

From Acceptance to Enrollment: An Approach to Enrolling Black/African-American Students at a Rural PWI

A disquisition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Educational Leadership.

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Abstract

In the competitive landscape of higher education, institutions grapple with the challenge of fostering racial diversity and a sense of belonging among students, particularly at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). This disquisition presents a comprehensive improvement initiative implemented at Western Carolina University (WCU) aimed at increasing Black student enrollment. Drawing on Improvement Science methods, the study assesses the effectiveness of the introduced changes during the 2023 enrollment year.

This study underscores the critical role of students' belief they will belong at WCU after their acceptance thus easing their decision to enroll. The study highlights recent positive shifts in WCU admissions practices, primarily hiring current students, which have improved applicants' communication and connection with the university. Examining the potential impact of the Supreme Court's 2023 case on affirmative action, the author discusses anticipated challenges to maintaining racial diversity at the institution. Moreover, the paper addresses the historical context of racial exclusion in higher education and emphasizes the need for a diverse perspective in decision-making processes.

Finally, this study offers insights into the complexities of admissions processes, suggesting that fostering diversity and belonging requires a multifaceted approach. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions in higher education on creating more inclusive environments and underscore the importance of addressing systemic barriers that prospective students may encounter during the admissions process while determining their college choice.

Keywords: *admissions, enrollment, Black student enrollment, predominantly white institution, rural serving institution*

The Disquisition

The disquisition is formal, problem-based discourse. The disquisition is closely aligned with the scholar-practitioner role of Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.) students and thus takes on a practical focus rather than the theoretical focus of traditional Ph.D. dissertations. The purpose of the disquisition is “to document the scholarly development of leadership expertise in organizational improvement” (Lomotey, 2020, p. 5). The Ed.D. program at WCU nurtures and matures students as both scholars and practitioners who are trained to understand systems and institutional challenges and opportunities through a lens of research and scholarship. Students apply their knowledge, using their institutional access and positionality, directly to the educational institutions where they lead. The Ed.D. is an applied degree, and the disquisition is similarly an applied capstone experience for doctoral work. The disquisition at WCU specifically utilizes an Improvement Science methodology, is shaped by critical theory and scholarly research, and engages the candidate in the application of the concepts in an applied manner through the development and implementation of an intervention within their local institution, focused on improvement of equity within that system. Ultimately, the disquisition serves as documentation and assessment of an improvement initiative that “contributes to a concrete good to the larger community and the dissemination of new relevant knowledge” (Lomotey, 2020, p. 5).¹

¹ Statement prepared by Alison Joseph, Ed.D. and Educational Leadership faculty

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From Acceptance to Enrollment: An Approach to Enrolling Black/African-American Students at a PWI

A National Issue

No house should ever be on a hill or on anything. It should be of the hill. Belonging to it. Hill and house should live together each the happier for the other.

Frank Lloyd Wright

□

Any day, on any campus in the United States, institutional stakeholders ask admission directors, “How are the numbers?” The numbers referenced most often include the number of applications and the commitment (or enrollment) number of the incoming first-year class. Because different areas of the campus have interest in specific subsets, a director must be ready to dive deeper into the numbers. Racial diversity of the incoming class is an area of particular interest to many on campus—especially at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). However, according to Miller (2020), many Black/African American² students fail to enroll after acceptance into PWIs.

According to Strayhorn (2019) failure to enroll may be related to a prospective student’s perceived sense of belonging. Everyone wants to belong. Humans share the need to belong at a basic level. According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), only when physiological and safety needs are met can humans move to the next level of love and belonging. Maslow noted deficiency, or unmet needs, take precedence over other, high-order needs such as growth. When a person has a deficiency, it must be met before growth can occur. If a student’s needs fail to be met, they cannot ascend the hierarchy. Maslow’s concepts can be applied to a student’s opportunity for growth in the college setting—a

² The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) uses Black/African American and Black or African American to describe race. I have chosen to use Black throughout the paper for ease of reading.

student cannot move to growth (belonging) until their safety needs are met. Unfortunately, Black potential students at PWIs may not feel a strong sense of belonging from the institution when considering enrollment.

The improvement initiative described in this disquisition explains how Western Carolina University created an admissions process to increase Black student enrollment. I used Improvement Science methods to assess whether the change we introduced was an improvement and ultimately increased Black student enrollment in the 2023 year.

Students' Sense of Belonging

Student Belonging or Sense of Belonging has become an area of concern in higher education, especially as it relates to students of color. Strayhorn (2019) defines belongingness as “perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (p. 4). Strayhorn asserts that a sense of belonging is relational and has a shared quality to relationships. Students who experience a sense of belonging feel as if they are considered an important part of the group. This can apply to groups they hope to be a member of as well—in the case of admissions, prospective students need to feel as though they would be a valued member of the college community.

As students begin their college search process, they consider many institutional factors such as academic programs, athletics, co-curricular activities, cost of attendance, and the location of the institution. These preferences might be conscious or unconscious as to the type of school that will, in the end, be the best fit—in other words what the student feels will make them feel safe in an environment that is, for many, different from the communities they have called home. While the admissions process should be one that allows the students to discover the possibilities of enrolling in a school, the process often creates various barriers

that prohibit students from getting to know the campus community and determining how they may feel as an enrolled student.

Historical Exclusionary Admission Practices in Higher Education

Admission to colleges and universities in the United States historically excluded rather than included non-white populations. “Following the Civil War, historically white colleges, North and South, diverged only slightly in their willingness to admit non-white students. These schools also limited or prevented the enrollment of other groups, such as non-Protestant Christians or Jews” (Harris, 2015, p.4). Quota systems in admissions processes kept Black students and those other than Protestants out or at a minimum. Threats of violence provided an excuse to keep segregation in all parts of society, including higher education.

Inequity has been maintained in higher education for centuries. While the Morrill Land Grant College Act of 1862 created a “class of land-grant institutions that Black students could not attend” (Mangan, 2021, p.3) the second Morrill Act of 1890 provided land-grant institutions specifically for Black students and at the time was lauded as an appropriate way to provide higher education opportunity to Black people. As a result, many of the country’s flagship institutions, while very well-funded, proved to be some of the least diverse schools, a trend which has not changed significantly over the last century. Unfortunately, institutions experience no consequences for not becoming more diverse, leading to complacency related to change in who is admitted. Universities tend to rely on factors related to academic performance, primarily based on grades earned during K-12 education and standardized test which have historically underserved Black students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). All these factors combined make the admissions process exponentially harder for Black students from a macro perspective—there are various ways Black people have systematically been kept out and despite many changes, these problems still linger. When Black students are admitted to PWIs they are then faced with the challenge of determining whether or not they will be welcomed

and feel like they belong. These barriers will be discussed further in sections below. Before any student enters a postsecondary experience, they must complete their K-12 education. For Black students, this means having navigated systematic racism in the first twelve years of their education.

Systemic Racism in P-12 Education

The P-12 system has historically been seen through the eyes of white teachers, mostly female. As such, systems to measure student achievement typically prioritize a White perspective that undervalues contributions of Black educators and curriculum. According to Milner (2012) the achievement gap debate in education typically focuses on students' standardized test scores. It also includes student graduation rates, patterns in gifted and advanced placement, and other measurable outcomes that allow for comparisons between groups of students—such comparisons always show White students as more prepared, or having better achievement data and does not take into account the systematic racism inherent in P-12 education. hooks (1994) argued that Black female teachers contribute gendered experiences and perspectives that have (historically) been marginalized and silenced to the discourses surrounding teaching and learning. Despite the widespread belief that teaching is "women's work," discussions about Black female teachers and their perspectives have frequently excluded them, even when the topic of race has been raised. The factors described in this paragraph illustrate the ways in which P-12 education has systematically oppressed all but those who identify as white, male, and middle-to-upper class thus ensuring that admission at the collegiate level is significantly harder for people of color (Lumina, 2022).

The US Education system has historically been administered by White men and studied via metrics developed by White researchers (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008; Stewart, 2008). Now that more educators and researchers better understand the ways in which we have not attended to non-white perspectives, it is important to have others in the room to bring

perspective and allow the system to be better. Standardization however says there is only a single way to evaluate students and when that is through a white lens, we assume all students have the same backgrounds and opportunities which is not the case (Milner, 2012). Thus, consideration of race was, until recently, one way to mitigate the inherent racism in our educational system.

Barriers to Access

□ The admission-and-enrollment process was not designed to promote equity and contains systemic racism effects through every component of the process (Lumina, 2022, p.1). Historically the admissions process has been utilized as much to keep people out of the university as it has to let them in. From the student search and application submission to the review and decision process of the admission office, and finally the student's decision to enroll (including financial aid, orientation, and pre-registration), barriers and complex steps exist to becoming a college student. According to the 2011 College Board report *Complexity in College Admission: The Barriers Between Aspiration and Enrollment for Lower-Income Students*, "Students and parents complained about the lack of transparency in the process, the confusing nature of the application process, how difficult it was to secure good information about college choice, and how the admission outcomes were unpredictable and sometimes appeared to defy logic" (p. 1). Despite the known barriers, few institutions have made significant changes to ameliorate issues to better support applicants and their families.

Enrolling in college brings steps that are unfamiliar to families, especially if the student is the first in their family to attend. While every state is different, in North Carolina kindergarten was most likely the only time a parent has had to enroll a student in education. In the North Carolina public-school system there are few applications, application fees, or test submissions to say nothing about supplemental essays, recommendations letters, community service hours, or resumes. Aside from enrollment in an early college program,

most public-school students nor their parents will have experience with applying to an educational institution prior to college. Charter or private school students primarily maintain enrollment once accepted and may therefore have some limited experience with an application process, though such an experience may have occurred many years in the past and primarily been undertaken by the parent rather than the applicant. As such, these distinctions make the higher education application process unfamiliar and confusing for most applicants and their families.

□ **Complex Application Process**

Each university has their own application deadlines and university specific questions which exacerbates the application process for potential students. All materials and processes must be completed to be accepted. Enrollment processes are as varied as universities themselves which can cause confusion, frustration, and ultimately, the choice not to enroll. The 2022 Lumina Foundation report, sponsored by the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), explained “the more complex the application process, the less equitable it becomes” (p. 2). While recent changes have made parts of the admissions process better for all applicants, there are a number of different factors that help maintain inequities.

For most four-year institutions, a complete application for admission at a minimum consists of the application, application fee, high school and/or community college transcript, and a standardized test score. Some institutions also require an essay as well as recommendation letters. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to testing centers became limited, which forced many institutions to become test optional. This allowed more students who otherwise might not have had the money or access to testing sites to apply and eventually enroll in college. Additionally, some colleges and universities, including Western Carolina University, began using self-reported information for admission purposes and would

require official transcripts only if the student enrolled at the institution. Because of the pandemic, roughly 80% of colleges and universities actively looked for ways to remove barriers such as standardized tests and, by doing so, improved access for many formerly reluctant applicants including those with marginalized identities who have typically been underserved in the application process (Colleges, Universities Review Standardized Test Policies, 2022).

Being transparent to applicants and their families is important and explaining that a holistic review allows counselors to know more about a person than just the numbers of their GPA, class rank, or standardized test scores. Not allowing race to be one of many factors in the admissions decision could negatively impact institutions sense of belonging for students by further marginalizing students of color. According to Maye (2023) college access has historically been tied to socioeconomic status, as well as a family's social and cultural status. Removing race as one of many factors that an admission counselor has in admissions decisions could affect the remaining admissions funnel. If the number of Black students admitted decreases, the number eligible to enroll would decrease which affects the final number enrolled on census day. Effectively, such policies uphold systems that may prevent Black student success.

The 2022 Lumina Foundation report recommended removing as many barriers as possible in the application process or “exploring alternatives to the current application process to minimize the burden on students” (p. 2). Giving students their admission decisions as fast as possible allows them to continue in the enrollment process. Admission office professional and student employees play an integral role by being the connection between admission and enrollment, including accessing financial aid, new student orientation, and pre-registration not to mention military benefits, transcript evaluations for college credit, and athletic eligibility.

Representation on Campus

During the admission and enrollment processes, prospective students strive to see themselves as members of the institutions to which they have applied, which ultimately contributes to their perceived sense of belonging. Their perceptions derive from many aspects including how many faculty and staff working at the institution look like them. As shared by the Lumina Foundation (2022) “Students need to see themselves reflected in the face of postsecondary education” (p.3). It is important for students to see themselves in the faculty, staff, and leadership of an institution in order to devote their full self into their college experience. When prospective students do not see themselves represented in the composition of the campus community they may not feel as if they will belong. If sense of belonging is lacking, students look for ways to avoid the environment (Bowen, 2021).

In the admissions process prospective students may ultimately not enroll at a university that lacks representation. Conversely, the prospective student may have attended an admission event and made a connection with a student group, or with faculty, staff, or students during the enrollment cycle. Sometimes those institutional partners stay in touch until the student arrives in the fall. Strayhorn (2019) reminds institutions, “positive interpersonal, peer interactions increase students’ sense of belonging” (p. 3). Building a sense of belonging should start at the application process but can be slowed or rendered insufficient because of the business-like nature of college admissions. Yet, if institutions want their prospective students to enroll, it is vital that they nurture budding connections with students. The need to build connections, however, is counter to the neoliberal, corporate structure under which higher educational organizations function.

Corporatization of Higher Education

Institutions of higher education are, in the end, a business. According to Washburn (2006), “more and more our nation’s leading universities are behaving in ways that suggest

money is what ultimately guides their decision making” (p. 156). Governing bodies expect institutions to increase the application funnel producing higher application yield, which, in turn, increases headcounts of enrolled students without regard to things such as diversity. Typically, when leaders are faced with a choice between headcount and diversity, headcounts are prioritized because they offer greater financial reward. Leaders in higher education often make decisions derived from the principle of serving the good of the many instead of the few.

According to Giroux (2002) the shift of higher education to a more corporate model is dangerous. Leaders often come into roles determined for institutions to be resources for everyone; however, in the pull of a more corporate culture, university leadership’s unrelenting search for profits often wields control (Giroux, 2002). University systems, such as the University of North Carolina, have based funding on enrollment headcount since the 1990’s (UNC, 2022). Funding in this manner incentivizes institutional leaders to focus on the overall number of students enrolled rather than the diversification of the student body. Funding decisions can indirectly impact a student’s sense of belonging because it results in enrolling predominately white students without regard to race (Morgan, 2023). This further drives the message to students their belonging on a campus is second to funding the campus at the desired level of senior leadership. Starting in the early 2020’s UNC System is funding is shifting to performance metrics which also has issues when it comes to race.

Federal and State Policy Implications

An institution’s ability to create a sense of belonging for students has been hindered by current legal challenges. On October 31, 2022, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) heard oral arguments affecting the use of affirmative action in college admissions. With the current make-up of a more conservative court, the use of race as a possible consideration in admissions may become unlawful for the nation. Nine states have chosen not to consider race in their college admission process (Vouge, 2022). According to

Peele (2021), California voters' rejection of the use of affirmative action led to enrollment decreases from Black, Latinx, and Native American populations from 1996 to 2018. At Western Carolina University (WCU) race has been one of many factors used in rendering an admissions decision. Race, among other factors such as the type of school a student attends, the rigor of classes offered at a students' school, and extracurricular activities are considerations in the holistic review. These factors along with academic grades, and sometimes standardized test scores, aid in the decision process.

□ The outcome of the 2023 Supreme Court case could negatively affect more selective colleges and universities' ability to build diverse classes of students. According to Ax (2023) universities that are the most selective and have fewer seats for their incoming cohorts will be affected differently than institutions that are not as selective. Top universities and colleges will be forced to review their procedures and look for fresh approaches to guarantee student diversity. Persons of Color enrollment on campuses is expected to decline as a result of this decision. Ax (2023) also states the University of California and the University of Michigan, two of the best public university systems in states where racial discrimination is illegal, claimed in briefs submitted to the Supreme Court that they have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in alternative programs meant to increase diversity, but that their efforts have fallen well short of their objectives as a result of directive to remove race from applications.

The SCOTUS case was specifically directed at admissions; however, the greater harm may still come to all college and universities as university systems are already interpreting this SCOTUS decision to apply beyond the college admission process to programs and scholarships that take race into consideration (*Directives Regarding Implements of Students for Fair Admissions Decisions*, 2023). This broader interpretation will make it harder for

college and universities to be as diverse as possible as it will continually narrow acceptance factors and systemically privilege upper-class and white students.

A Local Context: Western Carolina University

WCU is a public, four-year institution located in Cullowhee, North Carolina, and a member of the University of North Carolina system. In a state with 110 choices of accredited higher education institutions, options abound for students compared to many other states across the country. Of those 110 choices, eleven are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's), the most of any state in the country. This high concentration of HBCUs means Black students looking at WCU are geographically closer to HBCUs. Being a Black student does not automatically mean the only institutions of higher education Black students would consider are HBCU's, however the institutions' proximity may be a contributing factor for many applicants. Most students attend colleges within 94 miles of their home (Mattern et al., 2009) which may amount to students choosing an HBCU over WCU. As the westernmost four-year institution in North Carolina, WCU is closer to three other state capitals than its own. In fact, it takes five hours to travel to the system office from WCU. Cullowhee is 53 miles away from the closest densely-populated city in North Carolina.

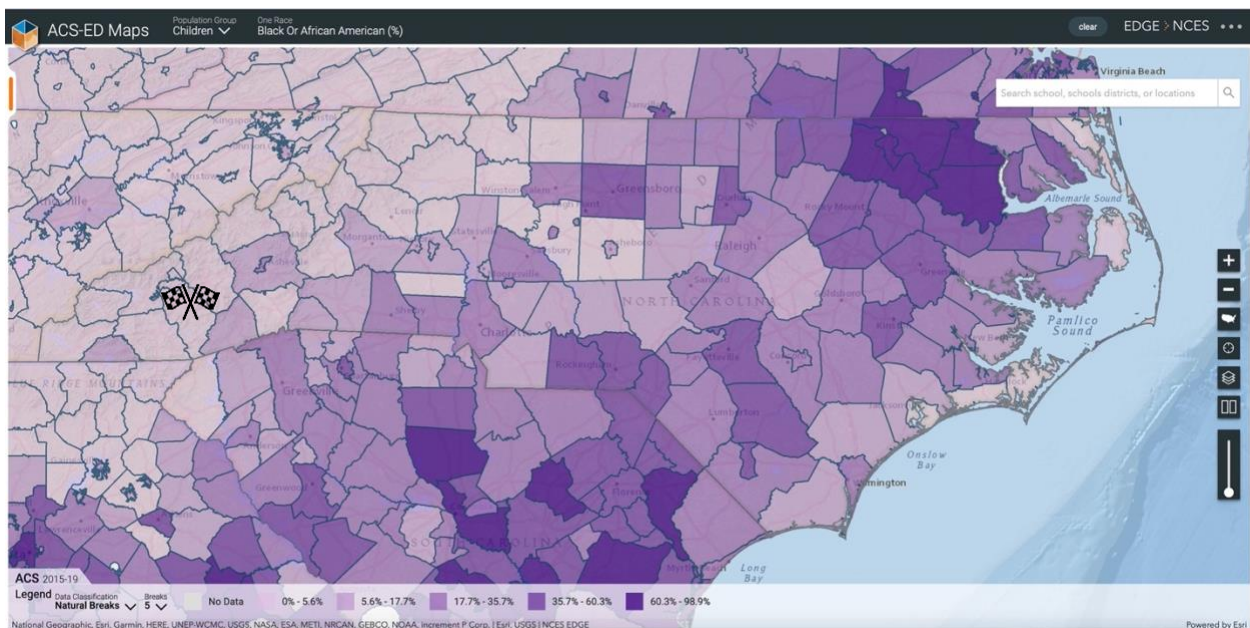
According to the National Center for Education Statistics map tool the largest concentration of Black students is roughly three hours away from WCU (marked with the crossed flags in Figure 1). The map in Figure 1 uses color gradation to represent the number of Black students enrolled in public or private K-12 schools. Buncombe County is the most populated western county from Interstate 26 to the Tennessee, South Carolina, and Georgia borders. The next highest concentrations of Black students are in the foothills of North Carolina in Catawba, Cleveland, and Gaston counties, which are roughly three hours away

from WCU. This means that most Black applicants to WCU will move a great distance from home and physically pass other, more diverse UNC system schools to attend WCU.

While WCU is physically closer to out-of-state regions with high populations of Black students, these cannot be areas where admissions staff can focus on recruitment. The University of North Carolina System mandates that each incoming first-time fall student enrollment is capped at twenty-five percent of the previous year's cohort. In Figure 1 it is visibly clear that WCU's location is closer to Black students in South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee rather than the concentrations in North Carolina. Based on institution reports WCU receives around 1,100 applications from out-of-state Black students representing about 35% of total Black applicants. Admissions officers must travel further to recruit Black students from North Carolina due to the limited number of total students the UNC System allows WCU from out of state.

Figure 1

Concentration of Black K-12 students by North Carolina school system



Note. Concentration of Black student enrolled in public school, by school district. National Center for Education Statistics (<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/maped/ACSMaps/>) In the public domain

There are a number of factors that may influence a Black applicant's choice to enroll in WCU, many of which are related to geographic, demographic, ideological, and political factors. In addition to the physical distance prospective Black students must travel to attend WCU, they may also wrestle with both the stereotypes and political realities related to the Appalachian region. Prospective students who visit campus encounter visible symbols of hate such as Confederate flags located on private property and tourist attractions on their drive to campus. The confederate flag, also known as the "White Men's Flag" by the designer William T. Thompson, is a very divisive image (Franqui-Rivera, 2016). While WCU in no way supports or uses the symbol, students who drive by them on various roads that lead to campus understand they are entering a region with community members who may hate them. This can certainly hinder a sense of belonging to the greater community in which WCU is located.

History and Review of the Problem at Western Carolina University

Western Carolina University has consistently paid attention to the numbers of diverse populations applying, being accepted, and committing to the university as part of enrollment monitoring. The goal in more recent years has been to admit a class that is diverse as possible (including race, students' home location, sexual orientation, etc.) At the direction of the Chancellor, the campus has an Enrollment Strategies Committee (ESC) which meets once a month during the fall and spring semesters and once during the summer term. Each member of the ESC leads a subgroup that has some bearing on the total enrollment of WCU.

WCU pays attention to the number of students it loses through graduation as well as those that do not persist, also known as attrition. Should WCU lose a large number of students, the ESC would suggest an aspirational goal of new students for the undergraduate and graduate Admission offices to enroll to maintain total enrollment. If these offices bring in more students than the institution graduated out, there would be a total enrollment increase.

One of the ESC’s subcommittees is focused only on diverse recruitment. In addition to this subcommittee, the Chancellor formed a Blue-Ribbon task team to focus on diversity for the campus including a subcommittee with a focus on student recruitment. This attention to diversity indicates many leaders, employees, and students want a more diverse student body and are dedicated to identifying the barriers to the goal. The enrollment goals remain an on-going focus which suggests that conditions are ripe on campus to increase recruitment efforts in new ways.

- Table 1 provides comparison data for Black students that have applied, been admitted, and ultimately committed by May 1st over the last three enrollment cycles. Prior to the pandemic a complete application consisted of an application, application fee or waiver, official transcripts, and official test score. The COVID pandemic created new circumstances, which allowed WCU to remove some barriers to the application process, such as removing standardized test scores and application fees as requirements. Removal of those two barriers allowed a sizeable increase in the number of applications from Black students during the 2022 cycle.

Table 1

Number of new first-year Black students enrolled per entry term

Term	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Students Enrolled	81	107	87	121	101	97	102	83	110	142

Note. Data were pulled from WCU Admission Tableau Dashboards on October 18, 2022, after the fall snapshot, census.

Application fees are used to supplement the admissions budget as the state appropriated budget does not cover all programming needed to recruit students to WCU. According to College Raptor Staff (2022) there are two reasons application fees are charged.

The first is due to the human resources needed to process and render a decision; even today where computers have eased the process, it costs a great deal to process an application. The cost of application fees may limit the number of schools applicants can apply to versus allowing applicants the ability to apply to as many institutions as possible. While WCU had a process to waive the application fee prior to COVID, it was not widely known and kept some students from completing their application. By removing the fee in 2020, we increased access for more students to apply who otherwise may not have done so due to financial constraints.

□ Second, the fee is a way for universities to determine who is more vested in their institution. Admissions staffs are very limited at most institutions and there are not enough staff to read in a timely fashion. The number of applications colleges would receive if there were no application fee could hinder a student receiving a decision fast enough for them to complete other enrollment steps in a timely fashion.

Application fees were not the only barrier to students applying. Standardized test scores historically have been required; however, the COVID pandemic shut down testing centers. Tests such as the American College Testing (ACT) and The College Board's SAT (which acronym now stands alone but last stood for Scholastic Assessment Test) are known to be biased and have shown students of color score lower than their white peers, contributing to the huge racial gap in college enrollments and completion (Walker, 2021). However, both tests have been widely accepted at universities across the country as a comparison to grades a student earns (Velasco, 2022). US News rankings have been a ranking that many institutions find important to their bragging rights. US News uses roughly twenty different data points to create a score per institution. Each institution is classified by U.S. News based on the Carnegie classification. Standardized test scores are used as five percent of the score for US News and World Report (Morse & Brooks, 2023). For institutions that choose to put lots of weight behind their U.S. News ranking the weight of the test score is just as important as

other data points such as graduation rates and Pell graduation rates to name a few. While five percent seems small for institutions that want every point to count, it means they want students that have higher test scores.

While some institutions have embraced a test-optional admission, others are planning to return or already have returned to this requirement. MIT for example, believes having the test is an important indicator, especially in regard to the math section due to the university's heavy focus on STEM (Najarro, 2023). However, WCU made a choice before the pandemic (under the leadership of the previous Chancellor) to lessen the emphasis on standardized test scores as they were not considered the most important indicator of a student's ability. To highlight this decision WCU created The Great Grades Guarantee, offering students who have a 3.5 unweighted GPA and the minimum required UNC System test score (SAT of 1010 or ACT composite of 19) admission to WCU.

While we have been able to remove the barriers of the application fee and the test score, both are time-limited and should be considered going forward because these changes have raised the number of applications from all races. For example, the number of Black students that applied for fall 2022 admission had an increase of 1,031 (39.82%) applications year over year. Latinx students increased 31%, and Two or More races increased 31% as well. White students increased 21%. During the COVID pandemic, application fees were waived by WCU to ease the financial struggles of applicants; however, because application fees are the major revenue source for the operating budget of the Office of Undergraduate Admissions the likelihood this continues is unlikely without another funding source identified.

Table 1 highlights the number of first-time, full time Black students enrolled by entry term. Although the numbers have increased over the last three entry terms, the average for the last 10 years is 103 students. Some years show higher numbers than others, but all hover

around 100 students, on average, with no change to our admissions practices other than the UNC system-level changes described above. The year with the largest number was last year, 2022, a year in which Admissions removed the application fee as a barrier for all students to apply and receive an admission decision. The change clearly indicates more acceptances of students, which increased the number of students who ultimately enrolled. The application fee has returned for Fall 2025 applicants. Applicants needing a fee waiver can request one, but this requires an added step in the process. The new customer relation system (CRM), Slate, will make the request easier for the applicant, but the feature is not yet fully deployed.

□ As such, WCU should not rely on the waiver alone to mitigate the barrier application fees create.

If we can remove the barriers of the application fee and test scores permanently, WCU would be in a position to let any student know of a college decision based on their grades in high school and other information gained in the admissions process. Such practices would streamline the information a student would need to submit to colleges and provide more equitable access to college entry. Yet, even when students persist beyond the application barriers, few Black students enroll once they have gained acceptance. Because the admissions issues related to UNC system requirements are outside of my locus of control, in this disquisition I addressed post-acceptance practices to increase enrollment rates of Black students.

In 2016, the N.C. Legislature passed NC Promise for the entering class of 2018 and beyond. Each NC Promise school sets their own tuition but the State of North Carolina subsidizes the tuition so in-state students tuition is capped at \$500 per semester. This program in combination other federal and state programs helps many students realize what an affordable option WCU is compared to other institutions.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of belongingness is a fundamental aspect of human experience that permeates various domains of life, including education. In exploring the intricacies of belongingness, Strayhorn (2019) identifies seven core elements that shed light on its significance and implications. These elements provide a conceptual framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of belongingness and its profound impact on individuals within the context of higher education.

1. **Basic Human Need:** At the foundation of belongingness lies a fundamental human need, akin to more tangible necessities like food and safety. Strayhorn distinguishes between latent and expressed needs, highlighting the subconscious nature of belongingness and its integral role in human motivation. This fundamental need must be satisfied before individuals can pursue higher-order goals, emphasizing its paramount importance in the college experience.
2. **Driving Human Behavior:** Belongingness is not merely a passive state but a powerful motive that influences human behavior. Strayhorn illustrates how individuals are driven to seek belongingness through various avenues, often resorting to both prosocial and detrimental behaviors in pursuit of acceptance and connection. This motive is especially pronounced in educational settings, where students may navigate academic norms and peer dynamics to fulfill their need for belonging.
3. **Heightened Importance in Specific Contexts:** The significance of belongingness is magnified in certain contexts, such as transitions or among marginalized populations. Strayhorn underscores the dynamic nature of belongingness, which fluctuates based on individual experiences and social identities. In higher education, students' sense of belonging profoundly impacts their academic engagement and overall well-being, necessitating attention to contextual factors that shape this experience.

4. **Interrelation with Mattering:** Mattering, the perception of being valued or appreciated by others, closely intertwines with belongingness. Strayhorn elucidates how individuals' sense of belonging is intricately linked to their perceived significance within social networks. The desire to matter motivates behaviors that reinforce belongingness, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between these constructs.
5. **Intersectionality of Social Identities:** Social identities intersect to influence individuals' experiences of belongingness. Strayhorn emphasizes the complexity of belongingness, which is shaped by intersecting dimensions such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Understanding these intersecting identities is crucial for recognizing the diverse ways in which students navigate belongingness in educational settings.
6. **Positive Outcomes and Consequences:** Satisfying the need for belongingness yields numerous positive outcomes, including academic achievement and well-being. Strayhorn underscores the importance of fostering environments that nurture belongingness, as the absence of belongingness can lead to adverse consequences such as disengagement and loneliness.
7. **Continual and Dynamic Nature:** Belongingness is not static but continually evolving, subject to change as circumstances and contexts shift. Strayhorn highlights the malleability of belongingness and its susceptibility to both positive and negative influences. Educators must recognize the dynamic nature of belongingness and actively work to cultivate environments that sustain individuals' sense of connection and inclusion.

In synthesizing these core elements, we gain a comprehensive understanding of belongingness as a multifaceted phenomenon that profoundly shapes the college

experience. By attending to the nuanced dynamics of belongingness, educators can create inclusive environments that support students' academic success and holistic well-being.

Black students enrolled in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) often grapple with a profound sense of alienation or unwelcomeness within their college environments (Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015; Strayhorn, 2019). These encounters, ranging from overt racism to subtle microaggressions, breed feelings of vulnerability and insecurity in classrooms, dormitories, and other communal areas, further reinforcing negative perceptions of belonging among Black students (Johnston-Guerro, 2016). Encountering racism and navigating racially charged campus environments can significantly hinder Black students' academic opportunities and impede their overall personal growth and development (McGee & Stovall 2015). Academic scholars and researchers argue that the academic journey of African American students at PWIs differs markedly from that of their White counterparts (Franklin, 2016; Harper, 2012; Hunn 2014). This research begs the question can an institution take steps to foster a sense of belonging during the enrollment process?

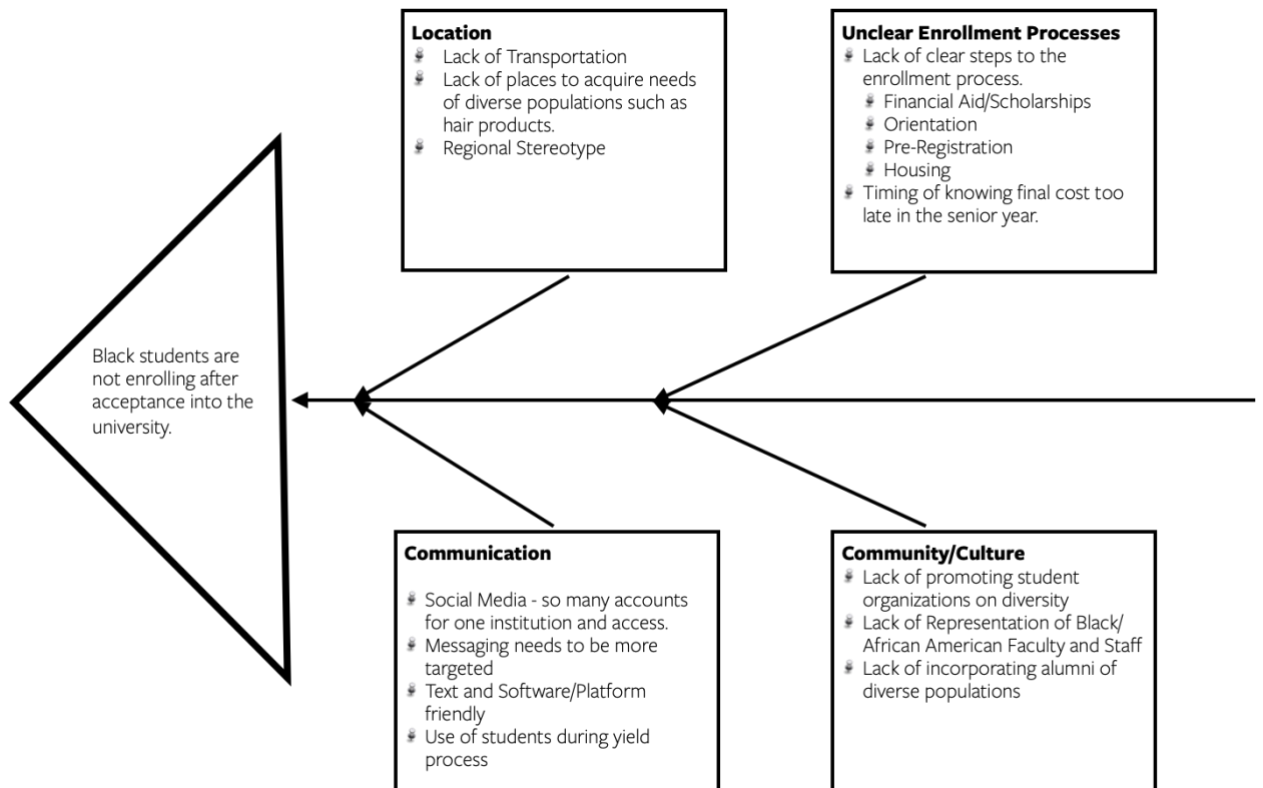
A Causal Analysis

Working with stakeholders in any organization provides an important step in Improvement Science to help identify the root cause of a problem. According to Hinnant-Crawford (2020) “in complex organizations or systems, you need individuals who view the problem from various perspectives” (p. 49). Pulling together stakeholders who are closer to the complexities of the root causes allows the group to identify possible solutions. In this section I present four different causes leading to a student not feeling a sense of belonging: location, unclear enrollment processes, communication, and the culture/community. Additionally, I outline the stakeholders who were committed to this improvement initiative.

Figure 2 illustrates the four areas identified in a root cause analysis depicted as a fishbone diagram.

Figure 2

Issues that hinder a Black student's sense of belonging



Location

According to Just (1999), the cities and locations of colleges and universities heavily influence underrepresented students' feelings of acceptance. Helping students see how they "fit" with a university starts with the location of a university or college. Institutions located in small towns and rural settings can be a lonely, isolating, or foreign experience for Black students from more urban environments (Denton & Massey, 1993). Further, some of the features institutions use to attract students, such as being located in the mountains or locations that boast outdoor activities, could be less of a draw for Black students (Asmelash, 2021). Forests and isolated communities can perpetuate historical trauma and cultural stigmas

for Black Americans, particularly regarding crime and safety (Dietsch et al., 2021). Elders have warned people not to visit places where oppressive acts, such as lynching of Black Americans, have occurred. Discrimination still exists in these areas.

The environment of WCU can be unwelcoming for some Black students. Hamilton (2020), a Black woman, observed that many Black people avoid rural spaces. According to Kang Jae “Jerry” Lee, an assistant professor at North Carolina State University, “some white elitists viewed parks and outdoor recreation as a tool for maintaining White supremacy, and believed White Americans could cultivate tough and boisterous characteristics in the outdoor environment” (Asmelash, 2021, para 12). Such beliefs leave little room for Black and other people of color to claim outdoor space as welcoming. It is even reasonable to assume racism still exists in these spaces. Additionally, for some students looking at colleges, the disconnectedness to a community with a sizable Black population can be a major deterrent to students and their families. If prospective students see beyond these location and geographical barriers, other barriers may still exist.

Universities located in more rural locations rely heavily on town-gown relationships. The phrase *town-gown relationships* refer to how relationships are formed between universities and the cities in which they are located. University leadership and city or county government officials find each beneficial and prefer positive relations versus strained ones (Massey et al., 2014). Drawing students from more urban areas of the state puts stress on institutions to push for rapid changes to communities that may prefer a slower, steadier change (or no change at all). It is important for students to have places to eat and hang out that resemble places they know from their hometowns. For example, WCU contracts with Aramark as the campus food provider. Because the community is unable or investors are unwilling to have the national food chains many of the more urban areas of the state provide, WCU contracts through Aramark to have Chick-fil-a, Moe’s Southwestern Grill, Which

Wich, Papa John's, Panda Express, and two Starbucks. National chain restaurants on or near campus are an expectation many students have when considering where to attend school.

Unfortunately, “in some cases, university-inspired economic development that other cities would embrace is seen with a wary eye, particularly in retiree-heavy regions where “change” is sometimes a cuss word” (Campus, 2020). Families that have lived in the communities for many generations are not always welcoming to new businesses or restaurants just to keep university students happy. Many times, those changes come at a social cost to the town gown relationship. In any relationship, personal, business, or political, one side will sometimes use all of their capital to gain something in return. When town-gown relationships are poor, students may sense a feeling of being unwelcome in the town space.

Unclear Enrollment Process

According to the 2011 College Board as well as the 2022 NACAC report, the transparency, timeliness, and distribution of information for students must improve. Regardless of whether applicants start with the Common Application, The Coalition for College Application, or an institution's own application, prospective students may struggle because the process resembles nothing they have previously encountered. Having a trusted high school counselor eases anxiety at this stage of the process. According to Vega and Puff (2020), “what really stands out from the research are the key roles played by the adults in [students'] lives, particularly families and educators, including not only teachers but also school counselors and psychologists.” (p.41) Unfortunately, because of teacher and staff shortages across the country, assignments of counselors are diverted to a “narrowly focused (and professionally inappropriate) task — such as enforcing student discipline and proctoring tests — that limit their ability to provide comprehensive counseling services and take on school leadership roles” (Vega & Puff, 2020, p.43). Finding ways to foster a team approach with counselors in the schools, university admission counselors, and parents more students of

color will have greater access to higher education, yet this does not fall within my locus of control.

Enrollment Processes

While the application process at most institutions has the same steps, each one has unique nuances that can cause students to miss a step. Institutions may view processes as simple and easy; however, enrollment processes also confuse students. Major enrollment aspects such as deadlines, self-reported information vs. official information, and binding vs. non-binding admission are examples of concepts students find difficult to navigate. The steps following the acceptance to a university become more complicated, especially when applying for financial aid. The process starts with filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and submitting it to the government as well as releasing the information to the students' choices of schools. Some institutions require students to fill out a separate scholarship application in addition to the FAFSA. While those steps proceed, a student must also be aware of other on-boarding requirements such as orientation registration, academic pre-registration, and housing registration all at the same time and possibly at more than one institution if they have not made their final enrollment decision. Applying to and enrolling in college may make students feel as though they have taken on a part-time job. Because this process is a very sterile, administrative process that includes a reliance on data and forms, students may struggle to feel a sense of belonging.

Community

The final factor that impacts underrepresented students' sense of belonging is connections to the community and culture of the institution. Students yearn to have a place where they fit and where they feel valued. That connection comes in many forms on a campus including engaged teaching, providing academic supports, campus activities, and positive messaging (Strayhorn, 2019). The experiences of belonging to a campus, the

structures, and institutional qualities have a huge effect on how a student experiences a sense of belonging (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). Getting students to make the connections to a campus directly impacts their sense of belonging. Helping them see themselves as a member in a community outreach organization, student government, a sorority or fraternity, or sports teams or clubs, helps students have a better sense that they belong to the campus (Strayhorn, 2019). My improvement initiative focused on addressing ways to increase community and perceived sense of belonging for prospective students throughout an otherwise sterile enrollment process. The previous three factors related to the problem were systematic in nature or outside the locus of my control, developing relationships with applicants falls squarely in the realm of admission office job requirements. The initiative is thoroughly discussed in the following section.

Strategic Enrollment Communication: A Proposed Improvement Initiative for Student's Sense of Belonging

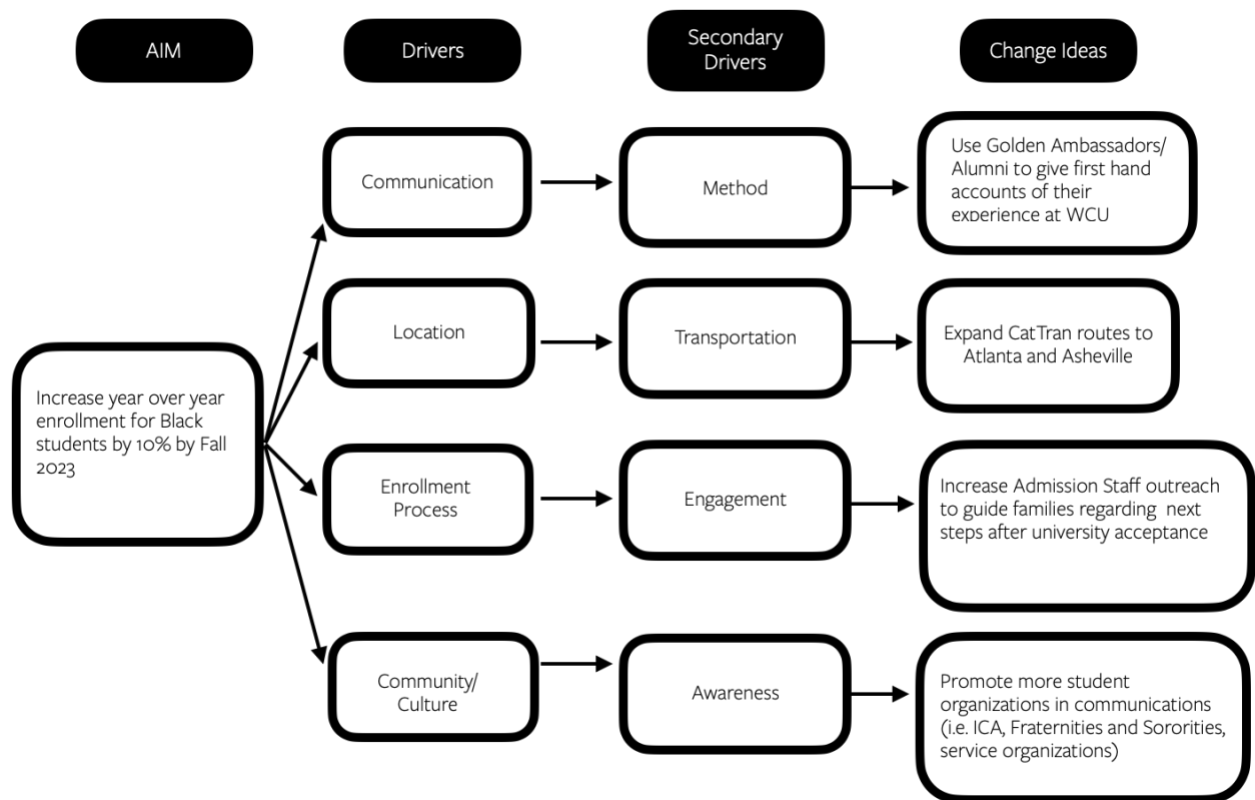
Theory of Improvement

In this section I examine my theory of improvement, driver diagram, and proposed plan of improvement. My theory of improvement asserts that if we create a stronger sense of community for Black students through the yield and enrollment process, the number of committed/deposited Black students enrolling in the first-year class will increase.

A driver diagram visually depicts my theory of improvement. According to Hinnant-Crawford (2020), a driver diagram “is a tool that illustrates your theory of improvement. It contains your desired outcomes, key parts of the system that influence your desired outcome, and possible changes that will yield desirable results period” (p. 119). In the driver diagram below, I present four drivers to help increase the enrollment of Black students. The four main drivers are: communication, location, the enrollment process, and community/culture.

Figure 3

Driver Diagram



Note: This diagram was designed by leaders within the Undergraduate Enrollment leadership during a special meeting focused on increasing enrollment of Black students.

Communication

Communication must be personalized beyond the standard communication that all students receive. WCU’s current communication plans assume all students and families understand the processes of enrollment, and if they do not, they call or e-mail their questions somewhere on campus. Unfortunately, students can stall or drop out at this stage of the enrollment process if they have not taken care of business. (i.e., completed the enrollment deposit, submitted their scholarship application, filed their FAFSA, registered for orientation and preregistered for the academic schedules). Many schools, including WCU, call these commitment action steps or enrollment steps. The admission decision stands as the first step of many to matriculate as a student.

Having a strong communication plan using multiple avenues to disseminate the information unlocks the process for many. In marketing classes students learn, “You have to tell them what you want them to hear. Then you have to tell them what you told them, and you have to remind them of the first two times that you told them.” In the marketing world this is called the “Rule of Seven” (Kaatz, 2022). The enrollment process requires admissions staff to duplicate and tell the parents and guardians in addition to the prospective student.

In tandem with written communication, we use multiple modes of communication such as social media, text messaging, and phone calls to students and parents, hoping one or more of them will be seen and read by multiple people from a family, especially the student. It is helpful for both the student and parent to get the information. Providing information to both the parents and students allows them to ask staff or students questions when attending an on- or off-campus event or during a campus tour. Information offers comfort and understanding so the student and their guardians feel that WCU cares and strives to provide a safe place to ask questions, especially when one does not understand a step in the enrollment process. We also use tools from our vendor partners such as YieldIQ. YieldIQ is a tool the Admissions Office uses which helps predict our incoming class by sending text and email messages asking if a student plans to commit, is unsure, or plans to withdraw. Depending on their answer to the text (along with other data points) YieldIQ gives us a likelihood-to-enroll score that helps the staff focus on students most likely to enroll.

While the admissions office has a number of professional recruiters, current students recruit better than anyone else. In most situations, current students leave a lasting impression to help sway a prospective student’s decision to attend a university. While young alumni working in the Office of Admission can focus on the admission process and enrollment steps, student employees best help prospective students by being current ambassadors of the university. They have recently navigated the admission and enrollment processes and

typically live in the residence halls, eat on and off campus, take classes from professors, are involved in campus activities, and are members of the greater community of Cullowhee, Jackson County, and western North Carolina. They are able to communicate all aspects of student life in person, by phone, or through video. In moments where prospective students can ask current students “real” questions, many may decide to attend. These personal connections and touch points create a sense of belonging for prospective students.

Location

□ The second driver is location. In this case “location” refers to a connection to nearby places allowing for reminders of home in places near the institution. For example, WCU is located only an hour from Asheville, a more diverse area than Jackson County. Similarly, Atlanta, Georgia, and Knoxville, Tennessee, are only two hours away from campus. These cities allow for experiences and interactions with diverse populations including other students enrolled in colleges and universities. While WCU cannot change the campus location, campus leaders could provide resources to make nearby cities more accessible.

Enrollment Process

Engagement with admission counselors proves key for prospective students and their families as they navigate the many steps of admission and enrollment. Having a diverse staff representing the students ensures a more comfortable experience. In absence of a diverse staff, a strong student organization can help offset the lack of diversity of the staff. When students and their families find themselves beyond the point of acceptance and beginning the enrollment phase, having a trusted person to guide them can make the difference in whether they continue or withdraw their consideration of the institution.

Former students provide one of the greatest resources to an admissions staff. Who better to talk about their experience? Since many alumni have graduated within a few years, their experiences provide very relevant information. Fortunately, WCU currently has several

alumni on staff, including African American staff members. Many families seek out the staff members they deem more relatable or with whom they believe they can have a more personal conversation. Without fail, especially at our off-campus events in the state, students and their families who have yet to visit campus seek out our staff and ask very direct questions. Staff report questions such as, “how diverse is it really,” “where do you get your hair done,” and “are there lots of people like me there?” Questions like these often start the conversation, but ultimately the prospective student and their families obtain a better sense of security hearing from a recent graduate who can identify ways in which Black students may feel connected to WCU.

The chance to ask a current student provides even better information. Prospective students and their families ask very direct questions of our Entourage Tour Guides and Golden Ambassadors. These students answer with their true experiences, and Admissions staff expects nothing less than their transparency with families.

The Entourage and Golden Ambassadors are student employees of the Office of Undergraduate Admissions. Each year the office strives to have a combined total of one hundred student employees who give tours, make tele-recruiting calls, and help execute large on-campus events such as Open House. At the end of the fall 2022 semester, because of schedule changes, graduation, work obligations and students being involved in multiple groups, the number of student workers decreased leaving just seven percent non-white students. Over half are from North Carolina and come from both rural and urban cities in the state. Some Golden Ambassadors are members of the marching band, Greek organizations, and other student clubs and organizations that are of interest to prospective students. Before the winter holiday break, office advisors aggressively recruit new students who just finished their first semester to help fill vacancies. This attrition occurs annually, so the admissions

staff continually looks for students who enjoy working and talking about their enrollment experiences.

Community and Culture

Promoting and connecting Black prospective students with organizations supporting students of diverse backgrounds can create a sense of belonging before they enroll. Just as having diverse staff members in Admissions helps start a conversation, alumni living in prospective students' community can further connect students to the institution. There is power in connection, even with alumni who graduated years earlier. Alumni chapters in strategic locations can help locate alumni who work in schools, faith centers, or even neighborhood community centers. Alumni working in any location where their careers and potential students' paths cross can lead to a better sense of belonging. These alumni can speak to their time as students and friendships they forged and maintain through Greek organizations and the African-American Alumni & Friends organization. Many alumni are teachers, school counselors, or faith leaders in churches—positions to which students look for guidance because these alumni are considered trusted sources. By empowering alumni with knowledge of the admissions and enrollment processes, they can be an extension of the Admissions office by helping recruit students to WCU. This idea, while valuable, also falls outside of the scope of the current improvement initiative.

Improvement Initiative Design

In this section I explain the proposed improvement plan and the design. This section details the members of the design team, my role, and how I ensured representation and engagement with the community.

Design Team

The design team I assembled consists of key staff from across the Enrollment and Student Affairs spectrum. The racial make-up of the team was intentional and consisted of five Black

members and five White members including myself. Table 2 outlines the design team’s various backgrounds and highlights their roles as leaders in the state and region and their knowledge of issues current students face. Most college application processes will follow a similar path; however, each institution has its own nuances. This design team knows how best to help our prospective WCU students navigate.

Table 2

Design Team

Design Team Member	Race	Office	Title	Role
Jane Adams-Dunford	Black	Student Affairs	Associate Vice Chancellor for Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Served on the Blue-Ribbon Task Team formed by the Chancellor and was on the enrollment subgroup. • Insight on the final Blue-Ribbon report in ways to better engage our faculty and staff in the recruitment process.
Patrick Frazier	White	Undergraduate Admissions	Associate Director of Marketing & Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oversees all admissions marketing and our events (e.g., Open House, Honors Day, and the campus tour experience). • Building out our communication plans: electronic, print, social, as well as phone and text. • Liaison with the university Marketing and Communications Office.

Brenda Holcombe	White	Scholarships	Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Held many positions in enrollment on campus including interim director of undergraduate admissions. • The scholarship process is separate from the aid process at WCU.
Jalin Montgomery*	Black	Admissions	Assistant Director of Admissions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alumna of WCU most recently navigated the WCU enrollment process • Attended HS close to the Charlotte, NC, area where we get many students
Trina Orr	White	Financial Aid	Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expert on the aid process, especially NC Promise tuition reduction program • Understands where students and families are caught in the federal and state aid process.
Keyona Presha	Black	Admissions	Assistant Director of Admissions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Originally from Asheville but wanted a more urban experience for college. • Attended an HBCU • Worked at PWI, private institution, that was in a more diverse part of NC
BaShaun Smith*	Black	Student Affairs	Associate Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs & Dean of Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oversees Greek Engagement & Development, Intracultural Affairs, and Student Community Ethics. • Has a pulse on the current student body. • Has connections to students that would be good Golden Ambassadors.

Suzi Swartz	White	Undergraduate Admissions	Associate Director of Recruiting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Associate director of recruiting oversees first-year and transfer counselors based in Cullowhee • Brings previous experience from other college admission offices. • Oversees the application review process, enrollment strategies, and all travel associated with WCU recruitment.
□ Brandon Thompson	Black	Undergraduate Admissions	Undergraduate Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undergraduate student that chose WCU • Parents had concerns of his attendance based on WCU location and him being an African American male

**Note:* Two Black members of my design team (marked with an asterisk) left during my improvement initiative. Both left WCU for job promotions at other institutions. Attrition of Black faculty and staff at WCU is an area of concern for many departments across campus.

My Role & Positionality at Western Carolina University

I am white, cis-gendered, straight, upper-middle-class, able-bodied, English-speaking, Christian, educated male. Since graduating from college, I have enjoyed working on a college campus except for a two-year period where I worked with a higher education marketing firm and provided guidance to colleges and universities. While working at the marketing firm I realized that my calling was a career where I could interact with students.

I attended public K-12 schools in North Carolina until going to college. Attending Lenoir-Rhyne University was a privilege my family could provide because of the many scholarships I received. During college many of the ideals of my Southern Baptist upbringing were questioned, providing a space for my own opinions to foster and solidify. Lenoir-Rhyne (LR) was founded by four Lutheran ministers and is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church

in America. The religious environment allowed me to question and strengthen my beliefs from multiple perspectives.

It was at Lenoir-Rhyne that one college mentor showed what compassion, humility, and servant leadership looked like. My college mentor saw a potential in me, and he created a job for me in the advancement office after graduation. In that role I continued learning while beginning my professional career. I think my mentor was intending to keep me around until a position opened in the admissions office. As a student I worked in the admissions office giving tours and educating families about LR. During these early years of employment my leadership and supervisory skills were being forged. I was lucky to be supervised by strong women, Black males, and my mentor Ray McNeely, a minister of music in the Lutheran Church, which provided diverse supervisory experience. To this day I channel each of these leaders when I interact with my staff.

I believe I am the leader I am today because of the supervision provided by my non-white male supervisors. In a world where white males are predominately the leaders, my experience in higher education has been nontraditional. Until arriving at WCU, my direct supervisors have been female or Black male. Due to this experience, I have not been accustomed to only having white leaders in the room when making decisions. However, I have seen others assume that the female and Black male leaders were not, in fact, the leaders because of their race or gender. Even worse, I have been mistaken for the person in charge because I was the white man in the room. Being mistaken in a work setting is not the only place in my life that has had a lasting impact.

During my last semester working on my Master's degree from Appalachian State University, my wife and I adopted our first child. Our oldest daughter is mixed raced (her biological father is Black-Samoan and her biological mother is white). Until adopting our daughter, I had never experienced a racist comment directed toward me or someone I love.

While doing an initial screening, a medical professional said there was no way that I was my daughter's biological father because she was too dark based on my skin tone. Taken back by her comment, I stated I was her dad and that I would like a different person to continue our check-in. My experience showed me the close mindedness of people believing couples or families of different races should not be together and reinforced negative biases people carry with them regarding race.

□ That one interaction with my daughter brought me to my knees. I can only imagine a lifetime of being negatively judged simply on the color of skin. As I have watched my daughter grow and understand her identity, it has aided in my being aware how a simple action, look, and especially words take a toll on her. As a father, a professional, and supervisor I strive to account for each person that I work with and supervise and how my actions carry powerful meanings. This power carries over in my working with prospective students and their families to ensure they do not have an experience similar to the one I had many years ago. Being aware of my position allows me to recognize how students of color and their families may have been treated or perceived and to treat them in the way all people deserve.

Working in the student affairs division here at WCU I am amazed at the compassion and comradery that staff have in providing our students the best possible college experience during recruitment and after they have chosen to become a student. When working to recruit more Black students it is important that when I ask Black staff and faculty to help, it comes from a place where they know it is a request and not a demand. As a white male in a position of power, I tried to remain aware of how my actions could be perceived by my Black colleagues. It is especially important for me to be aware of how my requests of Black colleagues, even when met with agreement, may further tax their energy and feel like tokenization (Niemann, 2011). Having a face-to-face conversation allows me the chance to

check in with my colleagues such as Evelyn Rucker, director of Intracultural affairs or Keyona Presha, who works in the admission office for open dialogue. These conversations allowed me to hear how these improvements could be perceived by prospective students and if they were negatively affecting the students and staff helping.

Proposed Initiative

The Golden Ambassadors (GAs) began in the Fall of 2021 to help the Office of Undergraduate Admissions strengthen diversity efforts at a time when the professional counseling staff was not as diverse as it is currently. These student workers support the Admissions office by providing services at Open House events, giving campus tours, and answering questions for prospective students and families from a diverse student perspective. In addition to the Golden Ambassadors, the office employs telemarketers who call prospective students regarding general information (e.g., upcoming events, dates, and deadlines) but call lists were only segmented by last name rather than other student demographics.

I enhanced the use (and increased the number of) Black Golden Ambassadors to make a more solid connection with our Black accepted students. By using tools already in place (such as our customer relation management (CRM) system, Slate, mass text messaging, and call center), the Black Golden Ambassadors became the student guiding the Black prospective student through WCU's enrollment steps. This strategy was intended to create a stronger connection between the potential student and the campus, ultimately helping the new student feel a greater affinity to WCU. Such strategies are supported by the literature on Black student sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019).

Additionally, an electronic communication plan complements the phone calls from Black/African-American staff/faculty members at specific times during this improvement plan. These communications come from colleagues such as Jalin Montgomery in Admissions,

BaShaun Smith, Dean of Students, and Evelyn Rucker, Director of Intercultural Affairs.

These targeted communications coincided with information the GAs addressed in their calls.

Slate automatically created call lists for our GAs.

Slate placed prospective student information into the new communication query when accepted as first-year students and self-identified as Black/African-American. Additionally, North Carolina students received an extra communication to our Spring Blitz events. GAs called students within the communication group two nights per week. The GAs had bullet points of discussion topics related to enrolling, such as the financial aid process, pre-
□ registration and orientation programming, and residence life topics. By having Black GAs connect with Black prospective students during the decision time of the enrollment cycle, current students spoke about specific issues that they may have encountered during their enrollment and offered suggestions as to people and offices who could help complete enrollment tasks. This new initiative gave prospective Black students a personal guide through the enrollment process creating a greater sense of belonging to the WCU campus. The design of these calls allowed the GAs a chance to tell their own stories to help ease the post-acceptance processes for the prospective students they called. GA training included asking open-ended questions to start a conversation with prospective students so the conversation does not seem like an informational telemarketing call.

When GAs engaged in the calls, they received the most questions around affordability and financial aid. While we did not expect the GAs to be experts in answering all financial aid questions, they were trained on the most frequently asked questions and were provided with a quick-answer guide. They were able to make notes on the prospective students' questions so professional staff could follow up the next business day. Frequently, financial aid creates the greatest barrier in the enrollment process. The cost of tuition has risen to the point it has outpaced inflation since 1981 (Browder, et al, 2022; Phillips, 2011). Financial

barriers keep Black students from enrolling in college (Davis et al, 2020). To alleviate financial burden, The North Carolina General Assembly selected WCU to be one of the NC Promise institutions.

The final event required of the GAs was a virtual Open House where those on the call list were able to meet with the GAs they had spoken to earlier in the semester. This created one more connection before the enrollment deposits due date on May 1. The virtual event allowed for any final enrollment questions as well as time to break into rooms should the callers and prospective students need to speak without professional staff present.

Improvement Initiative Goals

The goal for this improvement initiative was to increase the headcount of underrepresented Black students by 10% from the first-year 2022 cohort to the fall first-year 2023 cohort as measured by the commitment numbers as of May 1. All member schools of NACAC agree to a May 1st national commitment deadline in their Guide to Ethical Practices in College Admission (2020, p. 6).

Implementation Plan/Timeline

The Implementation Plan (Appendix A) outlined details of the timeline proposed for this improvement plan.

Starting in late summer of 2022, I pulled together the design team to work on specific tasks such as setting up the CRM for the communication, working to pull together GAs to make the calls, and designing the prospective student survey questions. As the beginning of the Fall semester started, the Office of Undergraduate Admission recruited, interviewed, and hired all our student employees. We aimed to hire and maintain a group of eight Golden Ambassadors by the end of the Fall 2022 semester. Our Golden Ambassadors trained with the other student employee groups at admission student employee orientation during August and

again in January. Admissions requires this training of all student employee groups who help with tours and events throughout the year.

During November and December 2022, the design team constructed the complementing communication plan to the existing plans all students receive. At the end of November through the holiday break, all additional e-mail, text, or social media outreach was created and loaded into our systems. The talking points and text messaging of our phone outreach were completed and incorporated into the calendar.

□ Starting in February 2023 and continuing through mid-April, the enhanced communication plan (Appendix B) deployed, and the Golden Ambassadors began making their initial calls (Appendix C). After each call the GA completed the data collection survey (Appendix D) as to how they believed the call influenced the prospective student's likelihood to submit an enrollment deposit. During each call, the GAs reminded and encouraged attendance at the virtual Open House as they shared their individual stories.

The enrollment report on May 1, 2023 was the first indicator of the number of students paying their enrollment deposit and whether the new intervention of the GAs made an impact. The months following May allowed for students to finalize their plans. Fluctuations occur during the summer months with some students deciding late to join the incoming class and some making other plans. In the enrollment world, we call this change in enrollment numbers summer *melt*. We aimed to keep the melt as low as possible. I hoped that the calls and time invested making connections with the GAs would minimize the melt of enrolling Black students. The Office of Admissions does not employ Golden Ambassadors during the summer months.

Our last data point was on census day September 1, 2023. On Census Day, the tenth school day of the year, WCU takes a snapshot of the campus enrollment. They report and compare all data points on that day to previous cycles and use the data for national and state

reporting. This number would also account for any summer melt we saw as mentioned previously.

Challenges/Barriers

Challenges and barriers come with any improvement plan or change. This plan relied heavily on student engagement and employment. The types of student workers preferred were those with passion for their experience at WCU so far, who have unique stories as to why they considered WCU during their college search, are strong students, and are students with high passion for equity work. Many places on campus seek the same characteristics in their employees as well. These paid positions required student workers to create conversation and not just read scripts. They improvised and engaged. Admissions employed more than eight Golden Ambassadors to make it to the end of the school year with the same group that starts. Some students were only able to join for part of the year due to schedule changes from first to second semester. The Admissions office staff continually recruited students throughout the year to be a Golden Ambassador creating a pipeline of possible student callers.

I received no resistance to this equity-focused project from institutional leadership as the strategic plan calls for more diversity among the student body. It was important to remind those non-Black staff helping design communications in this intervention that their experiences in life and exploration of college choices differed from those of the target audience; therefore, we leaned on the experiences of those on the design team and current students. Further, the students making the calls needed to remember the frustration they had during their transition from high school to college as inspiration for this intervention. Creating a sense of belonging with prospective students and their families could increase the families' connections with the staff, offices, and student organizations

Evaluating the Improvement Initiative

In this section, I discuss the rationale for following the data, why it is important, and what it tells us about the improvement initiative. The office of admissions will use the evaluation of this strategy as the foundation to build additional segmented plans to help other student populations gain a greater sense of belonging on campus. Both formative and summative evaluations provided important data.

Improvement Science has many definitions and is used in many different industries. It is a methodological framework supported by fundamental ideas that help scholar-practitioners identify problems, comprehend how the system causes the problems, find solutions to the problems, evaluate the effectiveness of those solutions, and disseminate the solutions if the changes are indeed beneficial (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). At the heart of improvement science is the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) process. According to Hinnant-Crawford (2020) the PDSA process is defined as “the signature improvement science methodology. It combines deductive and inductive forms of inquiry in iterative cycles to improve problems of practice” (p. 218). For this improvement I used the PDSA as my guide. The following section will explain the four practical measures of improvement science and how they were assessed.

During the plan phase, roughly July of 2022 until January 2023, the design team assessed and created the augmented communication plan, admissions staff hired and trained the GAs, and updated the CRM with the communications and call scripts. The do phase consisted of the GAs making the calls and filling out the call surveys (this occurred February through April 2023). The study phase started in May of 2023 and continued until September of 2023. The phase consisted of organizing and analyzing data and holding focus groups. The act phase started in September of 2023 and has continued to the present as we prepare for the next cycle of first-year students entering in Fall of 2024.

Results

Driver

A driver measure “lets you know if your improvement is moving in the right direction before you have data from one’s outcome measure” (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p. 140). Driver measures are in-between measures, indicating if changes need to be made to the improvement process.

Data Collection

□ Every Monday I referenced the past weekly report showing point-in-time data for a specific day as compared to the previous cycle. This tool allowed monitoring of the week-to-week changes of student stages in the recruitment cycle. I extracted from this report the number of commitments from Black students to create a weekly run chart. Comparing the communication plan and the phone calls made to the number of weekly commitments, I tracked whether prospective students paid their deposit (committed) as a result of the change initiative.

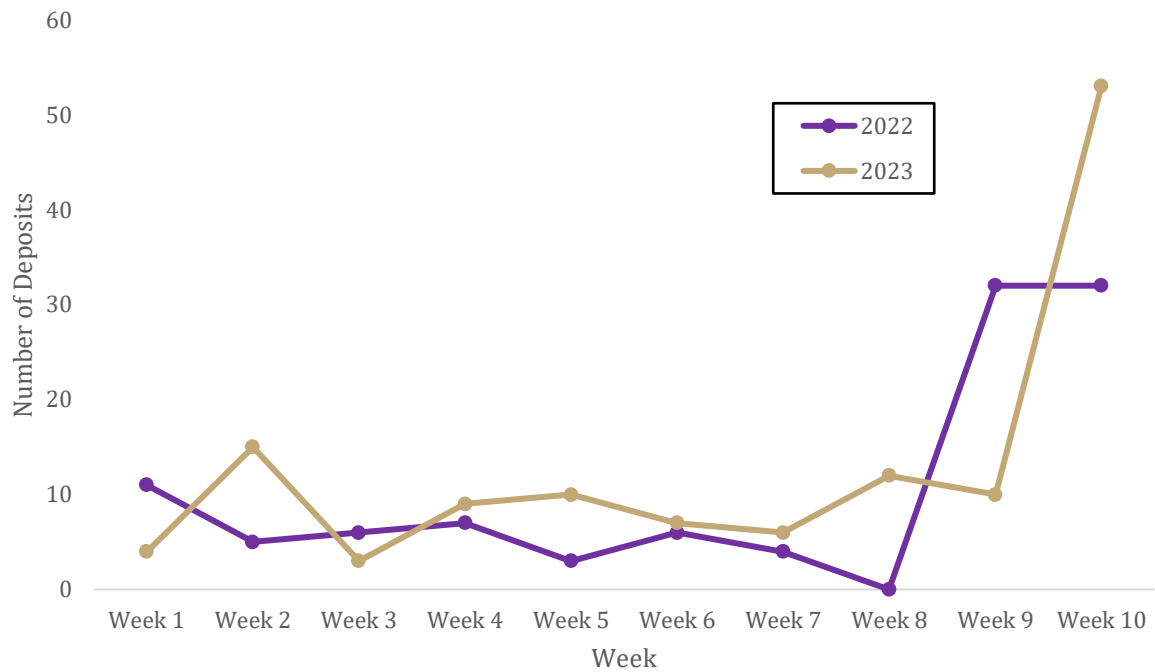
Results

In Figure 4, the data shows the 2023 cycle starting with spike for week two. The first week of data tracking included an Open House event including participants who received the first e-mail communication inviting them to attend. Many students deposited at that event. Week three saw a dip in deposits likely as a result of the university’s Spring Break when few GAs made calls. Following spring break, our numbers remained higher than the previous cycle until week nine. This figure demonstrates the number of prospective students who received a call then made a deposit at some point in the ten-week period. The last spike from week 9 to 10 resulted from a final e-mail inviting students to make a commitment leading into the national commitment deadline (this is a typical practice as many students wait until

the deadline to commit). Figure 4 shows students in 2023 committing to attend WCU than those in 2022.

Figure 4

Deposits Per Week in Response to Change Initiative



Data Analysis.

Descriptive statistics provide a summary and description of the data. Collecting data weekly provided a monitoring process to determine if the change had a more positive influence than the previous year without differentiation of communications to Black students.

PDSA Implications.

While the run chart alone demonstrates a correlation between the calls and the deposits made, we cannot know for certain the phone calls were a deciding factor in enrollment. Understanding that students and families respond to the messages received in different ways proves important as does the understanding that many families cannot respond immediately after a phone call or electronic prompt. Family budgets, cash flow, and other

institutions' processes account for when students can commit. Based on comments made to GAs during their calls, many students and/or parents would verbally say they would pay "when they were paid" or at a time when money was not "as tight." In addition to the phone calls, the GAs reported the prospective students were thankful of the communication plan and verbally acknowledged receiving e-mails from other Black faculty and staff. This information confirms that a communication or contact eventually made a difference by the commitment action date of May 1, 2023.

□ **Process Measure**

Process measures are collected frequently through an improvement to detect any variation or deviation from what is desired (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p. 141). For this improvement, a new electronic communication plan (Appendix B) launched starting February 1, 2023, in addition to communications all applicants received. These communications pre-empted the phone calls in order to announce forthcoming calls. Callers attempted to connect with as many students as possible on their call nights. Following each connected call, the GA completed a five-question survey. This measure was collected after each call gave a 'real time' account from each GA on the call they just completed.

In addition to the surveys, we held two focus groups at the end of the semester. The focus groups allowed GAs to reflect on the calls they made throughout the semester and hear how others interacted with their prospective students.

Data Collection.

Following each phone call, the GA completed a five-question survey quickly recall the conversation and give their perceptions of the prospective student's intent to enroll. This allowed each GA to report specifically on each connected call. If calls did not connect with a perspective student, then the CRM (customer relation management) system automatically put the perspective student's phone number back into a queue to call at a later time.

After the semester ended, I held two focus groups by zoom. The GAs were asked to participate in one of the two sessions. This allowed for the callers to pick a time that was most convenient with their schedules. I asked the two focus groups the same series of questions (Appendix E) to provide a jumping off point for discussions. The focus groups allowed the GAs to reflect on how they felt the improvement initiative worked and identify concerns to be addressed in future iterations of the initiative.

Participants.

□ The GAs were a small but mighty group of eight (seven females and one male) during the 2023 spring semester. Three were seniors, four were sophomores and one was a first-year student. The students grew up in an even mix of rural and urban areas within North Carolina. One student was a South Carolina resident. All GAs completed the short surveys after each phone call.

Table 3

Description of Golden Ambassadors During Spring 2023

Student	Graduation Year	Major
One	2024	Pre-Nursing
Two	2024	Recreational Therapy
Three	2026	Management
Four	2027	Pre-Nursing
Five	2026	Psychology
Six	2026	Marketing
Seven	2026	Criminal Justice
Eight	2024	Music

Data Analysis and Results

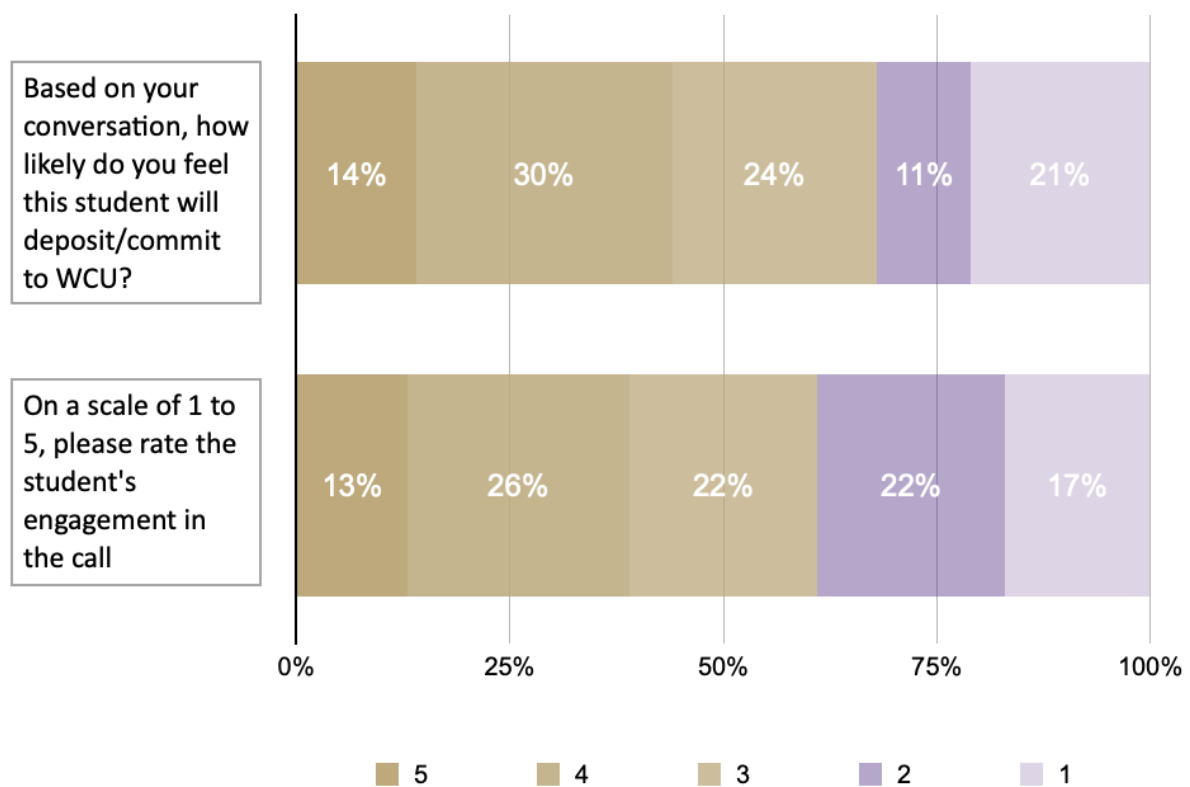
The process measures rely on two forms of data. First each GA filled out a post phone call survey form following each phone call. At the end of the semester two focus groups were held providing more insight from the GAs to speak to their responses as a whole to the forms that were completed.

Survey Analysis. Two survey questions asked GAs impressions of how the call went and whether they predicted if the student would pay their deposit. In Figure 5 GAs indicated 68% of those students contacted most likely or had already deposited at the time of the call. 61% of the students at a minimum engaged with the GA and had a genuine conversation rather than answering questions with yes/no.

Survey results. The post call surveys intended to provide a quick and easy way for the callers to report on each conversation. Of the five questions, the closed-ended questions were most frequently answered. From the 1706 attempted calls made, 446 forms were completed only 234 had comments entered into the forms. The remaining 212 surveys were completed only contained Likert-Scale answers. To summarize, the results indicated GAs felt prospective students were excited to receive a phone call from someone to whom they could relate.

Figure 5

GA Post Call Survey Questions



Focus Group Analysis. For the focus group, I used in vivo coding (Saladña, 2020). This allowed free-flowing thoughts of the students to be captured. Having their first-hand accounts of the calls and suggestions for future calls was important.

Focus Group Results. During the focus groups a few consistent themes emerged including the script, type of questions the GAs had to ask, and money and finances. The consistent theme that the callers rallied around was that they felt hindered by the script. The GAs suggested the script be more “student talking to student” prospective and not focus so much on the admission or enrollment processes that an admission professional could handle. □ “It felt like a weird shift for us to say make sure you do these things but now let’s just have a conversation” said one GA. “Make sure you have more student-based questions, not a checklist of steps.” Once the business questions were out of the way the GAs felt the calls became more enjoyable and the prospective students engaged asking about the location, what there was to do in the surrounding area, and campus life. “I was able to share that there’s different ways to get involved on campus. I mentioned how I was an RA and planned events for my hall to get to know each other.” Other topics the GAs said prospective students questioned were how to register for classes and who would help them with that enrollment step. When prospective students were asked about finances other than the enrollment deposit they often disengaged from the conversation. “When I asked questions about their FAFSA or enrollment deposit they would really just blow it off and not talk.”

The most exciting comment from one of the callers is the exact reason this improvement was implemented. “Someone I spoke to last spring I ran into like a week ago and basically said, everything that I learned from you in our conversation made my transition, so much better! I am here because of you!”

PDSA Implications.

Because the focus groups occurred after the conclusion of the calls and not during the timeframe of the calls, the knowledge gained will be applied to the next application cycle. The GA feedback that was gained during the focus groups will allow everything from the script to how we train the next group of GAs to be improved. The current GAs will be part of our training since they have first-hand accounts of the types of obstacles encountered during the calls.

Balance Measure

Monitoring the pulse on improvement is important. “Balancing measures are the vital signs” of an Improvement Science project according to Hinnant-Crawford (2020, p.145). Balance measures alert if the improvement has a negative effect or unintended consequence in another area of the system.

Data Collection.

Every Monday I recorded the number of withdraws that occurred the prior week compared to the same period of the previous year. I recorded and monitored the applications admits and deposit number weekly. Monitoring the numbers allowed me to watch the trend of the current year withdraws by comparing to the previous cycle. Comparing the two cycles allowed me to see if the calls made prospective students withdraw faster than the year before.

Data Analysis.

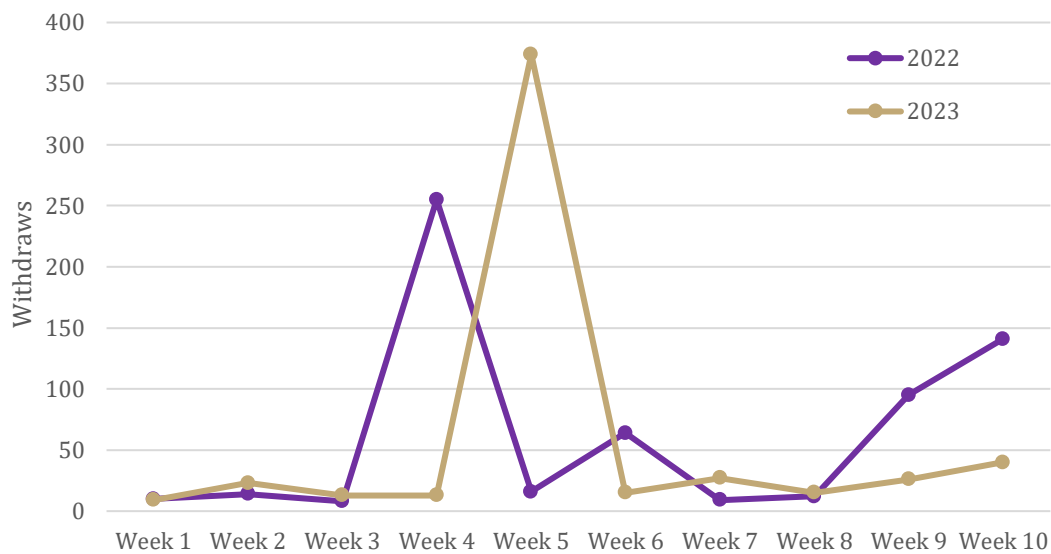
I plotted weekly data points of the two cycles of those students withdrawing their applications by week. This helped track the number of withdraws would remain below the number of the year before. If a low number of students withdrew, it would signal to the Admissions office that prospective students were still engaging and considering WCU as their college choice.

Results.

In week four for 2022 and week six for 2023 prospective students received an automated text message asking them with they intended to deposit or withdraw. On the figure below there are two spikes that occur around the time of those text message communications. Although the spike dates differ, this communication did remove any student that indicated their application needed to be withdrawn. However, the weeks following the text show the calls kept students engaged and the 2023 line shows students withdrew at a lower rate than in 2022.

Figure 6

Withdrawn Student by Week



PDSA Implications.

This change shows that having the GAs engage with prospective students from acceptance through their commitment action step decreases the prospective student withdrawing earlier in the yield cycle. Monitoring these rates consistently is important in order to know if any adjusting in the cycle is needed. Having more students remain in the pool allowed the GAs to speak to next steps and encourage the students to see themselves at

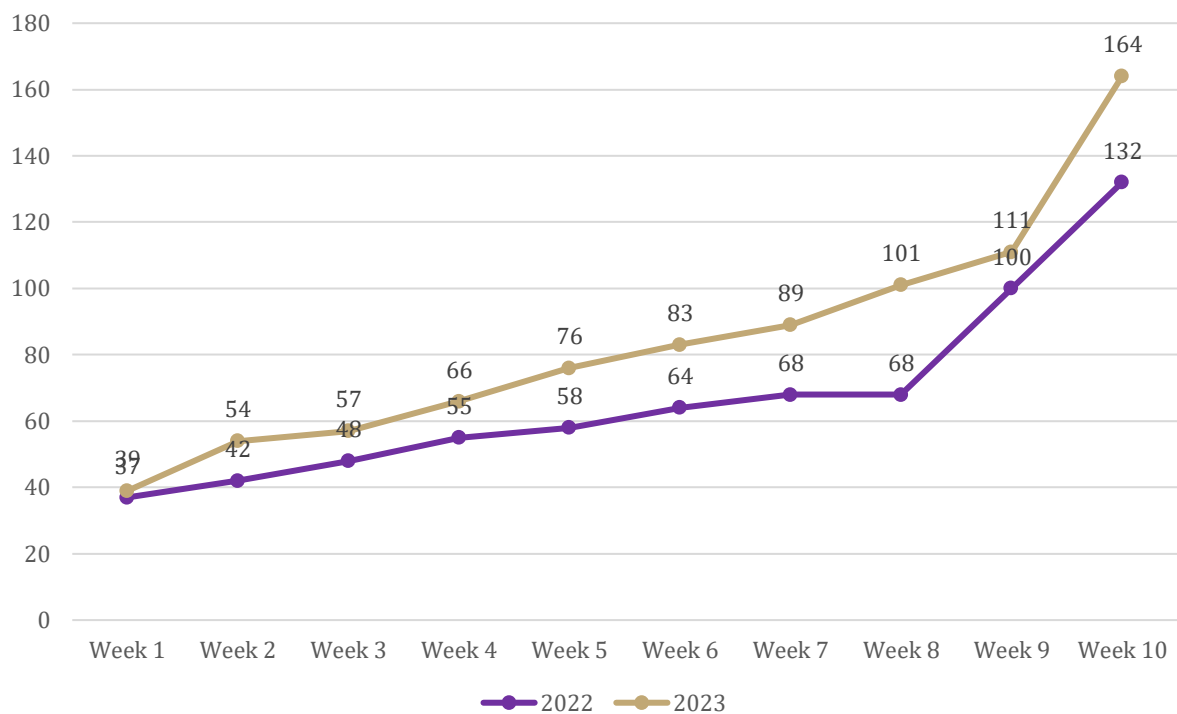
WCU. Having this change in place allowed the GAs to connect with the prospective students and keep them engaged with their enrollment steps to hopefully help more choose WCU as their college of choice.

Outcome Measures

Of all the measures, outcome measures, according to Hinnant-Crawford (2020) are the measures stakeholders best understand. Outcome measures answer the question, *did it work?* The leading outcome measure helps track the progress to the lagging measure. During the improvement window the total run of commitments from Black students outpaced the previous cycle (as shown in Figure 7) indicating the change was an improvement.

Figure 7

Black Student Commitment Numbers by Week



Data Collection- Leading Measure.

My leading outcome measure was the WCU Catalytics Weekly Status report (Appendix F). I ran the report on May 1, 2023, the national commitment day for college and universities across the nation. This date is standard for universities who ascribe to NACAC’s

Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission (2023). It also marks the date WCU uses as our high-water mark for the incoming fall cohort of first year students.

Data Collection- Lagging Measure.

My lagging outcome measure is WCU’s census day report (Appendix G). On census day, the tenth school day of the semester, data freezes for state and federal reporting purposes. The time between these two measures we call summer melt in the Admissions/Enrollment world of higher education summer melt happens every year. Summer melt is not unique to this improvement. At any institution, including WCU, there will always be students who commit and for varied reasons end up withdrawing. While we used the leading measure as an indication of a successful initiative, the lagging measure confirmed the outcome.

Data Analysis – Leading Measure.

I used the comparison data on the Catalytics report to compare the number of confirmed deposits on May 1, 2023 vs. May 2, 2022. In Table 6 below one can compare the two admissions cycles.

Table 4

Comparison of May 1 Commitment Numbers for Western Carolina University

Admission Stage	5/1/2022	5/1/2023
Applications	3,592	3,291
Admits	2,814	2,672
Commitments	132	164
% of Admit Pool	4.69%	6.14%

Note. Numbers are students who identified themselves as Black on their application for admission.

Data Analysis – Lagging Measure.

Census day proved, like all previous years, that we would lose some students over the summer who had committed by the May 1 commitment deadline. There was, however, an increase of enrollment of Black students to 175 for the fall 2023 first year cohort. This was 6.55% of the admit pool compared to 5.97% for the 2022 first year cohort. One noticeable area of concern is the week that bills were sent out for fall, there was a sizeable number of students that withdrew. Implications of this data point will be discussed below.

Results.

Table 6 shows a sizeable increase of 32 students for a total of 164 on May 1, 2023 compared to May 1, 2022. The applicant pool was larger in 2022 vs 2023 which means numbers increased in both count and percentage. The 2023 cohort boasts a 6.14% enrollment versus the 2022 cohort 4.69%. This increase confirms the additional communications plan, GA phone calls, and live zoom meetings engaged Black prospective students and increased a connectedness to our GAs and Black Faculty and Staff at WCU.

PDSA Implications

I wanted to increase the headcount of Black students by 10% from the first-year 2022 cohort to the fall first-year 2023 cohort as measured by the commitment numbers as of May 1. This improvement initiative yielded double the AIM statement goal. The combination of the augmented communication plan, phone calls, and live video meeting resulted in more Black students committed on National Commitment Day, May 1, 2023 than the prior year. With 32 more students on May 1, 2023 than the previous year, WCU celebrates a twenty-four percent increase in Black students in the first-year cohort. These results suggest the improvement initiative should continue in the future.

Connecting current Black students to prospective Black students allowed for conversations to occur that do not happen with the admissions staff. Even when the

admissions staff are young and recent graduates of the institution, once they become staff, they are automatically seen as professional staff members with an agenda to sell an institution. In the focus group Golden Ambassadors said the hardest part of the call was transitioning the call from business to “our” conversation. Getting information from the prospective student on their understanding of next steps in the enrollment process is important; there are other ways the GAs could get to those answers in their conversations with some more work on the prompted script. For example, helping the GAs understand they have more latitude with the script will allow the call to start off getting to know the prospective student before diving straight into the business questions. This may lead to developing a stronger sense of belonging for perspective students as they may connect better with a less formal (and more friendly) conversation.

In the future, rethinking the short survey the GAs fill out could provide more robust feedback. Keeping the survey short is key so it does not prevent flow of calls from the CRM system. The survey, however, does still need a text field for open ended comments after each call so GAs can immediately type the concerns of the call while the information is fresh in their memory. If GAs wait to reflect it is likely they would forget information or not attribute notes to student interaction accurately.

In future cycles, aligning the deployment of the Yield IQ tool with the start of the calls will better focus the calls. Deploying of the YieldIQ tool earlier would remove prospective students indicating they no longer have interest in WCU. If we can remove the students who have no intention of continuing with WCU, GAs can have more productive calls with prospective students we may possibly get to commit. Most calls receiving the low engagement scores were the ones that also received the scores least likely to enroll.

Strayhorn (2019) identified seven core elements of sense of belonging. In the third element a heightened importance in certain contexts such as being a newcomer in an

established group is emphasized. Belonging offers a shared sense of social construct that provides a sense of security (Maslow, 1943). New students coming into a space where others have already created a group can be intimidating. While the GAs may not remember their own enrollment experience, the prospective students find comfort in speaking with a current student. Their conversation may give comfort or a feeling of being connected to WCU when they arrive. Until sense of belonging has been achieved it is hard for students to take the next steps in the enrollment process.

- Concerns about inclusion and belonging may even become so strong that it is difficult for members to focus on the official tasks at hand "until they resolve where they stand in a particular social setting" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 88). When it comes to enrolling at an institution, until new students satisfy one of their most basic needs—the need to feel like they belong at WCU – incoming students may find it difficult to focus on enrollment tasks. The data linked to GA outreach suggests incoming students could see themselves as students at WCU enough after the call to make a commitment by depositing.

Implications for practice

Because this improvement initiative helped increase the number of Black students who enrolled, it stands to reason the improvement initiative can scale up to include other groups that need to know what it is like attending a PWI from someone with whom they can relate such as American Indian, Asian, and Latinx, or outside of race groups such as First Gen and LGBTQI + could also benefit from this type of interaction. I will need to work with the professional staff to employ the right students to become GAs and train them on creating a space to talk openly about their own experiences as we move into future admissions cycles.

Working with the director of Intercultural Affairs on this improvement helped identify some students who would be good GAs. Going forward this connection and additional people looking for new callers will help sustain a steady flow of employable students and some

continuity to the GA group as a whole. Having other campus partners that are on the lookout for good GAs will be vital as the expansion of this program takes place. For example, the Office of Admissions may need to build relationships with leadership in the Mentoring and Persistence to Success (MAPS) Office as well as other offices such as Greek Student Engagement that have close relationships to student leaders and their involvement on campus.

While the GAs self-identify and agree to the job description as callers, we employ over one hundred and fifty students in different roles. Allowing GAs to rotate to other positions within Admissions will keep them engaged which could open GA positions of students who recently enrolled that were called the previous Spring.

Implications for policy

After this improvement initiative began, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) gutted affirmative action and effectively ended race-based admissions programs (Totenberg, 2023). Race can no longer be a consideration in the admissions decision. This has led to many changes in policies including new directives from the University of North Carolina System (*Directives Regarding Implements of Students for Fair Admissions Decisions*, 2023). The ruling is so new that systems and institutions are still understanding how data about race can be gathered. WCU uses the Common App as one of our main applications. The Common App will continue to have a field for applicants to indicate race but institutions can choose to have that information suppressed.

At WCU, race is removed in the CRM and is not available to counselors. Because race will not be gathered before admittance in the future, I will need to find new ways to acquire data related to race after the admission decision. The information could come from Common App if they can share race once an admissions decision has been made. This feature will require some automation on Common Apps' part to be ready before the next admissions

cycle. Another option would be for WCU to create its own interest survey to gather race and other information. Reporting race is an important statistic used by many colleges and universities to describe their institutions. It is, however, optional and not a requirement. According to the National Center for Education Statistics who collect for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) students and staff have the option to provide race to questions asked but are not required. The UNC System currently collects and reports many data points that may be broken down by race. Not collecting this information at the admissions application stage may in the future provides less data where there are gaps by race. This means institutions would be unaware of potential issues that should be addressed.

Recommendations for practitioners

Having student employees in admissions offices is standard practice as they are an important tool in the recruitment process. However, employing a specialized group of students who can augment the professional staff for any lack of representation does require some skill. It is important that all students are paid employees (as opposed to volunteers). While volunteers are great, they do not always have the same buy in as paid students and the office may run the risk of losing volunteers when their work is vitally important. Paying our students has shown that we have more engagement, and the students see these positions as a job for which they are being compensated fairly. At WCU, students go through our Human Resource office to be hired and compensated. Recruitment and onboarding are sometimes a hindrance to the students, so having a working knowledge and allies in that office are also important to round out the student employment experience.

Coaching student employees on how to engage in conversations with prospective students may lead to more interactive and fulfilling discussions. If employees learn how to connect with the person on the other end of the line, they will likely build a sense of trust. This skill must be developed in the student employee during the training process.

Last and most importantly, practitioners and university leadership must hold a belief that a diverse student population allows for a more robust campus that thrives on multiple backgrounds and lived experiences. Such a belief, and actions that demonstrate these values will help students, staff, and faculty become more educated open to learning from and living with one another. It is important that all members of the campus community understand such values are not indoctrination, rather a way to ensure the university is a safe place to exchange ideas and learn from one another. While current policy set by policy makers rather than campus leaders is to not show race until after admission, a goal of practitioners should be to continue providing data that is currently available of states who have removed race and their struggle to return to levels when they did ask race (Colin & Cook, 2023).

Collecting the data at the time of application vs later in the process allows students applying to be seen as a person, not just a number on a piece of paper. The likelihood a student reports their race later in the enrollment process could be lower and seen as unimportant. Currently the Common App has continued to collect the data, but allowed institutions to block that data if they are forbidden by their own state government (Hartocollis, 2023). Meaning if we are not allowed the information during the admission process the gathering of information and holding post admission decision is better than not getting that data point.

Directions for future research

Going forward, carrying this across multiple groups would allow us to understand if other groups respond differently to the improvement initiative. Do students respond differently by race or affinity group compared to each other? Another direction would be interesting to see how groups of students that may communicate in ways other than talking such as Deaf and Hard of Hearing respond to being more engaged by texting devices or zooms with other students that use sign language to communicate. Meeting groups of

students where they are through communications seems to be less and less in the form of impromptu in person communication and more about the prospective students' terms.

Currently students do not want the unsolicited phone call or even text, they want to reach out on their own, in their own time.

Sustainability of the Initiative

Next year, the office of admissions will expand the communications plans and GAs to other race and affinity groups. This expansion is necessary to be more inclusive and meet needs of specific groups that will help diversify campus. It will also be important to work with other offices that have opportunities to carry out this work such as Orientation.

Orientation for new first-year students is held every June. A logical next step on the initiative is to have the orientation student staff include some of the GAs who make calls. Orientation leaders would therefore be the same GAs that made calls earlier in the year. A connection made during the decision process is then brought to life for the prospective student. A student who has a personal connection may combat summer melt. The GA could be a mentor when the new student gets to campus in the fall.

Limitations of the study

Limitations for this improvement initiative include the lack of qualitative data from each call survey completed by the GAs. If GAs were more thorough in their reporting (i.e., completing more text fields in the survey) we would have had more qualitative data on each specific call rather than having to rely on the focus group participants remembering the calls as a whole months after the calls were completed.

In future cycles having a survey from the prospective students could be useful in order to have their perspective of the calls, the callers, and if it helped them choose WCU in the end.

Conclusion

In this initiative, the admissions office increased the number of Black students who chose to enroll at WCU by twenty-four percent from the previous year. The initiative was based on the concept of sense of belonging and how vital it is for students to perceive they will belong before they enroll. The positive outcome of this initiative was accomplished by adding an additional communication plan from Black faculty and staff of their experiences at WCU and inviting prospective students to campus. In addition to this written communication plan, a new group of student telerecruiters, called Golden Ambassadors, called Black prospective students to speak to them about their personal experiences of being enrolled at WCU.

Black students have been declining their enrollments at the national level (Miller, 2020) and at WCU we have been averaging around 100 new Black students in the entering first-year cohort for the last decade. With this type of improvement, helping Black students with a sense of belonging after their acceptance may help institutions, especially PWI's, enroll more Black students as well as students of other races and marginalized groups. This fall, one of the GAs recently saw a student they called on campus and the student told him, "Everything that I learned from our conversation made my transition so much better. This [WCU] is the right place for me!" If WCU can find ways to make this opportunity for all students as they make the college choice it could continue to increase Black student enrollment.

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Appendix A

Proposed Implementation Plan

Black students are not enrolling after acceptance to WCU	Jul 22	Aug 22	Sep 22	Oct 22	Nov 22	Dec 22	Jan 23	Feb 23	Mar 23	Apr 23	May 23	Jun 23	Jul 23	Aug 23	Sep 23
Create Design Team and set meetings															
Train Golden Ambassadors with tour guides															
Design Team Construct New Communication Plan															
Put new plan in CRM, Social Media, Call Center, and Counselor to do list															
Train Golden Ambassadors with tour guides															
Golden Ambassadors targeted outreach															
May 1 national deadline for student enrollment deposit															
Census snapshot taken for of all students enrolled on tenth class day															

Appendix B: Enhanced Communication Plan

Date	Communication Type	From	Focus of Content
February 1, 2023	Email	Jalin Montgomery – Assistant Director of Admissions	Congratulations, Recent Alumna, Deposit (waiver), FAFSA Filed, Spring Events Open House and Spring Blitz - meet me in person, promote Zoom Event
February 15, 2023	Text message	Office of Admissions	Sign up for event – Open House,
March 1, 2023	E-mail	BaShaun Smith	Student involvement and opportunities, Greek Organizations, How students find their place, Pre-registration/Orientation, Spring Blitz (next week) Open House (week following)
March 6, 2023	Text Message- To NC students	Office of Admissions	It's Spring Blitz Week registration link
March 15, 2023	E-mail	Evelyn Rucker	ICA, Place to call home while at WCU, Specific events ICA leads, Last Open House, Campus Tour options
March 15, 2023	E-mail	Evelyn Rucker -	ICA, Place to call home while at WCU, Specific events ICA leads, Last Open House, Campus Tour options
March 29, 2023	Zoom Event	Host - Jalin	Have the callers available for breakout rooms after an intro by Jalin. Try to keep the breakouts smaller and possibly by city/region.
April 19, 2023	E-mail	Jalin	last questions before May 1 deposit is due? Fin. Aid, Deposit Waiver process if needed, Pre-reg/Orientation reminder

Appendix C: GA Initial Phone Call Script

Hello my name is _____ and I'm calling from Western Carolina University. Is this (Name of student you are calling)? Congratulations on your acceptance. I wanted to let you know of two enrollment steps and two events that we would like to invite you to attend.

1. Enrollment Deposit – 300 non-refundable due on or before May 1. Date of payment is the order rooms are assigned. **NOTE: If the enrollment deposit is a burden, they can request a payment waiver by e-mailing Financial aid Office – Finaid@wcu.edu.**
2. FAFSA filed – This helps us determine your financial aid package – if you are having trouble with the FAFSA– Financial aid office is ready to help. – **NOTE: If you have a personal story of how they have helped insert it here. If you have had a good experience with someone in Fin. Aid let the student know.**
3. Have you had the chance to visit WCU in person? (with their family or even a school group) Or, if you are from NC possibly at WCU's regional events in the Fall or Spring?
4. We would love to see you. Our Spring Blitz event is coming up the week of March 6th. Cities for Spring Blitz this year are Greensboro, Fayetteville, Raleigh, and Charlotte. Sign up at ontour.wcu.edu
5. Open House – Two of them Feb 25th and March 25th – sign up at openhouse.wcu.edu

Ask them a question such as

1. What made you consider WCU?
2. Are you thinking about a specific major?
3. What are some things you like to do in your spare time? Tell them about clubs and orgs here at WCU.
4. Are you wondering what it is like to attend a school in the mountains?

Tell them why you choose WCU and why you like being a student.

Possible topics to cover:

Why did you choose Western

What are the residence halls

What do you like to do (hobbies)

Culturally relevant (what it's like being in the mountains)

Overall Student Experience

Appendix D: Golden Ambassador Survey post phone call

1. On a scale 1 to 5, please rate the student's engagement in the call.
1 being not engaged to 5 asked a lot of questions
 - 1- Not Engaged
 - 2- Somewhat Engaged
 - 3- Engaged
 - 4- Strongly Engaged
 - 5 – Extremely Engaged

2. Has the candidate attended a regional event such as Western on Tour or Spring Blitz?
 - Western on Tour
 - Spring Blitz

-

3. Has the student visited campus either on a campus tour, Open House, Honors, or with a school group? Radio buttons and add other event open text
 - Campus Tour
 - Open House
 - Honors Day
 - School Group
 - Other

4. What were some positive comments or concerns about WCU that came up during your conversation? (No names or identifiable information please, just comments)

5. Based on your conversation how likely do you feel this student will deposit/commit to WCU?
 - 1- Will not deposit
 - 2- Small chance
 - 3- Probably
 - 4- Most likely
 - 5 – WCU Bound – Already paid

Appendix E: Focus Group Protocol

1. When did you find students to be the most talkative? (Any specific times where more phone calls were accepted)
2. Did you feel most students knew the admission steps needed to enroll? (Paying their enrollment deposit, filing FAFSA, filling out pre-registration/orientation, etc.)
3. What on or off campus events did you hear prospective students had attended?
4. Do you recall any students that had not yet been on campus?
5. For students that WCU did not seem a likely choice, did they share why?
6. What were some of the most interesting conversations you had with students.
 - a. What topics did prospective students have the most questions?
 - b. What topics did you feel the students knew the least about?
7. What concerns were shared with you that students had about possibly attending WCU?
8. Were you able to share anything that you felt helped a student better feel connected to WCU? If so, what?
9. Were there any common themes you observed of students that seemed more likely to deposit?
10. How can calls in the future be more targeted to help groups of students

Appendix F: May 1, 2023 Admission Point in Time



Admissions Point-in-Time View



Dataset of:
05/01/2023 6:06:38AM



IPEDS Term Code Se. 202380	Term Code / Date / Days to Census			Absolute Change (1-Yr.)	Percent Change (1-Yr.)	Current # Out-of-State			Final # Out-of-State		
	202180 5/1/2021 125	202280 5/1/2022 124	202380 5/1/2023 123			202180 5/1/2021 Out-of-State	202280 5/1/2022 Out-of-State	202380 5/1/2023 Out-of-State	202180 9/3/2021 Out-of-State	202280 9/2/2022 Out-of-State	
Custom PIT Date 5/1/2023	Total			-320	-8.9%	477	1,147	1,121	481	1,161	
Primary Application True											
	Temporary Decisions										
Applicant Type	Deferred	12	35	12	-23	-65.7%	4	17	4	0	0
Freshman	Referred	7	15	39	24	160.0%	5	7	20	0	0
	Admit Waitlisted	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0	0
Race/Ethnicity	Deposit Waitlisted	0	12	0	-12	-100.0%	0	12	0	0	12
Black or African Amer..	Pending Decision	35	24	137	113	470.8%	18	16	81	0	0
Gender											
All	ns										
Residency		1,474	2,814	2,672	-154.0	-5.5%	201	866	865	211	875
All	Net Admitted	1,218	2,355	2,171	-184.0	-7.8%	157	747	717	12	37
	Rejected	141	463	392	-71.0	-15.3%	13	156	133	27	157
Resident/Distance	Withdrawn	261	543	494	-49.0	-9.0%	46	143	151	441	968
All											
Geographic Band											
All	Commitment Actions										
Is ASP?	Committed	103	132	164	23	17.4%	11	24	31	16	37
All	Net Committed	103	128	153	25	19.5%	11	24	30	12	35
	Change Term	5	4	17	13	325.0%	0	2	10	2	3
Is Honors?	Enrolled	13	25	43	18	72.0%	1	4	7	11	30
All	Enrolled Full-Time	12	26	43	17	65.4%	1	5	7	11	29
Is Early College?											
All											

Appendix G: September 1, 2023 Admission Point in Time



Admissions Point-in-Time View



Database:
09/01/2023 6:06:38 AM



IPEDS Term Code Se.. 202380	Term Code / Date / Days to Census			Absolute Change (1-Yr.)	Percent Change (1-Yr.)	Current # Out-of-State			Final # Out-of-State		
	202180 9/1/2021 2	202280 9/1/2022 1	202380 9/1/2023 0			202180 9/1/2021 Out-of-State	202280 9/1/2022 Out-of-State	202380 9/1/2023 Out-of-State	202180 9/3/2021 Out-of-State	202280 9/2/2022 Out-of-State	
Custom PIT Date 9/1/2023	2,596	3,621	3,295	-326	-9.0%	481	1,161	1,128	481	1,161	
Primary Application True	Temporary Decisions										
Applicant Type Freshman	Deferred	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Referred	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Admit Waitlisted	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Race/Ethnicity Black or African Amer..	Deposit Waitlisted	0	12	0	-12	-100.0%	0	12	0	12	
	Pending Decision	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Gender All	Final Decisions										
Residency All	Admitted	1,505	2,840	2,677	-163.0	-5.7%	211	875	870	211	875
	Net Admitted	115	170	161	-9.0	-5.3%	13	37	31	12	37
	Rejected	239	469	396	-73.0	-15.6%	27	157	134	27	157
Resident/Distance All	Withdrawn	2,242	2,982	2,734	-248.0	-8.3%	440	968	961	441	968
Geographic Band All	Commitment Actions										
Is ASP? All	Committed	136	178	175	-3	-1.7%	16	37	38	16	37
	Net Committed	114	161	156	-5	-3.1%	13	35	29	12	35
	Change Term	13	11	23	12	109.1%	2	3	13	2	3
Is Honors? All	Enrolled	107	143	152	9	6.3%	11	30	26	11	30
	Enrolled Full-Time	104	143	151	8	4.2%	11	29	26	11	29
Is Early College? All											