

"THEY HAVE STORIES TO TELL": A SYMPHONY EXPLORING BIPOC  
BELONGINGNESS, JOY, AND STRUGGLE THROUGH IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE AND  
CULTURALLY RELEVANT PRACTICES IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A disquisition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in  
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**Abstract**

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BELONGINGNESS, JOY, AND STRUGGLE THROUGH IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE AND  
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Western Carolina University (May 2023)

Chair: Dr. Emily Virtue

Community colleges have a long-standing history of providing higher education to countless individuals who might not otherwise have been offered access. Research demonstrates that faculty members wield an abundance of power in fostering sense of belonging within their classrooms (Byrd, 2016; Carales et al., 2019; Danowitz, 2011; Eagen & Jaeger, 2008; Fong et al., 2021; Hlinka, 2017; Hoffman et al., 2002; Kezar & Maxey, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Strayhorn, 2019; Wood & Turner, 2010). As such, a focus on the classroom for improving sense of belonging remains compelling. The lack of a culturally relevant campus climate in the community college setting results in students of color continuing to enroll in large numbers while remaining underrepresented in the composition of college faculty and curricula. Such underrepresentation presents a barrier to fostering sense of belonging among students of color while attending college. Lower rates of sense of belonging place students of color at higher risk to not form meaningful relationships on campus or earn a college credential, leading to fewer job prospects, lower wage-earning potential, and less access to quality healthcare and retirement benefits, all of which perpetuate inequity and marginalization. By utilizing an improvement

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science approach, this disquisition leverages an equity-driven framework for implementing culturally relevant practices within the classroom to explore improving sense of belonging for students of color enrolled at the community college level.

*Keywords:* sense of belonging, students of color, culturally relevant pedagogy, community college, improvement science, faculty

### **Introduction and Statement of the Problem**

The United States developed schools for white upper classes to maintain advantages within that group, as well as to assimilate individuals in nondominant groups to the status quo. Consequently, the aftermath of slavery formed the foundation for a society deeply entrenched in a dominant mindset of white superiority, which later produced oppressive deficit ideologies and practices with a deliberate lack of consideration for equity and social justice in our educational system and its policies (Frattura & Capper, 2015, as cited in Capper, 2019; Gorski, 2011; Harper et al., 2009).

Following the initial early implementation of collegiate institutions, community colleges later arose because of a democratic desire to provide opportunities to the underserved citizens in the United States (Roman, 2007). Even with the intentional disparity in education, historically, community colleges have used their open-door policy, paired with comparatively low tuition, to offer access to higher education to many individuals who otherwise might not have been afforded that opportunity (Harper et al., 2009; Hlinka, 2017; Walpole et al., 2014). As such, student demographics at the community college level represent an increasingly diverse swath of the broader undergraduate population.

As of 2019, community colleges served approximately 41% of all undergraduate students in the United States, including 26% Hispanic students, 13% Black students, 20% students with disabilities, 29% first-generation students, and 15% students who identify as single parents (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). However, the lack of a culturally relevant campus climate in the community college setting results in students of color continuing to enroll in large numbers while remaining underrepresented in the composition of college

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faculty and curricula. Such underrepresentation presents a barrier to fostering sense of belonging among students of color while attending college.

A prominent retention model created by theorist Vincent Tinto (2006) asserts students must undergo both academic and social integration to develop a sense of belonging to persist to completion. Academic integration pertains to faculty and student relationships inside and outside the classroom, while social integration focuses on campus culture and organizational clubs. The unique circumstances of a commuter community college force a re-evaluation of the framing for sense of belonging under Tinto's model, as the only social interaction some students encounter occurs inside the classroom (Jacoby, 2000; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Tinto, 2006). As such, the role of faculty members as facilitators for fostering sense of belonging for students of color emerges as a crucial area for study.

In centering the voices of students and faculty in this disquisition, we explore how community colleges can leverage improvement science to increase sense of belonging for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) students in the community college classroom. We first offer an overview of our positionality as scholar-practitioners before highlighting existing notable literature and providing an overview of improvement science and the justification for our study. Following the explanation of formative and summative measures, we highlight the voices of participants and provide an equity-driven framework to articulate how culturally relevant practices by faculty can impact student experiences. Finally, we open into a broader discussion of our findings, address the limitations of this study, and provide areas for future research utilizing our framework.

### **Our Subjectivity and Positionality as Scholar-Practitioners**

Since improvement science focuses on continually evaluating how to make systems work better (Crow et al., 2019; Cohen-Vogel et al., 2014; Langley et al., 2009; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020), we also must keep in mind our relationship to the context when acting as scholar-practitioners. Research establishes the classroom as the place where faculty members have the greatest impact on sense of belonging; therefore, it is essential faculty be actively involved in any improvement initiatives to retain students (Carales & Hooker, 2019; Hlinka, 2017; Hutto, 2017; Martinez & Munsch, 2019; Strayhorn, 2009; Tinto, 2006; Wood, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2010). We both have experience as faculty members, specializing in communication, which allowed us an opportunity to leverage our role as practitioners of education to advance our work as scholars exploring social justice and equity in higher education.

Improving sense of belonging in community colleges requires breaking away from silo culture and individual college approaches. Bryk et al. (2015) discuss the importance of networked improvement communities in the pursuit of practical improvement in our education systems. Bryk et al. (2015) assert, “we could have an immense networked learning community [...] But we need to expand our vision—a more inclusive vision, but no less disciplined by scholarship and evidence. The call is urgent because our aim is so much higher than [...] a peer-refereed academic paper,” (p. 168-169). Our partnership across different institutions, racial lines, and lived experiences reinforces our commitment to our work as scholar-practitioners building a networked improvement community in western North Carolina.

As part of the presentation of our data, we drew upon the work of Wallace (2022) in utilizing music as storytelling devices for the participants whose voices we centered in our qualitative research, which includes both students and faculty. As the primary researchers, we

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found the use of music to enhance qualitative and sensemaking studies because we wanted to capture the authenticity of counter-storytelling by way of expressing the emotions of self through song (Wallace, 2022). Following the interview process, we utilized the song choices of our participants to learn more about their perceptions of their institutions and cultures by listening to the selections offered. Since we sought to capture the spirit of belongingness and storytelling, allowing students and faculty to highlight their experiences and cultures through song felt appropriate to this study. In the spirit of this, we also chose our own songs to describe our journey as students exploring belongingness, which we will share alongside our positionality and personal contexts herein.

### **Erika Lett – “Freedom”**

*“Freedom  
Where are you?  
'Cause I need freedom, too  
I break chains all by myself  
Won't let my freedom rot in hell  
Hey! I'ma keep running  
'Cause a winner don't quit on themselves.”*  
(Beyoncé, 2016)

In addressing the inequities students of color experience at A-B Tech, I often make individuals in power uncomfortable due to the dissonance required to examine their own responsibility in perpetuating the disenfranchising and deficit practices and policies implemented on campus. Insider research entails the researcher having experience within the world in which the research is being conducted (Drake & Heath, 2011). My interest in examining the experiences of students of color through a critical lens stems directly from their connection to my identity and mine to theirs. After receiving support through the federal Title III program to increase my reading competency as an elementary student, I breezed through middle school, and

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much of my high school career, advancing through honors, AP, and even general education classes from A-B Tech that were offered as a part of being a dual enrolled student. Much of my frustration in school came from having no teachers of color and very few, and often, no other people of color in my classes.

In high school, despite my successes, my school counselor questioned if it would be a good “fit” for me to attend the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The counselor recommended that I look at a talent track like modeling instead or consider a Historically Black College and University. However, I graduated from high school with honors, successfully passed my honors English class, was accepted to UNCG with a scholarship, and began the education shift that changed my life. UNCG, a minority serving institution, exposed me to the culture I was so desperately missing throughout much of my life. The institution was a metropolis of diversity. However, the thing I loved most about UNCG was having faculty and classmates from a variety of backgrounds. I will never forget the feeling of, for the first time in my life, having Black faculty and classmates—folx who looked like me, talked like me, and thought like me. I draw from the Leath et al. (2022) notion of homeplace where “Black students experience a deepened sense of ‘mattering’—feeling accepted, respected, and valued by other Black students on campus” (p. 756-757). In these classes I was safe—at home even. I was not penalized for just being myself for the first time in my educational experiences. In their classes, I found *belongingness*; I found my *homeplace*.

All my life education was an important value instilled in me. I cannot help but wonder sometimes what having a Black teacher, guidance counselor, or advisor earlier could have done for my confidence and my journey through life. I am grateful to have an amazing family, who were such strong support systems, but I think about my students that I currently serve who do not



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have that solid foundation. I think about their K-12 education, and they tell me similar stories to mine of being teased, left out, and feeling unwelcome. My goal is to not only accept, welcome, and affirm those students, but to encourage them, to let them know that they belong in college, and do not have to feel alone, marginalized, or silenced even though they experience that daily.

A-B Tech's student and faculty population similarly are predominantly white, and I am Black. As a practitioner I align with all values of intersectionality, specifically the fourth which stresses that social science research be used to better support multiply marginalized individuals (Gonzales et al., 2018). During my time at A-B Tech, I have served as the only Black, differently abled, female, full-time instructor in the entire Arts and Sciences division. In July 2022, I took a new position at A-B Tech as the executive director of diversity, equity, and inclusion. With this change in jobs, I have encountered the social closure theory as discussed by Lor and Jackson (2023), wherein they write,

African Americans are let into the academy, but to what extent they can participate in the higher education system is often controlled by a dominant group. Upon arriving to the institution, African American leaders often take on extraneous roles and responsibilities related to diversity and inclusion, which in turn, can take away from primary roles and responsibilities they were originally recruited to do. (p. 132).

Despite my professional promotion, I still find myself drawn to the classroom as the space that brings me the most joy to help students find the belongingness I first found as an undergraduate student myself.

As a result of my identity as a Black differently abled woman, I am often the person students of color seek out when they experience discrimination, marginalization, or lack of sense of belonging. I am fully aware that my intersectionality of identities is what cultivates the

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interests and agenda I have as an employee at A-B Tech. In addition, I also identify with a critical, feminist, and critical race theory lens that challenges systemic inequities enacted on individuals across multiple identities, as well as the poststructuralists position that takes the quest of knowledge a step further by holding those in power responsible for benefitting from the inequities that members of the disadvantaged communities face (Capper, 2019; Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

As a member of the initiative improvement team, which by nature of the College was mostly white, I was one of few individuals who could speak to the experiences of Black students at A-B Tech, because I was once a student at A-B Tech, and I was a doctoral candidate who experienced the behaviors and policies I research. My epistemological position allowed me to understand my personal investment in knowing and better understanding the lived experiences of people of color in higher education, while also informing my ability to explain why my concerns are so often silenced or minimized. These perspectives also allow me to actively explore and address the issues I am passionate about, while offering a framework for identifying potential interventions to improve them. Yet, I had to continually reflect and be cautious in my approach to this subject, as I recognized the experiences of students of color are far from a monolithic generalizable experience.

As a result of the adverse cultural climates students often face whether they be intentional or unintentional, I must be aware as an action-researcher of the bias that I bring into researching these hostile environments students encounter that contribute to their lack of sense of belonging. In qualitative research, practitioner-scholars are the main research instrument in that they not only collect data, they also are responsible for making sense of it. This results in the research being much more subjective in nature (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Consequently, it was easy as

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a Black student myself, and an educator, to make assumptions about how students might be feeling based on my own previous experiences in similar situations. Therefore, I practiced reflexivity and perception check to maintain objectivity, ensuring that I was in fact not only accurately observing behaviors, but also interpreting and understudying the data in relation to those behaviors correctly to minimize error (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). This was key as to not undermine my research.

As a Black woman, intrinsically I am connected to the participants I studied. However, as an executive director at A-B Tech, I am also a part of the culture I studied. As such, it proved necessary to intentionally detach myself to a certain extent from both communities to be impartial when evaluating the data produced in a baseline equity audit of current practices at A-B Tech, so that my team could successfully study and implement change ideas. If my goal was to research and improve the educational system, which fails Black students repeatedly, then I must continue to address power disparities, actively work to dismantle inequitable educational conditions, promote a culture that fosters the development of good leaders, while simultaneously accepting that our institution is flawed, but it can be changed with strategic improvements that have a strong theoretical and conceptual framework (Capper, 2019).

I chose the song “Freedom” by Beyonce as a reminder of my educational journey and that of my students. In the song, one of the most powerful lyrics made is “I’ma keep running ‘cause a winner don’t quit on themselves.” This song provides me with a deep sense of encouragement and motivation. Given the passion I have for serving and improving the educational experiences for students of color, I know that I can’t quit, and I won’t quit, because a winner doesn’t quit on themselves. I have experienced the persistence and dedication that is crucial to keep going time and time again during my journey even in the face of challenges and

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have heard that same drive in the stories of the many students I serve daily. I know that the work my partner Grace and I have conducted is meaningful and can change lives. So, I can only hope that my positionality, and what I bring to this work, embodies the empowered, powerful, critically conscious, and engaged practitioner-scholar that I strive to be.

### **Grace Cheshire – “Save Rock and Roll”**

*“You are what you love,  
Not who loves you.  
In a world full of the word ‘yes’,  
I’m here to scream ‘no’.”*  
(Fall Out Boy, 2013)

When Erika and I began this work, I had 4 years of experience as a student, 5 years as a staff member, and 3 years as a faculty member at Tri-County Community College. As a student, I spent the formative ages of 13 to 17 learning how to be a college student and a high school student at the same time because of my enrollment at the Tri-County Early College. In leaving behind my childhood friends to pursue a new school, belongingness would emerge as necessary for survival in such a rigorous educational environment. My high school friends and college instructors helped build that community and belonging for me. However, that experience left me split between two worlds, a place I would occupy long after I graduated with my associate degree and high school diploma in the same month. The subsequent years of earning my bachelor's degree found me stranded between being too young to make meaningful bonds with my junior-level, 21-year-old peers, and too educationally advanced to feel comfortable with “traditional” college first-year students.

Cultivating a sense of belonging during those undergraduate years proved difficult for me. I subsequently completed most of my master's degree online, wherein I conducted my thesis research on the importance of peer-to-peer relationships to retention and persistence. Following

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graduating from high school in 2011, the first meaningful level of belonging in my education I found was at Western Carolina University. Through this Educational Leadership program, and during a global pandemic, I gained new friends and mentors in my late 20s. One of those friends is now a lifelong sister in this work with me. These experiences reinforced my commitment to cultivating a sense of belonging for students and utilizing peer-to-peer channels for community building within the classroom.

Recognizing my history as a student and the role these experiences play in my positionality as a scholar-practitioner proved to be a vital act of self-reflexivity during the completion of our disquisition. Furthermore, as an educator-activist pursuing social justice and equity, I aligned with the tenets of both critical whiteness theory (see Matias & Mackey, 2015; Matias, 2013) and critical race theory (see Capper, 2019). Implicitly recognizing my whiteness and privilege as influences in my classroom space helped to ensure I could move beyond a “white savior” mentality of performative allyship. As Matias and Mackey (2015) assert:

the study of critical whiteness provides teachers, many of whom are white, with a process of learning their own whiteness and how the exertions of whiteness create a violent condition within which people of color must racially survive. Choosing to ignore this knowledge set gives a partial understanding of racial justice, one that cannot fully allow for commitment to racial justice. (p. 35)

My background as a white, millennial, highly educated, middle-class woman means I lack the lived experience of many of our intersectionally marginalized students (particularly along race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status lines). As a practitioner, I remained aware of this area for continued growth to ensure my improvement initiatives were user-centered (on our students) and driven by equity goals.

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During our last year as doctoral students in 2022, I left Tri-County Community College to join the communication department as a faculty member at Western Carolina University. Through the process of doing research, completing my doctorate, and teaching more courses, I felt myself being pulled increasingly toward the space that offered me the most opportunities to do work as a social justice and equity-minded scholar-practitioner: the classroom. Choosing to leave Tri-County Community College proved to be the hardest decision of my professional life but the right one for me. I was fortunate to have colleagues at Tri-County who remained committed to serving on my design team and piloting our change initiatives because of their love for the students they served.

In my role as a practitioner striving to implement change, being a graduate from Tri-County Community College allowed me an important insider perspective to connect not only with my students but also my fellow faculty and staff members, many of whom were there when I was a student. These insider partnerships I forged during my 7 years with Tri-County afforded us the opportunity to continue collecting data and engaging with stakeholders without disruption during the 2022 fall semester. While my path looks different in 2022 than I envisioned in 2020, I do find myself excited again for the first time in a long time about my purpose in higher education. I look forward to interacting with students and fostering a better work-life balance to pursue the areas of scholarship and research that interest me. Twitter user Je'Konjurha (2021), who earned her Ed.D. in 2020, created a thread I come back to often when considering my future, wherein she asks:

If you consider yourself to be an anti-capitalist (and oppressed), what does self-accountability around your career/work goals and desires look like? Are your dreams predicated on ascending to the top? ... I'm just in a place of questioning my desires as it

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relates to success - not so much that it will stop me from fulfilling my divine purpose or living in abundance, but def tryna interrupt the internalized scarcity, greed, and individualism that capitalism breeds.

As a social justice scholar-practitioner, I am still reflecting on what this self-accountability looks like for me. For now, I would like to focus on serving students and not splitting my attention in so many different directions that I cannot perform what feels most fulfilling to me—being an engaged, empathetic, and equity-driven educator.

As a white, middle-class, millennial, highly educated, cisgender woman, I hold a lot of privilege in my professional context as a faculty member at Western Carolina University, as well as my roles as a scholar-practitioner. Following the guidance of critical whiteness theory, I also must remain aware of the predominantly white demographics in the employee population in higher education in the western North Carolina region. My design team only included white participants, which emphasizes the importance of my partnering with Erika—a Black woman—to complete this crucial work. Matias and Mackey (2015) discuss the importance of both critical whiteness theory and critical race theory to provide “a Ying to the yang” of social justice work (p. 35). This is how I see the partnership we have built through this process: as two sides of a coin, providing balance to each other in this journey. Our lived experiences differ but also supported the work we set out to do toward increasing social justice and equity as critical scholars and educators in the community college setting.

Finally, I chose the song “Save Rock and Roll” by Fall Out Boy to describe my journey in this program and my philosophy in this work overall because there have been moments of deep loneliness, wherein I felt like I was the only one who really cared—in my institution, in my classroom, or in my doctoral courses. Then there were the moments like when I met my soul

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sister, Erika, and I knew I had to keep going. Not only because I deserved it, but, more importantly, because my students deserve someone who will fight for them in spaces where they do not see themselves represented.

Rock and roll owes its existence to the ingenuity of queer Black rhythm and blues artists of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s (Lewis, 2016), and the subsequent gentrification of the genre offers an almost poetic metaphor for a country that built elite higher education institutions on the literal backs of slavery and racism. Furthermore, the intertwining of young white audiences with Black music set off a cultural phenomenon that played in the background of the Civil Rights revolution from the 1950s onward. Picking this song as my representation in this work speaks to honoring a legacy of disruption, creation, joy, and culture. With that in mind, it is hard not to ask: What is more rock and roll than cultivating socially just and equitable classroom spaces?

### **History and Current State of the Problem**

Studies conducted in the last two decades focused on the 2-year setting make a compelling argument for viewing sense of belonging as a vital component to academic progress, achievement, and integration in higher education (Berger, 1997; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Tinto, 2006). Sense of belonging involves both the student's evaluation of their role in relation to the institution of higher education they attend and its agents, as well as how connected to, or disconnected from, that institution and its agents the student feels. The absence of sense of belonging for students of color is related to their failure to persist (Martinez & Munsch, 2019; Strayhorn, 2009). Further, research shows that students of color face a substantial burden of negative experiences in college such as adverse cultural climates that include overt racism, microaggressions, lack of representation and relatability to faculty, lack of representation in their curricula, as well as difficulty fitting in on campus, (Carales & Hooker,



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2019; Strayhorn, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010; Strayhorn, 2019; Wood, 2014). To concentrate on the faculty influence on students' senses of belonging, the literature can be divided into two focal categories: (a) culturally relevant pedagogy and (b) faculty cultural competence.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Many scholars have contributed to the literature regarding the bridging of curriculum and pedagogical strategies with the affirmation and integration of a student's background and experiences in the learning process. These frameworks are known by a myriad of different names "culturally responsive," "culturally appropriate," "culturally based," "culturally sustaining," or "culturally compatible" pedagogy or teaching (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Larke, 2013; Hutchison & McAlister-Shields, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2011; McCarty & Brayboy, 2021; McCarty & Lee, 2014). For clarification purposes, "culturally relevant pedagogy" will be the guiding framework in this disquisition. Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings developed the Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) framework in the early 1990s, based on three pedagogical tenets: academic success, cultural competence, and a critical sociopolitical consciousness (Larke, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2011).

For educators to become more culturally competent to connect with and relate to students of diverse backgrounds, one of the first areas to examine is their own personal background and identity, and how those experiences influence their perceptions of various cultures (Schwartz, 2019). This should prompt educators to ask what can be done to minimize harm, reduce inequities in the classroom, and limit deficit-based ideologies educators may unintentionally bring with them into the classroom. Further, as educators learn more about the backgrounds of their ethnically diverse students, and how those cultural influences impact a student's academic achievement, they can become more keenly aware of the practices they implement in their

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classroom that either validate the lived experiences of their students of color and demonstrate a level of cultural competence. Or educators may do the opposite and fail to accommodate the needs of the most marginalized students, demonstrating a lack of cultural competence (Gay, 2010).

Further, Ladson-Billings (2011) describes cultural competency with various anecdotes of educators using members of students' families and communities to explain a particular concept, and then having the class do further research on the subject to be better informed. This is also an example of cross-cultural teaching that intentionally incorporates practices and ideologies that are culturally relevant to the students within the classroom, while understanding and being mindful of the differences in cultural backgrounds between teacher and student (Dekker & Fischer, 2008). Cross-cultural teaching allows educators to make their instruction more equitable and assessable for all students by teaching students through their own cultural filters. As educators assess their cultural competence and realize the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy that includes cross-cultural teaching and learning experiences, ethnically diverse students were reported to advance academically (Gay, 2002; Gay, 2010; Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2011).

Teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds often presents a challenge for educators. Despite the significant literature available focusing on cultural competence and how educators can implement culturally relevant teaching into their classrooms, most educators still feel unprepared to teach students who are different from them. A culturally relevant pedagogical approach to curricula should prompt educators to examine the multicultural effectiveness of curriculum designs and instructional materials and adapt them to make them more accessible and equitable for all learners (Gay, 2000; 2002; 2010; 2013). While the concept of culturally relevant

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pedagogy permeates the academic milieu, educators must transform curricula in such a way that it that it not only combines a cultural foundation for instruction, but also challenges the status quo of traditionally Eurocentric school curricula (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Finally, culturally relevant pedagogical practices span cultures, races, and ethnicities to create a more intentional sense of belonging, especially for students of color.

### *African American Students*

Turner (1994) describes the experiences that students of color (African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American) face on campuses where they are not welcome or comfortable being a “guest in someone else's house” (p. 356). This was evidenced by the interviews in which students reported feeling lonely, discouraged by faculty who often were inaccessible, and a general lack of concern demonstrated by college agents for the student's well-being. Further Strayhorn (2019) posits that students who struggle to belong regardless of their cultural background describe the experience as a feeling of “failure,” which is often then internalized into the belief that they themselves are a failure. To show support and inclusion for students of color, and to redress the issue of lack of belongingness created by these unwelcoming environments, Turner (1994) recommends examining curricula to make certain it reflects the culture of students of color, actively work against racism on campus, have adequate representation, create classroom environments that promote respect for all students, as well as detailed equity audits institution wide. For Black males in college specifically those attending PWIs (predominantly white institutions), sense of belonging centered around having positive relationships with faculty members and peers, experiencing racial climates that were welcoming and affirming of the student, and participating in activities that promoted a sense of community (Strayhorn, 2009; 2010; 2019).

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### *Indigenous/Native American Students*

Indigenous students have been systematically disadvantaged and underserved by the educational institutions they attend (Fong et al., 2021). Indigenous students experience hostile campus climates like their other peers of color, which are characterized by racism, paternalism, discrimination, low expectations, violence, and culturally biased curricula (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Strayhorn, 2019). This is further exacerbated by the fact that most public schools are less likely to have Native American teachers or teachers with Indigenous cultural competency (McCarty & Lee, 2014; Lundberg & Lowe, 2016). The lack of Native American teachers often results in inaccurate representations of Indigenous culture being taught through a Eurocentric perspective and lens, which in turn leaves Indigenous students' cultural identities threatened, and leads to these students feeling alienated on campus (Fong et al., 2021).

Research from Castagno and Brayboy (2008) demonstrates positive academic outcomes for both Indigenous and non-Native students when culturally centered curricula and teaching methods are used in the classroom that encourage cross-cultural interactions and safeguarding that all voices are heard, specifically those of Indigenous students. Educators can engage Indigenous students by connecting educational materials with the student's culture and community. A study by Lundberg and Lowe (2016) surveyed a random sample of 647 Native American students from predominantly non-Native colleges and found that faculty play a significant role in the academic success of Native students. In particular, the study highlighted that when Indigenous students had access to supportive faculty, not only did persistence improve, but faculty offered the ability to mitigate circumstances that could potentially cause disengagement for Indigenous students while simultaneously demonstrating a strong belief in the student and their ability to succeed. Specifically, a finding of the study suggested that when

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faculty provide perspectives from diverse viewpoints, allow students to share based on their own backgrounds and experiences, and use inclusive course materials from non-European authors and non-Western worldviews, they create a culture where diverse perspectives and systems of knowledge are welcomed and valued in the classroom. As a result, students report increased satisfaction and engagement.

In the Fong et al. (2021) study that surveyed 1,393 tribal community college students who self-identified as either American Indian or Alaska Native, students indicated they experienced belongingness at their institution when they felt their school supported their Indigenous culture. A direct result of that increase in sense of belonging led to better academic performance. Further, Tachine et al. (2017) conducted a study of 24 Native (15 female and 9 male) undergraduate students from the Hopi, Navajo, and Pascua Yaqui nations to explore the needs of Native students and their communities. Numerous students reported experiencing racism that led to feeling marginalized and isolated. For many Indigenous students, having a sense of connection to their background, family, and spirituality was crucial in fostering sense of belonging. Moreover, it is impossible for educators to cultivate cultural competence or implement culturally relevant pedagogy if they do not recognize, nurture, and include the individuality and intersectionality of the diverse student identities within their classroom into their pedagogical materials.

### *Latinx Students*

Several studies have shown that Latinx students often experience negative social climates on campus, such as feelings of isolation, racism, self-defeating stereotypes, and discrimination (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Ortiz, 2004; Solórzano et al., 2000). After conducting a study in which 589 Latino and white college students responded to the College Student Experiences

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Questionnaire (CSEQ), Strayhorn (2019) documented that Latinx students consistently reported experiencing a greater lack of sense of belonging than their white peers at PWIs. In a second study, Strayhorn (2019) conducted a series of one-on-one interviews with 31 Latino undergraduates attending PWIs. Two major findings in that study highlighted 1) Latinx students cited having to develop coping strategies to navigate the college environments that differed from their own culture; and 2) Latinx students struggled to maintain a relationship with family members while adjusting to the unfamiliar college environment (Strayhorn, 2019). To counter these negative experiences Latinx students face, Locks et al. (2008) emphasize the importance of validating these students' lived experiences and making a point to ensure that they feel welcomed and valued. Further, in Hurtado and Carter's (1997) study of 272 mixed Chicano, Puerto Rican, and other Latinx college sophomores, students cited regular communication with faculty outside class to be a strong factor in contributing to high sense of belonging in the third year of college, compared with those who were less engaged in similar activities.

### **Faculty Cultural Competence**

Tinto (2006) argues that faculty actions, especially in the classroom, are essential factors in increasing student socio integration through belonging. As discussed, several scholars found when faculty implement culturally relevant pedagogy into their classrooms, positive gains for students of color follow (Carales & Hooker, 2019; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Strayhorn, 2009; Strayhorn, 2019; Wood & Turner, 2010). In a study of 28 African American male community college students, Wood and Turner (2010) found that most participants attributed their academic success to a positive relationship they had with their faculty. However, it was emphasized in their research that much of the pedagogical practices and curricula from community college faculty lack any connection to the sociocultural experiences of African American male students.

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To redress this issue, they recommend that faculty are frequently assessed on their knowledge and practice of culturally based pedagogy (Wood & Turner, 2010).

As their designation suggests, community colleges exist to serve the communities they are located within, which means a broad approach to belongingness improvement strategies might prove less effective than at a 4-year setting (Hlinka, 2017; Tinto, 2006). Hlinka's (2017) qualitative study at a rural Appalachian community college revealed faculty can quickly fall into victim-blaming mindsets around student values, which in turn causes a disconnect within the classroom. As a result of the adverse cultural climates students of color often face, whether they be intentional or unintentional, Wood (2014) argues that faculty should use their classrooms as opportunities to regularly expose and challenge the oppressive practices and behaviors exhibited against students of color. Often, underrepresented students face an overwhelming apprehension to reach out to faculty for support. Students of color frequently seek outside support from friends or remain silent, seeking no support at all (Wood & Turner, 2010). This requires that faculty not only be aware of their own cultural incompetence, but also be familiar with the classroom environment enough to mitigate circumstances in which disengagement can occur. Faculty must continually work on their cultural competence by engaging in authentic and affirming practices to support students of color (Wood, 2014).

Wood and Turner (2010) highlight in their study that Black students spoke favorably about faculty who knew the students and made a point to connect with them and provide personal attention. In a separate but related study on traditional-age rural Appalachian community college students, Hlinka (2017) found that students overwhelmingly spoke positively about the campus climate where the regional culture was reflected. Students appreciated faculty

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members who made a practice of connecting with the students on a personal level and simply knowing someone by name they could consult if they needed help.

Extant research has shown a positive relationship between students' sense of belonging and persistence (Strayhorn, 2009; Strayhorn, 2019). As faculty begin to foster environments that acknowledge and embrace the myriad cultural backgrounds of their students, the factors that contribute to the lack of sense of belonging for students of color can be minimized (Carales & Hooker, 2019; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Though a gap in studies on community college belongingness and students of color persists, in the past decade there has been an expansion in the literature surrounding sense of belonging for Black males in both community college and 4-year institutions (Strayhorn, 2009; Walpole et al., 2014; Wood, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2010). While this rise in interest in students of color at the community college level is necessary, there remains a gap in research focused on the intersecting elements of race, gender, and socio-economic status that should be addressed.

Unfortunately, a substantial amount of the research on underrepresented community college students comes from unpublished doctoral dissertations, and of that body of research most focuses exclusively on student persistence, instead of topics like academic achievement or student engagement (Wood, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2010). Given the under-explored area of sense of belonging among community college students of color, there is a need to orient future research efforts with a critical lens. The experiences and culture of students of color are not generalizable, like theory models often aspire to be. Therefore, to commit to and be intentional about developing sense of belonging among community college students of color, researchers must examine the critical barriers, such as systemic racism and oppression along intersectional lines, which lead to students not forming important relationships or seeing themselves in the



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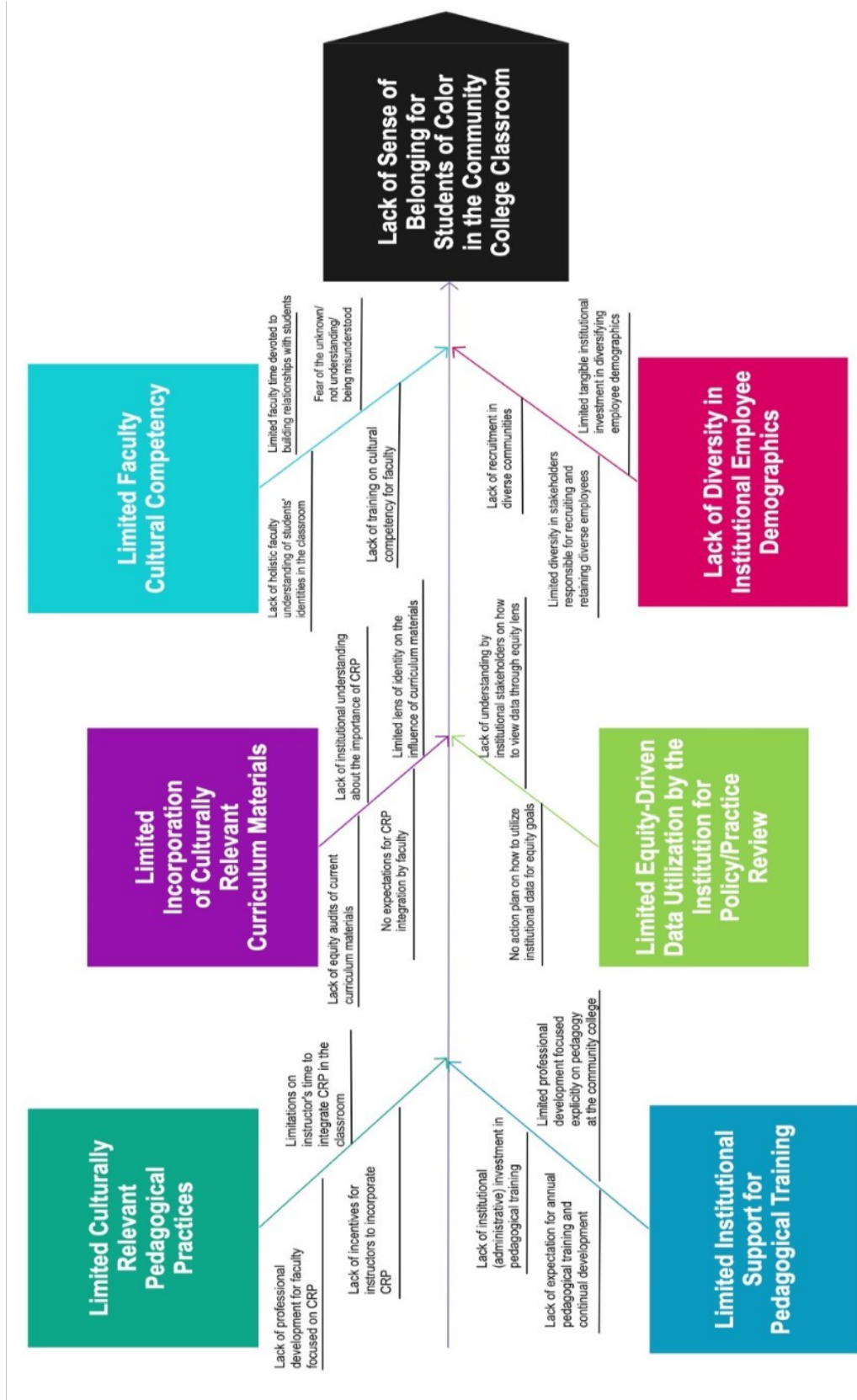
curriculum. Further, until a critical lens is applied to this matter, cultivating an equitable sense of belonging among students of color at the community college level students will remain unattainable.

### **Casual Analysis of The Problem**

When considering the issue of lack of sense of belonging for students of color in the community college classroom, a useful guide in understanding the systematic causes can be found by completing a causal systems analysis (Bryk, 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). As Hinnant-Crawford (2020) states, “When thinking about problems of practice, you have to be intentional about seeing the entire system,” (p. 54). Constructing a causal analysis gave us the ability to frame our problem of practice in terms of the entire system and then to drill down deeper into the root causes of the problem. The contributing factors for lack of student sense of belonging in the classroom manifest in six different areas as represented in Figure 1. Limited culturally relevant practices, materials, and faculty competency, as well as limited institutional support, lack of diversity in institutional demographics, and a limited use of equity-driven data utilization constitute our causal system analysis.

### **Figure 1**

*Casual System Analysis for Lack of Sense of Belonging for Students of Color in the Community College Classroom*



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### ***Limited culturally relevant pedagogical practices***

As previous research demonstrates, fostering sense of belonging in the classroom requires educators to better understand their students (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Hlinka, 2017; Jacoby, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Tinto, 2006). Utilizing Ladson-Billings' (2011) three pedagogical tenets of academic success, cultural competence, and a critical sociopolitical consciousness can provide a useful means of boosting sense of belonging through pedagogical classroom practices.

Academic success pertains to an educator's classroom awareness and management. Not only must educators know their subject matter, they must also be aware of the students in their classroom, and how to uphold strong academic expectations while also making the content relevant to the students. Several scholars have argued that faculty play a critical role in student retention (Byrd, 2016; Carales & Hooker, 2019; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Fong et al., 2021; Hlinka, 2017; Hoffman, 2002; Hutto, 2017; Martinez & Munsch, 2019; Miller & O'Daniel, 2019; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2006; Wood, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2010). Moreover, how culturally competent a faculty member is regarding their students' background can make all the difference in their achievement and success. Academic success entails instructors fostering a culture in which students not only enjoy the content they are learning about but are also encouraged to choose the standard of academic excellence throughout the course of their learning (Ladson-Billings, 2000; 2011).

### ***Limited incorporation of culturally relevant curriculum materials***

Critical social consciousness is a pedagogical approach that encourages teachers and students to critically examine the sociopolitical issues impacting the world. Moreover, using this critical lens, students should feel compelled to challenge the status quos that perpetuate inequitable outcomes for certain groups of people (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Strayhorn (2009)

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conducted a study of 231 Black men and 300 white men enrolled in 4-year predominately white institutions and found that sense of belonging can be significantly impacted by having cross-racial interactions and engaging with peers from diverse backgrounds. He asserts that when faculty implement pedagogical practices to promote cross-racial peer collaboration and exchange in the classroom, it results in positive educational outcomes for all participants (Strayhorn, 2009). As faculty incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy that includes experiences that align with a student's background, they offer a safe environment for marginalized students to expose the practices that lead to their marginalization, as well as getting to know one another on a deeper level (Carales & Hooker, 2019).

### ***Limited faculty cultural competency***

Cultural competence refers to an educator's ability to not only know the student and their background, but to incorporate those backgrounds into the learning materials so that students see themselves in what they are learning and can learn about larger ideas in a safe educational environment (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Welcoming, embracing, integrating, and celebrating students' culture is a way to increase sense of belonging for marginalized students (Carales & Hooker, 2019; Martinez & Munsch, 2019). Honoring and displaying sensitivity to students' cultural backgrounds offers a means to validate lived experiences. More than anything, students must know that faculty are personally invested in them. By implementing these practices, faculty can build the relationships necessary to create a feeling of support and sense of belonging for students of color (Carales & Hooker, 2019; Martinez & Munsch, 2019; Wood & Turner, 2010).

### ***Limited institutional support for pedagogical training***

A major obstacle to faculty building cultural competency is the general lack of pedagogical training for higher education instructors (Brownell & Tanner, 2017; Danowitz &

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Tuitt, 2011; Jensen, 2011). Many faculty members at the undergraduate level are hired due to their subject matter expertise but may not have received any formal pedagogical training prior to being employed to teach. As a result, faculty can lack the necessary knowledge for how to build a classroom focused on their students (Brownell & Tanner, 2017; Ebert-May et al., 2011; Miller & O'Daniel, 2019), which presents a major consequence as classrooms offer the most important space for socio-academic integration in all higher education institutions but especially 2-year commuter colleges (Aljohani, 2016; Jacoby, 2000; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Tinto, 2006).

Additionally, faculty often cite lack of time, incentives, and professional development offered by their institutions as barriers in advancing their pedagogical training (Henderson & Dancy, 2007). Without proper support from the institutional level to encourage faculty to seek out necessary pedagogical training designed for inclusivity and culturally relevant practices, the goal of implementing cultural competency in the community college classroom remains out of reach. As the literature suggests, both culturally relevant pedagogy and cultural competence displayed by facilitators in the classroom constitute vital practices to fostering sense of belonging for students of color.

### ***Limited equity-driven data utilization by the institution***

McNair et al. (2020) established three guiding principles for pursuing equity-driven initiatives in higher education: 1) equity is a means of corrective justice for the educational debt (see Ladson-Billings, 2006); 2) equity is an antiracist project to confront overt and covert racism; and 3) equity allows practitioners to see whiteness as a norm that racializes cultures/outcomes in higher education institutions (p. 21). While much data are collected in higher education settings, McNair et al. (2020) argue that such institutions fall into the trap of using data to obfuscate inequity. Utilizing data in a mindful equity-driven capacity can assist colleges not only in

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addressing inequities on their campuses but also offer a lens through which to locate what areas should be targeted in change improvements (Gullo, 2017; McNair et al., 2020).

### *Lack of diversity in employee demographics*

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) published their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion position statement in 2020, which strongly encouraged higher education institutions to employ a culturally diverse faculty population. As institutions create an equitable and inclusive culture, the opportunity arises to recruit diverse students, while fostering a culture of support and guidance, which in turn leads to positive student outcomes (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2020). This statement proves important considering research indicating that expanding the number of faculty members of color leads to improved educational outcomes and student achievement for all students, especially students of color (Fujimoto, 2012; Lara, 2019; Levin et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2009; Tinto, 2006; Wood & Turner, 2010).

Within the 2017-18 academic year at postsecondary institutions, Black students earned 91,273 master's degrees, Hispanic students earned 72,470 master's degrees, Asian/Pacific Islander students earned 50,091 master's degrees, American Indian/Alaska Native students earned 3,318 master's degrees, and two or more race students earned 18,850 master's degrees, which collectively was approximately 35% of all master's degrees awarded that year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019c). Additionally, Black students earned 14,241 doctoral degrees, Hispanic students earned 13,253 doctoral degrees, Asian/Pacific Islander students earned 20,762 doctoral degrees, American Indian/Alaska Native students earned 707 doctoral degrees, and two or more race students earned 4,497 doctoral degrees, which accounted for

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approximately 33% of all doctoral degrees awarded that year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a).

While work to improve the graduation rate for students of color remains, the evidence clearly shows there is no shortage of people of color with advanced degrees to hold faculty or staff positions. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2018), approximately 75% of community college faculty identified as white, while nearly half of all community college students are people of color. Further, examining the North Carolina Community College System level in the fall of 2020, North Carolina Community Colleges (2021b) reported that of the curriculum faculty, 81% were white, whereas only 11% identified as Black.

Given the growing student of color population in higher education and as evidenced by the increasing number of capable and highly qualified candidates, one might question where the faculty representation is to match? The answer is simple: institutions of higher education have historically been known for being places where people of color do not feel welcomed, which includes students and employees (Capper, 2019; Strayhorn, 2009). This is deeply rooted in a culture that protects whiteness and gatekeeps the opportunity to cultivate diversity (Kelly et al., 2017; Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017; Levin et al., 2013; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Stanley, 2006; Strayhorn, 2009; Wood & Turner, 2010). As a result, often the narrative for the lack of diversity becomes one that implies there are not any qualified candidates of color. However, the data indicate otherwise.

### **Sense of Belonging & Social Justice**

Critical race theory (CRT) reveals the prevalence of racism as endemic to society and deeply pervasive. The remnants of slavery form the foundation of a society deeply rooted in a

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dominant mindset of white superiority, which inherently produces the oppressive ideologies and practices on which our society was founded (Bell, 1992; Harper, et al., 2009; Tate, 1997). As Alexander and Alexander (2017) state, “It has always been the habit of privileged groups to deny the oppressed classes every opportunity for the cultivation of innate capacities and then to accuse them of lacking what they have been denied the right to acquire,” (p. 685). Author Derrick Bell (1992) further describes this form of racism as a means of “racial bonding” by whites, in which white people will often suffer undesirable conditions in comparison with their wealthier white counterparts, so long as people of color are more socially and economically disadvantaged.

Throughout history, based solely on skin color, BIPOC individuals, particularly African Americans, have been (1) deprived and denied of basic human and legal rights, (2) deemed inept, (3) prevented from attending educational institutions, and (4) oppressed into quasi citizenship (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Harper, et al., 2009; Lipsitz, 2018; Tate, 1997). For decades white people have positioned themselves using policies and discriminatory practices to remain in a place of power while continuing to marginalize and oppress members who are not a part of their culture (Bell, 1992; Capper, 2019; Lipsitz, 2018). Moreover, this American tradition of racism and its permanence ensures progress for people of color will be brief, while setbacks will be enduring and inevitable (Bell, 1992). As a result, CRT exposes the longstanding tradition of racism in America, and challenges individuals to work against its prevalent nature.

### **Critical Race Theory and Music in Qualitative Research**

Research on the experiences of students of color in higher education has utilized critical race theory as a framework to examine how BIPOC students pursuing higher education have fundamentally different experiences than their White counterparts due to an educational structure rooted in racism and systemic inequities (Hernández, 2016; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001;



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Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). A prevalent theme that appears in CRT emphasizes the centrality of experiential knowledge, which gives credence to notion that the experiential knowledge of people of color is not only legitimate and appropriate to improve one's understanding of the lived experiences of people of color, but is crucial as a practice for moving away from deficit-informed methods that often silence and misrepresent the experiences of people of color and instead centers the intersectionality of their experiences as sources of strength (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Music holds tremendous potential as a tool for critically examining and representing individuals' lived experiences (Bolden, 2017). According to Garcia et al. (2018), music often serves as a major source of ethnic/racial identity development and lived experience people of color. When discussing the social and aesthetic significance of African American music, Salaam (1995) states that Great Black Music is the “mother tongue” and that “with our people, in order to fully appreciate us, one must immerse oneself in our music” (p. 351). While exploring the importance of Indigenous languages within stories, songs, and education, Young (2023) asserts that “when interacting with Indigenous people, it is essential to learn their traditional knowledge by allowing sovereignty over dissemination by listening to their speech, stories, and songs, as these are how Indigenous people express this information in their own way” (p. 72). Moore (2013) adds that “songs are an important way that Indigenous people frame their world” (p. 151). Additionally, Anguiano et al. (2022), utilized critical race theory as a framework to examine the role of music listening practices of Latinx college students enrolled at a predominantly White institutions, wherein students' responses highlighted that music was the “sonic embodiment of their ethnic culture and/or a repository of culturally specific memories, sentiments, idioms, and

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grooves” (p. 72). In each study music is at the core to better understanding the lived experiences of students of color.

Wallace (2022) demands that researchers provide students of color opportunities “to express themselves in comfortable and culturally significant ways” (p. 542). One such way to do this is by centering storytelling through music. Given the essence of narrative inquiry centers on the use of storytelling as a technique to authentically capture and offer meaning to individuals’ lived experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000), music serves as way to enhance the qualitative data collected from those stories by efficiently and powerfully symbolizing their meaning (Bolden, 2017; Wallace, 2022). As such, music can be used as a way through which BIPOC individuals can create, alter, and share aspects of their cultural identities and experiences, while simultaneously providing a means to learn more about themselves and connect with others (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson, 2000). Further, as a counter storytelling technique, music can serve as a unique tool to elevate the voice of these historically underrepresented individuals through self-expression in the form of resistance, resilience, and triumph, while challenging any contradicting and inaccurate dominant culture narratives. We discuss the implementation of this strategy during our improvement process during our exploration of the qualitative findings from this disquisition.

### **Community and Critical Race Theory**

McMillan and Chavis (1986) assert a foundational definition and theory for sense of community as a psychological construct. Many of the educational research models interested in community trace roots back to this theoretical framework. Four elements comprise this definition of sense of community: membership, influence (mattering), integration, and shared emotional connection. The psychological framework for building a sense of community is instrumental in

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training faculty to foster relationships inside the classroom. Chickering (2000) advocates a need for faculty to build relationships inside the classroom space to foster a sense of community, especially for commuter students. College classrooms allow critical opportunities for students to engage in personal self-reflection and discussion, which may be impossible in their home or work settings. College instructors can foster trust, openness, and collaborative learning by giving students assignments with a more individualized focus.

Martinez and Munsch (2019) drew from Maslow's (1962) work on sense of belonging as a basic human need, Kohut's (1977) discussions of the importance of human connection to build relationships, and Tinto's (2006) retention theory to establish why community colleges must be proactive in ensuring students feel a sense of belonging. The absence of sense of belonging for students of color is directly related to their inability to persist (Martinez & Munsch, 2019; Strayhorn, 2009). Additionally, Morrow and Ackermann (2012) utilized online surveys based on the Sense of Belonging Scale and Academic Attitude Scale to gauge student persistence in relation to belongingness. The results indicated significance between perceived faculty support and retention, the more peer support a student reported, and a higher likelihood to return.

Leveraging full-time faculty in the improvement process remains essential to fostering sense of belonging for students of color at community colleges. While research into sense of belonging at the community college level has grown since 2000, a lack of equity-driven critical scholarship persists. Many studies remain focused on a 4-year institutional setting, largely ignoring a considerable block of the undergraduate population in the United States—those who are in community colleges. The lived experience of many students of color in the community college setting impacts sense of belonging. The lack of both a customized focus and a social justice lens on sense of belonging improvement strategies specific to 2-year institutions

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perpetuates inequity. Only by grounding improvement initiatives in critical race theory, culturally relevant practice, and equity-driven goals can educators strive to achieve a more inclusive sense of belonging on their campuses for students of color.

### **Problem of Practice within the Local Context**

#### **Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College**

Asheville Buncombe Technical Community College (A-B Tech) is one of 58 community colleges in the North Carolina Community College System. According to Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College (2019a), A-B Tech serves more than 20,000 students (9,560 curriculum and 13,504 continuing education), with seven college-wide academic divisions, 61 curriculum programs, 61 degrees, 20 diplomas, and 78 certificates. A-B Tech performs above the baseline level but below average in the areas of Credit English Success, Credit Math Success, First Year Progression, and Curriculum Completion, and above college average and below excellence in Transfer Performance (North Carolina Community Colleges, 2020). While A-B Tech is meeting the baseline metrics for Student Achievement Measures, the failure to exceed these indicators reveals substantial room for improvement on all fronts (except for College Transfer Performance which ranks slightly below the excellence level). Students of color make up 51% of the national community college population, while at the state level they account for approximately 40% of students enrolled for credit (American Association of Community College, 2020; North Carolina Community Colleges, 2021a).

However, A-B Tech's Black student population is staggeringly low in contrast to the national and state data on community college students, with students of color making up only around 20% of both curriculum students and the total student population (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, 2019b; North Carolina Community Colleges, 2021a). This

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number is characteristically comparable to Buncombe County's population, where people of color only account for around 17% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), the overall graduation rate at A-B Tech is 32%, with Black students graduating at a rate of 5%, Hispanic students graduating at a rate of 24%, Asian students graduating at a rate of 67%, two or more race students graduating at a rate of 31%, and white students graduating at a rate of 34%. As shown in these figures, white students are graduating from A-B Tech at almost seven times the rate of Black students, and there is still a significant gap in graduation rates between other students of color and white students, except for Asian students. The data reveal that there is a need for radical and transformative change institution-wide at A-B Tech, particularly as it relates to students of color.

According to the 3-year Strategic Plan 2016-2019, a priority was placed on improving student access and success (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, 2016). For this priority to be met A-B Tech highlighted that they must “practice effective enrollment management to increase student access, retention, success, and completion. This is accomplished through active recruitment, relevant programming, high-quality instruction, and comprehensive student support services” (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, 2016, p. 3). Further, the strategic plan indicated that one of the major college initiatives was to “reduce representation and achievement gaps between majority and underrepresented student groups,” (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, 2016, p. 3). According to the institution, due to this initiative, A-B Tech has seen a steady increase of students of color enrolling in associate in arts and science pathways (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, 2020b, p. 3). Moreover, students of color enrolled in pathways outperformed those not in

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pathways. Therefore, the Completion by Design (CBD) project serves as one example in which A-B Tech continues exploring and implementing measures to retain students of color.

According to Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College (2020a), the mission states the college is “Dedicated to student success, A-B Tech delivers quality education to enhance academic, workforce, and personal development,” (p. 24). If this statement truly represents the mission of the college, AB-Tech must work to serve the most marginalized students first, who are our students of color. When institutions elevate marginalized students to a place where they belong and they feel welcomed, embraced, respected, represented, and that the college remains genuinely dedicated to their academic success, everyone benefits.

### **Tri-County Community College**

With its main campus in Murphy, North Carolina, Tri-County Community College is the state's westernmost community college. As a smaller institution in the North Carolina Community College System, Tri-County Community College functions as an accredited public 2-year institution with three locations. All three of the counties Tri-County Community College serves—Cherokee, Clay, and Graham—have a poverty rate above the state average of 13.6%, with Cherokee and Graham significantly higher at 18.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b). The service area is 90% white (non-Hispanic or Latino) compared to a 62.2% state average, and the population served falls below the state average for residents holding a bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b).

As a 2-year institution, Tri-County Community College awards six curriculum associate degrees (Arts, Engineering, Teacher Preparation (in both arts and science), Science, and Visual Arts) and offers 40 curriculum career technical programs of study. Approximately 54% of the 1,300 curriculum students at Tri-County Community College during the 2018-19 academic year

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enrolled in a college transfer program of study. As of 2020, the student body was 88% white, 5% Hispanic, 2% American Indian, and 1% Black (North Carolina Community Colleges, 2020). Internal college data show a 5% increase in Hispanic/Latino students between 2015 and 2020, highlighting an increasing diverse pool of students.

Tri-County Community College offers traditional (face-to-face), hybrid, and online courses in the spring, summer, and fall terms. Nationally, adjuncts constitute approximately 51% of all instructors at the community college level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b). At Tri-County Community College, adjuncts make up just 36% of the faculty. During the 2019-20 academic year, 39% of students enrolled fully online at Tri-County Community College, while 25% did not take a single online course, compared with a system average of 26% and 44%, respectively. The average class size is 10 students to every one instructor.

Data also reveal 50% of all curriculum students enrolled at Tri-County Community College during the fall 2019 semester were under the age of 18, which is much higher than the state average of 26% (North Carolina Community Colleges, 2020). The demographics have trended younger for the last five years of data collection, highlighting a rise in interest in the Career and College Promise and Early College programs offered to local high school students at Tri-County Community College. During the 2019-20 academic year, 13% of curriculum students worked full-time while attending school while an additional 30% reported at least part-time employment status. Meanwhile, 59% of students attended school part-time and 41% full-time. While a current wealth of demographic data can be located, a lack of socioeconomic status and disaggregated multi-racial information comprise a few frustrating gaps in state and locally reported data for Tri-County Community College.

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As part of the Tri-County Community College 2004-2006 Strategic Plan, college leadership advanced the “Ethnic and Gender Diversity Enhancement Plan,” which focused on boosting the representation among faculty and staff, as well as educating current employees on “diversity issues” (p. 20). While this plan may have been well-intentioned and even ahead of its time, the institution failed to meet most of those goals set forth, especially relating to employee demographics and improving conditions for marginalized students. Currently, Tri-County Community College does not have a single employee of color in either the faculty or staff body on campus. Further, none of the strategies outlined by the plan to support “minority” students enrolled existed as of 2022.

When considering culturally relevant pedagogy for primarily white institutions, Byrd’s 2016 study asserts students of all races benefit from the techniques utilized in CRP. Other researchers have also showcased the importance of culturally relevant practices in developing critical consciousness (Epstein et al., 2011), promoting academic engagement (Christianakis, 2011), and cultivating positive attitudes toward other racial groups (Aldana et al., 2012). In the pursuit of a more equitable and just society, the need for white students to empathize with and understand nondominant cultures proves vital, as most often progress for people of color in the United States only comes when it benefits the white dominant group (Capper, 2019; Crenshaw et al., 1995). Rather than viewing the work of culturally relevant pedagogy as only a means of engaging students of color, there is unambiguous evidence CRP also benefits students at primarily white institutions, such as Tri-County Community College.

The data and initiatives from A-B Tech and Tri-County Community College demonstrate the dire need both institutions face in improving conditions for BIPOC students. While each institution has historically displayed interest in improving diversity, equity, and inclusion issues



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in some capacities, they have fallen short in previous years, which means there is still work to be done. Furthermore, high school graduation projections show that students of color will overtake white students for the majority by 2025 (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2020). This growth in diversity in high school graduates means more individuals interested in pursuing higher education in the next decade will identify as students of color (Seltzer, 2020). Though the current population of students of color at each institution is modest when compared to the white population served, it is crucial to make sure that (1) every student we serve has the support and opportunities they need to be successful, (2) we minimize the barriers that often are the result of being from an underrepresented and marginalized racial background, and (3) we are cultivating students of all racial backgrounds who have critical consciousness toward the goals of a more equitable society.

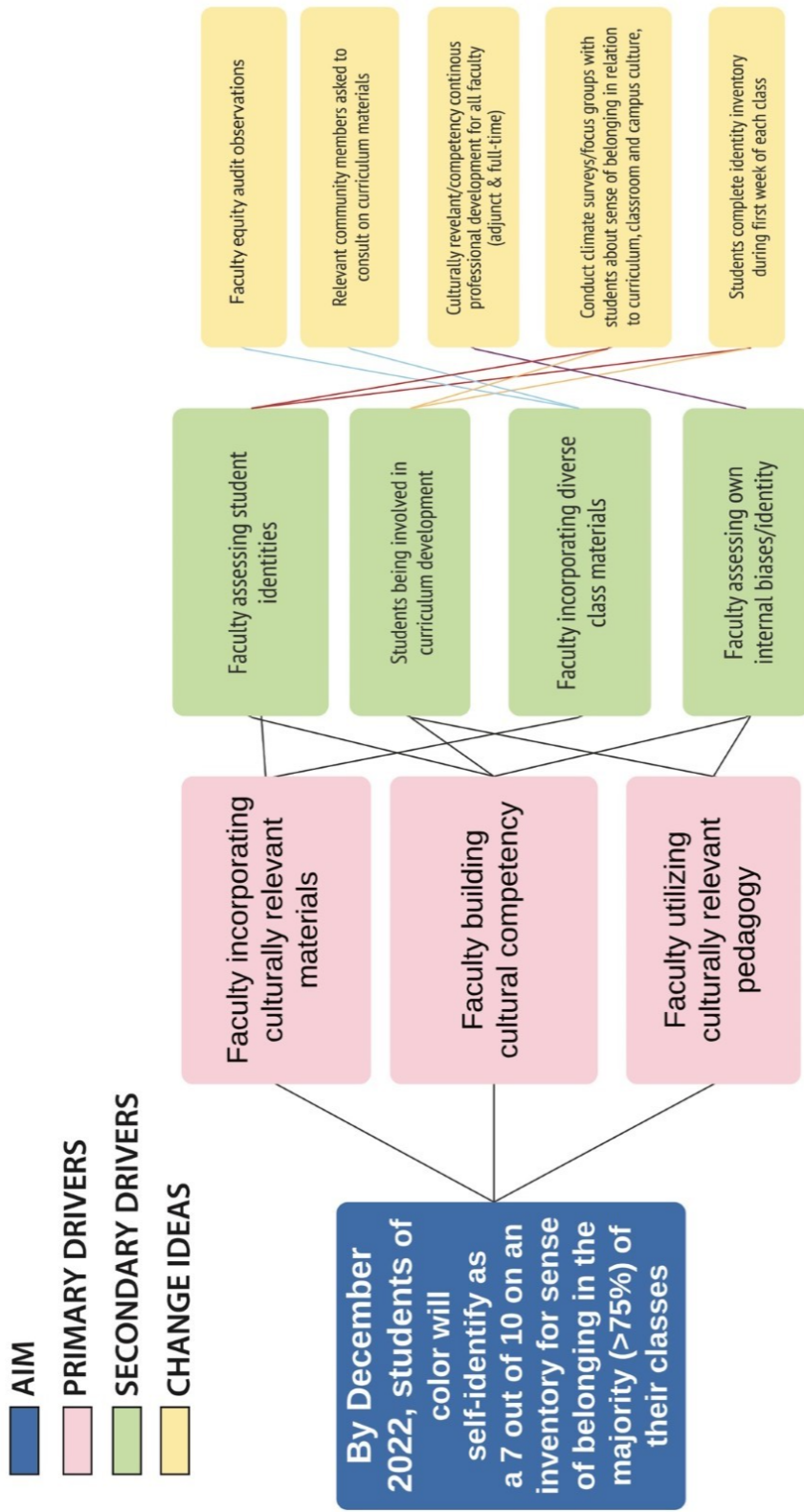
### **Theory of Improvement**

Community colleges educate a diverse population of students, including intersections of socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, ability, gender, LGBTQ+, and commuter individuals, many of whom also will balance familial and occupational roles while attending college. As such, a focus on the classroom for improving sense of belonging remains compelling. Our aim was that students of color would self-identify as a 7 out of 10 on an inventory for sense of belonging in 75% of their classes by December 2022. Our theory of improvements held that developing an equity-driven framework for implementing culturally relevant practices within the classroom would increase sense of belonging for students of color enrolled at the community college level (Figure 2).

### **Figure 2**

*Driver Diagram for Increasing Sense of Belonging for Students of Color*

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The focal point for increasing sense of belonging for students of color shifted to the area within the disquisitioner's locus of control, which centered on holding faculty accountable and responsible for developing culturally relevant curriculum in their courses. Research identifies the classroom as the place where faculty members wield the most control in relation to sense of belonging; therefore, faculty being actively involved in any improvement initiatives to retain students remained essential (Carales & Hooker, 2019; Hlinka, 2017; Hutto, 2017; Martinez & Munsch, 2019; Strayhorn, 2009; Tinto, 2006; Wood, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2010).

As an educator, it is important to continually evaluate the effectiveness of exercises and content used in the classroom to ensure all course objectives are met. The objective of improvement science centers on improving quality in a myriad of settings, using continuous cycles of learning (Crow et al., 2019; Cohen-Vogel et al., 2014; Langley et al., 2009; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). As a result, cultivating more culturally relevant curriculum and faculty cultural competence constituted our initial change idea. Educators must recognize how current classroom content and practices harm students of color (Capper, 2019). Further, faculty members must be cognizant of the lacking representation of student identities reflected in the curricula and shift to advocating for more culturally relevant practices and curricula.

An additional change idea was to conduct inventory surveys and focus groups with students about sense of belonging in relation to curriculum, as well as classroom and campus culture. We believed these inventories and focus groups would offer a crucial step in data collection toward exposing how students of color feel about the current curriculum, classroom, and campus culture. Using the data collected from these sources allowed us to identify what was working for the students of color, and what needed to be altered to produce more equitable and socially just results. In doing this, we retained the ability on a narrow scale to be transformative

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in our classrooms with the opportunity to generate immediate data that could be used to a larger extent collegewide.

### **Plan**

#### **Improvement Methodology/Design**

Our initiative centered on developing an equity-driven framework for implementing culturally relevant practices within the classroom to increase sense of belonging for students of color. This framework had two primary focal areas: (1) building faculty cultural competence and (2) increasing culturally relevant pedagogy through classroom materials and practices. Centering students' culture and making them feel as though they belong and are welcome offers one means of redressing belongingness for underrepresented students (Carales & Hooker, 2019; Martinez & Munsch, 2019). Honoring and displaying sensitivity to students' cultural backgrounds is a way to validate their experiences. Students need to know faculty are invested in them as unique individuals. By employing these practices faculty can build the relationships that prove vital for cultivating sense of belonging for students of color (Carales & Hooker, 2019; Martinez & Munsch, 2019; Wood & Turner, 2010).

When considering initiatives aimed at improvement in education, improvement science offered a compelling means of exploring change while minimizing harm. Improvement science provides a comprehensive framework for developing, testing, and implementing change within an organization (Langley et al., 2009). Though originally used in medical and industrial settings, during the last two decades researchers have highlighted the usefulness of improvement science within the educational field. One of the benefits of this framework was the ability to test small changes on a rapid timeline, as opposed to a traditional approach of "implement fast, learn slow" (Bryk et al., 2015). Data in improvement science are "collected frequently, analyzed frequently,

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and acted upon quickly to expedite learning about what works” (Hinnant-Crawford, 2019, as cited in Perry et al., 2020, p. 110). The three questions driving the improvement process are (Langley et al., 2009):

- What are we trying to accomplish?
- How will we know a change is an improvement?
- What changes can we make that will result in improvement?

In addressing sense of belonging and faculty involvement, the benefits of improvement science also included considerations for the human side of change, which plays a significant role in every phase of the improvement process. By leveraging PDSA—Plan, Do, Study, Act—cycles, researchers can test small change initiatives on a practical level while remaining closely aligned with their “local context, local processes, and local people” (Perry et al., 2020). Given that each cycle takes no more than 90 days to complete, developing and testing a change for efficacy in improvement on a rapid scale also allowed space for a critical epistemological requirement of constant self-reflection to ensure equity and social justice remain in the forefront.

### **Timeline**

Following approval from our institutions and the Institutional Review Board (IRB), we began to implement our initiative in fall 2022. Before our full implementation, we each led a design team at our respective institutions, tasked with assisting in the development and implementation of our improvement initiative. A list of the design team members can be found in Figure 3.

### **Figure 3**

*List of Design Team Members for Each Institution*

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<i>Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College</i>	<i>Tri-County Community College</i>
<b>Erika Lett</b> (Team Leader) - (Former) Chair of Academic Inclusiveness & Equity Initiatives / Instructor, Communication (Current) Executive Director of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion / Communication Instructor	<b>Grace Cheshire</b> (Team Leader) - (Former) Director of Communications & Community Outreach / Communication Instructor   (Current) Instructor – Human Communication at Western Carolina University
Jennifer Browning - (Former) English Instructor / Faculty Senate Secretary & Treasurer (Current) English Instructor / Faculty Senate President	Lee Ann Hodges - Dean of Humanities, Social Science, and Public Service
Rebekah Handy – Chair of Communication Department	Samantha Jones – Coordinator of the Advising and Career Center / ACA Instructor
Valerie Daniels - Executive Assistant for Instructional Services	Kelly Hembree - Director of Student Services
Porscha Orndorf - (Former) Sociology Instructor / Advisor for Queer the Way Society (Current) Chair of Human Services Technology Department	Tiffany Goebel - English Instructor / TCCC alumna
Bo Bennett- (Left organization) Chair of Human Services Technology Department / Faculty Senate President	Suzann Ledford – (Retired) Communication / English Instructor
Natasha Cramer - (Left organization) Human Services Technology Instructor	

The design teams for both community colleges included representation from various stakeholder positions including faculty, administration, institutional effectiveness, and student services. Most of those on each design team held a minimum education level of a master’s degree. Including staff from the Student Services side of college operations on the design team proved vital, as research demonstrates students at community college spend just as much time with staff members as they do their instructors (Duggan, 2002; Gibson-Harman et al., 2002). Our goal centered around bringing in as many unique perspectives on this work as possible; therefore

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our design teams contained representation from a multitude of departments to create a more holistic framework in community colleges of varied sizes and settings.

### *Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College*

This design team consisted of five faculty members within the Instructional Services division, spanning from English, Human Services, Communication, and Sociology. The identified faculty are crucial to this work for several reasons. First, four of the five faculty members identified as members of a marginalized population: one was a Black male, one was a Hispanic female, one was a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, and one was a differently abled female. Our English faculty member, while not of a marginalized background, served as the Faculty Senate Secretary and Treasurer. This allowed faculty senate representation as part of this process, which would create a pipeline for information about the project to be communicated to all faculty and garner feedback from a wider range of faculty as needed. Additionally, the faculty on this design team came from some of the most diverse departments on campus, both in terms of students and faculty demographics. Having insight from diverse perspectives about attracting and supporting students of color proved vital to this work. Additionally, the Executive Assistant of Instructional Services has a background as a research technician for the College's Office of Research and Planning. Her expertise in institutional data was an important asset for the design team.

### *Tri-County Community College*

The design team at Tri-County Community College consisted of three faculty members (all in the Humanities/English department), one administrative level staff member, and the coordinator of advising at the College. The Director of Student Services interfaces with students with the same frequency as many faculty members, as well as overseeing much of the advising

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for first-year students. Two of the curriculum instructors taught one of the pilot courses utilized in the change initiative, while the Dean of the Humanities, Social Science, and Public Service oversees the College Transfer pathways at Tri-County Community College. Incorporating the Coordinator of First-Year Success, who also teaches part-time, offered a wider scope of student interactions to explore and impact through this work. Finally, one member of this design team retired during our disquisition process but did contribute to initial meetings of the team pre-IRB approval.

### **Intervention Timeline**

Our intervention was comprised of one PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act) cycle, spanning from July through December 2022. The design teams identified three separate curriculum classes to use before the PDSA cycle to serve as pilots for culturally relevant pedagogy. While a limited number of classes served as pilots, all faculty were invited to a professional development session aimed at increasing the understanding and practice of cultural competency. During the PDSA cycle, we gathered data from both students and faculty aimed at exploring student sense of belonging and faculty cultural competency.

A bulleted timeline that includes each phase of PDSA cycle, team meetings, events, and outcomes is provided below.

#### Pre-PDSA CYCLE – March – June 2022

- Submit final proposal
- Defended proposal in April 2022

#### PLAN July – August 2022

- Design team identifies pilot courses by May 31, 2022
- Professional development planning held in July 2022



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- IRB Application submitted in July 2022; approved August 25, 2022
- PD seminar/materials finalized by early August 2022
- Faculty cultural competency inventory completed in August 2022
  - Consent form required
- Professional development held in late August 2022
- Students in pilot courses receive a link for pre-survey on sense of belonging at beginning of September 2022

## DO September – November 2022

- Students in 16-week and second 8-week pilot courses receive follow-up sense of belonging survey by December 12, 2022
- First round of student interviews conducted during October 2022
- Focus groups are conducted with students in November 2022
- Faculty interviews completed in December 2022

## STUDY

- Analysis (Early-mid December 2022)
- Compilation of data (early December 2022)
- Assessment of data (December 2023)
  - Thematic exploration / inductive coding

## **Formative Evaluation of Improvement Methodology**

Both historical and recent research highlights the importance of sense of belonging for students of color in higher education. The lack of a culturally relevant campus climate in the community college setting results in students of color continuing to enroll in large numbers while remaining underrepresented in the composition of college faculty and curricula. Such

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underrepresentation presents a barrier to fostering sense of belonging among students of color while attending college. Lower rates of sense of belonging place students of color at higher risk to not form meaningful relationships on campus or earn a college credential, leading to fewer job prospects, increased likelihood for poor health due to stress, lower wage-earning potential, and less access to quality healthcare and retirement benefits, all of which perpetuate inequity and marginalization.

Our intervention consisted of utilizing a modified instrument to measure sense of belonging specific to the community college setting (see Appendix A). While several instruments currently exist for sense of belonging in education (see Hoffman et al., 2002; Libbey, 2014; Şeker, 2011; Whiting et al., 2017), modifying existing scales to be more specific to 2-year higher education institutions proved vital to gathering accurate formative data related to the community college setting to address the current gap in scholarship. The Sense of Belonging Survey Instrument questions were designed to examine student perceptions of sense of belonging at their community college, which were derived from the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale by Goodenow (1993). Barnett (2011) designed an instrument called the College Experience Survey to measure faculty validation as a potential predictor of student belongingness. To measure to belongingness, the disquisitioners combined the statements based on Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale by Goodenow (1993) along with statements based on students' experiences with validation by faculty from Barnett (2011) and adapted the questions to suit the needs of the population being surveyed. The students evaluated the PSSM scale statements on a 5-point Likert scale about their experiences on campus, while they evaluated the College Experience Survey statements on a 7-point Likert scale about their experiences specific to faculty and the classroom.

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The final formative measurement centered on faculty self-inventories regarding cultural competency (see Appendix B) as adapted from Rodriguez (2013). The Faculty Cultural Competency Survey Instrument questions were designed to examine teacher knowledge of culturally diverse content, culturally relevant pedagogy, and the characteristics of a culturally responsive teacher were derived from a dissertation by Rodriguez (2013). To measure faculty knowledge of culturally diverse content, culturally relevant pedagogy, and the characteristics of a culturally responsive teacher, faculty responded to 35 statements based on the Teacher Knowledge of Culturally Responsive Teaching Survey created by Rodriguez (2013) that we modified. Twice during the fall semester faculty evaluated statements on a 6-point Likert scale about their knowledge of culturally diverse content, culturally relevant pedagogy, and the characteristics of a culturally responsive teacher.

### **Summative Evaluation of Improvement Methodology**

Following the collection of our formative measures and implementation of our anticipated timeline for PDSA cycles, we gathered summative data for measuring the difference between sense of belonging for students and cultural competency awareness for faculty. After conducting our interviews, we coded our transcripts using an inductive method and to analyze themes that arose from the recorded conversations. All formative and summative data are utilized in the improvement process as outlined in our measures listed below (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Proposed Data Sources for Improvement Process*

<b>Improvement Effort/Aim</b>	<b>Type of Measure</b>	<b>Type of Data to be Collected</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Analysis Strategy</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
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Increasing sense of belonging of students of color	Outcome; driver	Pre-survey/ Sense of belonging scale for community college students (modified SBS)	August/ October 2022	Paired T-test	Goodenow (1993); Barnett (2011)
Faculty incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy	Outcome; driver	Pre-survey for faculty/Cultural Competency Inventory	August 2022	Paired T-test	Mason (1995); Rodriguez (2013)
Increasing sense of belonging of students of color	Outcome	Post-survey/ Sense of belonging scale for community college students (modified SBS)	October/ December 2022	Paired T-test	Goodenow (1993); Barnett (2011)
Faculty incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy	Outcome	Post-survey for faculty/Cultural Competency Inventory	December 2022	Paired T-test	Mason (1995); Rodriguez (2013)
Increasing sense of belonging through culturally relevant practices	Process	Interviews with students	November 2022	Inductive coding	Kruger (2002)
Faculty incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy	Driver; balance	Interviews with faculty	December 2022	Inductive coding	Jacob & Furgerson (2015)

### Outcome Measures

Improvement science is aimed at improving outcomes, making the outcome measure of an improvement initiative crucial to evaluating the question of whether a change results in an improvement (Langley et al., 2009). Our goal for this disquisition is that students of color will self-identify as a seven out of 10 on an inventory for sense of belonging in 75% of their classes

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by December 2022. Using the same inventory and follow-up interviews at the end of our improvement process will offer insight into the initiative's success or failure.

- Leading Measure Data: Faculty implementing culturally relevant pedagogical practices
- Lagging Measure Data: Utilization of Sense of Belonging scale / focus groups wherein students identify “cultural competency/relevancy” as drivers for their sense of belonging

### **Driver Measures**

Driver measures assist in understanding outcome measures and identifying change initiatives. Faculty incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy, materials, and competency to increase sense of belonging among students of color is the expected change in this improvement process. We hosted a professional development around culturally relevant pedagogy and cultural competency, which provided a chance to gather quantitative data from faculty regarding their knowledge of culturally relevant teaching and utilizing culturally competent classroom strategies. Finally, sense of belonging interviews with faculty and students offered perspective into whether our processes proved accurate in predicting a change as an improvement.

### **Process Measure**

In studying the driver measures, we also wanted to be sure our change led to an improvement in sense of belonging. Our process measure held that students could identify cultural competency and relevant practices as a driver for improving their sense of belonging. Data collection for this process centered on the sense of belonging inventories and student interviews.

### **Balance Measure**

Being aware of the time expectation of the pilot faculty members for implementing our improvement plan helped us to design a balance measure. Our primary interest focused on how

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much time was spent retooling curriculum classroom practices toward being more culturally relevant. To collect data, we created a brief faculty survey and conducted follow up interviews (see Appendix C) at the end of our PDSA cycle.

### **Do**

As we neared our data collection phase of this disquisition, we underwent the institutional review board (IRB) processes at Western Carolina University. Delays from the IRB office in obtaining consent to begin collecting data forced us to restructure our methodology and design for this improvement initiative. The IRB delays also resulted in a narrower window of time to collect and analyze data. In recognition of the limitation of time, we decided to re-evaluate our data sources. Based on conversations with our disquisition committee members and chair, we decided to focus more on storytelling and qualitative methodology, with some quantitative supplemental support data. Part of our drive in changing to a qualitative approach came from a desire to elevate student and faculty voices in our disquisition. These changes included doing interviews with students (see Appendix D) rather than focus groups and eliminating the equity observation audits. Our proposal did originally include visiting classrooms to conduct audits of pilot faculty; however, our disquisition committee members guided us to remove these audits in favor of engaging more directly with our participants. The reorientation of our data collection methodology ultimately led to a much richer and more holistic understanding of culturally relevant practices in the journey to belongingness for students of color.

Through restructuring we were able to stick to our original timeline. Our initial design team meetings, which involved no data collection, began in May 2022, and continued through the start of the fall semester in August 2022. Due to the potential conflict of some pilot faculty serving on our design teams, we designed the professional development session without our

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design teams. Following IRB approval, we conducted our faculty professional development sessions in late August, wherein we also collected the initial faculty cultural competency inventory. During this time, we also obtained informed consent from faculty to participate in our intervention. Students received their sense of belonging surveys in early September and again in late November. We began meeting with students and faculty in November to conduct interviews and finished all interviews by mid-December. Finally, our post-survey for faculty cultural competence was completed by mid-December.

### **Design Team Experience**

Despite our design teams not directly partaking in the planning of the professional development, they did offer tremendous help in several areas of the design and implementation of this initiative. First, our design teams worked with us to brainstorm potential structures for the professional development sessions for faculty, including discussing previously successful experiences with professional development. As previously mentioned, the design teams assisted in deciding on the appropriate courses to serve as pilots on this improvement initiative. The teams also aided us in the decision as to what measures could be eliminated from our final data collection cycle due to restructuring and time constraints. Finally, our design team members were instrumental in locating students to participate in our quantitative and qualitative data collection.

### **Faculty Professional Development**

For our professional development, we wanted to provide a beginner's understanding of cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy, while also exploring why those topics are important for belongingness. We also focused on how faculty can practically bring more cultural relevance into their classrooms. In preparation for this session, we built a Google Drive

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repository with a wealth of resources for college faculty who are beginning the journey of developing culturally relevant classrooms. The materials provided to all pilot faculty included website links to external resources, practical examples of in-class activities, and techniques for a variety of class types (STEM, large group, online, etc.). We began these sessions by introducing ourselves and explaining our positionality and relationship with this work. Our main activity for faculty was an icebreaker that could be conducted in-person or online, where faculty built their own personal coat of arms based on their cultural identities.

Much of this professional development session stayed dialogue heavy with a particular focus on conversations around how to balance teaching course specific content and utilizing culturally relevant practices in the classroom and the curricula. Faculty at both institutions discussed their experiences trying to navigate cultural differences and voiced a desire to improve as facilitators in conversations about difference. Several participants alluded to the importance of being reflective in their work as faculty in a demographically changing higher education landscape. We will further explore several of the emergent themes from the professional development session in our analysis of the faculty interviews conducted at the end of the fall 2022 semester.

### **Survey Distribution**

The initial round of our student sense of belonging survey went out at the end of August/early September. At Tri-County Community College, all qualifying students were contacted through the advising system utilized by the Advising and Career Center. At Asheville Buncombe Technical Community College, students received an invitation to participate via faculty members. The final request for participation was sent during the final week of the fall



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2022 semester after each institution's course evaluation period had closed. The surveys were distributed in the same manner each time.

### **Interview Solicitation**

#### ***Faculty Interviews***

The pilot of this improvement initiative included 6 faculty members—3 from AB-Tech and 3 from Tri-County Community College. Each faculty member received an invitation to participate in an individual interview lasting no more than 45 minutes via Zoom. Faculty were contacted via institutional email and face-to-face communication in November.

#### ***Student Interviews***

To identify qualifying students for our individual interviews, we asked pilot faculty members for student suggestions. After receiving a short interview list and confirming eligibility to participate, all students were invited to join our research study interviews through their school emails or via face-to-face communication during November. After confirmation, we collected informed consent from each student who agreed to participate.

### **Study**

The data analysis portion of our Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle provided robust and holistic findings from both faculty and students at Asheville-Buncombe Technical and Tri-County Community College. In this section, we present our observations of the faculty professional development sessions and the subsequent major themes identified from student and faculty interviews, which can be seen in Figures 7 and 8. Table 2 offers the list of pilot courses from each institution. A limited amount of quantitative data are also presented herein (see Figure 6).

#### **Table 2**

*Pilot Courses Selected for Improvement Process*

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<b>Institution</b>	<b>Course Number</b>	<b>Course Title</b>	<b>Typical Semester/Year Sequence for Students</b>
AB-Tech	ACA-115	Success and Study Skills	First Semester or First Year
AB-Tech	ENG-111	Writing and Inquiry	First Semester or First Year
AB-Tech	ENG-241	British Literature I	Second Year
TCCC	ACA-111	College Student Success	First Semester or First Year
TCCC	ENG-111	Writing and Inquiry	First Semester or First Year
TCCC	ENG-242	British Literature II	Second Year

Our pilot courses were selected through a process with the design team, wherein we wanted to reach as many first-year students as possible. We focused on the two subjects students tend to enroll in earliest during their community college journey: academic success and English courses. We also included two higher-level English courses to gain some perspective from students who had been with the institution longer than a year.

### **Quantitative Findings**

#### ***Student Sense of Belonging Survey***

In the fall 2022 semester, the pre and post surveys were sent to students in early September and mid-December. Unfortunately, our student surveys did not yield enough responses to be statistically significant. Two contributing factors for lack of survey participation may stem from not incentivizing the survey for students, as well as not allowing students under the age of 18 (a growing demographic for community colleges in North Carolina) to participate in our study. Both measures would result in further IRB processes if implemented in future research but might provide a far greater sample size for pilot courses. We remain aware that low response rates and subsequent smaller sample sizes can cause type II errors in analysis due to difficulty identifying statistical significance (Tanner, 2012), so we chose to utilize descriptive statistics to convey general information from the pre-survey responses received. The post-survey only elicited two complete responses from students, so we used the pre-survey data as a baseline

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before conducting our student interviews. Below we present our generalized findings from the quantitative student survey (see Table 3).

### **Table 3**

*Generalized Demographics from Student Sense of Belonging Surveys*

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Demographic		<i>n</i>	%
<b>Institution</b>			
AB-Tech		9	45
Tri-County		11	55
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
Black/African American		3	14.29
White/Caucasian		15	71.43
Hispanic/Latinx		3	14.29
<b>Gender</b>			
Female		17	85
Male		2	10
Non-Binary		1	5
<b>Age</b>			
18-23		10	50
24-29		4	20
30-35		5	25
Over 45		1	5
<b>Credit Hours</b>			
1-3		2	10
4-6		3	15
7-10		6	30
11-12		5	25
More than 12		4	20

Note. Total number of participants was  $n = 24$ , but three respondents were excluded due to being under the age of 18.

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

Most of the pre-survey data fell on a scale between 1 and 5 or 1 and 7, depending on the set of statements. One statement that scored below a five that we took note of before the interview stage was “I see myself as part of the campus community,” which earned a 4.94 on the 7-point scale. This result was subsequently reinforced in the qualitative data from student interviews. Despite the overall lower response rate, a few interesting areas stood out from the data. Students surveyed did positively rate their instructors as being empathetic and engaged. Even students who felt disconnected from their institution still ranked their instructors high on making them feel welcomed. Non-traditional students tended to cite feeling disconnected with the institution at higher rates, which might stem from the overall trend toward younger students enrolling at the community college level, especially while in high school. Full results from our sense of belonging surveys can be found in Table 4.1 and 4.2.

### **Table 4.1**

*Results from the Student Sense of Belonging Pre-Survey (Statement Set 1) with n, Mean, and Standard Deviation*

BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

<b>Statement</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b><i>M</i></b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>
I feel like a real part of (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College or Tri-County Community College).	20	3.65	0.79
People here notice when I am good at something.	20	3.85	0.79
It is hard for people like me to be accepted here.	20	1.95	0.92
Other students in this college take my opinions seriously.	19	3.53	0.82
Most instructors at this college are interested in me.	20	3.85	0.57
Sometimes I don't feel as if I belong here.	20	1.85	0.91
There's at least one instructor or adult in this college that I can talk to if I have a problem.	20	3.90	0.77
People at this college are friendly to me.	20	3.95	0.86
Instructors here are not interested in people like me.	20	1.85	0.91
I am included in lots of activities at this college.	20	2.35	0.79
I am treated with as much respect as other students.	20	4.15	0.57
I feel very different from most other students here.	20	2.35	1.15
I can really be myself at this college.	20	3.85	0.57
The instructors here respect me.	19	4.37	0.48
People here know that I can do good work.	19	4.05	0.69
I wish I were in a different college.	19	2.00	1.12
I feel proud of belonging to (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College or Tri-County Community College).	19	4.21	0.61
Other students here like me the way I am.	19	3.84	0.74

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

Note. The minimum score is 1.00 (strongly disagree) and the maximum is 5.00 (strongly agree) on a 5-point scale.

### **Table 4.2**

*Results from the Student Sense of Belonging Pre-Survey (Statement Set 2) with n, Mean, and Standard Deviation*

BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

<b>Statement</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b><i>M</i></b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>
I have had at least one instructor at this college who helped me to believe in myself.	16	5.44	1.00
I feel accepted as a person by my instructors.	16	5.44	0.79
At least one instructor has talked with me about my personal goals at this college.	16	5.19	1.24
My instructors seem to genuinely care how I am doing.	15	5.40	1.08
My instructors understand that students come from different backgrounds.	16	5.63	0.93
Most instructors are interested in what I have to offer in class.	16	5.06	1.03
I am encouraged by my instructors to openly share my views in class.	16	5.25	0.83
My instructors show that they believe in my ability to do the class work.	16	5.50	0.94
My instructors know who I am.	16	5.44	1.00
My instructors are willing to take as long as needed to help me understand the class material.	16	5.31	0.98
I feel accepted as a capable student by my instructors.	16	5.63	0.86
My instructors make me feel as though I bring valuable ideas to class.	16	5.38	0.86
I interact with my instructors outside of class.	15	3.53	1.45
My instructors are willing to give me individual help when needed.	16	5.50	1.00
Even if the work in my classes is hard, I can learn it.	16	5.63	0.86
It seems like my instructors really care about whether I am learning.	16	5.38	0.93
People of color are encouraged to contribute to the class discussion.	16	5.75	1.09
If I have enough time, I can do a good job on all of my coursework.	16	5.94	0.90
I am encouraged to share life experiences when they relate to the class material.	16	5.44	1.06
I can generally express my honest opinions in my classes.	16	5.06	0.90
My instructors provide lots of written feedback on the assignments I turn in.	16	5.38	1.11
I feel like my personal and family history is valued in class.	16	5.19	1.07
Women are encouraged to contribute to the class discussion.	16	5.44	1.32
I feel as though I am treated equally to other students.	16	5.88	0.70
My instructors make an effort to make their classes interesting.	16	5.69	0.85
I see myself as a part of the campus community.	16	4.94	1.39
I'm certain I can do almost all the work in college if I don't give up.	16	5.88	0.86
My instructors encourage students to become involved on campus.	16	5.06	0.97



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Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I see myself as a part of the campus community.	16	4.94	1.39
I'm certain I can do almost all the work in college if I don't give up.	16	5.88	0.86
My instructors encourage students to become involved on campus.	16	5.06	0.97
I'm certain I can master the skills taught at this college.	16	5.88	0.78
I am planning on returning to this college for the spring semester.	16	5.88	1.36
I can do almost all the work in college if I don't give up.	15	5.93	0.93
I feel that I am a member of the campus community.	16	5.13	0.86
I expect to complete a degree or certificate at this college.	16	6.06	1.20
I feel a sense of belonging to the campus community.	16	5.25	1.20
My instructors are easily accessible outside of their classrooms or offices.	16	5.44	0.93
I can do even the hardest coursework if I try.	15	5.93	1.00
I've had one or more instructors at this college whom I thought of as a mentor.	16	5.25	0.83
My instructors generally remember my name.	16	5.50	0.94
I'm certain I can figure out how to do the most difficult coursework.	16	5.56	0.93

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

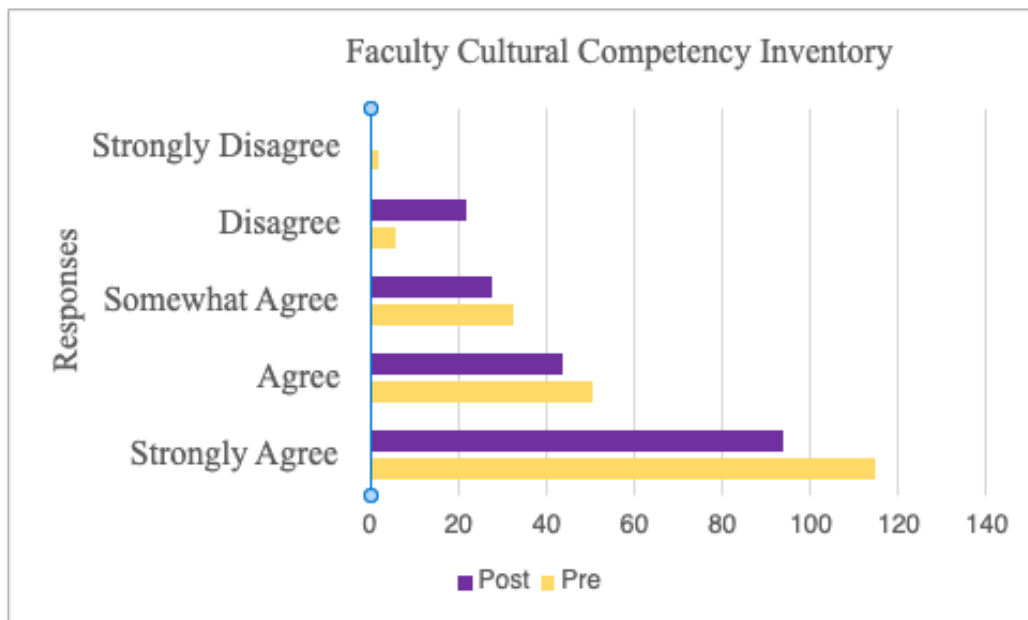
Note. The minimum score is 1.00 (very strongly disagree) and the maximum is 7.00 (very strongly agree) on a 7-point scale.

### *Faculty Cultural Competency Survey*

We conducted our faculty cultural competency survey in both August and December 2022. Participants included pilot instructors who received the professional development training at the beginning of the fall semester. Unfortunately, the survey did not result in a statistically significant result, which might be attributed to inconsistent responses. While the initial survey showed a high completion rate for all the questions by faculty, the follow-up survey had many questions that were left blank, perhaps due to human error or intentionally. This inconsistency made any significant regression analysis impossible. Complete data from the faculty cultural competency survey can be found in Tables 5.1 and 5.2, while the comparison between inventories can be found in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

*Comparative Results of Faculty Cultural Competency Inventory*



## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

Note. Scale represents cumulative total of responses for each statement with Strongly Disagree=2; Disagree=3; Somewhat Agree=4; Agree=5; Strongly Agree=6

While we could not complete a paired t-test, we do have some generalized data that show a complicated potential narrative. The largest result from the faculty surveys was a negative regression in their perceived level of cultural competency (participants stating they “strongly agreed” with statements declined from 87% to 83%, while “disagree” rose sharply from 3% to 12%). At the surface level, this result might indicate the change initiative did not yield improvement. However, our speculation offers two possible rationales for these results. First, our initial faculty survey was completed prior to the professional development session based on culturally relevant practices; therefore participants may have overestimated their knowledge and utilization of culturally relevant pedagogy. Second, these results may indicate faculty awareness and consciousness around their own lack of knowledge following the intervention process. As we will discuss in greater detail in the qualitative findings, all faculty interviewed voiced multiple times that the professional development session increased their awareness around culturally relevant teaching. The negative regression in this instance may show growth in faculty mindsets, which then subsequently resulted in downgrading their perceptions of their cultural competency. As we will now explore in the qualitative summative findings, this awareness offers a cornerstone in the journey toward implementing culturally relevant practices to foster student belonging.

### **Table 5.1**

*Results from Faculty Cultural Competency Pre-Survey, including n, Mean, and Standard Deviation*

Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
My classroom walls and bulletin boards include images, symbols, celebrations, and other artifacts that convey and address the cultural background of all students.	3	4.00	1.63
I acknowledge the cultural differences that exist among students and help students of culturally diverse backgrounds build bridges between what they already know and believe about a topic.	7	5.29	0.70
As an educator, I recognize and see all students as learners who already know a great deal and who have experiences that can be built and expanded to help them even more.	7	6.00	0.00
I incorporate multicultural information, resources, materials, and multicultural content into my teaching.	7	4.71	0.88
It is important to establish a classroom environment in which students and teachers become partners to improve student learning.	7	6.00	0.00
I adjust my teaching methods to teach students to view classroom situations from cultural perspectives other than their own.	7	4.71	0.70
I adjust my teaching methods to teach students to know and affirm their respective cultures.	7	5.86	0.35
I understand that utilizing multicultural instructional strategies and matching instructional techniques to the learning styles of students from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds is important.	7	5.57	0.73
I strive to know and understand as much as possible about the students in my classroom to facilitate learning.	7	6.00	0.00
It is important to adjust the content of the current curriculum to reflect diversity from the perspective of populations other than the European-American point of view.	7	5.43	0.73
I see my students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in an affirming light and acknowledge their existence by validating their ways of thinking, talking, behaving, and learning.	7	4.71	1.03
I account for the diversity in my classroom by planning to involve the cultural strengths of my students in my lessons.	7	5.57	1.05
I incorporate the lives of my students within the curriculum as an instructional strategy because it is essential in addressing the needs of all students.	7	5.71	0.70
I believe that it is possible to reconstruct education to give all students opportunities to learn in academically rigorous ways.	6	5.00	1.15
I incorporate the use of cooperative learning groups within the curriculum as an instructional strategy because it is important to build communities among learners in which the welfare of the group takes precedence over the individual.	7	5.57	0.49

Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I incorporate the use of cooperative learning groups within the curriculum as an instructional strategy because it is important to build communities among learners in which the welfare of the group takes precedence over the individual.	6	5.00	1.15
My role as an educator is to recognize that we are all cultural beings and to add rather than replace what students bring to learning.	7	5.57	0.49
I teach my students to understand and value pluralism, the right for people to maintain their languages and culture while combining with others to form a new society reflective of all our differences.	6	5.17	0.90
I recognize that the textbook I use offers diverse cultural views of the curriculum.	5	5.20	1.17
As a teacher, I recognize that we are all cultural beings and that it is my moral obligation to have the best interest at heart and make sound educational decisions for all of my students.	7	5.86	0.35
I develop a variety of multicultural instructional examples to use in teaching students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.	7	4.57	1.05
I examine the nature and extent of my attachments to the social and cultural groups to which I belong and how my membership in them has shaped my personal and family history.	7	5.43	0.73
I draw from the knowledge of my students and their prior experiences and embed learning activities in context to make learning more appropriate and effective for them.	7	5.00	1.07
I understand that the way people behave, think and what they believe are deeply influenced by factors such as race/ethnicity, social class and language.	7	5.29	0.45
I recognize the diverse cultural characteristic of students from different ethnic backgrounds and teach in ways that guarantee the progress of all my students regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, exceptional/special needs, or language.	7	6.00	0.00
I acknowledge that all students are capable learners who bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences to school.	3	5.00	0.82
I integrate into learning experiences components of what I know about my students and their personal experience to give them access to learning.	7	5.14	0.83
I understand the way schools perpetuate discriminatory practices of a larger society, and make it a priority for my students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to develop facility with the mainstream ways so they can effectively function in society.	6	5.17	0.69
I teach students to use their diverse learning experiences to accommodate different cultures represented in my classroom.	6	4.67	1.37

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Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I understand the way schools perpetuate discriminatory practices of a larger society, and make it a priority for my students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to develop facility with the mainstream ways so they can effectively function in society.	7	5.14	0.83
I teach students to use their diverse learning experiences to accommodate different cultures represented in my classroom.	6	5.17	0.69
I teach my students to recognize barriers that exist between their home culture and the culture of the school.	6	4.67	1.37
Selecting materials and books that help my students see how their cultural heritage is part of the curriculum is important to me.	5	5.40	0.80
As an educator, I examine the roles that schools play in the reproduction and legitimization of social inequalities.	7	5.43	0.73
Rather than making different types of learning (cognitive, physical, and emotional) discrete, I emphasize a holistic or integrated learning environment in my classroom.	7	5.29	0.45

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

Note. Minimum is 2.00 (strongly disagree) and the maximum is 6.00 (strongly agree) on a 6-point scale.

### **Table 5.2**

*Results from Faculty Cultural Competency Post-Survey, including n, Mean, and Standard Deviation*

Statement	n	M	SD
My classroom walls and bulletin boards include images, symbols, celebrations, and other artifacts that convey and address the cultural background of all students.	0	0.00	0.00
I acknowledge the cultural differences that exist among students and help students of culturally diverse backgrounds build bridges between what they already know and believe about a topic.	6	5.67	0.47
As an educator, I recognize and see all students as learners who already know a great deal and who have experiences that can be built and expanded to help them even more.	6	6.00	0.00
I incorporate multicultural information, resources, materials, and multicultural content into my teaching.	6	5.33	0.47
It is important to establish a classroom environment in which students and teachers become partners to improve student learning.	6	5.67	0.47
I adjust my teaching methods to teach students to view classroom situations from cultural perspectives other than their own.	6	5.33	0.94
I adjust my teaching methods to teach students to know and affirm their respective cultures.	6	5.00	0.82
I understand that utilizing multicultural instructional strategies and matching instructional techniques to the learning styles of students from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds is important.	6	6.00	0.00
I strive to know and understand as much as possible about the students in my classroom to facilitate learning.	6	6.00	0.00
It is important to adjust the content of the current curriculum to reflect diversity from the perspective of populations other than the European-American point of view.	6	5.67	0.47
I see my students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in an affirming light and acknowledge their existence by validating their ways of thinking, talking, behaving, and learning.	6	5.33	0.94
I account for the diversity in my classroom by planning to involve the cultural strengths of my students in my lessons.	6	5.83	0.37
I incorporate the lives of my students within the curriculum as an instructional strategy because it is essential in addressing the needs of all students.	6	5.83	0.37



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Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I believe that it is possible to reconstruct education to give all students opportunities to learn in academically rigorous ways.	6	6.00	0.00
I incorporate the use of cooperative learning groups within the curriculum as an instructional strategy because it is important to build communities among learners in which the welfare of the group takes precedence over the individual.	6	4.33	0.47
My role as an educator is to recognize that we are all cultural beings and to add rather than replace what students bring to learning.	6	6.00	0.00
I teach my students to understand and value pluralism, the right for people to maintain their languages and culture while combining with others to form a new society reflective of all our differences.	4	4.67	0.75
I recognize that the textbook I use offers diverse cultural views of the curriculum. As a teacher, I recognize that we are all cultural beings and that it is my moral obligation to have the best interest at heart and make sound educational decisions for all my students.	3	5.50	0.50
I develop a variety of multicultural instructional examples to use in teaching students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.	6	6.00	0.00
I examine the nature and extent of my attachments to the social and cultural groups to which I belong and how my membership in them has shaped my personal and family history.	3	5.00	0.82
I draw from the knowledge of my students and their prior experiences and embed learning activities in context to make learning more appropriate and effective for them.	6	5.00	1.41
I understand that the way people behave, think and what they believe are deeply influenced by factors such as race/ethnicity, social class, and language.	6	6.00	0.00
I recognize the diverse cultural characteristic of students from different ethnic backgrounds and teach in ways that guarantee the progress of all my students regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, exceptional/special needs, or language.	3	6.00	0.00
I understand that the way people behave, think and what they believe are deeply influenced by factors such as race/ethnicity, social class, and language.	6	5.67	0.47

Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I acknowledge that all students are capable learners who bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences to school.	6	6.00	0.00
I integrate into learning experiences components of what I know about my students and their personal experience to give them access to learning.	6	5.67	0.47
I understand the way schools perpetuate discriminatory practices of a larger society and make it a priority for my students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to develop facility with the mainstream ways so they can effectively function in society.	3	5.33	0.94
I teach students to use their diverse learning experiences to accommodate different cultures represented in my classroom.	6	6.00	0.00
I teach my students to recognize barriers that exist between their home culture and the culture of the school.	6	5.67	0.47
Selecting materials and books that help my students see how their cultural heritage is part of the curriculum is important to me.	6	6.00	0.00
As an educator, I examine the roles that schools play in the reproduction and legitimization of social inequalities.	3	5.33	0.47
Rather than making different types of learning (cognitive, physical, and emotional) discrete, I emphasize a holistic or integrated learning environment in my classroom.	3	5.67	0.47

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Note. The post-survey showed inconsistent responses to questions in comparison to the total respondents, which was  $n = 6$ . Minimum is 2.00 (strongly disagree) and the maximum is 6.00 (strongly agree) on a 6-point scale.

### **Qualitative Faculty Findings and Impact on Measures of Improvement**

In restructuring the primary methodology for this disquisition, the choice to center faculty voices emerged as vital. As faculty are tasked with the front-end work of using culturally relevant practices, we felt hearing their perspectives through a qualitative approach provided a richer contextual exploration of building more inclusive classrooms for the goal of fostering sense of belonging for BIPOC students. The resulting discussion around culturally relevant pedagogy revealed the successes and challenges for implementing our framework in the community college classroom.

Our pilot program included nine instructors but due to scheduling and time constraints, only six faculty members—three from Tri-County and three from AB-Tech—participated in the in-depth interviews. Participants ranged from 5 years to 28 years teaching experience in higher education. All faculty who served as pilot instructors identified as white. After the interviews, we completed two rounds of inductive coding. Inductive coding allows researchers to make meaning from the data, identify themes, find representative data, and explain findings using literature (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). We felt inductive coding would align under our qualitative goal of sensemaking through counterstorytelling, which helped identify the central themes to build the subsequent framework following our analysis of data (Thomas, 2006).

The inductive coding process produced three major themes from across the interviews: Awareness and Intentionality; Reflection and Improvement; and Communication and Storytelling. Each theme also intersects with the three tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy:

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academic success, cultural competence, and critical sociopolitical consciousness, as outlined by Ladson-Billings (1995). We will discuss each theme and relationship to culturally relevant pedagogy in greater detail while utilizing the faculty members' chosen song pseudonyms.

**Table 6**

*Faculty Pseudonyms, Demographic Information, and Core Themes Identified*

<b>Song Title Pseudonym</b>	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Classes Taught</b>	<b>Years Teaching</b>	<b>Core Theme(s)</b>
"You're the Top"	Ella Fitzgerald	White	AB-Tech	English/Literature	20 years	Awareness & Intentionality/Reflection & Improvement
"Have You Ever"	Brandi Carlile	White	TCCC	English/Literature/Student Success	7 years	Reflection & Improvement/Communication & Storytelling
"What You Give"	Tesla	White	AB-Tech	Student Success	8 years	Communication & Storytelling/Awareness & Intentionality
"Speak Life"	Tobymac	White	TCCC	English/Literature/Student Success	28 years	Communication & Storytelling/Awareness & Intentionality
"Cactus Tree"	Joni Mitchell	White	AB-Tech	Literature/Humanities	23 years	Communication & Storytelling/Awareness & Intentionality
"Be As You Are"	Mike Posner	White	TCCC	Student Success	5 years	Awareness & Intentionality/Reflection & Improvement/

**Awareness and Intentionality**

The word “awareness” remained constant across all faculty interviews. Participants discussed how being aware of cultural differences and how to be more inclusive represented a key step in becoming a more culturally relevant practitioner. As “Speak Life” stated when considering the professional development around culturally relevant practices at Tri-County Community College, “It’s something that has stuck in my mind ever since the training. I think just being aware is a major step.” This sentiment was also expressed by “What You Give” at AB-Tech, who said, “It’s kind of sparked more of my awareness. So anytime I’ve seen something that was related to culturally relevant pedagogy or equity and education, I’ve been more interested in it and curious about it.”

However, faculty voiced an important second component to awareness: remaining intentional in their approach to culturally relevant practices. This idea was emphasized by several instructors when considering class materials and syllabi. As “Be As You Are” stated when considering teaching online and our suggestions of inclusive language,

You get used to how you've always done things, and so [it’s important] to try to bring things in. I think for me that was a really easy thing to try to be more aware of, and then for moving forward, what would I like to do? [...] I want to be more intentional with how I interact with students.

Echoing this sentiment, “Cactus Tree” discussed our example of adding intentional belongingness language to the syllabus and stated, “Sometimes we get in the routine of doing the same thing. I think that it's really important to take a hard look at it from the lens of, ‘Well, I say,

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I believe these things. But is it reflected in what I'm asking them to do?" These conversations reveal that even small steps like refreshing syllabi or considering language used in online courses constitute beginning steps faculty can do to show Awareness and Intentionality.

When considering Awareness and Intentionality, Ladson-Billings' (1995) tenet of cultural competency emerges as crucial for those leading classroom spaces because "culturally relevant teachers utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning," (p. 161). Following the results of these conversations, we argue that faculty practicing Awareness and Intentionality constitutes the first step toward becoming a culturally competent instructor. Since we designed the faculty professional development sessions for this improvement initiative to be targeted at a beginner's level understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy, the theme of Awareness and Intentionality reinforces gauging participants' understanding of cultural competency. Many of the instructors involved in this initiative had little understanding or interaction with the idea of culturally relevant teaching or scholarship, which supported our causal analysis discussions of limited cultural competency and culturally relevant practices. Several faculty attested to the professional development session being extremely beneficial to not only their awareness but how to practice intentionality in their classrooms moving forward.

### **Reflection and Improvement**

For practitioners interested in developing their cultural competency, self-reflexivity presents a necessary step in the improvement process. As such, this theme of Reflection and Improvement intersects with Ladson-Billings (1995) concept of critical sociopolitical consciousness. Freire (2005) highlights "the notion of 'conscientization,' which is 'a process that invites learners to engage the world and others critically'," (p. 162), which is reinforced by Ladson-Billings' work (1995). To develop critical consciousness, intentional reflection is vital

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for instructors. Without faculty doing the deeper work of self-reflecting, cultivating critical consciousness in students will remain elusive.

### *Self-reflection*

Throughout our interviews, faculty kept returning to their positionality in this work and how to use reflection to create more culturally relevant spaces for students. In defining culturally relevant teaching, “Cactus Tree” stated, “It’s an approach to teaching that reflects having done at least some basic amount of work to check within oneself for bias and stereotypes [...] these in-brain things that we all get and have to reckon with.” This ideology around checking in with the self also emerged when “You’re the Top” discussed desired interactions between student and instructor in the classroom by saying, “Part of it is personal. I want to have a good rapport with the students, and the more ways I can connect with them the better—philosophically in and outside of myself.” A similar concept is reflected in response to a question regarding future work around culturally relevant pedagogy by “Be As You Are” who said, “it is an area of insecurity because I come from a place of privilege, and I know that. I want to never be hurtful, even if it is unintentional. And I think that happens sometimes intentionally and unintentionally.” These statements display a growing critical consciousness around how the identities faculty carry into the classroom can affect students.

### *Curriculum materials and classroom interactions*

Faculty who emphasized reflection as an important practice when considering cultural competency also touched on utilizing reflection specifically as a tool to improve their interactions with students and as a means of increasing student success. Therefore, Reflection and Improvement as a theme aligns with the tenet of academic success in culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes the importance of academic success by stating,

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“thus, culturally relevant teaching requires that teachers attend to students' academic needs, not merely make them ‘feel good’” (p. 160). Multiple faculty participants grappled with the goal of meeting curriculum standards while also leveraging equity-driven classroom practices. As “Cactus Tree” put it, “To me equity means having to hold in the same high standards for each student... And not giving them a pass by saying, ‘Well, they might be struggling, or there might be something else going on.’ [...] It’s about consistent standards and genuinely valuing every voice in the class.”

When discussing course materials, one interesting area of conversation focused on open resource classes versus courses with an assigned text. AB-Tech did not utilize an open resource approach to any of the pilot classes, whereas several English courses at Tri-County did. When asked if the instructor sought out texts beyond the core book required, “You’re the Top” responded no, partially as an access issue for students. At Tri-County, both “Have You Ever” and “Speak Life” praised open resource classrooms as a cost-effective approach but admitted that materials are determined by an instructor’s willingness to search out things beyond their own lens. As “Speak Life” put it, “You have to be aware that sometimes your own biases or your own lens of the world is going to color what you bring in.” The open resources discussion also speaks to the Awareness and Intentionality theme, while underscoring the importance of Reflection and Improvement for faculty interested in diversifying their curricula.

### *Critical consciousness*

Several faculty members showed resistance to adapting course concepts to be more inclusive beyond a colloquial sense. “You’re the Top” in discussing nonbinary students expressed, “I have no issue saying they/them if that's what they prefer. However, as an English teacher, it's still in the rule books that we have binary pronouns. So, one of the things that I talk



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about in my class is the difference between what we do culturally, and what we do when somebody is judging our writing.” Another discussion by “Speak Life” around course content also highlighted an area of struggle in bringing in culturally relevant materials, “I would just like to say that it's difficult to bring that in and also look at what your course content is and your outcomes. I particularly struggle with it in British literature, because especially the first part of British literature—it's white as snow.” These examples show that despite an awareness around cultural difference, there is still a structural-functional (Capper, 2019) aspect to utilizing culturally relevant practices. Faculty desired an effective and efficient solution that fit within the familiar structure of higher education rather than facing the post-structural need to reexamine the system. For instance, rather than considering why British literature is one of the few literature courses offered consistently to meet transfer agreements, the faculty remained more interested in practical solutions rather than metaphorical discussions.

However, several participants did also show awareness of structural issues around belongingness and culturally relevant practices. “Be As You Are” stated, “I think equity is giving everyone the same opportunity from the get-go. So, it's not just tilting the scales, but it's addressing individuals and the system itself to ensure that no matter the individual, they are starting at the same starting place to reach their goals.” This statement reflects Freire's (2005) assertion that “For the truly humanist educator and the authentic revolutionary, the object of action is the reality to be transformed by them together with other people,” (p. 94). Further reinforcing Freire's point, “Have You Ever” discussed the importance of cultural competency through the lens of students who intended to transfer to a larger university by stating,

It's important not only for students to feel as though they're included, but also for other students to recognize that it's not just, you know, people like themselves walking around

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in the world. The world is a varied place, and I think, especially in a small town, that often gets lost.

“Speak Life” gave a practical example of critical consciousness from both the instructor and students in an all-white American Literature course. In discussing the Harlem Renaissance, one student spoke up, inquiring why those white individuals who never owned slaves or perpetuated overt racism still faced being “demonized” in many higher education spaces. “Speak Life” utilized that class moment to cultivate student consciousness of cultural competency by highlighting how the authors being studied in this period still lived under the shadow of slavery. “I think it was sort of an interesting discussion, and that he was being sincere in that he didn't feel like he was being racist [...] it just created a good discussion about giving voices to people who have been denied voices in the past.”

While discussing this example, “Speak Life” stated several times, “I tried to do my best.” The notion of trying to do better around these conversations of difference came up across interviews. In a different example, “You’re the Top” offered reflection on misconceptions and preconceived notions by assuming students would need remedial assistance because they were not native English speakers. As it turned out, those students were second-generation Americans, who grew up in non-English speaking homes, but due to attending primary schools in the United States, they could all speak, read, and write proficiently in English. As “You’re the Top” put it, “So yes, I did learn stuff from the [training], and I did utilize it... and yet I still flipped up.” Finally, “Have You Ever” responded to a question about why being culturally relevant in practice as an educator was important by saying, “I don't ever want somebody to come into the classroom and feel like they're missing something because I have limited my scope of resources

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or my scope of teaching.” These statements show a desire to utilize culturally relevant practices to improve the self to help students succeed and enhance student experiences.

### **Communication and Storytelling**

The final theme from our faculty interviews encompasses all three of the tenets of culturally relevant teaching through recognizing the vitality of communication and storytelling within the classroom. As Freire (2005) writes, “Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.” (pp. 92-93). Nearly every faculty member interviewed brought up a desire to facilitate better dialogue in their classrooms, in part to ensure their students felt comfortable sharing their full selves.

One of the most powerful ideas to emerge in the faculty interviews centered on the role of empowering those voices of cultural difference—because as “Cactus Tree” stated,

I find that when those voices are cultivated, they really have something powerful to say. [...] It's important to me because they have stories to tell, and I want them to get to the point where they are confident in articulating it and sharing it with people in their lives and their communities.

“Be As You Are” captured this sentiment by saying culturally relevant practices are about “the simplicity of human connection.” Both “Have You Ever” and “Speak Life” also emphasized the importance of students telling their own stories through cultivating safe spaces inside their classrooms.

### ***Masking and true learning***

Another key subtheme from faculty was the recognition of students’ tendency to hide or mask their true selves to complete their courses. As “Have You Ever” explained,

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I never want anyone to ever come into a classroom and feel like they can't fully express who they are. Or feel like they have to hide some part of themselves, because they feel like they're going to be treated differently for showing some part of who they are.

This statement reinforces the idea of Awareness and Intentionality being a vital first step for instructors who desire to become culturally competent educators.

In discussing the concept of student presentation, "You're the Top" made the point that despite faculty wanting to interact with students with good intention, there is a need to understand that students may have learned or acquired a mask to allow them to simply meet the expectations of the course rather than "really connect to the material." This, therefore, creates a monetary exchange for a piece of paper rather than a chance to develop "brain power." Both "You're the Top" and "Speak Life" spoke to the banking ideology presented by Freire (2005), wherein knowledge is merely deposited in students, rather than learning being viewed as a meaningful and transformative process. As "Speak Life" put it,

I think education is more than just training someone for a particular job. [...] It is making them an informed, educated citizen; and knowing and understanding and grappling with the issues of different cultures is very important [...] it's part of the process of becoming an educated person.

### *Facilitation and dialogue*

Several faculty members also voiced a desire to become better facilitators following our professional development session, as well as wanting to be involved in more discussions with their peers around the concepts of culturally relevant teaching. "What You Give" emphasized the importance of rethinking communication with students while also wanting to have faculty-level discussions wherein participants could "share their experiences and learn from each other." The

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idea of faculty-led networks of learning communities was also shared by “Speak Life,” “Cactus Tree,” and “Be As You Are.”

In discussing the most impactful part of cultural relevant teaching, “Be As You Are” explained, “incorporation of practices like the activities and the critical thinking and the peer-to-peer growth—that’s where I think can really be the most impactful. I want to be a better facilitator, and that’s where I’d like more growth.” Further consideration of how faculty interactions with students can be improved by better communication practices, “Have You Ever” made the point to say, “I feel like sometimes I struggle to have interactions at all,” especially within online classroom spaces. Facilitation for several faculty members also included the idea of facilitating peer relationships. As “Have You Ever” put it, “I do hope that, especially when students are in a class together, they try to create some kind of relationship.” Additionally, “Speak Life” and “Cactus Tree” also emphasized their perception of small groups as an effective use of class time to build rapport and develop critical thinking for learning about new cultures.

### *Hope and communication*

The final sub-theme from our faculty interviews focused on a consideration of what being an educator meant to a few participants. The notion of hope and communication as channels for culturally relevant teaching connect Awareness and Intentionality, Reflection and Improvement, and Communication and Storytelling as necessary perspectives for faculty looking to make their classrooms more just and equitable. As “Speak Life” eloquently stated, “An instructor is not going to handle things perfectly. My interaction with my student in that American literature class was not perfect, but what you take out of it is speaking life into it, to speak hope into it, and to speak positively to guide someone to look at these culturally relevant situations [...] in a more positive, compassionate way.” This last point echoes Freire’s (2005) assertion that “Hope,

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however, does not consist in crossing one's arms and waiting. As long as I fight, I am moved by hope; and if I fight with hope, then I can wait.” (p. 99). Many faculty participants of our improvement initiative viewed continuing to improve and reflect on their communication as a manifestation of their hope for the students in their classrooms to feel seen and to develop the capacity to see others more holistically through the practice of dialogue.

### *Song Pseudonyms and Sensemaking*

The pseudonyms were chosen by the faculty to express their relationship to their profession, their students, and their cultures (see Wallace, 2022). We acknowledge that the faculty participants all identified as white, therefore utilizing music to explore their feelings around culturally relevant practices provided a sensemaking opportunity as opposed to a counter-storytelling mechanism. Faculty used their song choices to highlight their relationship to teaching and feelings around the students in their classrooms (see Appendix E for full lyrics to all songs selected). As researchers, we utilized these songs during our analysis and coding processes to better understand the perspective of the educators involved in our improvement initiative. The choices in song fell under the following categories: 1) songs about student potential (“You’re the Top”; “Cactus Tree”; “Be As You Are”), and 2) songs about the teaching process itself (“What You Give”; “Speak Life”; “Have You Ever”). We highlight the rationale for song choices along with the important lyrics we used in the sensemaking process in Table 7.

**Table 7**

#### *Explanation for Faculty Song Pseudonym Selections*

<b>Song Selected</b>	<b>Rationale</b>	<b>Key Lyrics</b>
“You’re the Top”	A song to remember student potential and the need for positive reassurance by instructors	“At least it’ll tell you How great you are— You’re the top! You’re the Coliseum—

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		You're the top! You're the Louver Museum; You're a melody from a symphony by Strauss— You're a Bendel bonnet, A Shakespeare's sonnet, You're Mickey Mouse”
“Have You Ever”	A song about embracing the ability of an educator to widen students’ perspectives about the world	“Have you ever wandered lonely through the woods? And everything there feels just as it should; You're part of the life there, You're part of something good”
“What You Give”	A song about teaching and feeling called to be an educator	“It's not whatcha got, it's what you give; It ain't the life you choose, it's the life you live” / “And who is the reason you're livin' for? Who's the reason for your smile?”
“Speak Life”	A song about teaching as a soul-gratifying experience for the educator and a life-changing opportunity for students	“When you speak life with the words you say, Raise your thoughts a little higher; Use your words to inspire— Joy will fall like rain when you speak life with the things you say”
“Cactus Tree”	A song to remind female-identifying students that they are meant to live free	“And her heart is full and hollow Like a cactus tree While she's so busy being free”
“Be As You Are”	A song about encouraging students to show up as their fullest selves in the classroom	“There are moments when you fall to the ground But you are stronger than you feel you are now You don't always have to speak so loud, no Just be as you are

It doesn't matter if you  
become some star  
Life is better when you open  
your heart  
You don't always have to act  
so hard, no  
Just be as you are”

*Impact on Improvement Measures*

As the central methodology of this disquisition utilized improvement science, our analysis included identifying the correlation of faculty qualitative data and our outlined measures. Our outcome measure held that students would self-identify as a 7 out of 10 in 75% of their classes in December 2022, with the leading measure focusing on faculty implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms and developing their cultural competency. Through the discussions with faculty participants and the limited quantitative data, we identified improvements in perception of cultural competency and comfort around incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy. Faculty heavily emphasized a desire to have more cultural awareness, intentionality, reflection, and communication with students after the professional development and pilot course experiences.

Additionally, our balance measure focused on examining the amount of time faculty spent implementing culturally relevant practices and learning about cultural competency. Overwhelmingly, faculty participants cited a desire for more time spent on these practices rather than less. Faculty wanted more time with us as researchers and guides in this process, as well as with one another to explore important concepts from our professional development and their subsequent classroom experiences. Our balance measure was a successful indicator of the faculty



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members' capacity and interest in continuing this work beyond the completion of this disquisition.

### **Qualitative Student Findings and Impact on Measures of Improvement**

As students are the focus of our improvement initiative, we wanted to bring in BIPOC voices at the end of the fall semester. We conducted 6 in-depth interviews via Zoom with 3 students from Tri-County and 3 students from AB-Tech (see Table 8). All participants identified as female, and the racial makeup of the group was  $n = 67\%$  Black,  $n = 17\%$  Latinx, and  $n = 17\%$  Asian/Pacific Islander. Traditional and nontraditional aged students participated in the interviews. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and an hour.

Following the interviews, we utilized two rounds of inductive coding to identify three core themes from students: Representation and Resilience; Relationships and Belonging; and Communication and Facilitation. Each of these core themes also intersect with the themes identified from our faculty interviews.

In conducting our interviews, we wanted to examine our improvement measures to gauge the success of the initiative. The core outcome was for students to self-identify as 7 out of 10 in 75% of their classes in December 2022. Additionally, we wanted students to articulate faculty cultural competency/relevant practices as drivers for their sense of belonging. Regarding the driver measures, students interviewed rated their sense of belonging with an average of eight out of 10 at the end of the fall 2022 semester. Of those students,  $n = 83\%$  stated their sense of belonging had been impacted by a classroom experience or a faculty member on campus, explicitly correlated to making them feel seen through respect and recognition of cultural differences. One participant described a negative experience in an earlier program of study, wherein she rated her sense of belonging as 4 out of 10 due to treatment by her instructor, which

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she felt to be partially racially motivated. However, after moving to a new program of study at the same institution, she ranked her sense of belonging as 9 out of 10 because of the care of her new instructor. Further discussion of our improvement measures is explored in this section. We will also discuss the role faculty practices have on student experiences in further detail herein while utilizing the participants' chosen pseudonyms.

**Table 8**

*Student Pseudonyms, Demographic Information, and Core Themes Identified*

<b>Song Title Pseudonym</b>	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>	<b>ESL</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Core Theme(s)</b>
“Ribbon in the Sky”	Rod Wave	Black	No	Female	TCCC	Representation & Resilience/ Relationships & Belonging
“Nassam alayna”	Fairuz	Black/ International	Yes	Female	AB-Tech	Representation & Resilience/ Communication & Facilitation
“Techno Cumbia”	Selena	Latinx	Yes	Female	TCCC	Communication & Facilitation/ Relationships & Belonging
“Wonder”	Emeli Sandé	Black	Yes	Female	AB-Tech	Representation & Resilience/ Communication & Facilitation/ Relationships & Belonging
“444”	Krishnan	Black	No	Female	TCCC	Relationships & Belonging/

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						Communication & Facilitation
“By Your Side”	Sade	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Yes	Female	AB-Tech	Relationships & Belonging/ Representation & Resilience

### Representation and Resilience

As the prolific Black science fiction author Octavia Butler once wrote, “What we don’t see, we assume can’t be. What a destructive assumption.” (The Huntington Art Museum, 2017). When discussing sense of belonging with students, a throughline between conversations hinged on feeling “seen” by their instructors. “Wonder” offered her definition of sense of belonging by stating,

It means being seen, being heard, being accepted, and knowing that this is not a superficial acceptance, but deeply being seen and held for who you are, and not just elevated and embraced because of strength, but also being seen and embraced for the weaknesses as well.

For instructors to rise to this level of recognition, Awareness and Intentionality proves essential. The women interviewed cited little to no racial representation of themselves in their faculty or classmates while attending community college. Despite this lack of physical representation, several participants highlighted practices their instructors leveraged to incorporate diverse cultures into the classroom. For example, “Nassam alayna” discussed a public speaking class, where:

I did a presentation about my culture, and it was really nice because it was my first time really giving details to like a huge group of people, because normally I take like

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one-on-one questions, and I know people always feel bad when they ask me questions, but I'd rather just answer their questions.

This example speaks to the benefit of exposing all students at predominantly white institutions to diversity within the classroom when care is taken by the instructor to cultivate a respectful space for meaningful learning.

However, another student interviewed cited the negative impacts of instructors lacking in Awareness and Intentionality. In discussing how slavery was handled in one class, "444" said, "It's like as soon as they bring up slavery everyone automatically looked at me." She added the instructor seemed unprepared to field this reaction from students in the room. "Ribbon in the Sky" also told a story of a white student who raised their hand to point out a statistic about Black education levels being lower than whites, which made the instructor uncomfortable in trying to articulate how the statistic itself was not racist, just a fact in the textbook. "It's not wrong, but it made me feel awkward to the point where I'm like, we shouldn't have to tip toe around that. But also, don't bring it up to everybody who is Black."

Without the proper faculty training in these scenarios, BIPOC often find themselves facing the job of being the educators within their classrooms, rather than simply being students engaged in learning. In discussing a positive experience in a statistics course, "Wonder" specified the freeing nature of not needing to be hyperaware of her identity in the classroom space:

The professors were equitable in treatment because they [never treated me differently].

Of course, it doesn't erase my identity and doesn't make me any less aware of my identity. But it does make me focus on the reason that we're there, which is to learn. And I've been able to do that because of that sense of equity and because it was normalized. I

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didn't have to think about it or question, do I belong here? I was just able to show up and perform my job as a student, which was to learn and perform and contribute to that class. "Wonder" speaks to the necessity of Awareness and Intentionality of faculty who are tasked with moving beyond "not seeing color" toward not letting implicit biases impact their perceptions of student ability or performance.

By recognizing difference without "othering" it, faculty can be strong drivers for student sense of belonging. "By Your Side" in articulating the importance of meeting Erika, a Black woman in an executive director position with prior teaching experience, said the encounter "made me automatically feel a connection because there's a woman of color that is in this position of power, who wants to show support. It made me feel really comforted and safe and like there was another resource that I could reach out to if needed." Instructors practicing Awareness and Intentionality can recognize how destructive it is for BIPOC students if they never feel represented or seen in their classroom, around campus, or in their curriculum, which offers the first step toward building more culturally relevant spaces.

### *Resilience*

In discussing their experiences in college, resilience appeared across institutions and age groups. The Black women interviewed emphasized their "intrinsic and interior" drive for sense of belonging. As "Wonder" said, "My sense of belonging is really more intrinsic and interior. I feel very centered in my identity. And so, it means that I can be in various settings and hold that identity." This concept of self-motivation was also expressed by "Ribbon in the Sky," who struggled with the question of belongingness in stating, "I feel like I go here, so in my brain I know I belong because I'm going to be there regardless, you know. So, it doesn't matter about the school or whatever they have going on." Yet, when asked if having more instructors or peers

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who shared her identity as a Black woman would impact her sense of belonging, she replied that such a change would unequivocally elevate her classroom experience. So, while Black students may persist in college due to an internal drive to succeed, finding representation in instructors or peers can offer a powerful external source of validation and belonging, which we will explore in the following section.

### **Relationships and Belonging**

Felten and Lambert (2020) highlight the importance of relationship-rich college environments by stating “scores of students we interviewed told us of moments when they were one relationship, or one conversation, away from dropping out of college. Relationships matter.” (p. 1). The focus of our change initiative centered on student belonging with an expectation that cultivating relationships while attending community college would impact sense of belonging. Felten and Lambert (2020) consider relationship-rich campuses to be those who prioritize forging relationships between students, faculty, staff, and administrators. These relationships can be harder to develop at a commuter community college, especially for BIPOC students in predominately white institutions, which means faculty using culturally relevant practices can assist in building relationship-rich spaces for students.

#### ***Peer relationships***

In conducting student interviews, 83% of participants attributed the value of a relationship on campus to their sense of belonging. As “Ribbon in the Sky” said when discussing meeting “444,” who is a math tutor at Tri-County,

[They said] That’s your tutor. And I was just like, okay. And then I got closer, and I was like, Oh, my gosh! She’s me! And it shocked me because I was like, a mixed tutor, like

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for real? [...] I went home and told my family like I have a mixed tutor, and so it was, it was literally crazy. It shouldn't be that crazy. But it was for me that day.

“Ribbon in the Sky” later returned to the importance of having at least one other Black woman on campus she could spend time with by saying,

There's not many people here to relate to when it comes to culture. For instance, like my hair right now [...] [“444”] understands—everyone around me is probably just like why do that? But [she's] just like I understand, I know exactly why your hair is like this today. We met each other and we connected, it was just really cool. I love the fact that she's my tutor. [...] I don't come off as too aggressive to her.

Though these two participants had only known each other two months, the relationship's impact stretched beyond the classroom, as they were planning to take a vacation together soon.

In contrast, “By Your Side” offered an example of not feeling connected with her peers affecting her classroom performance when she enrolled in a statistics class where most of the students were under the age of 18, which left her feeling like she did not belong. However, after being granted her request to move to a different section of the same course, she expressed a positive experience with her peers and instructors. This offers an insight into the ways students and faculty can work together to find spaces that benefit students of color. Anecdotally, “By Your Side,” like “Wonder,” listed her statistics course at AB-Tech as giving her a high sense of belonging but for the reason of having a classmate she could reach out to for help, where they could “create [their] own sense of belonging.” Another participant, “Techno Cumbia,” in articulating what her institution could do to increase her sense of belonging, raised the idea of a support group on campus that connected marginalized students to build relationships and learn from each other. The idea of a “group by us for us” was also proposed by “By Your Side.” Such

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a group could provide a channel for students to meet earlier in their higher education journey and form bonds that last well beyond their community college career.

### *Faculty relationships*

In building upon the research of Kezar and Maxey (2014), Felten and Lambert (2020) found that “student-faculty interactions are the single most significant factor in positive educational outcomes for students of color and are also especially significant for first-generation students” (p. 83). Faculty comprise most of the points of contact for students at commuter schools, which emphasizes the role instructors can play in sense of belonging, both inside and outside of their classroom spaces. Felten and Lambert (2020) continue, “Faculty need to take responsibility for creating classroom environments that encourage meaningful interactions with and among students.” (p. 83). Through the lens of culturally relevant teaching, this responsibility moves beyond Awareness and Intention into Reflection and Improvement. It is not enough for faculty to merely be cognizant of diversity; rather, instructors must reflect on their own identity and role as educators to improve the conditions of their classrooms to be safer places for BIPOC students to feel represented and respected. Such spaces can then flourish as rooms where relationships are nurtured. As “Wonder” described, “I think that those interactions offer opportunities to grow connections and relationships with classmates.”

Several participants discussed the value of faculty relationships to their learning experience. “Nassam alayna” outlined an experience where she worked with faculty to ensure assignments that overlapped with familial obligations could be turned in after the initial due date, which helped her feel like her instructors respected her culture. Similarly, “Techno Cumbia” outlined a time when she had to switch to a new computer in the middle of the semester and her instructor remembered without needing a reminder and offered her an extension to complete



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assignments. These are small-scale changes by faculty that had major impacts on students' perception of faculty care. Faculty willing to Reflect and Improve their approach through culturally relevant practices can offer flexible and equitable options for students from diverse cultures. Kezar and Maxey (2014) outline several opportunities for faculty to improve their relationships with students, such as attending professional development, being accessible for communication, and facilitating deeper quality interactions in the classroom. In the next section, we will address the importance of communication and facilitation for BIPOC belongingness.

### **Communication and Facilitation**

As with the faculty participants, the student interviews revealed a desire for more and better communication in the classroom. Much of the frustration voiced from students hinged on a perception of faculty being unwilling or unprepared to facilitate the level of dialogue wanted. Students repeatedly reinforced the value of “hard” conversations if held in a respectful manner, especially in conversations around cultural differences, including religious, political, and racial diversity.

#### ***Classroom dialogue***

Echoing Freire's (2005) emphasis on dialogue as the most effective channel for true education, Felten and Lambert (2020) touch on the benefits from difficult conversations and conflict in the classroom by asserting

Students in a relationship-rich classroom can navigate, and sometimes even flourish in, conflicts when they arise in the course. Kathleen Fitzpatrick calls this capacity “generous thinking”— the ability not only to articulate and value your own perspectives but also “to care for the quite different concerns of others.” (p. 97).

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While discussing the usefulness of classroom dialogue, “Wonder” stated, “I just like conversations and connections with people [...] especially the backgrounds and the stories; like what brought people to A-B Tech that I’ve heard.” This concept directly intersects the faculty theme of Communication and Storytelling, particularly in empowering students to share their stories with others. “Nassam alayna”’s story about her cultural assignment in a communication class also touched on her appreciation for the conversation sparked by her presentation, where she felt others could learn about her religious and international identities. “444” placed a special emphasis on wanting more communication between peers, as well as faculty, in all her classes regardless of subject matter. “By Your Side” discussed communication from the lens of online learning and stated a desire to have more outreach by faculty and more facilitation for conversation via forum posts or video meetings. There is clearly an appetite from BIPOC students to partake in hard conversations where respect and care from the faculty is evident.

### *Impacts of communication*

An important sub-theme of Communication and Facilitation from student participants focused on the ability of communication to buoy confidence and empower students to feel comfortable asking questions. As “444” stated, “I feel like the more you feel connected with the people around you, the more open you are to ask for help.” Multiple students discussed how better Communication and Facilitation impacts their sense of belonging through feeling empowered to ask questions and answer questions from their instructors and peers. As “Nassam alayna” explained when asked what faculty could do to increase her sense of belonging:

I think having more opportunities to discuss different harder topics [...] I feel like people are always scared to ask me questions or to ask other people questions, and I feel like as

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long as it's not like disrespectful, I don't mind answering them. So, I wish we had more spaces where we can have these discussions.

Faculty can utilize Communication and Storytelling practices to foster culturally relevant classroom spaces wherein students can communicate with intentionality. Instructors should demonstrate a willingness to facilitate conversations around difficult topics by practicing Awareness and Intentionality, Reflection and Improvement, and clear Communication and Storytelling. Student participants offered praise to those instructors who attempted to hold space, even if the instructors did not always get it "right." In a culminating thought to faculty influence on student sense of belonging, "Wonder" offers this eloquent conclusion,

I feel like I belong. I feel that instructors have played a pivotal role in that. I feel like self-confidence, self-assuredness, and self-awareness have played a role in that. But I definitely don't want to undermine the role that professors have or the power that they have to draw people into this common space of inclusion. [Or] of the power that they have to spotlight the importance of respect for differences because there is that power and I've seen it at play, and it's important.

### *Connecting Music with Lived Experience*

As this disquisition is qualitative in its methodological grounding, we felt music as a counter storytelling mechanism would add useful context for students seeking to describe their lived experiences (see Wallace, 2022). Students used their song choices to discuss their culture and how it felt to be a BIPOC student at a primarily white institution (see Appendix F for full lyrics to all songs selected). As researchers, we utilized these songs during our sensemaking and coding processes to better understand the perspective of the students involved in our improvement initiative. The choices in song fell under the following categories: 1) songs about

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their potential (“Ribbon in the Sky”; “444”; “Wonder”; “By Your Side”), and 2) songs about their culture (“Nassam alayna”; “Techno Cumbia”). We highlight the rationale for song choices along with the important lyrics we used in the sensemaking process in Table 9.

**Table 9**

*Explanation for Student Song Pseudonym Selections*

Song Selected	Rationale	Key Lyrics
“Ribbon in the Sky”	A song about pushing through life’s challenges and honoring your potential	“Life too short to be living in a lie, It's too much pain to be living just to die. Can't feel my pain 'cause I hid it deep inside, I keep my head to the ribbon in the sky”
“Nassam alayna”	A song about feeling split between cultures and missing your home	“In a mantra of energy and image, take me to them, oh love; Oh, panic, my heart, grow up with alienation; My country does not know me, take me, take me, take me to my country”
“Techno Cumbia”	A song that is a reminder of home and Latin culture	“I look around and something I'm noticing is that there are some people not dancing— Dance, dance without stopping; There is no time to rest”
“Wonder”	A song about never forgetting your worth, no matter what you encounter in life	“Though our feet might ache, the world's upon our shoulders No way we goin' break, 'cause we are full of wonder— Whoa, oh we ain't falling under, oh we are full of wonder”
“444”	A song about honoring legacy by fulfilling your dreams through owning your potential	“I wanna be something great for myself and my family; Came to the states had a dream— I'm a visionary, we'll be legendary.  Worked hard for days, had no doubt; Now we in a house, and we're safe and loved.

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“By Your Side”	A song to remember your worth and reclaiming your potential for yourself	I'll make you proud, make you proud, without a doubt.”
		“When you're on the outside baby and you can't get in, I will show you you're so much better than you know.
		When you're lost and you're alone and you can't get back again, I will find you darling and I will bring you home.”

### *Impact on Improvement Measures*

As previously outlined, our interviews with students directly correlated BIPOC student belongingness with faculty cultural competency and culturally relevant practices. Our driver measure gauged if faculty incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy and cultural competency increased sense of belonging for our BIPOC students. Our process measure looked at whether students could explicitly tie the driver measure to the outcome measure by stating faculty cultural competency and relevancy contributed to their sense of belonging.

Given that the students interviewed averaged an eight out of 10, with the lowest sense of belonging being a 6 and the highest a 10, there was a clear indication of the outcome measure showing improvement. Students reinforced not only our outcome measure, but also our driver and process measures in their interviews, wherein they could identify their belongingness increasing in spaces where faculty made an effort to understand, celebrate, and explore cultural difference at the predominately white institutions involved in our improvement initiatives. Three of our Black students discussed examples where teachers who lacked cultural competency actively undercut feelings of belongingness, especially when subjects such as slavery were discussed in class. The link between faculty incorporating culturally relevant practices and

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improving their cultural competency and BIPOC students citing higher levels of belongingness indicate this improvement initiative was successful under the parameters of the improvement science framework.

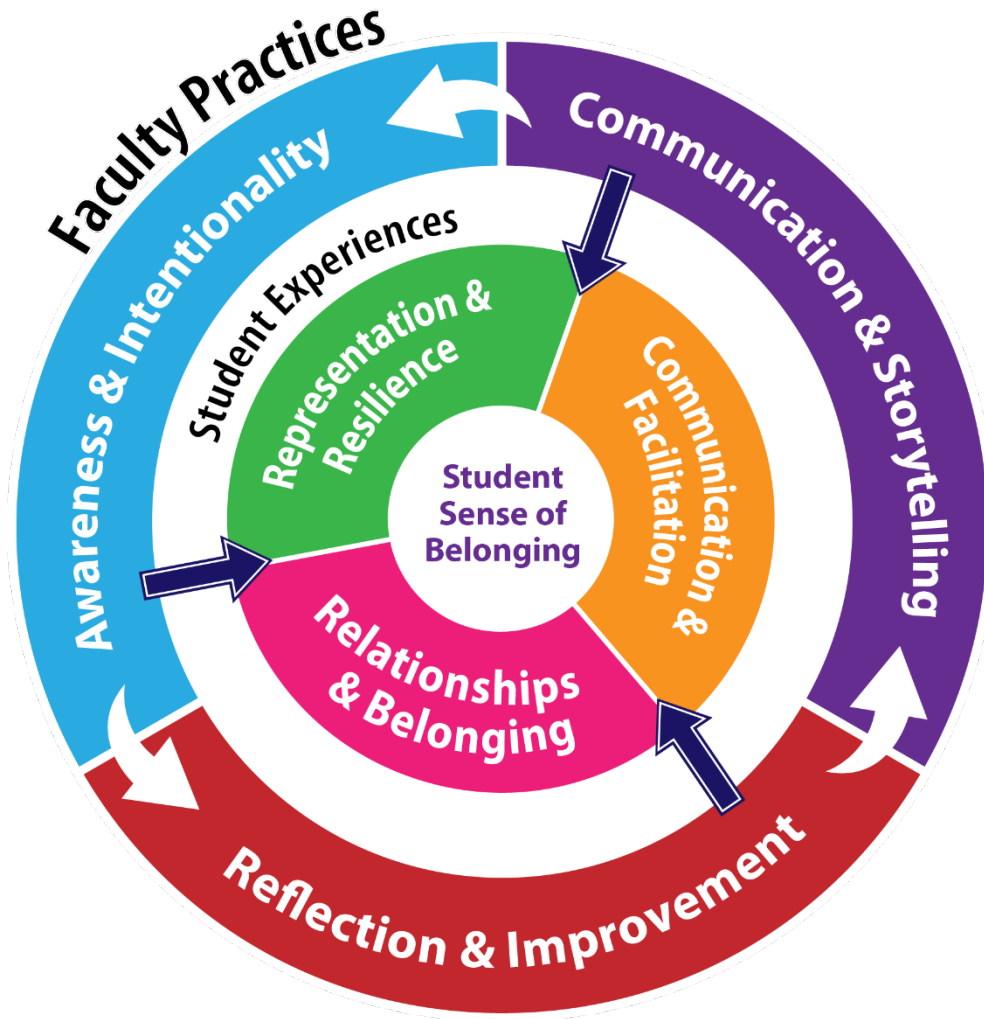
### **Act**

#### **Discussion**

At multiple points in conducting this research, we found ourselves deeply humbled by the stories shared by both students and faculty. Culturally relevant teaching at its core involves vulnerability and reflection, which can be daunting. Through collecting the interviews presented in this disquisition, the stories began to intertwine to produce a vivid portrait of life as a BIPOC community college student at a predominantly white institution. As we are two women who felt drawn to study and subsequently teach communication at the college level, the power of storytelling and the emphasis on a genuine desire for better communication from all participants remains deeply affecting for us. Our research through this disquisition created a framework depicting the relationship between faculty practices and student experiences (see Figure 5). This framework shows faculty practices as a continuous cycle, as is typical in improvement research, and displays the intersection of some key practices with experiential themes shared by students.

#### **Figure 5**

*Faculty Practices Impact on Student Experiences with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*



The importance of communication—in the classroom, with faculty, and among peers—to the work of building cultural competence emerged as a cornerstone of culturally relevant pedagogy. Students praised the instructors who engaged in true dialogue in their classrooms, especially in conversations around difference, even when those conversations did not always feel comfortable. Faculty expressed a desire to facilitate these conversations but voiced a concern of doing harm despite good intentions. Bridging these two concepts through continued professional development and training could have profound implications for students’ sense of belonging while enrolled at a community college. In the current discordant political atmosphere, the clear

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indication of interest in having richer discussions about difficult subject matter offers a hopeful perspective on the capacity for building critical sociopolitical consciousness for these students and their instructors.

The instructors involved in our pilot courses did fall into structural-functionalist patterns of thought, often seeking a quick and practical example to address issues around cultural competency. However, in conducting interviews, the kindling of critical epistemology did surface in instructors feeling more empowered to challenge their own and their students' preconceived notions and misconceptions about others. Students repeatedly cited the importance of feeling as though they were being seen but not treated differently as a major factor in their sense of belonging, which held true across both technical and social science disciplines. The willingness of faculty to undertake the task of unlearning thought patterns and recognizing how their worldview impacts the students they teach requires Awareness and Intentionality to move toward Reflection and Improvement in the pursuit of better Communication and Storytelling.

The most vital takeaway from this study came from the undeniable value students ascribed to instructors in either elevating or decreasing belongingness while attending college. Every student interviewed offered examples of faculty working to make them feel welcome, and several explicitly stated that faculty wield great power in fostering belonging. Many students attributed that power to the ability to facilitate conversations and relationships within their classrooms. However, equally powerful was the admission of all student participants that they either never had, or rarely had, an instructor who looked like them. Almost all students also found themselves to be the only student of color in most of their classes. Every student agreed that if there was more representation in the faculty, they would feel an increased level of belonging. This speaks to the broader more urgent need to diversify the faculty workforce in



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higher education as our BIPOC student populations continue to grow at the community college level.

Bringing our focus back to the use of improvement science, our goal focused on creating a successful change initiative on a rapid timescale. In utilizing each phase of an improvement science framework—Plan, Do, Study, Act—we were able to better understand what parts of the change initiative resulted in improvement and which can continue to be improved upon in future PDSA cycles. First, the professional development and practical techniques for faculty to develop cultural competency and begin implementing culturally relevant pedagogy showed to be successful in increasing sense of belonging for students of color. Second, students were able to identify faculty implementing these practices as things that helped them feel connected to their institution, which resulted in higher reported levels of belongingness. While we received several strong suggestions for future iterations of our professional development program, the success of our change ideas gives credence to faculty as drivers for belongingness. Finally, the results from the PDSA cycle encompassed in this disquisition offer a framework that institutions can leverage for practical and tangible improvement initiatives.

### **Limitations**

The largest limitation of this study was sample size in the quantitative and qualitative data collection cycles. Due to these smaller samples, female voices comprise the dominant gender represented in our analysis. As previously stated in our discussion of the “Do” process, the limitations of time due to delays with the Institutional Review Board process severely hindered our ability to conduct more in-depth interviews with faculty and students. Additionally, we were unable to utilize minors in our data collection. Students under 18 represent a growing demographic in North Carolina community colleges, so we missed an opportunity to capture

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their emerging voices in this work. These delays also forced a restructuring of methodology and an elimination of a few sources for data analysis, which changed the trajectory of how we approached structuring our findings. We struggled during our quantitative data collection and analysis cycle with participation due to time constraints and inconsistency in the number of responses left blank by respondents.

While we feel the qualitative data presented in the disquisition highlight powerful storytelling from our participants, we understand this may not represent all experiences of BIPOC students at the community college level. An additional limitation stems from only including two predominantly white colleges for data collection, which also limited the pool of BIPOC students. Finally, all the faculty chosen to lead the pilot courses identified as white. The white demographic in faculty ranks is part of a broader discussion regarding diversifying the faculty workforce. However, as long as higher education remains a predominately white profession while our student population continues to diversify nationwide, an urgent need for development and training with white faculty on culturally relevant practices and cultural competency will persist.

As this study focuses on Black, Latinx, and Asian/Pacific Islander student experiences, we recognize the missing voices from our work. Therefore, an exciting area of study based on this research would involve seeking out students of color not represented herein, particularly Indigenous students, as well as male students of color. Bringing in faculty who do not identify as white would also provide a rich contextual examination of different approaches to cultural competency based upon race/ethnicity. Additionally, several of the students interviewed were not enrolled in a course taught by a pilot instructor for fall 2022 but intended to take a course with one of those instructors in spring 2023. Tracking these students would offer an interesting

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follow-up opportunity with students and faculty about the sustainability of the change initiative. Further study also could include more urban and larger community colleges from across the region or the country to identify faculty/institutional approaches to fostering student sense of belonging. Finally, a deeper analysis of intersectionality applied to our framework could provide an opportunity to explore how gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and multiculturalism affect student perceptions of belonging and faculty awareness around intersectionality in general.

However, despite these limitations and small sample sizes, the qualitative data in this disquisition do highlight the importance of faculty and classrooms on students' sense of belonging while attending community college. The data collected from faculty also suggest several important initial steps in the journey of developing cultural competency and engaging in culturally relevant teaching practices. Therefore, this work amplifies existing research about faculty as agents of change in improvement initiatives targeted at increasing sense of belonging through culturally relevant pedagogy, not only for students who identify as BIPOC, but for all students in their classrooms.

### **Lessons for Leadership and Social Justice**

Our results build upon current research at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels regarding faculty cultural competency/relevancy and students' sense of belonging (see Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Martinez & Munch, 2019). Our work adds to the existent scholarship, focusing on community colleges with commuter populations in predominately white areas (see Hlinka, 2017; Jacoby, 2000; Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017). This research also demonstrates how important culturally relevant teaching is not only to students of color but also for white students in the process of developing a critical consciousness beyond primary and

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secondary education (see Byrd, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition, our disquisition provides a means of leveraging an improvement science methodology to explore belongingness in higher education (see Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Finally, this study offers the unique approach of juxtaposing faculty and student voices to examine areas of convergence and divergence around sense of belonging through storytelling (see also Miller & Daniel, 2019; Wallace, 2022).

As leaders in this process at our respective institutions, we were able to leverage a powerful force on campus: the faculty. The pilot faculty all demonstrated a willingness to listen, learn, and reflect on culturally relevant teaching. Following this initial PDSA cycle, Tri-County and Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College have shown interest in continuing the work of belongingness, equity, and inclusion. At AB-Tech, where Erika now serves as an executive director, the institution has chosen belongingness to be the next goal of their reaccreditation cycle for the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). This broadens the scope of our original pilot faculty into a multiple-discipline and campus-wide change effort. At Tri-County, all three faculty voiced a desire to continue to receive training from us in 2023, including the Dean of Humanities, Social Science, and Public Service. In her role, she can bring our professional development to a broader audience, as well as educate and train other faculty on culturally relevant pedagogy. The human side of change is often the hardest to influence but through using an improvement science methodology, we have been able to capture the buy-in of important agents on campus to advocate for our change ideas beyond the fall 2022 semester.

### **Future Areas of Research**

While we attempted to be holistic in the presentation of this improvement initiative, several areas of continued study remain compelling. One such area focuses on the professional

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development sessions, which could be expanded to span an entire semester or utilized to help faculty build networked learning communities on campus to elevate culturally relevant practices beyond just a few classrooms to a campus-wide initiative. Several faculty members cited a desire for continued interaction from us throughout the semester to ensure they remained on the right course in building cultural competency. We gained a list of modifications, additions, and goals we intend to utilize in our future research involving this framework. The next step in this work is engaging stakeholders in administration and the board of trustees to ensure sustainability for the longevity of this improvement initiative.

A common response of faculty regarding their institution's work with culturally relevant pedagogy centered on desire for accountability from leadership to ensure meaningful change can occur at their institutions. One faculty member at AB-Tech highlighted the need for a "culture shift" at the institution from the top down, with her hope that the current QEP being focused on belongingness as a result of this initiative was the first signal of the shift beginning. At TCCC, another faculty member spoke to the institutional goals of growth and retention in student enrollment being predicated on embracing culturally relevant practices from the level of president and down through the ranks of faculty and staff. Several faculty members from both institutions also discussed the necessity of the executive leadership signaling the work of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belongingness as vital to the institutional mission and daily operation.

### **Conclusion**

While the change initiative in this disquisition did result in improvement for faculty and students, several pressing areas remain in the work of fostering student belongingness through culturally relevant practices. Educators should be mindful of the deep-rooted deficit ideologies

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that pervade educational institutions. Student persistence and engagement issues are the direct result of an institutional culture that makes students of color feel inferior and/or marginalized (Capper, 2019; Wood, 2014). Recognizing the importance of intersectional student identities and perspectives must be at the center of the conversation when developing initiatives related to equity and social justice in our institutions (Capper, 2019; Harper et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2009). In this disquisition, we presented the case for addressing sense of belonging for students of color in the community college setting by developing an equity-driven framework.

Improvement science allows the unique opportunity to explore small changes, which might bring considerable progress in the efforts to foster sense of belonging for students of color in the community college. The change initiatives put forth in this research are broad enough to be applied across disciplines and institutions on as wide or narrow a scale as needed. Scalability and adaptability constitute important pieces of this process, as community colleges are diverse in both size and demographics. Additionally, this initiative allowed for a disruption of the status quo and realignment to ensure all students can succeed through belonging.

Faculty-student interaction and engagement remain drivers for academic integration, and an equity focus holds the institution—faculty, staff, and leadership—accountable in building culturally relevant atmospheres. In striving for equity-driven efforts for belonging through faculty involvement, this disquisition highlights relationships, values, and identity as factors in sense of belonging at for students of color. Continually looking for ways to change oppressive systems remains imperative to offer equitable student experiences, wherein students feel a sense of belonging, support, and the ability to succeed (Capper, 2019). Using improvement science to drive this change initiative remains paramount.

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As our research demonstrates, faculty wield an abundance of power in fostering sense of belonging within their classrooms. Our framework represents a step toward working to address the racial inequities and lack of sense of belonging that plague students of color as members of the community college community. Through utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy to practice Awareness and Intentionality, Reflection and Improvement, and Communication and Storytelling, faculty can guide students to meaningful dialogue, relationships, and true learning.

As social justice scholar-practitioners, we remain aware of undertaking this work with a group of white faculty members at the community college level. While the faculty participants improved in cultural competency and began implementing culturally relevant practices, our student interviews highlighted the urgent need to diversify the faculty workforce in community colleges. Students appreciated the efforts by their instructors toward equity and inclusion; yet in every single interview, students voiced a desire for more—or any—faculty who shared their identity as BIPOC. Bonilla-Silva (1997) writes, “social systems and their supporters must be ‘shaken’ if fundamental transformations are to take place,” (p. 474) which reminds us to not be placated by merely working within a system that perpetuates racial inequity and was never designed to be inclusive and just for all.

Racial equity in education is not a realistic objective, only a hope. However, to understand and radically address the persistent contentious state of race relations operating within the community college with a critical lens, we must adopt an approach of racial realism (Capper, 2019; Harper et al., 2009). In the United States, particularly in education, “race [still] matters, and will always matter” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 8 as cited in Capper, 2019). The participants in this study represent our hope for a more equitable and just future for BIPOC students enrolled at the community college level. As such, this disquisition offers an initial path

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that predominantly white institutions can take to ensure all students feel seen and valued through culturally relevant practices, which constitutes the first step in ensuring our institutions are truly dedicated to belonging, equity, inclusion, and student success.



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## Appendix A: Sense of Belonging Survey Instrument

This survey is part of data collection associated with Ed.D. Disquisition research. The project is related to developing an equity-driven framework for implementing culturally relevant practices within the classroom in efforts to increase sense of belonging for students of color enrolled at the community college level.

This survey will be administered before and after the implementation of the equity-driven framework and will be used to gauge whether the use of culturally relevant practices in the classroom improve sense of belonging for students of color enrolled at the community college. Participation in this survey is completely voluntary, and a participant may choose to discontinue participation at any time.

The survey responses will be anonymous, but please be aware that the small number of respondents may limit anonymity. The survey should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. The survey presents no risk in that there is no anticipated potential harm to respondents. Raw data will only be accessible to Grace Cheshire and Erika Lett, the project leads, and Dr. Emily Virtue, the faculty member(s) assisting with the disquisition, if needed.

This document contains Part I and Part II of a survey questionnaire. Part I pertains to demographic information. Part II pertains to student perceptions of sense of belonging at their community college.

Q1 I agree to participate in this survey.

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q2 Survey Directions:

Part I: Please provide the most accurate response to the demographic information questions.

Q3 Are you 18 or older:

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q4 Gender identity:

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Non-binary / third gender (3)
- Intersex (4)
- prefer not to answer (5)

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

Q5 Please indicate your age:

- 18-23 (1)
- 24-29 (2)
- 30-35 (3)
- 35-45 (4)
- Over 45 (5)

Q6 Race/Ethnicity (choose all that apply):

- American Indian/Alaskan Native (1)
- Black/African American (2)
- White/Caucasian (3)
- Hispanic/Latinx (4)

Q7 Please select the institution where you are currently a student:

- Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College (1)
- Tri-County Community College (2)

Q8 Program of study/major:

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Q7 How many credit hours are you enrolled in this semester:

- 1-3 (1)
- 4-6 (2)
- 7-10 (3)
- 11-12 (4)
- More than 12 (5)

Q8 What is your current GPA:

- have not established a GPA at the current institution (1)
- below 2.0 (2)
- 2.00-2.50 (3)
- 2.51-3.00 (4)
- 3.01-3.50 (5)
- 3.51-4.0 (6)
- don't know/unsure (7)
- prefer not to answer (8)

Q9 Please select any course you are currently enrolled in:

- ACA-122-HRM1 College Transfer Success - Tiffany Goebel (Tri-County Community College) (1)
- ACA-111-O2O1 College Student Success - Samantha Jones (Tri-County Community College) (2)
- ENG-111-OL1O1 Writing and Inquiry - Tiffany Goebel (Tri-County Community College) (3)
- ENG-232-HRM1 American Literature II - Lee Ann Reynolds (Tri-County Community College) (4)

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

- HSE-240-OAM2 Issues in Client Services - Porscha R. Orndorf (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College) (5)
- ENG-111-B1 Writing and Inquiry - Jennifer L. Browning (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College) (6)
- COM-140-OAM1 Intro Intercultural Com - Rebekah S. Handy (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College) (7)
- ACA-115-ROAM1 Success & Study Skills - Jason R. Fair (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College) (8)
- ENG-241-1 British Literature I - Ellen J. Perry (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College) (9)
- I am not enrolled in any of the following courses (10)

Q10 This part of the questionnaire contains several statements about student sense of belonging and its related attributes. Please read each statement and then use the scale to select the scale point that best reflects your personal degree of agreement to the statement.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
I feel like a real part of (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College or Tri-County Community College). (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People here notice when I am good at something. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is hard for people like me to be accepted here. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other students in this college take my opinions seriously. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Most instructors at this college are interested in me. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sometimes I don't feel as if I belong here. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
There's at least one instructor or adult in	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

<p>this college that I can talk to if I have a problem. (7)</p> <p>People at this college are friendly to me. (8)</p> <p>Instructors here are not interested in people like me. (9)</p> <p>I am included in lots of activities at this college. (10)</p> <p>I am treated with as much respect as other students. (11)</p> <p>I feel very different from most other students here. (12)</p> <p>I can really be myself at this college. (13)</p> <p>The instructors here respect me. (14)</p> <p>People here know that I can do good work. (15)</p> <p>I wish I were in a different college. (16)</p> <p>I feel proud of belonging to (Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College or Tri-County Community College). (17)</p> <p>Other students here like me the way I am. (18)</p>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

Q11 This part of the questionnaire contains several statements about student sense of belonging and its related attributes. Please read each statement and then use the scale to select the scale point that best reflects your personal degree of agreement to the statement.

	Very strongly disagree (1)	Strongly disagree (2)	Disagree (3)	Neutral (4)	Agree (5)	Strongly agree (6)	Very strongly agree (7)
I have had at least one instructor at this college who helped me to believe in myself. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel accepted as a person by my instructors. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
At least one instructor has talked with me about my personal goals at this college. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My instructors seem to genuinely care how I am doing. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My instructors understand that students come from different backgrounds. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Most instructors are interested in what I have to offer in class. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am encouraged by my instructors to openly share my views in class. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My instructors show that they	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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believe in my ability to do the class work. (8)

My instructors know who I am.

(9)

My instructors are willing to take as long as needed to help me understand the class material.

(10)

I feel accepted as a capable student by my instructors.

(11)

My instructors make me feel as though I bring valuable ideas to class. (12)

I interact with my instructors outside of class. (13)

My instructors are willing to give me individual help when needed. (14)

Even if the work in my classes is hard, I can learn it. (15)

It seems like my instructors really care about whether I am learning. (16)

People of color are encouraged to contribute to the class discussion. (17)



## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

If I have enough time, I can do a good job on all of my coursework. (18)

I am encouraged to share life experiences when they relate to the class material. (19)

I can generally express my honest opinions in my classes. (20)

My instructors provide lots of written feedback on the assignments I turn in. (21)

I feel like my personal and family history is valued in class. (22)

Women are encouraged to contribute to the class discussion. (23)

I feel as though I am treated equally to other students. (24)

My instructors make an effort to make their classes interesting. (25)

I see myself as a part of the campus community. (26)

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

I'm certain I can do almost all the work in college if I don't give up. (27)

My instructors encourage students to become involved on campus. (28)

I'm certain I can master the skills taught at this college. (29)

I am planning on returning to this college for the spring semester. (30)

I can do almost all the work in college if I don't give up. (31)

I feel that I am a member of the campus community. (32)

I expect to complete a degree or certificate at this college. (33)

I feel a sense of belonging to the campus community. (34)

My instructors are easily accessible outside of their classrooms or offices. (35)

I can do even the hardest coursework if I try. (36)

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

I've had one or more instructors at this college whom I thought of as a mentor.

(37)

My instructors generally remember my name. (38)

I'm certain I can figure out how to do the most difficult coursework. (39)

## Appendix B: Faculty Cultural Competency Survey Instrument

This survey is part of data collection associated with Ed.D. Disquisition research. The project is related to developing an equity-driven framework for implementing culturally relevant practices within the classroom in efforts to increase sense of belonging for students of color enrolled at the community college level.

This survey will be administered before and after the implementation of the equity-driven framework and will be used to gauge whether faculty members believe the use of culturally relevant practices in the classroom improves sense of belonging for students of color enrolled at the community college.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary, and a participant may choose to discontinue participation at any time. The survey responses will be anonymous, but please be aware that the small number of respondents may limit anonymity. The survey should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. The survey presents no risk in that there is no anticipated potential harm to respondents.

Raw data will only be accessible to Grace Cheshire and Erika Lett, the project leads, and Dr. Emily Virtue, the faculty member(s) assisting with the disquisition, if needed.

This document pertains to Part I and Part II of a survey questionnaire. Part I pertains to demographic information. Part II pertains to four dimensions of professional teacher knowledge and understanding of culturally relevant teaching and its related attributes.

Q1 I agree to participate in this survey.

- Click to write Choice 1 (1)
- Yes (2)
- No (3)

Q2 Please provide the most accurate response to the demographic information questions.

Q3 Gender identity:

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Non-binary / third gender (3)
- Intersex (4)
- prefer not to answer (5)

Q4 Highest Level of Education:

- Bachelor's (1)
- Masters (2)
- Ed.S. (3)

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

- Ed.D/Ph.D/J.D. (4)
- M.D. (5)
- Other (please specify): (6) \_\_\_\_\_

Q5 How many years have you taught at the postsecondary level (cumulatively)?

- Less than 1 year (1)
- 1-3 years (2)
- 3-5 years (3)
- 5-10 years (4)
- More than 10 years (5)

Q6 Race/Ethnicity (choose all that apply):

- American Indian/Alaskan Native (1)
- White/Caucasian (2)
- Black/African American (3)
- Hispanic/Latinx (4)
- Asian/Pacific Islander (5)

Q7 Please rate the following statements regarding your knowledge of culturally responsive teaching using the following scale:

	Not Applicable (1)	Strongly Disagree (2)	Disagree (3)	Somewhat Agree (4)	Agree (5)	Strongly Agree (6)
My classroom walls and bulletin boards include images, symbols, celebrations, and other artifacts that convey and address the cultural background of all students. (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I acknowledge the cultural differences that exist among students and help students of culturally diverse backgrounds build bridges between what they already know and	○	○	○	○	○	○

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

believe about a topic. (2)

As an educator, I recognize and see all students as learners who already know a great deal and who have experiences that can be built and expanded to help them even more. (3)

I incorporate multicultural information, resources, materials, and multicultural content into my teaching. (4)

It is important to establish a classroom environment in which students and teachers become partners to improve student learning. (5)

I adjust my teaching methods to teach students to view classroom situations from cultural perspectives other than their own. (6)

I adjust my teaching methods to teach students to know and affirm their respective cultures. (7)

I understand that utilizing multicultural instructional strategies and

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

matching instructional techniques to the learning styles of students from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds is important. (8)

I strive to know and understand as much as possible about the students in my classroom to facilitate learning. (9)

It is important to adjust the content of the current curriculum to reflect diversity from the perspective of populations other than the European-American point of view. (10)

I see my students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in an affirming light and acknowledge their existence by validating their ways of thinking, talking, behaving, and learning. (11)

I account for the diversity in my classroom by planning to involve their cultural strengths of my

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

students in my lessons. (12)  
I incorporate the lives of my students within the curriculum as an instructional strategy because it is essential in addressing the needs of all students. (13)

I believe that it is possible to reconstruct education to give all students opportunities to learn in academically rigorous ways. (14)

I incorporate the use of cooperative learning groups within the curriculum as an instructional strategy because it is important to build communities among learners in which the welfare of the group takes precedence over the individual. (15)

My role as an educator is to recognize that we are all cultural beings and to add rather than replace what students bring to learning. (16)

I teach my students to understand and



## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

value pluralism, the right for people to maintain their languages and culture while combining with others to form a new society reflective of all our differences.

(17)

I recognize that the textbook I use offers diverse cultural views of the curriculum. (18)

As a teacher, I recognize that we are all cultural beings and that it is my moral obligation to have the best interest at heart and make sound educational decisions for all of my students. (19)

I develop a variety of multicultural instructional examples to use in teaching students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. (20)

I examine the nature and extent of my attachments to the social and cultural groups to which I belong and how my membership in them has shaped my personal and family history. (21)

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

I draw from the knowledge of my students and their prior experiences and embed learning activities in context to make learning more appropriate and effective for them. (22)

I understand that the way people behave, think and what they believe are deeply influenced by factors such as race/ethnicity, social class, and language. (23)

I recognize the diverse cultural characteristics of students from different ethnic backgrounds and teach in ways that guarantee the progress of all my students regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, exceptional/special needs, or language. (24)

I acknowledge that all students are capable learners who bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences to school. (25)

I integrate into learning experiences

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

components of use what I know about my students and their personal experience to give them access to learning. (26)

I understand the way schools perpetuate discriminatory practices of a larger society and make it a priority for my students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to develop facility with the mainstream ways so they can effectively function in society. (27)

I teach students to use their diverse learning experiences to accommodate different cultures represented in my classroom. (28)

I teach my students to recognize barriers that exist between their home culture and the culture of the school. (29)

Selecting materials and books that help my students see how their cultural heritage is part of the curriculum is important to me. (30)

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

As an educator, I examine the roles that schools play in the reproduction and legitimization of social inequalities.

(31)

Rather than making different types of learning (cognitive, physical, and emotional) discrete, I emphasize a holistic or integrated learning

environment in my classroom (32)

Click to write

Statement 33 (33)

Q8 Thinking about the most recent semester you taught, please list the ways you felt you addressed diverse student populations (students of color, LGBTQ students, differently-abled students, etc.) in your curriculum materials:

---

Q9 Thinking about the most recent semester you taught, please list the ways you felt you addressed diverse student populations (students of color, LGBTQ students, differently-abled students, etc.) in your pedagogical practice:

---

Q10 How do you ensure diverse populations are not marginalized, tokenized, or “othered” in your classroom?

---

**Appendix C: Faculty Semi-Structured, Open-Ended Interview Guide**

1. Explain in your own words “what is cultural competency and culturally relevant pedagogy?”
2. Explain in your own words “what does it mean to be equity-minded?”
3. Why is using culturally relevant pedagogy in your classroom important to you?
4. What are your opinions about having culturally relevant materials as a part of your curricula?
5. Did you receive any new information on cultural competence from the training?
6. As a result of implementing culturally relevant practices into your classroom, what kind of interactions do you want to have with your students?
7. As a result of implementing culturally relevant practices into your classroom, what kind of interactions do you want your students to have with their classmates?
8. Having gone through the professional development training to learn how to implement culturally relevant practices within the classroom, what are some of the highlights you took away? What were the lowlights? What would you add or change?
9. What equity-driven or culturally relevant practices have you noticed you have adapted since the completion of your training?
10. What are some additional comments you would like to make regarding culturally relevant pedagogy at (A-B Tech or Tri County)?

**Appendix D: Semi-Structured, Open-Ended Student Interview Guide**

1. In your own words, what does “sense of belonging” mean to you?
2. Provide an example of when you felt you belonged at (A-B Tech or Tri County)?
3. Provide an example of when you felt you did not belong at (A-B Tech or Tri County)?
4. When you think about the experiences you have had at (A-B Tech or Tri County), how do you think feelings of belonging or not belonging influenced your classroom performance?
5. Use three words to describe the students at (A-B Tech or Tri County).
6. Use three words to describe the faculty at (A-B Tech or Tri County).
7. What can a teacher/faculty member do to make you feel a sense of belonging in their class?
8. What kind of interactions do you want to have with classmates and other students?
9. What is something you wish (A-B Tech or Tri County) would do to make you feel more comfortable or valued?
10. What are some additional comments you would like to make regarding belonging at (A-B Tech or Tri County)?

**Appendix E: Lyrics to Faculty Song Pseudonyms**

*“You’re the Top”* – Ella Fitzgerald

At words poetic I'm so pathetic  
That I always have found it best  
Instead of getting 'em off my chest  
To let 'em rest, unexpressed  
I hate parading my serenading  
As I'll probably miss a bar  
But if this ditty is not so pretty  
At least it'll tell you how great you are

You're the top, you're the Coliseum  
You're the top, you're the Louvre Museum  
You're the melody from a symphony by Strauss  
You're a Bendel bonnet, a Shakespeare sonnet, you're Mickey Mouse

You're the Nile, you're the Tower of Pisa  
You're the smile of the Mona Lisa  
I'm a worthless check, a total wreck, a flop  
But if baby, I'm the bottom, you're the top

You're the top, you're Mahatma Gandhi  
You're the top, you're Napoleon brandy  
You're the purple light of a summer night in Spain  
You're the National Gallery, you're Garbo's salary, you're cellophane

You're sublime, you're a turkey dinner  
You're the time of the Derby Winner  
I'm a toy balloon that's fated soon to pop  
But if baby, I'm the bottom, you're the top

You're the top, you're a Waldorf salad  
You're the top, you're a Berlin ballad  
You're the nimble tread of the feet of Fred Astaire  
You're an O'Neal drama, you're Whistler's mama, you're camembert

You're a rose, you're inferno's Dante  
You're the nose, on the great Durante  
I'm a lazy lout who is just about to stop  
But if baby, I'm the bottom, you're the top

---

*“Have You Ever”* – Brandi Carlile

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

Have you ever wandered lonely through the woods?  
And everything there feels just as it should  
You're part of the life there  
You're part of something good  
If you've ever wandered lonely through the woods  
If you've ever wandered lonely through the woods

Have you ever stared into a starry sky?  
Lying on your back you're asking why  
What's the purpose I wonder who am I  
If you've ever stared into a starry sky  
Ah-ah-ah, ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah  
Have you ever stared into a starry sky

Have you ever been out walking in the snow?  
Tried to get back to where you were before  
You always end up not knowing where to go  
If you've ever been out walking in the snow  
Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh, ah, ah, ah  
Ha-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-oh, ah-ah-ah-ah  
Ha-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-oh  
If you'd ever been out walking you would know

---

### *“What You Give” – Tesla*

One, two, three  
Who's the one that makes you happy?  
Or maybe, who's the one always on your mind?  
And who is the reason you're livin' for?  
Who's the reason for your smile?

I feel so lonely, yet I know I'm not the only one  
To ever feel this way  
I love ya so much that I think I'm goin' insane  
I'm goin' crazy, outta my head, I'm goin' crazy, outta my head  
I can't think about nothin' but your good, good love,  
And what you give

Now I mean everybody  
Everyone needs somebody  
And you know, everybody needs someone  
Well, and a-yes it's true, everybody needs a special kind of love  
And you're the only one I'm thinkin' of  
You mean the world to me, you are my only

I feel so lonely, yet I know I'm not the only one  
To carry on this way



## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

I love ya so much I lose track of time, lose track of the days  
I'm goin' outta my head, I'm goin' crazy, outta my head  
I can't think about a-nothin' but your good, good love  
And what you give

It's not whatcha got, it's what you give  
It ain't the life you choose, it's the life you live  
It's only what you give, only what you give, only what you give  
It's not whatcha got, but the life you live

That's it and that's right  
Why it's the life you live  
Oh play it pretty for the world

And you're the one that makes me happy, oh yeah baby  
And you're the one always on my mind  
Oh and a-yes it's true  
You are my reason, my one and only that I've been livin' for  
Why can't forever be forever and nothin' more

I feel so lonely, yet I know I'm not the only one  
To ever feel this way  
I love ya so much I lose track of time, I lose track of the days  
I'm goin' outta my head, I'm goin' crazy, outta my head  
I can't think about a-nothin' but your good, sweet love  
And what you give

It's not whatcha got, it's what you give  
It ain't the life you choose, it's the life you live  
No, no, no, no, no, no  
It's not whatcha got, it's what you give  
And it ain't what it's not, but a-what it is  
It's only what you give, only what you give, only what you give  
It's not whatcha got, oh but what you give

It's not whatcha got, it's what you give  
It ain't the life you choose, it's the life you live  
It's only what you give, only what you give, it's only what you give  
It's not whatcha got, but what life you live  
It's only what you give, what you give, what you give  
It's only what you give, it's only what you give, no no no  
It's only what you give, what you give, what you give  
It's only what you give, it's only what you give

Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah

Is that good enough for the girls that we run around with?  
Well, I do believe so,

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

It's only what you give, what you give, what you give  
It's only what you give, it's only what you give

---

*"Speak Life"* – Tobymac

Some days life feels perfect  
Other days, it just ain't workin'  
The good, the bad, the right, the wrong  
And everything in between

Yo it's crazy, amazing  
We can turn our heart through the words we say  
Mountains crumble with every syllable  
Hope can live or die

So speak life, speak life  
To the deadest darkest night  
Speak life, speak life  
When the sun won't shine and you don't know why  
Look into the eyes of the broken hearted  
Watch them come alive as soon as you speak hope  
You speak love, you speak  
You speak life, oh oh oh oh oh  
You speak life, oh oh oh oh oh

Some days the tongue gets twisted  
Other day my thoughts just fall apart  
I do, I don't, I will, I won't  
It's like I'm drowning in the deep

Well, it's crazy to imagine  
Words from my lips as the arms of compassion  
Mountains crumble with every syllable  
Hope can live or die

So speak life, speak life  
To the deadest darkest night  
Speak life, speak life  
When the sun won't shine and you don't know why  
Look into the eyes of the broken hearted  
Watch them come alive as soon as you speak hope  
You speak love, you speak  
You speak life, oh oh oh oh oh  
You speak life, oh oh oh oh oh

Lift your head a little higher  
Spread the love like fire  
Hope will fall like rain

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

When you speak life with the words you say  
Raise your thoughts a little higher  
Use your words to inspire  
Joy will fall like rain when you speak life with the things you say

Lift your head a little higher  
Spread the love like fire  
Hope will fall like rain  
When you speak life with the words you say

So speak life, speak life  
To the deadest darkest night  
Speak life, speak life  
When the sun won't shine and you don't know why  
Look into the eyes of the broken hearted  
Watch them come alive as soon as you speak hope  
You speak love, you speak  
You speak life, oh oh oh oh oh  
You speak life, oh oh oh oh oh

You speak life, oh oh oh oh oh  
You speak life, oh oh oh oh oh

Some days life feels perfect

---

### *"Cactus Tree"* – Joni Mitchell

There's a man who's been out sailing  
In a decade full of dreams  
And he takes her to a schooner  
And he treats her like a queen  
Bearing beads from California  
With their amber stones and green

He has called her from the harbor  
He has kissed her with his freedom  
He has heard her off to starboard  
In the breaking and the breathing  
Of the water weeds  
While she was busy being free

There's a man who's climbed a mountain  
And he's calling out her name  
And he hopes her heart can hear three thousand miles  
He calls again  
He can think her there beside him  
He can miss her just the same

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

He has missed her in the forest  
While he showed her all the flowers  
And the branches sang the chorus  
As he climbed the scaley towers  
Of a forest tree  
While she was somewhere being free

There's a man who's sent a letter  
And he's waiting for reply  
He has asked her of her travels  
Since the day they said goodbye  
He writes "Wish you were beside me  
We can make it if we try"  
He has seen her at the office  
With her name on all his papers  
Through the sharing of the profits  
He will find it hard to shake her  
From his memory  
And she's so busy being free

There's a lady in the city  
And she thinks she loves them all  
There's the one who's thinking of her  
There's the one who sometimes calls  
There's the one who writes her letters  
With his facts and figures scrawl  
She has brought them to her senses  
They have laughed inside her laughter  
Now she rallies her defenses  
For she fears that one will ask her  
For eternity  
And she's so busy being free

There's a man who sends her medals  
He is bleeding from the war  
There's a jousting and a jester and a man who owns a store  
There's a drummer and a dreamer  
And you know there may be more  
She will love them when she sees them  
They will lose her if they follow  
And she only means to please them  
And her heart is full and hollow  
Like a cactus tree  
While she's so busy being free

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

*"Be As You Are"* – Mike Posner

Virginia Woolf and poetry  
No one seemed to notice me  
Being young was getting so old  
Cheap beer and cigarettes  
Life was like a movie set  
And I seemed to be given no role

But in times of trouble  
I can turn to my mother  
And I know that she gon' understand  
So at age 18  
I cried to my mother  
And she told me, "young man"

"There are moments when you fall to the ground  
But you are stronger than you feel you are now  
You don't always have to speak so loud, no  
Just be as you are  
Life is not always a comfortable ride  
Everybody's got scars that they hide  
And everybody plays the fool sometimes, yeah  
Just be as you are"

They played me on the radio  
And everything was changing, so  
I thought I was all the way grown  
But I can still remember in that cold November  
When I realized I'm all alone

But in times of trouble  
I can turn to my mother  
And I know that she gon' understand  
So at age 22  
I cried to my mother  
And she told me, "young man"

"There are moments when you fall to the ground  
But you are stronger than you feel you are now  
You don't always have to speak so loud, no  
Just be as you are  
It doesn't matter if you become some star  
Life is better when you open your heart  
You don't always have to act so hard, no  
Just be as you are"

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

"There are moments when you fall to the ground  
But you are stronger than you feel you are now  
You don't always have to speak so loud, no  
Just be as you are

It doesn't matter if you become some star  
Life is better when you open your heart  
You don't always have to act so hard, no  
Just be as you are"

**Appendix F: Lyrics to Student Song Pseudonyms**

*“Ribbon in the Sky”* – Rod Wave

Uh, picture me rolling in my 500 Benz  
I got no love for these niggas, ain't no need to be friends  
I don't fuck with these niggas, ain't no need to pretend  
Ain't no trust in a nigga after this

You said you love me, but you're leaving me  
I guess nothing's what it seem to be  
I need some happiness again, this life done beat on me  
I caught a flight to ease the pain I switched the scenery

Through the pain know I gotta stay focused  
'Cause since a kid this all I wanted  
I heard he feed his problem to the vultures  
He couldn't say no more so he exploded  
Read the book on murder when she wrote it  
We hit the street with heat and we unload it  
ATR for life, I run with soldiers  
Heard he drive his coupe like he stole it  
Pray to God that I can see the morning  
I pray to God that I can see the morning, uh  
And now I lay me down to sleep  
Pray the Lord my soul to keep  
If I should die before I wake  
I, I pray the Lord my soul to take

Can you hear me mama?  
I need you now, answer your phone  
It's been too much shit going on, uh  
These demons want my soul  
Life too short to be living in a lie  
It's too much pain to be living just to die

Can't feel my pain 'cause I hid it deep inside  
I keep my head to the ribbon in the sky

Okay  
Ribbon in the sky (whoa, whoa)  
Life too short to be living in a lie (in a lie)

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

It's too much pain to be living just to die (whoa)  
I keep my head to the ribbon in the sky

Ribbon in the sky  
Ribbon in the sky  
Life too short to be living in a lie  
It's too much pain to be living just to die

Uh, ribbon in the sky, okay  
Ribbon in the sky  
I keep my head to the ribbon in the sky  
Ribbon in the sky  
Ribbon in the sky, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa

---

“*Nassam alayna*” – Fairuz (Arabic with English translation)

We call passion from the valley junction  
نسم علينا الهوى من مفرق الوادي

Oh passion income passion Take me on my country  
يا هوى دخل الهوى خذني على بلادي

We call passion from the valley junction  
نسم علينا الهوى من مفرق الوادي

Oh passion income passion Take me on my country  
يا هوى دخل الهوى خذني على بلادي

We call passion from the valley junction  
نسم علينا الهوى من مفرق الوادي

Oh passion, passion entered, take me to my country  
يا هوى دخل الهوى خذني على بلادي

Oh love, oh love, oh love  
يا هوى، يا هوى يا اللي طائر بالهوى

In a mantra of energy and image, take me to them, oh love  
في منتورة طاقة وصورة، خذني لعندهن يا هوى

Oh love, oh love, oh love  
يا هوى، يا هوى يا اللي طائر بالهوى

In a mantra of energy and image, take me to them, oh love



في منتورة طاقة وصورة، خذني لعندهن يا هوى

Oh, panic, my heart, grow up with alienation

آه فزعانة يا قلبي، إكبر بها الغربية

My country does not know me, take me, take me, take me to my country

ما تعرفني بلادي، خذني، خذني، خذني على بلادي

We call passion from the valley junction

نسم علينا الهوى من مفرق الوادي

Oh passion, passion entered take me on my country

يا هوى، دخل الهوى خذني على بلادي

Shaw, Shaw us, Shaw us, my love, Shaw us

شو، شو بنا شو بنا يا حبيبي شو بنا

You and we were deceived, and we separated

كنت وكنا تضلوا عنا وافترقنا شو بنا

(Show us (Show us) Oh my love (Show us

(شو بنا (شو بنا) يا حبيبي (شو بنا

You and we were deceived, and we separated

كنت وكنا تضلوا عنا وافترقنا شو بنا

Oh, and then the sun is crying, at the door and not talking

آه وبعدها الشمس بتبكي، ع الباب وما تحكي

It tells the air of my country, take me, take me, take me to my country

يحكي هوا بلادي، خذني، خذني، خذني على بلادي

We (breathe) passion from the valley junction

نسم علينا (نسم) الهوى من مفرق الوادي

Oh passion income passion Take me on my country

يا هوى دخل الهوى خذني على بلادي

Ah we name passion from the valley junction

آه نسم علينا الهوى من مفرق الوادي

Oh passion income passion Take me on my country

يا هوى دخل الهوى خذني على بلادي

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

“*Techno Cumbia*” – Selena (Spanish with English translation)

If they come to dance  
Si vienen a bailar

Well let's enjoy  
Pues vamos a gozar

if they come to sleep  
Si vienen a dormir

get out of here  
Salgan fuera de aquí

This is the rhythm of my cumbia that will move you  
Este es el ritmo de mi cumbia que te va a mover

The techno cumbia that I bring you will give you the pleasure  
La techno cumbia que te traigo te dará el placer

For you to move your body from head to toe  
Para que muevas tu cuerpo de la cabeza a los pies

And now that we're partying, everyone repeat later  
Y ahora que estamos de fiesta, repitan todos después

Hey (hey), oh-oh (oh-oh)  
Hey (hey), oh-oh (oh-oh)

Hey (hey), don't leave me alone  
Hey (hey), no me dejan sola

This blowout is for the whole ball  
Este reventón si es para toda la bola

If they come to dance, then we are going to enjoy  
Si vienen a bailar, pues vamos a gozar

If you come to sleep, get out of here  
Si vienen a dormir, salgan fuera de aquí

Because this song is not for any lazy  
Porque esta canción no es pa' ningún flojo

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

If you're still sitting, pull the chair to the side.  
Si aún estás sentado tira la silla a un lado

Dance, dance without stopping  
Baila, baila sin parar

no time to rest  
No hay tiempo para descansar

this dance is for you  
Este baile es para ti

I want to see you sweat  
Quiero verte hasta sudar

You move him here, you move him there  
Le mueves para acá, le mueves para allá

This is the new dance of techno cumbia  
Este el nuevo baile de la techno cumbia

You move him here, you move him there  
Le mueves para acá, le mueves para allá

It is the new dance of techno, techno cumbia  
Es el nuevo baile de la techno, techno cumbia

I look around  
Miro alrededor

and something I'm noticing  
Y algo estoy notando

that there are some people  
Que hay unas personas

that they are not dancing  
Que no están bailando

Dance, dance without stopping  
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## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

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Look at Juan, he can't even move  
Mira a Juan no se puede ni mover

Well, your shoes weigh you down, you have to bring a lot of mud  
Pues le pesan los zapatos, mucho lodo ha de traer

Look at Maria, she doesn't move from her chair.  
Mira a María no se mueve de su silla

It is that what always happens to you if you eat a lot of tortillas  
Es que lo que te pasa siempre si comes muchas tortillas

Look, José, he's just sitting  
Mira José pues nomás esta sentado

He had a lot of beers and now he walks sideways  
Se tomó muchas cervezas y ahora camina de lado

Look, Rosa doesn't want to get up  
Mira Rosa no se quiere levantar

Because her socks are torn, don't look at her  
Porque trae rotas las medias, no la vayan a mirar

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Move it, move it and stop  
Muévele, muévele y alto

Move it, move it and stop  
Muévele, muévele y alto

Move it, move it and stop  
Muévele, muévele y alto

Don't move him so much, stop  
No le muevas tanto, alto

All right, oh yeah  
All right, oh yeah

All right, oh yeah  
All right, oh yeah

All right, oh yeah  
All right, oh yeah

All right, oh yeah  
All right, oh yeah

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*“Wonder”* – Emeli Sandé

I can beat the night, I'm not afraid of thunder  
I am full of light, I am full of wonder

Whoa, oh I ain't falling under  
Whoa, oh I am full of wonder

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

Though our feet might ache, the world's upon our shoulders  
No way we goin' break, 'cause we are full of wonder

Whoa, oh we ain't falling under  
Whoa, oh we are full of wonder

This light is contagious, go, go tell your neighbors  
Just reach out and pass it on, ooh yeah  
This light is contagious, go, go tell your neighbors  
Just reach out and pass it on, ooh yeah  
This light is contagious, go, go tell your neighbors  
Just reach out and pass it on, ooh yeah  
This light is contagious, go, go tell your neighbors  
Just reach out and pass it on, yeah

Whoa, oh we ain't falling under  
Whoa, oh we are full of wonder

When everything feels wrong, and darkness falls upon ya  
Just try sing along, this is a message from Cabana  
If your heart turns blue, I want you to remember  
This song is for you, and you are full of wonder

Whoa, oh we ain't falling under  
Whoa, oh we are full of wonder

Whoa, oh we ain't falling under  
Whoa, oh we are full of wonder

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“444” — Gayathri Krishnan

I wanna be something great for myself and my family  
Came to the states had a dream  
I'm a visionary, we'll be legendary  
(I'm a visionary, we'll be legendary)  
Worked hard for days had no doubt  
Now we in a house, and we're safe and loved

I'll make you proud, make you proud  
(You're my heart and soul)  
Without a doubt, thout a doubt  
I'll make you proud, make you proud  
Without a doubt, thought a doubt

## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

I'm manifesting the life of my dreams I do believe  
I'm visualizing till my souls at ease, till my spirit leaves  
Mmm  
Mmm

I take the time to take a breath I'm in the present moment spirits guiding me  
I close my eyes to visualize, attract my life, control my mind be consciously  
My soul is guiding me aligning me providing me divine energy  
The universe is on my side I'm manifesting what is always meant to be  
I listened to my inner guidance always was so clear this the path I choose  
I put my fears aside relaxed and let my spirit lead me to my own truth  
I let the universe just take the lead I'm so relieved and so assured  
There's no one in this world that can be you so you do you the best till you leave  
Oh  
Oh

To me creativity is limitless, fearless, boundless  
I create with love, intention, and gratitude  
And most importantly I Create to Express

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*"By Your Side"* – Sade

You think I'd leave your side baby  
You know me better than that  
You think I'd leave you down when you're down on your knees  
I wouldn't do that  
I'll tell you you're right when you want  
And if only you could see into me

Oh when you're cold  
I'll be there  
Hold you tight to me

When you're on the outside baby and you can't get in  
I will show you you're so much better than you know  
When you're lost and you're alone and you cant get back again  
I will find you darling and I will bring you home

And if you want to cry  
I am here to dry your eyes  
And in no time  
You'll be fine

You think I'd leave your side baby  
You know me better than that



## BIPOC BELONGINGNESS

You think I'd leave you down when you're down on your knees  
I wouldn't do that  
I'll tell you you're right when you want  
And if only you could see into me

Oh when you're cold  
I'll be there  
Hold you tight to me  
Oh when you're low  
I'll be there  
By your side baby

Oh when you're cold  
I'll be there  
Hold you tight to me  
Oh when you're low  
I'll be there  
By your side baby