for me, I would say that I feel very connected in that way.

However, they noted that the **burden of discovering those opportunities and forging those relationships at the college falls on students themselves**. Students described having to find information on their own and/or take the first step toward joining a program (rather than the college pushing them information and/or reaching out). One participant advised:

> The best thing for you to do is try to get as involved as you can in order to make friends and make connections. And really tap into the things that they have to offer. But at first glance, it's kind of hard to see that when you first get there.

Many students additionally described **challenges locating information about resources and opportunities designed specifically for Black/African American students**. For example, a lengthy discussion about insufficient advertising of Black History Month activities ensued in one session. We held the focus groups during Black History Month, and a preponderance of students in this same session reported not knowing the college hosted related events or not finding out about them until after they occurred.

In other cases, students expressed **interest in supports and experiences designed for Black/ African American students but questioned how to access them**. As one student said:

> It's nice to have programs, but I can't seem to find where I go to sign up for Blackademia?

Participants underscored the **importance of raising the visibility of these offerings and amplifying their benefits** if the college seeks to generate more connection and engagement among Black/African American students.

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[4] See more information on the BSSC beginning p. X.

Student Challenges in the Classroom and with Counseling and Support Services

The experiences and perspectives of focus group participants indicate that Black/African American students do not feel systematically and comprehensively supported in achieving success at PCC. In fact, in several cases, students reported that the college's personnel and practices challenged–rather than facilitated–their sense of belonging along with their progress and completion.

Certainly, students reported some bright spots of individual personnel addressing their needs and programs offering useful support as they work to reach their goals. At the same time, several issues surfaced, including those related to **unhelpful faculty and instruction, negative counselor interactions, and insufficient access to existing supports**. In addition, students described issues **completing college-level math** early in their PCC journey, a critical milestone for transfer success (Cooper et al., 2022). They also highlighted how these obstacles were particularly acute for those who identified as returning students, working adults, and/or who were primarily taking online courses. Throughout the focus group sessions, students described how **they uniquely experienced these challenges as Black/African American students.**

We further explore these issues and students' perceptions of PCC's response below.

Faculty and Instruction

Some students outlined ways individual professors supported their achievements and encouraged their connection to PCC, as previously described. At the same time, when discussing challenges to their success, several students across focus groups reported negative faculty interactions in the context of the classroom.

In some cases, students described **challenges getting feedback, support, and direction in their courses**. One student shared:

> *Teachers are rude. They'll try their best to persuade you to drop their class instead of giving you … that extra 30-minute help on the assignment.*

Another student expressed how an instructor's lack of attention impacted their own engagement with the class and the college:

> *I have an English teacher that did not read probably a single word of any essay I wrote. I got no feedback. That's frustrating for me as student because once you feel like someone doesn't care about you, or is responding to you, you kind of check out as a student. So, it was really hard for me to say engaged.*

Some participants also explained how the **absence of faculty commitment impeded their progress toward program completion**. In some instances, students reported considering switching to a different college to better meet their academic needs and complete their major. A few students further described the specific impact of enrolling in a small program where students must take the same professor for multiple courses when that professor fails to support their success. One said:

> I'm trying to get this certificate in [a program] and graduate…. I'm thinking about taking it somewhere else and transferring over because I can't take [this professor] again with this same type of attitude, wasting my time and my hard work…. I just need common sense feedback.

Participants additionally felt that in some cases, **courses were not as equity centered as advertised, and quality was lacking**. A few shared instances of outright racial bias and an inadequate response by the college when reported. One student stated:

> I've had similar kind of experiences [to another participant] where there was a lot of back and forth, and I was just begging for support. I had a problematic instructor for two classes…. And eventually I was able to take Ws on those classes, and then take a late start, condensed course for those same two classes. And I am still sitting there with these Ws, okay? Because of the racial comments that this teacher made, I couldn't stay in her class anymore.

Some students expressed a desire for the institution to take a **more proactive and purposeful approach to assessing the efficacy of faculty performance and course content and delivery**. One student emphasized:

> I mean, why aren't these teachers being monitored? Who's running this department?... Because [one of my teachers] didn't know what she was doing. So, it's a couple of things that's going on here that need to be addressed. I don't think the head of these departments are monitoring what's going on. And when they find out, they don't do anything about it. It's like they're in a position of authority, but they don't exercise any.

Another summed up multiple students' comments:

> Who's monitoring the descriptions? Who's doing the assessment of the materials that the teachers are giving … and are they the right people to be doing this job? So, I would say look at the evaluation processes. How often do they do it? Are they monitoring the content? And making sure the content is high quality?

Counseling and Advising

In a few cases, students shared positive experiences with individual counselors. These relationships often formed through special programs such as Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) or in the Black Student Success Center (see additional information in the next section). One student explained the transformative impact of connection with a caring and encouraging counselor:

> Last fall, I was losing myself and direction. I had went through a personal loss of a partner, and I would say I messed up a semester. And [an EOPS counselor], she got me back on track. She said, "You know what? Through adversity you'll become successful. Just keep at it, keep at it, keep at it." So, last fall … I ended up with a 3.5 and ended up on the dean's list because I refused to give up and let my circumstances dictate my future. I kept going, and I kept going, and I kept going. Long story short, I'm two classes away from graduating this semester due to her egging me on and telling me, "You can do this. I know you got circumstances that have nothing to do with your academics here at Pasadena City College. I know you got a housing situation. I know you've lost a loved one. But I know that you're determined and that you're resilient, and I know you're going to do this. Just get the job done. Keep grinding."

At the same time, some participants reported that counseling was the most problematic part of their PCC experience. They described ways PCC's counseling system was unable to meet students' demand. One participant shared:

> I was trying to see a counselor. It was the biggest headache.

Once they made contact with a counselor, some students depicted transactional interactions and a desire a more relational approach. One student stated:

> I did go through a little hardship … academically. She … wasn't giving [me a], "I'm here to support you" [vibe]. It was more … like, "Well, you need to do this, this, this, this … that's it, you're done."

Others described engaging with counseling and receiving inadequate advising. They felt **left on their own to figure out how to navigate the system, select a major, and/or develop educational plans**. One student explained:

> If you don't go into PCC knowing exactly what you want to do, you shouldn't go…. I feel like PCC is a trial-and-error school when it comes to figuring out what classes you need to take…. I think you get more counseling through communication with students than you would get from the people that actually work there…. I hate to say this on record,

but it is horrible…. And I think a lot of [PCC students] are really trying–especially people that return–are really trying to figure out, "What do I do?"

Students suggested professional development for some counselors might be in order, with one person asserting:

They don't have the skills to do what PCC has them doing…. Whether they're Black, White, green, or purple, I think they need training.

Student Supports

Participants reported they are "winging it" (in the words of one) when it comes to accessing both educational and nonacademic supports at the college. Again, many students noted that the supports may exist to facilitate their journey and success, but it is **incumbent upon students to find them on their own. Or, the supports' design and implementation are not effectively meeting students' needs**. One participant described the ways this disconnect can leave students feeling stuck and demoralized:

Didn't even know I had a success coach because no one ever reached out to me, nothing at all like that until my second semester when I was trying to register, and I couldn't register on time because I didn't have a success coach…. It just feels weird that systems are built in place, but the systems aren't being used. It's like I don't have the key to the system, but you're telling me to use the system. And I can't do that without help. A lot of the time being at PCC feels like they're like, "Oh okay, so we have free food or free t-shirts for everybody." And then you show up, and they're like, "Oh, sorry we didn't tell you? It was just a first five or the first 10 people. Sorry. Maybe try again next time." But it's not about t-shirts. It's not about food. It's about my literal survival.

Others expressed how the **supports specific to Black and African American students' needs were lacking**, often describing a desire for experiences theoretically available through existing structures such as Blackademia, Ujima, the Black STEM program, and the Black Student Success Center. They particularly **wanted help from people–counselors and staff–who understand the unique challenges Black/African American students face and can enable them to efficiently locate appropriate resources and services**. One student explained:

If they had [a person who understands that] typically African American students may have X, Y, Z [issues]. It's not saying that we all have that problem but just sounds like … an extra support, something that we can turn to, [would be helpful]. Like even someone that it's their job to make sure that we aren't run around in circles.

As mentioned above, a handful of participants across the focus groups shared their positive experiences with Blackademia, Ujima, the Black STEM program, and (to some extent) the Black Student Success Center. At the same time, some again reported having to initiate those connections on their own.

For example, one student spoke of Googling instructors until she found one who was Black and reaching out to him for help. He provided her direction and connected her to the Black STEM program. Once involved, she felt positively about the assistance and benefits she received, describing the program as "extremely beneficial." When discussing their availability, participants demonstrated an interest in these offerings and **desire for the college to more to proactively broker their participation.**

Math

The RP Group's African American Transfer Tipping Point study found that "African American/Black students who pass both transfer-level English and math in the first year are more than 300% more likely to make it near the transfer gate than those who do not" (Cooper et al, 2022, p. 2).[5] When asked about their insights into The RP Group's finding that there is a strong connection between Black/African American students' completion of transfer-level English and math in their first year and their transfer success, focus group participants almost universally spoke about their math experiences. A few students posited that **passing math can be a confidence booster** for Black/African American students who may not perceive themselves as capable or supported in the discipline. They also noted the ways that **completing math can help students build transferable skills that contribute to overall achievement in college and beyond**. One student explained:

> *What I find with math is if you want to succeed you can. You just have to reach out … to tutoring…. Attending office hours, and also watching YouTube videos, and doing things on your own to help you succeed is the only way that you're ever going to get through life. So, I feel like math is a great example of that because it takes a lot of discipline. And in succeeding in that class, you succeeded in many different areas.*

However, yet again, participants mentioned **insufficient college outreach about available assistance to strengthen their completion of math milestones as Black/African American students**. One participant described the inadequate promotion of available resources and concurrent supports:

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[5] Find more information on The RP Group's African American Transfer Tipping Point study here.

I want to say that there are a lot of programs that support math that I don't think are advertised as much for the African American students. [You] can get calculators and extra learning materials. And they even have a support system for calculus where you can actually take … an extra class [with calculus] that supports it so that you can push through the calculus with your own set of tutors, and a professor that is with you afterwards. That wasn't advertised.

Several participants also reported strong dissatisfaction and major challenges with the math department. Once more, issues included **negative faculty experiences, unsatisfactory support, and feelings of isolation as Black/African American students in math classes**. One student stated:

My [math] professor was 'very selective' when it came to assisting students.

Another summed up the experience of several participants, explaining:

I would definitely agree that the math program is not very helpful to students of color…. I was the … only Black female in all of my math classes, and that definitely took an effect on … the way I felt in the class. Tutoring is [also] very limited. They have all these signs up around the school about tutoring, and you can come to tutoring, but it's very hard to get a sustainable tutoring session. When you go there, they only give you 30 minutes or so for a session, which is not nearly enough. If you're taking … statistics or calculus, [that amount of time is] not realistic. So [like others], I definitely think that the math department does need to be re-evaluated.

Returning Students and/or Working Adults

Returning students and/or working adults described unique challenges accessing courses, counseling, and support services. One student stated simply:

Doing this as an adult is hard, and PCC needs to come up with some ways to make it easier for us because I want a degree. But can you make it a little more accessible?

Their collective experiences punctuated previous discussions of the ways participants felt the college has a stronger orientation to "traditional" students: full-time, recent high school graduates. These students expressed less time for a "college experience" and greater focus on securing credentials and achieving transfer in a convenient and efficient manner to advance their economic mobility. Some returning students indicated they had struggled academically during previous attempts at college coursework and indicated they felt especially behind and unsupported in regaining an academic foothold.

Online course availability surfaced as a particular concern given students' need to work to meet their financial needs. One participant shared:

> The problem that I'm having, I'm working 40 hours, and any overtime I can get because you all know it's hard out here. So, I need more online classes.

Some students described **inadequate online course availability and insufficient options**. One student elaborated:

> The scheduling specifically [of] online classes, I feel like should be definitely expanded because there always is a small amount of online classes. And they fill up very, very fast.

They reported specific issues related to accessing math courses required for program completion and/or transfer in an online modality. Two students explained the impact of this challenge:

> I have to take math classes, and PCC does not offer a single online asynchronous math class. And it makes it hard when you're 40 years old, going back to school…. It almost makes you want to leave PCC and just do an exclusive online school because it just don't jive with being an adult and going to school.

> The math classes that I need for STEM are half campus, half online. It's hybrid only. There's not full online. And I'm telling you, when I'm working, my commute is like two hours. And then [the college] ha[s] classes at 7:00 in the morning all the way to like 4:00 or 5:00 … that's my workday…. So, I kind of need online.

Participants also described obstacles with accessing content and assignments required for their online coursework once enrolled. They noted that **course pacing does not necessarily recognize the demands of working adults' schedules**. One participant crystalized the challenge:

> The biggest challenge for me actually being completely online [mostly asynchronously] is having access to larger amounts of material because they tend to like open little bits and pieces. And it doesn't quite align with my schedule. Because the weekend is freer than the week. And they're making some assumptions about someone being a fulltime student. I'm not a student all the time. I'm actually employed, and I'm a student as well. So, the weekends are where I can get a lot done, and then I don't have access to the material, so…

Course availability was not the only concern. Working adult students also noted **issues accessing counseling and advising services and getting information on programs and services to support their success**. As one participant shared:

For me, the most difficult obstacle was simply getting in touch with a counselor and setting up my educational plan. I work full time … and it was very difficult.

Representation

We specifically asked participants about their experiencing navigating their identity as Black and African American students at PCC. At the same time, participants' perceptions of belonging at PCC and the college's approach to specifically fostering their achievement surfaced throughout the focus group discussions.

Again, across sessions, participants frequently described **feeling alone in courses and on campus as Black/African American students**, with minimal representation across both the student body and college personnel. One participant summed up the experiences shared by others, explaining how this isolation negatively impacts their sense of belonging:

The classes that I was taking, I also noticed that I was like the only Black student in the class. And all of my professors also didn't really look like me, besides the Ujima professor that I had. So, I do understand that it does kind of feel uncomfortable in a way. It's not that I'm uncomfortable with the people around me. It's just uncomfortable because no one in the room looks like me.

Others described feeling outright bias against them. For example, one student who was pregnant and delivered during a compressed course required for her degree felt stereotyped rather than supported, including by her Black instructors:

I didn't have the support [I needed], and they kind of like blame it on you, which, I get it. But it's just like … if I didn't come for help and you see that I'm about to deliver, like why not mention those [services and the option to withdraw] to me.

Some expressed **feelings of resignation with their feelings of isolation and the lack of representation**, describing this experience as "business as usual." Others explained that these feelings had resulted in a sense of pressure to perform.

In contrast, other participants described **feeling generally unwelcome on the campus** due to their lived experiences and/or intersectional identities. These participants described painful ways this lack of inclusion impacted their sense of ease and connection at PCC, and ultimately their academic success. One student shared:

I feel like I'm not wanted [at the college]. I'm literally a Black queer person who's low income…. It's not that I just feel like I'm not wanted there, or it doesn't matter, it feels like I finally gotten myself mentally and financially and physically to a place where I can take the time to go to school and to better myself in that way. And this school is actively

standing in my way…. So, it's just really hard besides fighting myself, [I'm] also having to fight the school, fight faculty members, like literally cry on the phone asking people to care enough to make decisions that they need to for me and getting nothing in return, literally just like, "Oh sorry, I don't know what to do for you."

Others described ways they felt **uncomfortable in Black spaces like the BSSC because they may not be perceived as "Black enough."** One student explained:

You look like you're one of us, but you don't act like us, so you must be an imposter. It's just a lot of pressure. So, things like the [Black Student Success Center] … and those kinds of resources, they sound like they're really helpful, but they would make me uncomfortable…. What if I go there, and they expect me to behave a certain way? Or like certain things? Or feel passionate about certain things just because I'm Black? And then they're disappointed in me. I'm not going to feel supported…. Being in groups of African American people makes me uncomfortable because I get that fear of what if they're going to treat me that way again? I like being a Black person. I'm proud of being a Black person. But I have a different culture, [my past is] very unusual, and a lot of my peers just didn't make space for that…. It actually is a little bit of a relief when there's not a whole lot of African Americans in my class, because then I don't feel this pressure of okay, well I want to fit in, but do I need to act more like them?

A few participants simply **did not perceive PCC to have a specific strategy for promoting the success of Black/African American students**. One articulated:

My main issue with PCC is that it doesn't challenge me for Black excellence.

Use of the Black Student Success Center

Student feedback on the Black Student Success Center indicated that students believe it can be a vital hub for building community, accessing educational support, and securing success. Positively, some students indicated that the **BSSC provided an important and primary source of information on opportunities** designed specifically for Black/African American students and guidance on supports available both in the center and across the institution. One participant explained:

In the Black Student Success Center, they'll usually have flyers in there about the events that are going on in the month or throughout the year. That's usually how I find out about a lot of the events.… And that's kind of how I stayed connected.

Some participants described the **sense of ease and kinship they felt being in the center** with students and staff of a similar background and forging impactful connections. One student shared:

> *I really enjoyed being in a space with my community, and I always felt very welcomed going.*

Another participant stated:

> *I went in there to talk to a counselor, and he was really, really helpful with just directing me to the right people. And I know at least for us, I always feel better talking to somebody who looks like me.*

At the same time, when asked specifically about their experiences with the BSSC, **most students were either unaware of or had not engaged with it because they did not know where it was or *why* they would go there.** They were unclear how the resources and services provided would uniquely strengthen their success. As one student asked:

> *Do they have faster appointments? And does it mean a lot that someone that looks like me is going to help me with my educational plan? Because I just have to have an educational plan in order to apply for loans [and] to advance my academic career…. I just need to get it done as quickly as possible. So honestly, I'm straight asking, what does that center do for people right now? Why should I go there?*

Many noted the absence of broad public information about the BSSC for both students attending classes on campus and those taking online courses. As one participant explained:

> *They don't really advertise it…. A lot of people don't really know about it. So, if it's not advertised and people don't know about it, people are not going to go.*

A few participants noted that **programs designed for other affinity groups appeared more visible**. When their peers discussed utilizing its resources, those who had not yet used its services or supports expressed interest in and enthusiasm about its possibilities.

However, several participants shared disconcerting experiences in the BSSC. In some cases, participants **felt unwelcomed by other students and staff**. Some participants shared **unsuccessful attempts to access services and supports**, underscoring the many ways these interactions negatively impacted not only their perception of the center but, perhaps more importantly, their academic success. These participants relayed their frustrations and disillusionment, as described in this sampling of quotes:

When I seen [the BSSC] online when I was applying, I was like, "Oh, that's so exciting!" So, I went there, and I took my best friend too because I've never seen like a program like that. Go in there, not welcoming. The [staff] … seen us. We were in there for an hour, [they] never spoke to us. Just stared at us…. I initially went too because I wanted tutoring in my math class…. It's not welcoming. I don't want to [get tutored] there. I don't want to go back.

Seeing a counselor [in the BSSC] was not easy, and the Black counselor that helped me tried to dissuade me from pursuing my degree…. A non-Black counselor gave me my education plan and was quite encouraging.

I'm confused … as to what we have going on here. These are the people that are supposed to help me, and I'm not getting help. When I utilize the [BSSC] services, they don't show up…. You know, it's a struggle.

Some students noted that even when they did contact BSSC personnel, they experienced a lack of follow through on the part of some working in the space. One student shared:

[After three visits], I did manage to talk to the coordinator. I went up to her, and she took down my information to send me all the information and everything, and I never got anything from her. I reached out and I never heard anything back.

Across all focus groups, participants discussed the **importance of proactively increasing awareness of the center in a variety of ways**. Some participants noted the value of existing activities already implemented by the BSSC, including an event held in tandem with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Several students suggested more social gatherings and a welcome event to bring students to the physical space. Many students encouraged an advertising campaign and tailored outreach via text and email, in addition to a word-of-mouth strategy. Other participants recommended raising the visibility of the BSSC and its services and resources on the homepage of the website.

During these outreach efforts, participants also expressed the importance of articulating the basics of the center's location, hours, and offerings–along with the benefits of engaging with it– in any outreach and marketing effort. Further, some participants requested that the BSSC offer an array of services and supports to increase its value proposition to students. While some students described an interest in social activities, others asserted that a space to gather was not enough. They emphasized the **importance of resources and services that would advance their success—both at the college and after graduation**. Specific ideas included the delivery of counseling services and networking opportunities.

Additional ideas surfaced related to both advertising and providing BSSC resources and services virtually to better meet the needs of adults who have work and/or caregiving responsibilities, those who live far from campus, and/or those taking courses primarily or exclusively online. One student stated:

> *So, this program, is it only on campus, or is it virtually?.... Because I think that might help some students that don't live in the Pasadena area. And also ... students do work. I work a lot, and I don't stay in the area.... Then also, I have a son. So, I have to pick him up from daycare or drop him off and all of that stuff.*

One participant offered concrete insight and direction on how to specifically leverage the college's learning management system (Canvas) to raise awareness of the BSSC's programming:

> *I am part of the Blackademia group ... and the only reason why I know about it is it popped up on my dashboard as an online student ... when I first started taking classes, because I identified as African American. And I have reached out to them for academic counseling and things like that.... But the other programs that you mentioned [e.g., Ujima, BSSC], I have no idea what they are. So, I don't know if they can be also added to the dashboard? That's the only way I knew that there was a counseling service designed for me. Because I'm solely focused on getting my work done online, and I'm not accessing other things because they're on campus. If there was a way to have that sort of [information] populate on our dashboard when we're in Canvas, that would be helpful.*

Conclusion and Recommendations

These student focus groups provide PCC with direct feedback from Black/African American students regarding their perceptions of and experiences at college. Listening to the voices of Black/African American students is essential to developing a true understanding of how to respond to their specific strengths and aspirations and address their unique challenges.

Taken together, focus group findings indicate **a significant opportunity for PCC to develop a more intentional, proactive approach to ensuring more Black/African American students feel seen, supported, and successful at the college**.

At best, participants appreciated the college's reputation, opportunities, and resources–both those available to all attending PCC and those specifically for Black/African American students. Yet, they frequently indicated they were **connected to programs and people by luck, rather than design**. At worst, participants described structural and systemic challenges inside and

outside the classroom and feelings of isolation and racial bias that impacted their sense of belonging, and progress and achievement as Black/African American students.

Many are **seeking a more engaged and relational experience where their individual identities are honored, their needs are understood and met, and their educational excellence is supported.**

Given these results, we offer the following nine recommendations:

1. **Articulate a clear vision for Black/African American excellence and success at PCC.** Develop a discrete set of experiences and outcomes for this student population, in collaboration with the many student, faculty, staff, and administrative leaders already involved in fostering a culture and climate of success for **Black/African American** students.

2. **Create a more intentional strategy for systematically connecting Black/African American students with designated PCC personnel upon entry—or re-entry—at the college**. Equip personnel across the institution with information about and understanding of resources and supports for **Black/African American** students. Develop a process for regular touchpoints so that college employees become a part of students' on-campus support networks.

3. **Ensure both instructional and counseling faculty and frontline staff understand and can approach course and service delivery with an equity mindset.** Engage faculty and frontline staff in training on racial bias and stereotyping, and on equity and inclusion. Enact and widely publicize a clear policy for reporting and addressing incidents of racial bias.

4. **Raise the profile of programs, activities, and resources designed to increase Black/African American students' success.** Employ multiple modes of outreach simultaneously including via Canvas, the homepage of the website, through push notifications, on social media, through flyers, text messaging, and via a personal outreach campaign leveraging networks and organizations of Black/African American community members.

5. **Re-evaluate the approach taken within the Black Student Success Center to ensure it effectively serves all Black/African American students at the college.** Ensure there is a clear value proposition for engaging with the center and amplify those benefits to students. Consider specific opportunities for social connection, supports that promote educational progress and completion, and networking and career development for post-

graduation success. Implement customer service training for those working in the center to help students feel immediately welcome and served upon entry.

6. **Recognize that many of PCC's Black/African American students are frequently taking courses while juggling other job and caregiving responsibilities.** Many students are returning and/or working adults. Several participants mentioned struggling with long commutes. A significant proportion of students indicated they are taking some or all courses online. Effectively serving these learners will require more consideration in the selection, scheduling, and delivery of courses and support services–especially online–to ensure these students feel both connected to PCC and able to complete their goals efficiently.

7. **Proactively foster a sense of belonging among Black/African American students by demonstrating sincere concern for their success.** Increase awareness among all college personnel, particularly front-line faculty and staff, of the specific experiences of this student group at the college. Engage faculty with professional learning on culturally responsive and sustaining teaching and counseling practices in and out of the classroom.

8. **Examine current hiring and employee retention practices to address issues of representation through purposeful hiring of Black/African American faculty and staff.** Identify and interrupt bias among committee members and examine demographics of participants through each stage of hiring process: applicants, screening, first level, and final interviews. The University of Southern California Center for Urban Education's Equity for *Faculty Hiring Institute: Faculty Hiring Toolkit* may be a useful resource in this effort.

9. **Conduct regular research with Black/African American students for continuous improvement.** Soliciting student feedback in an ongoing way through focus groups or other channels will allow a more complete picture of Black/African American students' experiences at the college. This insight will empower PCC to understand if and how it is improving the campus climate for this student group and further develop strategies and make decisions, so all students thrive.

Appendix A. Student Focus Group Protocol

Session Start-Up

[PCC focus group protocol timing](#)

- Confirm Zoom is recording
- Document the number of participants and their name

Introduction [10 min, includes late start]

- Welcome everyone. We are excited to have you here today. I know that you likely have tremendous demands on your time, so we appreciate your participation in this focus group.
- My name is Darla Cooper, and I work for the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges, also known as The RP Group. We are a nonprofit organization engaged in research, planning, and evaluation activities. We often partner with California Community Colleges to help them use data and evidence to support student success.
- We were asked by the college to come in and speak with African American/Black students to learn more about their experiences at the college. Our goal for today is to gain a better understanding of what may or may not be impacting your experience at the college.
- To show you how much the college really values your time and willingness to share your experience as a student, we will be providing you with a $50 Amazon gift card after today's session through email.
- Toward the end of the session, I will be sharing a link to the sign-in survey, where you'll enter your name, ID, and email. It is important that you complete this survey to show that you were here and to get your gift card sent to you via email.

Guidelines

- Before we get started, we want to provide you with some guidelines to make this a positive experience for you.
- First, there are no "wrong" answers to any of the questions. We are interested in hearing your perspectives as students.
- Second, I ask that only one person speak at a time and be respectful of others' comments and ideas.

- If you are not speaking, please mute yourself to help reduce external noise. When you are ready to share, please unmute yourself, and I will call on you. You can also use the 'raise your hand' feature under 'Reactions.'
- Everyone will have a chance to speak. If you have not had an opportunity to provide your perspective, I may ask you to share your thoughts or ideas. However, everyone will not be expected to answer every question, so only answer the questions where you feel comfortable.
- If you haven't already done so, please be sure your name is listed in your video window; click on the 3 dots in the right upper corner of your video window, click on [change name], and write your name.
- The college and The RP Group value your confidentiality and want you to be honest. We will not associate or connect any feedback that comes out of this focus group with a particular individual. Our focus is not on who says what, but on what you all say.
- I will record the session. Our conversation here today is one of three focus groups I am conducting here at the college. This recording will not be shared with anyone here at the college.
- I will monitor the chat throughout this session, so feel free to input questions or comments there.
- Video is optional, so please do what is most comfortable for you. If you do choose to use video, and you haven't already, you may wish to blur your background to ensure others in your background are not in the recording.
- Any questions before we start?

Consent to Participate and Record

- Participation is voluntary and you can leave at any time. If you agree to participate, we ask that you respect the privacy of other students by not disclosing any content discussed during the focus group. **[HIT RECORD]**
- By staying in the focus group, you are consenting to participate and be recorded. If you do not want to participate and be recorded, that's okay. You may leave now or at any time.

Focus Group Questions [80 minutes]

Introductions [5 MIN TOTAL]

As students who have identified as African American/Black, we are interested in talking to you today about your experiences at PCC. We are eager to hear from you about what has helped you, any obstacles you are encountering, and what ideas you might have about how to help

students be more successful here at PCC. PCC hopes to use your feedback to make improvements to how it serves students as they enter the college.

To get started, we would like to do a quick round of introductions. To keep it simple and ensure no one is skipped, I will call on you to avoid people talking over each other.

Please introduce yourself by telling us your name, your major if you have one, how long you've been at PCC, and what your future educational and career plans are (after leaving PCC).

College Culture [10 min]

1. How would you describe the culture at PCC to someone who is unfamiliar with the college?
2. Would you say you feel connected to the college?
    a. If yes, please share a time when you felt connected.
    b. If no, please share what is missing that might make you feel more connected.
    c. I notice that many of you are affiliated with a program. For those not connected to a program, what does or would make you feel connected to the college?

Engagement [10 min]

3. If you have time between classes, how do you spend that time?
    a. Prompts: study alone, study with others, socialize with others, work, eat, go home, visit faculty office hours
4. What can the college do to help build more community among students?
    a. In what kinds of activities or events, if offered during this time, would you be interested in participating?

Black Student Success Center [10 min]

5. How many of you have been to the Black Student Success Center?
    a. For those who haven't visited, have you heard about it? What do you know about it?
    b. If you've heard about it, is there a particular reason why you haven't visited?
        i. Where are you going on campus for academic support?
    c. What would you get you to go?
        i. What would you want this center to provide?
        ii. What would you want it to feel like in the center?
    d. For those who have visited the center, how has the center helped you? What more could the center do or provide to help you?

Challenges and Supports [10 min]

6. What challenges do you face as an African American/Black student? As a student in general?
7. What have you personally done to overcome these challenges?
8. What is the college currently doing that is helping to address these challenges?
9. What more could the college do that would help you be successful? What is missing?
   a. What can faculty do in the classroom to help you?
   b. What can staff do?
   c. What can the administration do?

Navigating Your Identity at the College [15 min]

10. From your perspective, how do you believe your racial identity impacts how PCC's faculty and staff interact with you?
11. Do you feel the coursework offered at PCC is reflective of your own lived experience or the experiences of your community?
12. PCC wants all students to feel safe. How safe do you feel on campus?
    a. What concerns, if any, do you have about your safety on campus?

African American Transfer Tipping Point Study [15 min]

My organization recently did some research on Black transfer success. Specifically, we were looking at what factors increase the chances that a Black student will transfer. I can put a link to the project webpage in the chat, but I want to ask about your thoughts on a couple of findings from that study. https://rpgroup.org/All-Projects/ArticleType/ArticleView/ArticleID/269

13. We found passing transfer-level English and math in the first year at the community college was by far the largest predictor of whether a student persisted on their transfer path.
    a. Do you have any insights into why there is such a strong connection between passing transfer-level English and math in the first year and whether a student is successful in continuing down their transfer path?

A related finding from our study was that African American/Black Students who did not pass math were much more likely to report having experienced microaggressions at their college. In fact, the more frequently they experienced microaggressions, the less likely they were to pass math on their first try. However, we did not find the same association when it came to passing transfer-level English. It is important to note that we did not ask where the microaggressions occurred on campus (i.e., we don't know if it occurred in the math classroom) or who was the aggressor (faculty, student, staff). To make sure we're all on the same page, a microaggression

is a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority.

14. How has experiencing or witnessing microaggressions affected your success at the college?
    a. If you are comfortable, can you please share a time when you either personally experienced or witnessed microaggressions at PCC, including the roles of the people involved and where it happened?

Conclusion [5 min]

As we conclude our session, we want to say thank you for being open and honest with us and your peers about your experiences at the college.

15. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us today?

Thank you for your time. Your input will influence positive change. I wish you the best with the rest of the semester.

References

Cooper, D. M., Brohawn, K., Nguyen, A., Purnell, R. D., Redix, A., Segovia, D. (2022). *The African American Transfer Tipping Point: Identifying Factors that Impact Transfer among African American/Black Community College Students (Brief 1)*. The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges. https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/African_American_Transfer_Tipping _Point-(AATTP)-Study/AATTP_Brief1_Fall2022.pdf

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group) is a leader that supports equitable outcomes for minoritized and marginalized students through race-conscious, equity-minded research, planning, and professional development. We uplift student voices and empower researchers and planners to improve institutional effectiveness by dismantling systemic barriers and injustices.

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