Honors Theses at the University of Iowa

Spring 2019

Understanding the Impact: The Iowa Edge Program and African American Students in Higher Education

Tristan Schmidt

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT: THE IOWA EDGE PROGRAM AND AFRICAN AMERICAN
STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Tristan Schmidt

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the African American Studies

_____
Jessica Welburn Paige
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2019

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
African American Studies have been completed.

_____
Timothy Havens
African American Studies Honors Advisor

Understanding the Impact: The Iowa Edge Program and African American Students in Higher Education

A thesis presented by

Tristan A. L. Schmidt

To

The University of Iowa African American Studies Program

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

With Honors in African American Studies

The University of Iowa

Iowa City, Iowa

April 12, 2019

Abstract

The objective of this study was to determine if certain interventions made by the Iowa Edge program influenced their success and persistence of African American students who went through the Iowa Edge program. The hypothesis of this study is that African American students who participated in the Iowa Edge program were retained at higher rate because of the different mechanisms of the Iowa Edge program.

The study used qualitative data that was retrieved through in-person interviews with participants. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 24, identified as African American/Black, were University of Iowa students, and previous participants of the Iowa Edge program. This study focused on assessing whether certain mechanisms such as peer mentors, resource, and social support/network of the Iowa Edge program led to successful outcomes for participants of the Iowa Edge program. Participant interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for coding. Transcripts were coded, and themes were presented.

The results suggest that overall the mechanisms within the Iowa Edge program assisted students in being successful through their first semester after the Iowa Edge program and led to successful outcomes for African American students. There is, however, variation in the positive effect of such mechanisms. Additionally, certain mechanisms of the Iowa Edge program were viewed as not helpful for some participants. Adding in institutional data from the University of Iowa with the mechanisms of the Iowa Edge, the results support the hypothesis stating that Iowa Edge program leads to successful outcomes for African American students with some variation in response to the generalized approach of the Iowa Edge program.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, institutions have had to make changes and adjust to the changing demographics of the late 20th and 21st century (Cohn and Caumont 2016). With these changing demographics, however, comes the challenge of students from non-white, first-generation student backgrounds entering institutions of Higher Education that were previously geared for white individuals with financial and social capital. These challenges vary and range from the financial cost of higher education, campus climate, sense of belonging, or simply the amount of quality resources for non-white students, particularly African American students (Anonymous 2009; Cabrera et al. 1999; Dulabaum 2016; Harper 2006; Hunn 2014).

According to data from the Nation Center for Education Statistics (2017), only 34.5% of Black or African American undergraduate students enrolled at a postsecondary institution graduated within the 6-year metric (or 150% time) while white students graduated at almost double that at 60.7%. This paints a rather dismal image but begs the question of what institutions are doing to challenge the low retention and graduation rates of their African American students. Within many institutions several federal programs and numerous institution-specific programs exist to alleviate the pressures and challenges facing African American students. Several of them use similar tools and mechanisms such the use of faculty and peer mentors, knowledge of resources, and the establishing of professional and social networks (Brittian, Sy, and Stokes 2009; Mahoney 1998; Stromei 2000).

For the University of Iowa, many of the mechanisms are condensed into a singular program that uses a generalized approach for students from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds and first-generation college students. Unique in form, does the Iowa Edge program work to address the needs of African American students and provide them with successful

outcomes? Does it help them in comparison to their non-Iowa Edge peers? Using qualitative data analysis, this study hopes to address that question and provide a more transparent idea of what institutions and programs can do to address the needs of their African American undergraduate students. This study details the qualitative perceptions of a proactive, retention-based program and furthers adds to the research on African American students in higher education.

Review of Literature

I.   *Introduction*

The retention and graduation of students from underserved backgrounds is of great concern to many institutions and educational policy leaders. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), rates of student graduation from four-year institutions in the United States within 6 years from starting cohorts 2002 to 2009 show that Black and African American students come in at an average 40 percent whereas their white counterparts average at 62.1 percent. These averages present a startling image considering that the higher the educational attainment of an individual the more likely they are to receive additional income, more employment opportunities, improved health care, and more. Yet, even though those benefits exist, a large percentage of African American students do not graduate or persist to obtain them. Why does this barrier exist? What factors play a role in the retention and graduation of African American students? These questions are ones that sit at the forefront of this issue.

The literature presented addresses the work and research that has been put into understanding the problems and barriers that exist, but also to identify gaps, specifically the qualitative perceptions and perspectives of programs and initiatives working to tackle the retention and graduation rates of African American students in higher education.

II.   *The Issues in Higher Education*

There are a number of different barriers and issues that exist that may have a negative impact on retention and graduation rates for African American students. Issues range from a lack of mentorship, campus climate and community, financial hardship, and several others.

Self-Esteem

For example, previous research has shown that major barrier that exists for African American students is access to mentorship. Research shown that the underrepresentation of faculty of color on campus can contribute to lack of mentorship because students may feel that they have fewer faculty on campus to relate to. Limited opportunities for mentorship can affect African American students' sense of self and their self-esteem. As individuals proceed through postsecondary education, there is an amount of stress that accumulates affecting students' self-esteem and perceptions of success (Brittian et al. 2009; Negga, Applewhite, and Livingston 2007). This compounded stress affects self-esteem in several ways leading to lower academic performance which in turn translates to lower retention rates, particularly for African American students.

Research has also shown that African American students may receive less preparation for college than their white peers. This can be connected to the schools they attend before college, access to mentors, and their level financial and social capital. Lack of academic preparation can also negatively impact self-esteem and increase stress levels. For example, according to Michael Cuyjet (1997), there are other factors stemming from pre-college events such as lack of academic preparation and lack of appropriate role models that inadvertently influence the level of stress, sense of readiness, and self-esteem. Another issue relating to self-esteem is the perception of the African American or Black identity on college campuses. PWIs do not offer the appropriate spaces for African American students, especially African American men, to foster positive experiences in a non-threatening way and develop a positive image of self and their identity (Booker 2007; Cuyjet 1997; Haywood and Sewell 2016). These instances of non-affirmation, according to Keonya Booker (2007) stem from things such as in-class experiences with peers and instructors.

Racism and Discrimination

Similar to the experience within the classroom, experiences throughout the entirety of campuses or the campus climate can play a role in the lower academic performance and retention of African American students. Notably, research has shown and supported that racism and racial microaggressions have a large and direct effect on institutional commitment and self-esteem (Cabrera et al. 1999; Gallien and Peterson 2005; Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). Microaggressions in particular have a substantial effect in constructing a negative campus climate according to Solorzano et al. (2000) and the microaggressions do not just come from peers or other students, but instructors and university administrators themselves (Booker 2007). These student-faculty interactions can be affected by stereotyping and discrimination by faculty which can affect self-motivation, social expectations, and ultimately, academic success (Dulabaum 2016). In many of the studies mentioned previously, African American students connect back to a theme that is presented by Rowser (1997) that they have optimistic goals that are often overturned by several things including campus climate and lack of academic preparation.

Financial Resources

Campus climate presents itself as a larger system that is influenced by perceptions of identity and perpetuation of stereotypes of identities, yet another barrier exists that prevents the successful retention and graduation of African American students, financial ability.

Financial ability, defined as the ability to financially pay for postsecondary education, is a persistent barrier that has only worsened as the cost of higher education has increased over the past several decades. With state budget cuts to institutions and increasing prices of universities,

2.5 percent higher than the 2017 to 2018 academic year (College Board 2018), it becomes harder for all students to afford college. African American students may be more likely to experience financial challenges because on average African Americans have access to fewer financial resources. For example, an article from the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education notes that 69 percent of Black students faced financial issues leading to discontinuing their enrollment in colleges and universities according to data from the U.S. Department of Education (Anon 2006).

In addition to rising costs, need-based financial aid for undergraduates students granted by state governments has receded to 62.2 percent which has fallen almost from 81 percent throughout the course of a decade (Anon 2009). This may be particularly detrimental to African American students who , on average, come from households that have fewer financial resources than their white peers (Kochhar and Fry 2014). For example, black households have considerably less wealth than white households. Therefore, African American students may have fewer financial resources to draw from than white students. This results in lesser ability to invest in things such as education which research shows is perceived as tool to reduce the effect of intergenerational poverty on an individual or to exit poverty altogether (de Vuijst, van Ham, and Kleinhans 2017). Additionally, African American, Latino and first generation students may have less knowledge than white students about how to search for and access financial aid. (Dulabaum 2016).

First Generation Student Identity

Barriers may be even more significant for African Americans who are first generation students. There issues that arise for first-generation college students such as transitioning to a university or campus environment where there is a more intense academic curriculum to understanding faculty expectations of work (Collier and Morgan 2008). Noted in research for

8

both African American students and first-generation college students, there is the need for familial support systems, however, this often times is not easily found and can lead to a lack of self-esteem and sense of belonging (Haywood and Sewell 2016; Longwell-Grice et al. 2016; Owens et al. 2010). Many times resources are provided, however, research shows that issues still arise in how to use those resources and introduction to them, this is not including financial resources and financial ability to attend a college or university (Haywood and Sewell 2016; Owens et al. 2010). In addition to those first-generation barriers, African American students who also identify as first-generation college students face barriers related campus climate, which requires extensive academic, social, and personal support which is often not centralized into a singular program, but multiple different resources on a single campus (Owens et al. 2010).

Gender Differences & Education

Finally, in addition to first-generation identity, gender also plays a role in the retentions rates of African American students since research has documented a gender disparity between African American men and women. According to Harper (2006), in 2004 the average six-year graduation rate for African American men was approximately 44.3 percent while white men were at 61.4 percent and African American women were at 53.2 percent at flagship universities. This disparity is not just a quantitative, but qualitative as differences in perception of ability to succeed are also different between African American men and women (Rowser 1997). Personal development differences such decision making and socialization, according to Cuyjet (1997), are potentially exacerbated by sociological factors that prevent development of African American male identity in positive and successful ways. Interlocking identities such as gender and race, create different experiences for African American men and women leading to differences in

career aspirations and desire to achieve that makes the two different groups dissimilar (Cuyjet 1997; Rowser 1997).

With questions like the ones previously stated, there exist a number of different initiatives and programs at pre-dominantly white institutions (PWIs) and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) that work to help with the retention and graduations of African American students. There are problems and barriers that exist that prevent students from being successfully retained or making it to graduation, however, for African American students there are problems such as retention and attrition, lack of mentorship or faculty of color, self-esteem, academic performance, and campus climate to name just a few. Many programs and much research has been dedicated to exploring the social support of African American students, social environments of PWIs, financial hardships and changing financial landscapes of universities and colleges, gender disparities and gaps for African American students, and the mentorship effects on persistence and success.

III.   *Efforts & Initiatives*

Given the number of different barriers and problems that are presented, institutions have developed different initiatives to tackle them. One such effort has been mentoring programs and models that are structured differently per institution. Alongside retaining African American students, academic programs such as McNair scholar which promote academic performance, academic excellence and encourage students to pursue post-baccalaureate education exist to prevent attrition of underrepresented groups. Another federally funded program is TRIO programming, which McNair Scholars falls under, which often helps to guide low-income, first-generation, and students with disabilities through their undergraduate experience (Anon 2018c). Many other institutional mechanisms have been created to assist in recruitment and retention

efforts such as the use of student organizations in recruitment, advisory councils or groups to assist in oversight of institutional efforts, and other support systems (Gallien and Peterson 2005). Other forms of support exist to address the barriers mentioned, however, not all will have the same effect which will be discussed in the sections after this.

Mentorship Initiatives

Mentoring initiatives, or mentoring in general, has historically been seen as an effective method for ensuring the retention of African American students by allowing them to share experiences and seek assistance (Brittian et al. 2009; Butler et al. 2013). Mentoring, according to research, takes several different forms, but for the sake of this study, mentoring will be referred to as the connection between a student and a faculty member or peer in a collaborative and developmental way. Mentoring has been an effective approach used at PWIs for a number years either it be mentoring alone or a component of a program like the McNair Scholars program or those at other institutions (DeFreitas and Bravo Jr. 2012; Gallien and Peterson 2005; Stromei 2000). Research and literature has suggested that those programs, typically standalone in reference, have suggested that faculty mentors have a significant effect on students especially related to academic achievement and sense of belonging (DeFreitas and Bravo Jr. 2012). Yet, there is some research suggesting that there is evidence of no difference between students in mentorship programs and those not in them as suggested in Brittian et al. (2009). This research leaves room for further investigation into mentoring programs which will be discussed in the next section of this review.

Mentioned in research is the usage of peer-to-peer mentor models which place lower division students with upper division students to facilitate a more intentional and personal relationship. These programs prove to be effective for African American students because they build

community and share both academic and non-academic experiences about their collegiate career thus far at their institution (Gallien and Peterson 2005). These programs, however, vary from institution and so does the support for them. Additionally, there is no clarification on the effects of cross-race mentorship and same-race mentorship for the programs, however, Dahlvig (2010) notes that there are differences between the racial composition of those mentoring relationships. Same-race mentorship allows the development of empathy between a shared identity such as being African American whereas cross-race mentorship while not sharing that identity still allows for a developmental relationship especially if the mentor is culturally sensitive to the mentee's identity or identities (Dahlvig 2010).

McNair Scholars

While mentorship is an effective tool for the retention of students from underrepresented backgrounds there are academic programs in place at some institutions to help retain students and assist them in persisting to graduation. A goal of one such program, the McNair Scholars program, is just that and to assist students from underrepresented backgrounds enter into graduate study particularly doctoral study (Anon 2018b). Programs like McNair Scholars partner faculty mentorship, scholarly research, and academic excellence in order to increase academic success, retention and graduation rates (Campbell 2008). There is a limitation as research suggests that for some McNair programs, they foster the academic success of students in a manner geared more towards the STEM fields which, while not uncommon, still shows room for focusing on the social sciences and humanities (Vaughan 2017). African American students actively participate in programs like McNair Scholars at a higher rate than other groups. According to TRIO and McNair Scholars enrollment data a large number, approximately 11 out of every 25 students identify as Black establishing it as the largest enrolling racial group for the

academic year 2000-2001. For academic years 2002 up to 2005, a large percentage (=>43%) active participants enrolled were African American/Black according to program reports from the U.S. Department of Education (2016).

TRIO SSS

Additionally, the McNair Scholars program falls under the umbrella of the federal program, TRIO, which sets to serve first-generation, low-income, and students with disabilities. Another branch of TRIO is Student Support Services (SSS) that states all SSS projects must include tutoring services, assistance in course selection, financial and economic literacy, and several other factors that either relate directly or indirectly to the academic development and success of students (Anon 2018a). Research shows that this branch of TRIO provides support and views student success as holistic acknowledging the multiple factors that go into student success acknowledging not just academic stressors but personal stressors which results in the use of financial counseling and personal counseling with staff (Mahoney 1998). The use of such programming shows historically the number of students participating in such programs have exceptional graduation rates and outcomes (Thomas, Farrow, and Martinez 1998).

IV.   ***The Iowa Edge Program & Limitations***

The impactful efforts mentioned previously are executed by a large majority of institutions, yet the degree and effectiveness vary based on various factors. For the University of Iowa, a program that incorporates many of the different efforts is established and has been since 2006. The Iowa Edge program is a collaborative and developmental program made to assist incoming first-year students from underrepresented backgrounds in several ways. Four of the main goals according to the web page for the program address that the program helps students (a) engage

with faculty and campus leaders, (b) build community with peers in that incoming group, or cohort, (c) develop leadership skills, and (d) locate and access support services on campus. This program, in comparison to those mentioned earlier, is unique in that it attempts to condense different successful efforts and initiatives into one program. Additionally, it uses large group and small group mentorship models and offers students the ability to be in consistent contact with their mentor, or peer leader as mentioned in the program, throughout the duration of their time at the university.

The Iowa Edge program addresses several of the concerns mentioned in the first part of this review, especially the mentorship component. It provides direct contact with peer mentors and fosters an environment where faculty of color meet program participants developing connections and a social network. The creation of the social support system, one with both faculty and peers, is beneficial to African American students at PWIs (DeFreitas and Bravo Jr. 2012). The peer leaders in this program do vary on different identities such as racial and gender identities. This presents one justification for studying this program and its mentorship model. While Dahlvig (2010) mentions differences between cross-race and same-race mentorship, there is more room to explore how African American students explore and discuss their relationship with their peer leader.

Another justification to explore the effect of the Iowa Edge program is that there seems to be a lack institution specific programs that successfully centralize retention strategies into one program. Not mentioned previously, this program also serves as a high school to college transition assistance program providing navigational experience and allowing for the development of social capital. While the program aims for such, no research has been done to explore whether the aim holds true for African American students. Additionally, is the Iowa

Edge program and similar comprehensive models that exist providing too much information to participants at once? There are a number of other reasons to evaluate and research the effectiveness of this program, the overall research question as it relates to the literature is to address whether it accomplished its comprehensive mission of intervening and helping African American students persist and graduate at higher rates than those who did not participate.

With the given initiatives as mentioned in the previous sections, there are challenges and barriers that exist on campuses with such programs, both inside and outside of them. Notably, not much mention of financial aid initiatives and efforts other financial literacy efforts by TRIO are mentioned in research. This might align with trends of funding for higher education as noted in one of the earlier sections, where state governments and federal investment in postsecondary institutions has been declining. The Iowa Edge program does incorporate financial literacy resources; however, it does not provide funding or financial services which is a limitation to the program. An additional limitation is that the program does attempt to match up peer leaders and new students by academic discipline, however, this is not controlled for when examining retention rates as some academic disciplines are potentially more demanding in terms of curriculum than others.

V.   *Conclusion*

The barriers to persistence, retention and graduation rates for African American students are often more than systematic but things that are common occurrence on college campuses. The lack of faculty of color and mentorship, funding for programming and financial aid, and campus climate are factors that easily affect the student experience for African American students. Such factors that relate to the student experience are stress, self-esteem, sense of belonging, and

financial ability which are all intertwined and effect previously mentioned barriers and their subsequent effects on African American students.

Given those barriers many programs, efforts, and initiatives exist at many institutions aiding African American students. Programs like the McNair Scholars and TRIO SSS are crucial to the academic development and successful retention of students. Programming often includes mentorship experiences and not mentioned frequently are the student opportunities such as student organization involvement that develop self-esteem and sense of belonging (Gallien and Peterson 2005). One such program, the Iowa Edge program, attempts to provide a comprehensive approach to the many barriers, however, with a lack of current research focusing comprehensive programs there is a need to explore this gap. There are limitations to such programming as mentioned previously that will be explored and discussed later in this study.

Given all that has been presented in this literature review there is a need to examine what these programs are doing and how African American students perceive them and, ultimately, how they are affecting them throughout their collegiate journey. This study was conducted using interviews and qualitative data analysis. Data was presented at the end of the study to contextualize the different retention and graduation rates between African American students who did participate in the Iowa Edge program and African American students who did not participate in the program. Additionally, interviews were conducted with nine African American student-participants, four men and five women, to examine their perception of the Iowa Edge program, the mentorship component of the program, and other related topics. The interviews were analyzed and coded to identify themes that occur. Using both the qualitative and the cohort data, this study will examine the overall effect of the Iowa Edge program on different areas that often present themselves as barriers to African American retention and graduation rates. My

hypothesis is that the Iowa Edge program is an effective program in helping to retain African

American students and aid them in persisting to graduation compared to non-Iowa Edge African

American students.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine the outcomes of African American students who participated in the Iowa edge program and to identify if program interventions were beneficial to participants. The guiding question for this qualitative research study was: Does the Iowa Edge program provide successful interventions to retain African American students better than those who did not participate in the Iowa edge program.

Participants were recruited through different methods of communication and non-probability sampling. Potential respondents were notified of the study through the University of Iowa Center for Diversity & Enrichment email to all previous Iowa Edge participants still enrolled as undergraduate students at the University of Iowa and through email via their peer mentor. Participants were also notified through the Iowa Edge Student Organization social media page where previous participants of the Iowa Edge program were recruited and notified. Participants who were eligible were also asked to share the study with others therefore some participants were recruited through snowball sampling.

The sample size for this study was 9 students or approximately around 10% of the eligible population. All participants aged from 18 to 24 years old, identified as African American/Black and participated in the Iowa Edge program, and attended and participated in the Iowa Edge program. These students were selected because of their interest in participating in the study as it related to the Iowa Edge program. Of these students, 5 identified as female and 4 identified as males. Of all those that were interview, 3 indicated that neither parents/guardians had received an undergraduate degree, meaning these students were first generation college students. The remaining 6 students had either one parent/guardian or both parents/guardians obtain an undergraduate degree.

Potential respondents who were eligible and consented to participating were then interviewed for approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour. Interviewees were then interviewed at a location of their preference. Participants also consented to audio recording through an audio tape recorder for coding purposes. Interviews were conducted in with a structured interview schedule. Questions included, "What are some challenges you faced on campus?", "Did your peer leader help you make social connections?", and others that can be found in the appendix. Once participants finished the interview, they were compensated $25 for their time and participation. Participant audio recordings were then labeled with their respective pseudonym and uploaded to DataGain, a company that provides transcription services, to be transcribed for coding. Once transcribed, logs of each participant's interview were then hand coded and went through two rounds of coding. Codes were selected based on relevance to the research question and on common occurrence. Themes were identified based on code groupings and reoccurring emphasis points throughout the interview. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were assigned a pseudonym which can be referred to in the appendix.

Results

As has been stated in the literature review and in other studies, the factors such as mentorship, social support, and resources are themes all participants emphasized when interviewed specifically in connection to their outcomes with the Iowa Edge program. Yet, it is a lack of nuance to not address that the level of effect of those factors varied from one participant to the next. Some of the variations ranged from deviated perception of the Iowa Edge's purpose all the way to an almost negative perception of certain aspects.

The aspects or themes that were heavily emphasized during interviews were related to social support/community, peer mentorship, and resource availability. These themes appeared consistently in many of the interviews and even more so when participants were asked "Imagining after one semester after the program ended, do you feel the as if the program helped you get through your first semester?" While this is a large question that could have potentially yielded very general responses or short answers, many participants continued to discuss specific aspects of the program that they felt assisted them in their first semester following the Iowa edge program.

Peer Mentorship

For most participants, peer mentorship or the peer leader component of the program was viewed positively and as beneficial through the program. This perception of benefit came from some participants stating that their peer leader established a genuine connection with them and/or their group during the program. For instance, when asked about their impression of the peer leaders of the program, more specifically, their own peer leader, Lisa shared

"We have a real connection, sounds cool. -- She is in the Latinx [community], Latina, but it's still cool to see someone in any minority racial or ethnic minority doing big things on campus."

This connection and role model idea was apparent not just because of the ability to establish a sense of pride, but also peer leaders were able to help students discuss and talk about experiences at the university that relate to minoritized student experiences. When discussing the difference of racial and ethnic identity, Jennifer acknowledged that even though they were not the same identity, but still one a part of a minority on campus, they could share experiences. When asked about the relationship between Jennifer and their mentor and if their racial and ethnic identity influenced their relationship, she shared

"Possibly yes just because he's also a minority technically. So, I feel like that had a lot to do with it because we can relate on a lot of experiences here and since he was at that, I believe he was a junior so he had a lot of more background in a sense but not really of what it's like being here and being a minority on campus, so, yeah."

This sense of similarity was echoed and observed in a few other participants' responses. Tyler stated that his peer mentor assisted him in finding activities to get involved in and helped to create a social network him and his fellow participants that also provided some resources for the participant to have access to. Kara, however, provided that her mentor was not the same racial or ethnic identity as them which was felt as something to hold back on sharing experiences. Specifically, Kara stated,

> "sometimes I can hold back at times only because I have in mind that they don't
>
> understand, or this is my life and this is their life and they won't understand min, and I
>
> can't understand theirs so I tend to hold back."

Kara shared her experience which may highlight the benefit of same-race mentorship or
mentoring relationships.

Community & Social Network

A sense of community that translates into belonging and social networks was observed in
all interviews, six participants felt that the program provided a sense of community for them and
allowed them to build networks and have social support mechanisms in place. There is, however,
a caveat in that there were three participants, Lisa, Michelle, and Mike felt that the social
network aspect of the program was not helpful to them or that it was not impactful enough to
suffice as something that could be described as significant to their experience in the program or
beneficial to their outcomes after the program. For example, Lisa discussed that the connections
made through the program was not significant to the extent they thought it would be. When
asked if the program helped to create any specific social networks or support for them, Lisa
stated,

> "Kind of. I don't think to the extent it was meant to, but I know people who went to the
>
> program with me, but I don't know them. I think that a lot of the connections we made
>
> were very surface level, and it was – I probably don't know their names anymore, but I
>
> could point them out and say they went through the program with me."

This sentiment was echoed almost in exact word to participant Mike who stated that the social network and support aspect of the program was not something that was noted as beneficial or helpful to his persistence at the institution.

On the other end of participant response, six of them noted that the social support and network aspect of the program came through their peer mentor, faculty they met through the program, or the result of being introduced to other students within their peer groups or the program itself. In one instance, Alan described that this network extended via social media,

"like I got a lot of people's like Snapchats, Facebooks, and everything from my Iowa Edge group and then, a lot of couple of other people from different groups."

This provided a good way to stay in contact with the social network built within the Iowa Edge program beyond just the assigned peer group within the program. Sara shared similar thoughts about being able to gain a group of friends.

"Yeah, it made me feel calm. It's like I automatically had a group of friends, and we stuck together all the time. Like even now, I can recognize someone who was in the Iowa Edge. And so I felt like I not only did gain friendships but also gained like resources. I still talk to some of the mentors that I met there, and their mentors of all different backgrounds."

Alan also echoed those same things and shared thoughts about interactions with faculty during the program,

"Well, like, I feel like they kind of like allowed us to like I remember there was ones thing in Iowa that's programmed with us. A couple of professors said it's okay to switch your major like a couple of them switched theirs."

Within both those statements, participants identified that there were resources, for example the faculty, to assist them or the creating of community that Sara mentioned about recognizing individuals and friendships, both faculty and friendships meaning, in this case, social capital and community.

Resources

All participants when asked if there were resources provided by the Iowa Edge program to assist them in the various challenges, they may have faced throughout their first semester. Generally, all participants expressed that there were resources provided them for their different challenges they encountered. It should be noted that there is variation in how impactful those resources were for them and what kind of resource participants described using as well. Many participants acknowledged the academic resources offered by the program as something that was beneficial and supportive to their first semester after the program ended. Additionally, participants were described the knowledge of where to find academic resources as a very beneficial to their outcomes after the program ended. Particularly, Alan, Chris, Jennifer, Sara, Lisa, and Kara acknowledged that the program showed them where to find academic resources such as supplemental instruction, tutoring services, writing services, and office hours. This benefit was expressed by the participants and resulted with many feeling prepared or a sense of being ready for classes. Chris stated,

> "It prepared me – that's like the best explanation I could get you – it prepared me. I thought it was gonna prepare me for school and it did just that, it gave me resources, to do a lot for myself."

Another participant, Lisa, noted specifically that from going into the classroom on her first day of classes that because of the Iowa Edge program and the resources provided she described feeling prepared to enter the classroom.

There were other resources that the Iowa edge program as noted by other participants. Many participants during interviews acknowledged finances as a barrier and something resulted in a lot of stress. Yet, Michelle described resources made available them.

> "I mean I had that challenge and the I guess financial problems were kind of part. And like, I know that there are resources there I just haven't used them. But I knew if I needed a financial literacy specialist, I could go see one."

Chris, however, stated that there was no financial aspect of the program that assisted in helping him after the program and that there were resources that had not been introduced to him during the program. This acknowledge that there may be a lack of financial planning or financial assistance resources based on that statement. Another participant, Sara, stated that there as benefit to them especially being introduced to mental health resources during the program:

> "I was given information about who to meet with to talk about like mental health and counseling."

Most participants frequently mentioned in-direct resources such as peer mentors and faculty that were beneficial to them in several varying challenges and barriers that they encountered.

Negative Perceptions

There is another perspective that was shared by a small number of participants that the program was not helpful to them specifically. Mike shared their response:

25

"No. Honestly no. I – I think that what the program offered was something that to be frank with you I did not need. I think it was really good for people that had the background that I had, this program wasn't geared for that even though I am – you know African American or a person of color."

When probed further about their response, denoted that the program felt it was an orientation for individuals of color on smaller scale than typical college orientation yet geared more as a social support mechanism.

"But I don't think it really impacted my social life that much because of the fact that myself and a lot of those people didn't remain friends throughout you know the first year,"

Mike stated which echoed what participant Michelle had felt and went further to say that it did not affect their experience at the University of Iowa when viewed as a PWI.

"I've been around white people my whole life you know? I think it's a bigger [deal] if you haven't been around white people and going to a PWI versus you know being comfortable with it and knowing how to deal with certain situation."

The social network aspect of the Iowa Edge program for these participants felt to be the less helpful or even just not necessary. This lack of social support is not negating that they did not make any friends as both participants established at least one friendship, however, the connotation was that they felt it was not helpful to them.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that there is overall a positive benefit and take away from the Iowa Edge program for African American students especially considering the challenges African American students face at a PWI like the University of Iowa. In exploring the results, it should, however, be noted there was variation among how certain aspects of the program such as social support/networks, for example, influence a student's experiences through the program and thereafter. A few participants noted this that the social support/network component to the program was not as beneficial to them because they felt they were not intended audience for such support. This is not to say that support mechanisms within the program are not critical, yet it questions what about that mechanism was not beneficial to those students. For participant Mike, it was the sense that he was not the intended audience of such a mechanism and that the program attempted to establish what they felt as surface level connections. Another participant echoed that thought and further explained that it was not necessary because they had been used to being around white individuals, that there was no need an additional social support mechanism. In looking at similar response, the participants tended to be from predominantly white neighborhoods and had noted that they did not explore their racial identity extensively until arriving at the Iowa Edge program. Mike acknowledged that while the Iowa Edge program was one of the first times, he saw himself in a different light because of being made aware of their African American identity, it did not necessitate a need for the social support mechanism that were placed. However, for a majority of the other six participants, the social support/network aspect of the program provided a sense of community where individual felt they individuals they could talk to and felt like they belonged. This sense of belonging and

community was a benefit to participants in which they attribute back to their success post-Iowa Edge and after their first semester on campus.

The results of this study also address something that was noted in within Dahlvig (2010) about the effect of different racial and ethnic identities for mentorship of African American students. Most participants had a peer mentor that was often from a different racial background except for a small number of participants. For the participants that did have a mentor of a different racial background or different-race mentor, many said that it did not have too much of an effect on their interactions. Jennifer, specifically, mentioned that even though her and her mentor were not of the same racial identity, that fact that they were both from minoritized backgrounds allowed an established line of connection for the sharing of experiences. However, Kara shared that it was potentially because of that difference in race that they might not share some experiences or social aspects of themselves with their mentor which was reminiscent in the study done Dahlvig (2010). Participants were also asked about cross-gender interactions as well to consider if gender played a role their relationship. All participants indicated that it neither had a positive or negative effect on their mentoring relationship which brings attention to the discussion of how gender affects students of other backgrounds when it comes to peer mentorship or mentorship in general.

The Iowa Edge program attempts to cultivate social and cultural capital for students, especially first-generation college students, using the various mechanism previously mentioned. For some participants, this was the first time they saw other students and mentors that were non-white. Yet, for others it was that fact that they were so used to being around white students that they did not feel that had to find community within the Iowa Edge program. This was specifically the case for Mike and Michelle, self-identified as first-generation college students,

who described that even though the University was PWI, there was a sense that that aspect of building social networks, or social capital, may not have been necessary for them. Both participants, however, did acknowledge that they came from predominantly white neighborhoods, middle-class neighborhoods which might cause question of the effectiveness of the Iowa Edge program's generalized and condensed programming and approach. Yet, they found interest and use in the resources of the program which does not rule all other aspects of the program being beneficial to them. For other participants, all the aspects of the program were seen as beneficial or positive which begs the question of how do we address the concerns of those students participating in the program with an already accumulated amount of social and cultural capital. While according to a number of studies, there tends to be less for first-generation college students, the results of this study add more nuance to the discussion and further warrants investigation into the development of both sub-populations of African American undergraduate students.

Institutional data obtained from the Iowa Edge program in tandem with the qualitative data suggests the mechanisms such as social support/network, mentorship, and/or resources do have an overall effect on the retention of African American students who participate in the program. When looking at the graduation and retention rates from the Iowa Edge cohorts in Figure 1, there is noticeable difference between cohorts of African American students who went through the Iowa Edge program and those who did not go through the Iowa Edge program.

Figure 1 – Iowa Edge & Non Iowa Edge Graduation & Retention Rates for First Time Full Cohorts

Average Graduation & Retention Rates for African American Students

■ Iowa Edge ■ Non Iowa Edge
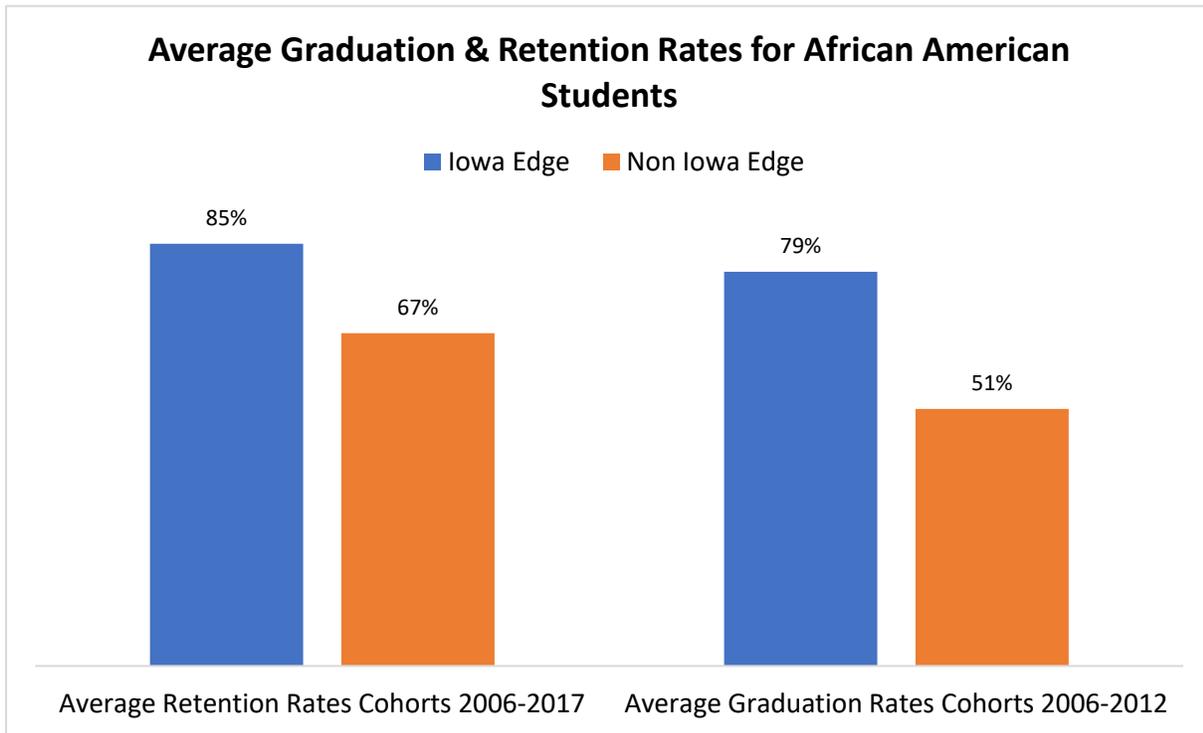
Using this data to help inform what participants stated in interviews, the results generally support the hypothesis, however, based on participant interviews certain mechanisms may not be useful or necessary as they may have come with the developed social or cultural capital that would make a mechanism like social support/networks redundant or not helpful. Yet, when looking at the larger picture the program and the participant responses establish, the Iowa Edge program provides enough mechanisms to increase personal and student success with some given variation based on accumulated social and cultural capital.

There were limitations to this study that may potentially threaten the generalizability of the results and discussion. The number of participants is quite small (n=9) and while useful for creating a qualitative image, the ability to obtain the perspectives and qualitative responses of the larger, eligible population was not possible.

Future Research

The Iowa Edge program, as seen in the previous sections, years of institutional and quantitative data available to track the retention and graduation rates, participant feedback, and grade point averages. Besides open-ended surveys and this research, there is no qualitative research available to further explore the in-depth perspectives of the multitude of students that go through the program. While this study focuses solely on African American students, there are a number of students from other racial and ethnic groups as well as first-generation students that have different perspectives that might differ from or strengthen the hypothesis tested in this study.

Future research and suggestions include conducting additional qualitative research with other demographics and educational groups within the Iowa Edge program. This will assist in addressing the question of the overall effectiveness of the program's generalized, uniform approach. For example, conducting a qualitative study of Latinx populations that have participated in the Iowa edge program may yield results that discuss the specific nuances associated with Latinx identity in relation to the Iowa Edge program and present data on the overall effectiveness of the program to address the needs of Latinx students who may also have varying levels of social and cultural capital.

In full review, additional research is needed to address the perspectives of other racial, ethnic, and educational student groups to further develop suggestions that will assist the program in improving its own graduation and retention rates, as well as addressing the concerns mentioned within this study.

Conclusion

The Iowa Edge program approaches students from many backgrounds in a generalized way to be as applicable as possible as possible. While data and participant interviews suggest that the program was, for the most part, helpful to them, there is still much more to investigate and explore within this type of programmatic solution to institutional and systematic barriers. Given all that the program attempts to bring together African American students, there is still much left to be addressed, however, the Iowa Edge program deserves merit for what it has done. Addressing concerns of social support, providing peer-to-peer mentoring relationships, and identifying the resources necessary for academic and personal success on campus, the Iowa Edge program seems to support better outcomes for African Americans, more so than those who did not go through the program. There are still barriers within the program that make it difficult for those even with the assistance of the program that will need to be addressed and require appropriate solutions. In the time being, however, the Iowa Edge provides something to the African American students who participate in it with it being one of the aspects mentioned previously. This begs the question of what this means for students within other programs or what can be done to address the concerns mentioned about the program itself. While it is still in its infancy, the Iowa Edge program continues to provide successful outcomes for African American students, but still has work to do in terms of ensuring that students who participate can reap the full intention, purpose, and mission of the Iowa Edge program.

References

Anon. 2016. "Office of Postsecondary Education - Reports & Resources." Retrieved December 12, 2018 (https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/reports.html).

Anon. 2018a. "Student Support Services Program." Retrieved December 12, 2018 (https://www2.ed.gov/programs/triostudsupp/index.html).

Anon. 2018b. "TRIO - Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program -- Home Page." Retrieved December 12, 2018 (https://www2.ed.gov/programs/triomcnair/index.html).

Anon. 2018c. "TRIO Home Page." Retrieved December 12, 2018 (https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html).

Anonymous. 2006. "The Grievous Shortfall in Financial Aid for Most African-American College Students." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education; New York* (54):24–25.

Anonymous. 2009. "Declining Financial Aid for African-American College Students: Rating the States on Providing Need-Based Financial Aid for Low-Income, College-Bound African Americans." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education; New York* (65):44.

Booker, Keonya C. 2007. "Perceptions of Classroom Belongingness Among African American College Students." *College Student Journal* 41(1):178–86.

Brittian, Aerika S., Susan R. Sy, and Julie E. Stokes. 2009. "Mentoring: Implications for African American College Students." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 33(2):87–97.

Butler, S. Kent, Marcheta P. Evans, Michael Brooks, Cyrus R. Williams, and Deryl F. Bailey. 2013. "Mentoring African American Men During Their Postsecondary and Graduate School Experiences: Implications for the Counseling Profession." *Journal of Counseling & Development* 91(4):419–27.

Cabrera, Alberto F., Amaury Nora, Patrick T. Terenzini, Ernest Pascarella, and Linda Serra Hagedorn. 1999. "Campus Racial Climate and the Adjustment of Students to College: A Comparison between White Students and African-American Students." *The Journal of Higher Education* 70(2):134–60.

Campbell, Clark D. 2008. "Best Practices for Student–Faculty Mentoring Programs." Pp. 325–43 in *The Blackwell Handbook of Mentoring*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Cohn, D'vera and Andrea Caumont. 2016. "10 Demographic Trends That Are Shaping the U.S. and the World." *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved April 30, 2019 (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/31/10-demographic-trends-that-are-shaping-the-u-s-and-the-world/).

College Board. 2018. "Trends in College Pricing." Retrieved November 7, 2018 (https://trends.collegeboard.org/college-pricing).

Collier, Peter J. and David L. Morgan. 2008. "'Is That Paper Really Due Today?': Differences in First-Generation and Traditional College Students' Understandings of Faculty Expectations." *Higher Education* 55(4):425–46.

Cuyjet, Michael J. 1997. "African American Men on College Campuses: Their Needs and Their Perceptions." *New Directions for Student Services* (80):5–16.

Dahlvig, Jolyn. 2010. "Mentoring of African American Students at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)." *Christian Higher Education* 9(5):369–95.

DeFreitas, Stacie Craft and Antonio Bravo Jr. 2012. "The Influence of Involvement with Faculty and Mentoring on the Self-efficacy and Academic Achievement of African American and Latino College Students." *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning* 12(4):1–11.

Dulabaum, Nina L. 2016. "Barriers to Academic Success: A Qualitative Study of African American and Latino Male Students | The League for Innovation in the Community College." Retrieved July 14, 2018 (https://www.league.org/innovation-showcase/barriers-academic-success-qualitative-study-african-american-and-latino-male).

Gallien, Louis B. and Marshalita Sims Peterson. 2005. *Instructing and Mentoring the African American College Student: Strategies for Success in Higher Education*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

Harper, Shaun. 2006. "Black Male Students at Public Flagship Universities in the US: Status, Trends, and Implications for Policy and Practice." *ResearchGate*. Retrieved October 18, 2018 (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237751147_Black_male_students_at_public_flagship_universities_in_the_US_Status_trends_and_implications_for_policy_and_practice).

Haywood, Jerry Lee and Said Sewell. 2016. "Against All Odds: Implications for Low Income African American Male Students Seeking a College Degree at a Predominately White College." *Race, Gender & Class; New Orleans* 23(3/4):109–28.

Hunn, Vanessa. 2014. "African American Students, Retention, and Team-Based Learning: A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for Retention at Predominately White Institutions." *Journal of Black Studies* 45(4):301–14.

Kochhar, Rakesh and Richard Fry. 2014. "Wealth Inequality Has Widened Along Racial, Ethnic Lines Since End of Great Recession." *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved November 7, 2018 (http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/12/racial-wealth-gaps-great-recession/).

Longwell-Grice, Rob1, Nicole Zervas2 Adsitt, Kathleen3 Mullins, and William4 Serrata. 2016. "The First Ones: Three Studies on First-Generation College Students." *NACADA Journal* 36(2):34–46.

Mahoney, Robert G. 1998. "Components of TRIO's Success: How One Student Support Services Program Achieved Success." *The Journal of Negro Education* 67(4):381–88.

Negga, Feven, Sheldon Applewhite, and Ivor Livingston. 2007. "African American College Students and Stress: School Racial Composition, Self-Esteem and Social Support." *College Student Journal* 41(4):823–30.

Owens, Delila, Krim Lacey, Glinda Rawls, and Jo Anne Holbert-Quince. 2010. "First-Generation African American Male College Students: Implications for Career Counselors." *The Career Development Quarterly* 58(4):291–300.

Rowser, Jacqueline F. 1997. "Do African American Students' Perceptions of Their Needs Have Implications for Retention?" *Journal of Black Studies* 27(5):718–26.

Solorzano, Daniel, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso. 2000. "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students." *The Journal of Negro Education* 69(1/2):60–73.

Stromei, Linda K. 2000. "Increasing Retention and Success Through Mentoring." *New Directions for Community Colleges* 2000(112):55–62.

Thomas, Earl Preston, Earl Vann Farrow, and Juan Martinez. 1998. "A TRIO Program's Impact on Participant Graduation Rates: The Rutgers University Student Support Services Program and Its Network of Services." *The Journal of Negro Education* 67(4):389–403.

Vaughan, Terry1. 2017. "The Work of Scholars: An Institutional Ethnography of a McNair Scholars' Class." *Ethnography & Education* 12(1):17–32.

de Vuijst, Elise, Maarten van Ham, and Reinout Kleinhans. 2017. "The Moderating Effect of Higher Education on the Intergenerational Transmission of Residing in Poverty Neighbourhoods." *Environment and Planning A* 49(9):2135–54.

Appendix

Interview Schedule

Background

1. Where do you live now?
    a. On-campus?
    b. Off-campus?
2. What do you do for a living?
    a. If employed, how long have you had that job?
3. Are you a first-generation college student? (Defined as neither parent/guardian obtained a four-year degree/bachelor's degree)
    a. How far did their parents go in school?
4. Where are you from? **(Probe: Demographics of community)**

The University of Iowa

1. Why did you pick/decide to come to Iowa?
2. What kind of experience have you had?
3. Did you live on-campus?
    a. What was that experience like? (**Probe**)
4. What were/are you involved in on campus?
    a. Student orgs? **(Probe: Racial Composition)**
    b. On-campus employment?
    c. Research?
5. What were/are involved in off campus?
    a. Community orgs/Volunteer work?
    b. Off-campus employment?
6. How do you feel attending a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)?
    a. What do you think it is like for other Black students?
    b. Have you experienced any discrimination on campus? **(Probe)**

Pre-Iowa Edge

1. Did you visit the University of Iowa prior to Orientation? The state of Iowa?
2. What did you think of the Iowa Edge program **before** attending?
3. Have you had a mentor before?
    a. If so, what in your opinion made them a good mentor?

Post-Iowa Edge

1. Imagine yourself…
   a. One semester after the program – do you feel the program helped you through your first semester? **(Probe: social, psychological, academic, etc. aspects)**
2. Did Iowa Edge help you ease/feel more comfortable at a PWI like the University of Iowa?
   a. If not, what do you believe would have been effective?
3. How did you feel **after** the Iowa Edge program ended?
4. How did the program help you and your transitional experience from High school to College?
   a. *Please rate from "Helpful - Somewhat Helpful - Not Helpful"*
5. Did the program meet your expectations? **(Probe: cultural, social, academic, etc.)**
6. How did Iowa Edge prepare you to do what you are doing now?
7. Imagine it is graduation day. Looking back, do you believe the Iowa Edge helped you get to that point?

Challenges and Successes on Campus

1. What are some challenges you faced on campus?
   a. **(Probe: Financial, social, academic, etc.)**
2. Did the Iowa Edge program help you overcome those challenges or provide resources to overcome them?
   a. If so, how?
   b. If not, how?
3. Do you believe the Iowa Edge program assisted you in being academically successful or prepared?
4. The Iowa Edge program is developed to help create social support for participants. Do you feel that the program did that for you?

Peer Mentor Relationship

1. What was your impression of your peer leader **before** the program?
2. What was your impression **after** the program?
3. Was your mentor of the same race or ethnicity as you?
   a. If so, how did you benefit from that identity similarity?
   b. If not, how did that affect your relationship, if at all?
4. Was your mentor of the same gender or gender identity as you?
   a. If so, how did you benefit from that identity similarity?
   b. If not, how did that affect your relationship, if at all?

5. How did your peer leader, if at all, help you to get involved on campus?
6. Did your peer leader help you make social connections? **(Probe: What kind – Peers, Staff, Faculty)**
7. Did your peer leader help you through academic adversity?
    a. If not, what do you wish they could have done?
8. Are you still contact with your peer leader? Your peer groups?

Friends (College)

1. What are your friends like? Supportive/Unsupportive? **(Probe: racial/ethnic composition)**
2. How did you meet them?
3. Were they involved in the Iowa Edge Program?
    a. Were they aware of the program if not from Iowa Edge?
    b. Do you think they would have benefitted from the program?
4. Have your friends helped you through your time at the University of Iowa?

University Perception & Policy

1. How do you think the University of Iowa views the Iowa Edge program?
2. Do you think the University of Iowa should support the Iowa Edge program more? **(Probe: financially, socially, etc.)**
    a. If not, why?
3. Do you think all students should be aware of the program?
4. What is your opinion on the racial climate and racial diversity on campus?
5. In your opinion, do you believe the University of Iowa engages and does enough for minoritized or underserved/underrepresented students?
    a. What do you think the University should do better?
6. Do you believe students from underserved or minoritized communities should have a say in University programming and policies? (more programs for first-gen students, more Iowa Edge-like programs)

We have reached the end of the survey. I would like to say thank you and much appreciation for your participation. Is there anything you want to add or think that should be included in this that has not been said or asked?

Participant Pseudonyms:

Sara – X1

Jennifer – X2

Lisa – X3

Kara – X4

Michelle – X6

Mike – Y1

Alan – Y2

Chris – Y3

Tyler – Y5