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# Thriving on a Faith-Based Campus: An Exploratory Study on Sense of Belonging, Spirituality, and the Student Experience for Students of Color

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## ABSTRACT

While enrollment for students of color has increased by nearly 15% over the past 20 years, universities have struggled to retain and graduate students of color in comparison to their White peers, including Christian universities. Looking to foster success for all students, higher education has sought to better understand the factors that impact student retention and graduation, particularly for students of color. *Thriving* has been shown as an effective metric for understanding the student experience through a more holistic framework as it pertains to the student success. The purpose of this study is to explore the concept of thriving as success and its impact on students of color in order to identify key factors in the student's experiences, analyzing how they may differ across racial identifiers as they pertain to thriving. This exploratory study utilizes a cross-sectional survey of a convenience sample of 1111 undergraduate students at a private faith-based institution in Texas. The researcher discovered there were higher means of reported success for White students in comparison to students of color, and that the significant factors that contributed to student success are being White, female, seeking a graduate degree, and spirituality. For students of color these factors were spirituality and classification. Though limitations apply, this study reveals crucial insight on the student experience for students of color. It is recommended that universities within higher education seek to promote and create more culturally engaging and responsive learning environments for their students of color to succeed.

Thriving on a Faith-Based Campus: An Exploratory Study on Sense of Belonging,  
Spirituality, and the Student Experience for Students of Color

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Social Work

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

By

Hannah Felice

August 2020

This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Hannah Felice has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Science in Social Work

*Donnie Snider*

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Assistant Provost for Graduate Programs

Date

July 30, 2020

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Thesis Committee



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Liz Brown (Jul 30, 2020 17:25 CDT)

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Elizabeth Brown

To the beloved students whose stories fill in all of the holes of this paper making it real,  
whole and true- those heard, and unheard; you are worthy, you are valued, you are loved.

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Looking over this paper, I am filled with gratitude to those who will read its contents in the hopes of furthering the understanding and works of social justice and racial reconciliation within higher education. In the midst of one of the largest Civil Rights movements in history, the purpose of this work could not be more timely.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The retention and four-year graduation rates of college students across America remain a focal point in higher education journals and among education researchers. Higher education administrators in academic and student affairs increasingly recognize the impact poor retention and four-year graduation rates have on their universities' bottom lines, recruitment and marketing strategies, and ultimately whether some students will choose their college or university for study. Researchers realize seeking to untangle and identify the factors that influence student retention and graduation rates realize is not an easy endeavor. Many biopsychosocial factors play a part in shaping students' experiences in college, including resources allocation and availability, familial support, sense of belonging, and a student's race/ethnicity (Kuh et al., 2006). Individually and collectively, each of these factors bring with them varying degrees of influence in determining a student's overall college experience and more importantly whether they graduate.

These and other factors continue to be considered by higher education researchers in order to shed light on and shape institutions' policies, practices, and programming with the goal of admitting, retaining, and graduating students. However, while all students have factors that influence their college-going experiences, Black and Latinx college students' retention and four-year graduation rates are markedly different compared to their White college classmates and have become particular target groups of interest for

research in recent years. The increase in admittance of Black and Latinx students into colleges and universities is desirable and seen as fertile ground for institutional growth and solvency.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the past 20 years, enrollment of students of color for undergraduate degrees has increased by nearly 15%, with graduate students of color making up a third of graduate enrollment (Brown, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 1996 & 2016). As campuses become more racially and ethnically diverse, questions arise as to how institutions have adapted and changed to support the diverse needs of students of color. Even with an increase in access to higher education for diverse students, undergraduate programs have had challenges retaining and graduating students of color, in particular Black and Latinx students, compared to White students (Brown, 2015; Shapiro et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 1996 & 2016). When assessing six-year graduation rates at four-year college institutions, African American/Black (45.9%) and Hispanic (55%) students were least likely to graduate compared to White students (67%). On average, there is a 16.5% gap in four-year graduation rates for African American/Black and Latinx students attending public and private institutions. When considering private Christian colleges, the gap in graduation rates among this student population is more than 15% (Ross et al., 2012).

The gap in four-year graduation rates is concerning if not alarming to many educators and college and university administrators as well as social justice advocates concerned with racial disparities in higher education. Careful, critical attention must be given to assessing and understanding the dynamic interplay between factors influencing

retention and graduation rates for students, and particularly historically underrepresented African American/Black and Latinx students. In order to do this, research must go beyond traditional individualistic or cultural of poverty models and thinking that focus on deficits. For social work, ecological systems theory is a grounding model for understanding human behavior and social phenomenon. Unlike traditional research approaches to understanding racial differences in academic outcomes, more attention should be given to institutional culture, policies, and practices. In their research, Derrico et al. (2015) identify a lack of attention to learning outcomes, retention, student engagement and supportive programming as areas for students of color during their enrollment in college. Contemporary research investigating the gap in retention and graduation rates include social and behavioral constructs and increasingly turn to systemic institutional practices, supportive resources, and student-faculty engagement opportunities for explanation. This includes broadening conceptual frameworks, the nature, scope and focus of retention and graduation research, and the particular research questions being asked.

Concepts such as sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2017) , spirituality (Astin et al., 2011; Derrico et al., 2015; McIntosh, 2012), persistence (Ross et al., 2012; Schreiner, 2010c; Shapiro et al., 2017) and faculty/staff relationships (Kuh & Hu, 2001; McClain & Perry, 2017; Schreiner, 2012) are seen as key elements in recent and emerging research on the experiences, retention, and graduation of African American/Black and Latinx students attending colleges and universities across America, and for the purposes of this research those attending faith-based college institutions. While these factors are imperative to

understanding the African American/Black and Latinx student experience, unaccompanied by equal consideration to institutional responsibility, supportive resources, and targeted programs, they may well fall short in providing a comprehensive explanation. One such concept for consideration is *thriving*. In 2014, Schreiner's research study identified four primary pathways to thriving that are experienced differently by African American/Black and Latinx students when compared to their White counterparts: (a) campus involvement, (b) student faculty interaction, (c) spirituality and (d) sense of community on campus. This conceptual framework has been used to evaluate five domains of thriving: Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Social Connectedness, Diverse Citizenship, and Positive Perspective (Schreiner et al., 2013).

### **The Present Study**

As previous studies have looked to investigate thriving among diverse students on college campuses, this study aims to explore the differences in the thriving between students of color and White students at a private, faith-based university in Texas. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What are the determining factors that play a part in student thriving on campus?
- What role does spirituality play as it pertains to thriving for students on campus?
- What is the difference in thriving between students of color and White students on campus?

### **Significance of Study**

This completed study seeks to inform practices within higher educational institutions contributing to creation of culturally engaging learning environments that retaining and educate students of color in a faith-based, private institution. As social workers in human services agencies, the National Association of Social Workers articulates within the context of the professional mission the ethical responsibility to clients. In higher education, students are the client and institutions have a responsibility to create supportive programming, provide supportive resources, and implement institutional policies that allow all their students a more equitable opportunity to thrive on their campuses, contributing to creation of culturally engaging learning environments that retain and educate students of color in a faith-based, private institution.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The persistent gap in retention and four-year graduation rates between racial/ethnic groups attending colleges and universities in America is concerning. More has to be done to address the disproportionate reality in American higher education if campuses are to be more welcoming, inclusive, and supportive of students from traditionally underrepresented groups on college and university campuses.

#### **Literature Review Search Strategy**

The following literature will review past and present research on the student experience for students of color as it pertains to thriving, sense of belonging, and spirituality. Peer-reviewed journals and articles were collected through databases and synthesized for review. The databases included: the ACU Brown Library, EBSCO, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. The following search terms were utilized and combined: “students of color” and “student experience,” “students of color” and “sense of belonging,” “thriving,” “students of color” and “retention” or “graduation rates,” “higher education” and diversity,” “spirituality” and “students of color,” “achievement gap” and “students of color,” “success” and “students of color,” “undergraduate students of color” and “thriving.” Relevant literature was analyzed and used in continuance with the literature review.

## **Defining Student Success**

Through an institutional lens, predictors for success have predominately been viewed by examining high school GPA's and standardized testing scores (SAT and ACT). More traditional definitions of student success have looked towards a student's grade point average, their completion of Advanced Placement classes or dual credit classes, and their standardized testing scores. This fails to acknowledge opportunity gaps for many students, in particular students of color, and therefore places the pressure and blame of the achievement gap for success on the student, rather than areas within an institution's capacity of change (Banks & Dohy, 2019). By choosing to expand the scope of success, concepts emerge from literature that help see student success in a more holistic light, allowing for their student experiences and success to be expanded into not only individual motivation, but identifying areas where institution-wide interventions and resources can be impactful for student thriving (Schreiner, 2016).

## **Contemporary Definitions and Metrics for Student Success**

Assessing students' ability and aptitude are difficult. Using one or two individual characteristics to measure academic ability or academic potential is problematic. While research has shown racial bias among standardized tests, these tests are often the single most influential factor in determining whether a student is admitted into college. In addition, many of the same standards for measuring a student's success in high school and admittance into college are also used in determining whether a student will be placed on academic probation or dismissed from school entirely.

For many first-generation and traditionally underrepresented students, the system seems in opposition to their presence on campus. Success for students of color, for

example, has been measured throughout the literature by looking at several outcomes, including persistence or intention to graduate (Ross et al., 2012), sense of belonging or sense of community (Hussain & Jones, 2019; Schreiner, 2017) positive and meaningful relationships with faculty and staff (McClain & Perry, 2017; Vetter, Schreiner & Jaworski, 2019), and institutional integrity pertaining to diversity and culture (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Hussain & Jones, 2019; Smith, 2015;). These factors play a role in students' overall experience and can often be determinants in whether or not students are retained. An additional factor for consideration within the faith-based institution is the influence of spirituality on a student's sense of belonging and success (Derrico, Tharp & Schreiner, 2015; McIntosh, 2012; Rockenback & Mayhew, 2014; Schreiner, 2014).

**Persistence to graduate.** For every student attending college, the ultimate measure of success is graduation day. The graduation rates at four-year institutions reveal the reality that universities are failing to retain their students of color. For national six-year graduation completion rates, African American students were the least likely to graduate at 45.9%, with Latino students following closely at 55% (Shapiro et al., 2017). This is also an issue for students of color who are transferring from two-year community colleges, as one out of four Asian students and one out of five White students graduated within six-years, and merely one out of ten Black students and one out of thirteen Latino students graduated within that period following transferring (Shapiro et al., 2017).

Persistence to graduate is studied in educational research today to discover a student's ability stay enrolled until the completion of their degree in higher education (Banks & Dohy, 2019), and can be perceived as a process of determining whether or not an institution is a good fit for a student (Burrus et al., 2013). Tinto's (1975, 1993) model for

predicting students' persistence was utilized as a foundational model after which to base other theories or models. However, Tinto's model focused primarily on the characteristics of individual students, their commitment to graduate at their particular university, an understanding and commitment to the academic standards and expectations of their university, as well as integration into the university's social community. This failed to recognize the importance of the student's experience and take into account the impact and responsibility an institution has on creating an experience that students are satisfied with (Braxton, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004). Astin (1977) brought simplistic realism to the topic of student satisfaction when he asserted that it is the prime factor in educational outcomes. Satisfaction has been tied to increased institutional commitment (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004), student academic achievement (Pike, 1993), and ultimately, persistence (Fischer, 2007).

Utilizing relevant literature, Bean (2005) revealed nine themes that posed as factors for persistence research. These include institutional environment factors (structural features or programming), student demographic information, commitment, academic preparation and success factors, psychosocial factors and study skills (achievement, goals, self-efficacy, etc.), integration and fit (socially and academically), financial standing, and environmental pull factors (employment and family) (Bean, 2005; Burrus et al., 2013). Alongside these, sense of belonging (Museus et al., 2017; Schreiner, 2010c), racial climate (Hurtado et al., 1999), spirituality and faith (Derrico et al., 2015), and positive interactions with faculty and staff (Jackson et al., 2003) are factors contributing to persisting to graduate for students of color.

**Thriving as a metric for student success.** *Thriving* is a concept created by Laurie Schreiner in 2010, which seeks to see student success through a more diverse and complete lens (Schreiner, 2010a). However, it differs from other historically researched concepts pertaining to student success, as it primarily focuses on the institutions' responsibility for the experiences and environment that perpetuate the success of its students (Schreiner, 2017). This ideology studies the frameworks within a student's environment, including the faculty and staff that are responsible for teaching and leading them, and focuses on aspects of students and the institution that can be developed. Schreiner (2014) explains thriving as "optimal functioning" in five key areas: Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Social Connectedness, Diverse Citizenship, and Positive Perspective. These areas, or domains, are integral pieces of factors that drive the student experience as well as the institutional environment, and ultimately their academic success and persistence to graduate.

### **Other Influential Factors for Consideration**

While particular metrics for student success highlight areas to which higher education look, many influential factors contribute to the student experience and play a role in student success. These factors will be examined below.

**Sense of belonging.** Hurtado and Carter (1997) define *sense of belonging* as something that "captures the individual's view of whether he or she feels included in the college community" (p. 327). It speaks to their psychological connection to their community. Without it, there is potential for negative impact on the mental health and behaviors of students (Hausmann et al., 2007). However, the responsibility for sense of belonging reaches far beyond the student's viewpoint as the relationship between student

and institution plays a role in creating the space and environment that creates an influence of connectedness. Museus and Saelus (2017) discuss the importance of institutions shaping the learning environment to be culturally relevant and responsive, a factor that is key for students of color. Looking at how culturally engaging campus environments influence students' sense of belonging, Museus and Saelus (2017) found that holistic support and cultural familiarity yielded a strong relationship with sense of belonging for both students of color as well as White students. However, the perception of belonging varied, as White students reported having "more positive experiences with the environment and belonging in college" (Museus et al., 2017, p. 479). In fact, Johnson et al. (2007) reports that first-year students of color report lower on sense of belonging in comparison to their White peers.

Hausmann et al. (2007) revealed that among African American and White first-year students, that greater peer and parental support as well as interactions with faculty and peer group interaction led to a greater sense of belonging across the board. Academic integration or student background variables did not factor in, leading to the reality that the university settings and social bonds are key to shaping the belongingness of students in their early days of arrival on campus. These social bonds help to form sense of belonging for students of color and have a direct impact on institutional commitment and students' intentions to persist (Hausmann et al., 2007).

Contributing to a student of color's sense of belonging, and ultimately persistence to graduate, is their sense of community on campus (Schreiner, 2010c), sometimes the relationships they attain with their faculty and staff (Johnson et al., 2007; Kuh & Hu, 2001), supportive and inclusive spaces (Museus & Maramba, 2011) and institutional

engagement surrounding diversity and culture (Museus et al., 2017). A factor of importance is the student's feelings of connectivity to communities that share their cultural and ethnic heritage. In a study done to investigate the relationship between culture and belonging as it relates to Filipino students at a predominately White school, Museus and Maramba (2011) discovered that students' feeling a sense of connectivity with their cultural heritage was positively associated with sense of belonging. They also discussed the importance of the campus' culture having forms of resemblance to their home, which was positively associated to belonging (Museus & Maramba, 2011). For Latinx students the importance of campus climate has a direct impact on their sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nuñez, 2009). In both studies, if the campus climate was perceived as hostile, there was a negative influence on sense of belonging. Similarly, Chavous (2005) reports that African Americans' sense of campus community was positively correlated with positive racial climates on campus, displayed by how they perceived institutional support, fair treatment, and group interdependence. This informs institutions about the significance of creating environments that foster the diverse cultural needs of their students, which in return will promote a greater sense of belonging and ultimately their persistence to graduate.

**Cultivating relationships with faculty/staff.** A large portion of the student experience in college revolves around the interactions and relationships cultivated with the faculty and staff employed. While recurrent exchanges with faculty have been known to be a strong predictor of student learning for all students (Kuh & Hu, 2001) and have been identified by Schreiner (2012) as a pathway to thriving, the impact of those

exchanges can vary at times depending on race and ethnicity (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004).

Frequent interaction with faculty has had differing impacts on particular diverse student groups. Asian American undergraduates report the least amount of interaction with faculty and staff (Kim et al., 2009), and one study found that when there is contact, an academic relationship can have positive outcomes on their college GPA, whereas personal contact does not (Kim, 2010). African American students have reported to have more negative relationships with faculty and staff and often experience a negative campus environment in comparison to Latino/a or Asian Pacific students, though each have reported having more negative experiences in both categories in comparison to Whites (Anscis et al., 2000). However, African American students have been found to interact with faculty more than Whites, Asian Americans, Latinos and Native Americans (Kuh & Hu, 2001). Native American students report having both positive and negative interactions with their faculty, and those that were positive were found to be a factor of their persistence (Jackson et al., 2003). It is also important to note that having higher educational aspirations has a positive effect on their academic and personal relationships with their faculty and staff, with no exceptions of race or ethnicity; the highest positive effect is on African American students (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). According to Lundberg & Schreiner (2004), it is the quality of relationships with faculty and staff that act as a key predictor for learning outcomes for all students of color across differing racial or ethnic groups, particularly for Asian/Pacific American, Mexican American and Native American students.



The quality of relationships with faculty at institutions can have a benefit on students of color (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Ash and Schreiner (2016) view these beneficial interactions as relationships with faculty that result in mentorship, research, and when faculty focus on growth mindset while giving feedback. In fact, feedback from faculty and staff that encouraged students to work harder in their courses was shown to be a predictor of student learning outcomes, particularly for African American students (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Derrico et al. (2016) found that students who thrived overall in the academic setting when they “interacted with faculty personally, and when they knew faculty believed in them and desired for them to grow” (p. 310). The impact of faculty and staff interaction also reaches into the implementation of their curriculum within the classroom. Students of color had better learning outcomes and thrived when the pedagogies and curriculum within the class was taught from a background of multiple perspectives with diverse viewpoints, encouraging the input from students of color (Lundberg, 2010; Schreiner, 2016). Thus, while faculty and staff interactions as well as relationships play a key role in sense of belonging and learning outcomes, when it comes to students of color, the quality and significance of those relationships determine the variance of impact.

**Spirituality.** While the concept of religion and its impact on students have been studied broadly within higher education, Astin et al. (2011) indicated the need for a systematic study on the spiritual development of students. Astin et al. (2011) found that students are growing ever interested in spirituality and even religion as they have grown interested in ways to develop and mature inwardly. Their longitudinal study revealed that spiritual growth leads to growth in other aspects of their student experiences, including

academic gains, psychological well-being, leadership development, and overall satisfaction (Astin et al., 2011). Derrico et al. (2015) discovered through a mixed methods study looking at thriving students on faith-based campuses that students utilized faith as a tool for overcoming adversity and persistence to face challenges, leading to an internal sense of confidence and ability to reframe negative events.

Spirituality becomes a factor of interest when looking at students of color, as it is a predictor that is twice as impactful for the concept of thriving within students of color (Schreiner, 2014). McIntosh (2012) found in a study of over 7,900 students and 42 differing universities that spirituality was the largest contributor to psychological sense of community for students of color and offered a safe place for coping when things got difficult. Rockenbach and Mayhew (2014) found that students who had higher levels of satisfaction with their campus's spiritual climate were religious minority students and non-religious students in contrast to religious majority students. However, these students of color had a negative perception overall of the spiritual climate in comparison to their White peers (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2014). They found that "structural worldview diversity, space for support and spiritual expression" as well as "proactive experiences with worldview diversity" were positively correlated with a satisfaction in their campus' spiritual climate (p. 56).

As spirituality can play such an important role in the student experience for undergraduate students, literature reveals that it is a vital piece of sense of community for students of color (McIntosh, 2012). It is important to note that while spirituality has an impact on students of color, their expressions or engagement in spirituality vary on their own specific ethnic and cultural background and experiences. While students of color's

perception of the spiritual climate on campus is negative, African American students in particular were found to also be dissatisfied with the social environment (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). If minority students are experiencing both spiritual and social dissatisfaction on their campuses, it is very possible that this could negatively impact their sense of community on campus and therefore their student experience overall, leading to feelings of isolation or exclusion.

**Institutional responsibility for cultural engagement.** While institutional engagement is widely studied and surveyed in common practice, particularly through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), McIntosh (2012) brought to light the lack of evidence in research to suggest that engagement is improving the GPAs, graduation rates, or even psychological well-being for students of color. However, the idea of institutional engagement has merit. Believing in an institution's power and ability to shape learning environments in ways that engage its students seems fundamental. Museus' (2014) model for culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) include nine elements of an institutional environment, which fall into two subcategories: cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness.

Cultural relevance holds importance for students of color as it pertains to the relevancy and connection they experience with their own cultural backgrounds and identities in their learning environment (Museus, 2014). This speaks to the importance of opportunities provided or fostered learning environments on campus for the students to engage in. Cultural responsiveness is defined by the institution's ability to provide holistic support and respond to the needs of its culturally diverse students. Museus et al. (2017) utilize the CECE model in a study to observe the relationship between culturally

engaging campus environments and sense of belonging. While sense of belonging and its impact on students of color has been previously studied, cultural engagement is not as widely studied as it pertains to creating sense of belonging or thriving. This study revealed that culturally engaging campus environments are indeed a predictor for sense of belonging for all students, while also bringing to the light the importance of institutions responsibility in providing holistic support, specifically for diverse students.

### **Considering Institutional Barriers to Success**

As persistence and graduation rates are reportedly lower (Brown, 2015; Museus et al., 2017; Shapiro et al., 2017), there has been more interest in research to expand upon what challenges students of color are facing today in higher education. The primary concerns have been focused on students' academic gaps in success and achievement (Welner & Carter, 2013) alongside of various institutional barriers such as campus racial climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado et al., 1990; Lowe et al., 2013; McClain & Perry, 2017), lack of diverse faculty and staff (Doan, 2011; Kena et al., 2015; Smith, 2015), and institutional integrity (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Braxton et al., 2004; Schreiner, 2014). These systemic issues create a complex and challenging learning environment for students of color that disproportionally hinder their success and experience. Each of these factors contribute to students of color's experience at their institution, and ultimately the declining retention rates for students of color at predominately White institutions (PWIs).

### **History of Racism and Exclusion on College Campuses**

There is long-standing American and world history in which education systems excluded minority students. Predominately White institutions historically possess more

experiences of excluding minorities than they do of inclusion (Milem et al., 2005). This history plays a role in the very core of the start of higher education institutions and is a piece of what Smith (2015) describes as an institutional identity. The history of exclusion within institutions continues to influence current practices and racial climate, often only felt by students of color, but impacting all students. Lowe et al. (2013) conducted a study revealing that in comparison to White students, students of color reported having negative campus racial climate by 69%. Students of color who perceive a negative campus racial climate also struggle to find sense of belonging on campus (Chavous, 2005; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2017).

### **Representation of Diversity on Campus**

Hurtado and Carter (2009) explain that a component of assessing a campus environment for its racial climate is looking at its compositional diversity, or the representation of various race and ethnicities on campus. This includes student body composition as well as faculty/staff. In fact, a lack of diverse faculty and staff composition negatively impacts the retention of students of color (Guiffrida, 2005). Smith (2015) states that diversity overall is “a powerful facilitator of institutional mission and societal purpose” (p. 3), bringing attention to the key fact that campus diversity allows for students to flourish in a more holistic way, whether it be social and cognitive development or long-term worldly success (Hurtado, 2006).

### **Lack of Diverse Faculty and Staff**

The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) provides pertinent data regarding the faculty composition as it pertains to race and gender within higher education. White faculty make up 41% (male) and 35% (female) of all institutions in

higher education, while Black faculty consists of 3% male and 3% female and 3% Hispanic males and 3% Hispanic females. Asian/Pacific Islander males were 6%, while their female counterparts consisted of 5% of faculty. Those who identified as American Indian/ Alaska Native made up less than 1% of faculty (Kena et al., 2015). With an overwhelming majority of White faculty employed within higher education institutions, there is an implicit disconnect with the diverse student body enrolled, as faculty and staff of color promote a more “trusting and comfortable environment for students of color” (Doan, 2011, p. 36). Smith (2015) argues that it is the very lack of diversity among faculty and staff within higher education that can rob students of not only mentorship, or one-to-one relations, but the very significance of their presence that “influences perceptions of possibility and openness” (p.149).

### **Campus Racial Climate**

A campus’s racial climate is defined by “its current beliefs, judgements, and outlooks within an academic society about race, ethnicity and diversity” (Hurtado et al., 1999 as cited in McClain & Perry, 2017, p. 2). Racial climates have the opportunity to contribute to the retention of students of color (McClain & Perry, 2017), or harm them and their academic success (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Hurtado et al. (1990) expounded upon four factors of a campus’s racial climate: the institution’s history of racism, the representation of various ethnic and racial groups on campus, and what McClain and Perry (2017) describe as the psychological and behavioral climate on campus.

**Psychological climate.** The psychological and behavioral climates of an institution are components of a campus’s racial climate (Hurtado et al., 1990). The psychological climate of an institution is the beliefs that individuals hold as it pertains to

the institution's representation and responses to diversity (McClain & Perry, 2017), including perceived institutional integrity.

**Behavioral climate.** Behavioral climate on campuses refer to the interactions and relationships between varying racial groups on campus, including the quality of those interactions (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Hurtado et al., 1990). Peer relationships play a vital role in the student experience, particularly their influence on sense of belonging (Lowe et al., 2013) and learning outcomes (Chang, 1999). Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2003) also report that students of color tend to experience negative interracial interactions with their peers on campus. Students of color are also high at risk for experiencing marginalization (Jones & Reddick, 2017) and microaggressions, or “subtle mechanics of racism” (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Harwood et al., 2012, p. 3), on campus.

### **Institutional Integrity**

Institutional integrity is what Braxton et al. (2004) describe as “when the actions of a college university's administrators, faculty, and staff are compatible with the mission and goals proclaimed by a given college or university” (p. 24). Students' perceptions of institutional integrity have an influence on their persistence (Braxton et al., 2004).

Schreiner (2014) argues that when students of color are sold on a picture or promise of inclusivity and diversity for admission and then reality is different when they arrive to campus, their ability to experience a sense of community diminishes. This incongruency of promises and programming can compromise the student experience for students of color:

For students of color, perceiving a diverse student body enjoying the institution on an admissions brochure then encountering negative racial experiences, little

structural racial diversity, and discriminatory actions on a predominantly White campus upon arrival may well feel like a deception that compromises the integrity of the institution. (Lowe et al., 2013 as cited in Ash & Schreiner, 2016, p.49)

Overall, students who do not have a positive perception of their institution's integrity risk being compromised in their institutional fit and ultimately their desire to graduate (Ash & Schreiner, 2016).

### **Conclusion of Literature Review**

While higher educational institutions have focused on understanding the challenges that students of color face in college, more research is needed on the supportive programs, institutional resources practices, and policies most influence retaining and graduating these traditionally underrepresented students. Faith-based institutions are not exempt from understanding this challenge. In fulfilling their higher spiritual calling, they may be required to lead the in this charge to correct generations of racialized wrongdoing and exclusion, while simultaneously appropriately addressing barriers to success and thriving for African American/Black and Latinx students on campus. The environment created by the institution promotes an experience that contributes to the retention of its students. The concept of thriving looks into domains of the student experience and helps to determine pathways in which institutions can adopt a more holistic approach to achieving educational outcomes that cultivate a learning environment that can be tailored for all students.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore the concept of thriving as success and its impact on students of color at a faith-based undergraduate institution. This study was designed to identify key factors in the student's experiences and how they may differ across racial identifiers as they pertain to thriving.

#### **Research Design**

This exploratory descriptive study used a cross-sectional survey study. According to Lavrakas (2008), a cross-sectional survey design can be used when researchers aim to look at the prevalence of a particular factor at a given time and can be useful in a descriptive study as it relates to a causal relationship. However, due to the nature of this research design, there was potential for antecedent-consequent bias, meaning there can be confusion around whether the results are a consequence of the problem at hand, or if they are just collected in tandem as a result of the study, leading to difficulties in interpreting cause and effect (Setia, 2016).

#### **Sample**

The study population for this research is students of color within faith-based higher education. This study utilized convenience sampling, which Frey (2018) defines as follows:

Convenience sampling (also known as availability sampling) is a method where the selection of participants (or other units of analysis) is based on their ready availability. This availability is usually in terms of geographical proximity (e.g., students in the researcher's own college or in neighboring colleges) but may involve other types of accessibility, such as known contacts. (p. 2)

The convenience sample is undergraduate students on a faith-based university located in Texas. Though convenience sampling is often times practical, it has limitations. These limitations are explained by Frey (2018) as sampling error and undercoverage, meaning the sample is not representative of all students of color in faith-based higher ed, and that the sampling method provides data that is possibly different from population of interest-students of color, due to systematic characteristics. The sample is convenient as it looks primarily at students of color in the Spring semester of 2018 at one faith-based university within Texas.

### **Data Collection**

This study utilizes secondary *Thriving Quotient* data that was collected by a faith-based university located in Texas. The data set was collected by the university via a survey originally to explore concepts of student sense of belonging, thriving, and persistence for students of color. The present study uses this data set for exploring the differing experiences of both students of color and White students. The online survey instrument run by the research team at the Thriving Project collected the data and deidentified it to an Excel document. This document was then sent to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at the faith-based university, which was then formatted into SPSS prior to being emailed to the researcher.

*Thriving Quotient* data was surveyed online through the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs for Spring semester of 2018. The survey was sent out on April 11, 2018, and closed on April 25, 2018. It was sent to all undergraduate students who were enrolled for the Spring semester in the institution, and a total of 1380 students responded out of 3358 who were enrolled, resulting in a response rate of approximately 41%. Participants were incentivized with chapel credits. It was gathered through a Qualtrics survey system account created by *Thriving Quotient* at Azusa Pacific University (APU) and sent out to ACU students via a link from the Office of Institutional Research. Consent was obtained in the link, prior to the survey. Following collection, APU then sent a data set to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs.

### **Instrument**

The following sections outline the varying subsections within the *Thriving Quotient* instrument, as well as their metrics on how they are measuring success. These are as follows: Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Positive Perspective, Social Connectedness, Diverse Citizenship and Spirituality. Furthermore, the specific sociodemographic information that was gathered within the data set is discussed below.

### **Student Success**

Student success was measured using the *Thriving Quotient*, created originally by Laurie Schreiner and her team of researchers at Azusa Pacific University (2009). The instrument looks holistically at how to measure the student experience for college students. Scales were created to measure within five differing domains: Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Positive Perspective, Social Connectedness, and Diverse Citizenship. Schreiner (2014) has found that students of color experienced

pathways to thriving differently than their White counterparts, primarily through their experiences with: campus involvement, student faculty interaction, spirituality, and sense of community of campus (or sense of belonging). Thriving has been seen as a valid concept, as well as a reliable tool for when measuring with the *Thriving Quotient*, to measure and assess student success (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Schreiner et al., 2009).

The scale has met all national standards for reliability at  $\alpha = .89$  (“The Thriving Quotient”, n.d) and utilizes a Likert scale for its items (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = agree, 6 = strongly agree).

**Engaged learning.** Schreiner and Louis (2006) describe the concept of Engaged Learning as “a positive energy invested in one’s own learning, evidenced by meaningful processing, attention to what is happening the moment, and involvement in learning activities” (p. 6). This looks at both behavioral and psychological factors as pieces of student engagement, and it not only acts as an identifier as to how students engage in the classroom and therefore feel about their learning process, but it also is a predictor for how they view their student experience as a whole. (Schreiner, 2010a). Engaged Learning has a tested internal validity of .85 (“The Thriving Quotient”, n.d).

**Academic determination.** Academic Determination is the measure in which academic thriving is looked at through the lens of the Thriving Quotient. It seeks to understand the self-regulation of students’ learning behaviors and contains four main aspects: investment of effort, self-regulation, environmental mastery and goal-directed thinking (Schreiner, 2010a). It has a tested internal validity of .83 (“The Thriving Quotient,” n.d).

**Positive perspective.** Positive Perspective is the ability that students have to view their experiences through optimism, meaning that despite challenges or hardships they obtain the ability to reframe these experiences positively and confidently, and ultimately persist. This directly correlates with seeing their student experience in a positive light (Schreiner, 2013). This factor has a tested internal validity of .83 (“The Thriving Quotient,” n.d).

**Social connectedness.** The concept of Social Connectedness can take on varying forms within the student experience. It represents the healthy relationships a student has with their community, including friends, faculty and staff, and how they see themselves as a part of the larger college campus community as well (Schreiner, 2010b). This includes the perception the student has of how they contribute to the larger whole of the campus community, which in return, gives them a sense of belonging and purpose. This purpose is how they also contribute to the community whilst feeling accepted and value (Schreiner, 2010b). Social Connectedness has a tested internal validity of .81 (“The Thriving Quotient”, n.d).

**Diverse citizenship.** Diverse Citizenship is defined by Schreiner (2013) as “the desire to make a contribution to one’s community as well as the confidence to do so” (p. 43). This also encompasses the student’s openness to the differences in others around them as well as an openness for diverse community overall (“The Thriving Quotient”, n.d). Diverse Citizenship has shown to be a predictor for intent to graduate and overall satisfaction with their student experience and has been positively correlated with higher critical thinking (Schreiner, 2010b). Looking to make a difference, students with Diverse Citizenship participate with students, even those who may differ from them, in order to

have a positive impact on their community and the world as a whole (Schreiner, 2010b). Diverse Citizenship has a tested internal validity of .80 (“The Thriving Quotient,” n.d).

### **Spirituality**

Spirituality is an additional scale that is added and included on the online *Thriving Quotient* survey and is seen as a scale that contributes to student success (“The Thriving Quotient,” n.d). Spirituality has been identified as one of the pathways that is indicated to have a strong influence on student thriving, as well as a predictor of thriving for all students (McIntosh 2012; Schreiner, 2012). Astin et al. (2010) distinguished spirituality as “our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here. . . our connectedness to one another and to the world around us” (p.4).

The scale of spirituality asked the students to rate the statements on a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = agree, 6 = strongly agree). Higher scoring indicates the reported significance of spirituality as it pertains to the subject’s life. The three statements were “My spiritual or religious beliefs provide me with a sense of strength when life is difficult,” “My spiritual or religious beliefs give meaning and purpose to my life,” and “My spiritual or religious beliefs are the foundation of my approach to life.”

### **Sociodemographic Information**

Students were asked to report on the following sociodemographic information: age, classification (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), gender, sexual orientation, race, religious affiliations and preferences, financial related information, income, housing information, work, chosen major and aspirations, and grade point average (both high school and collegiate reported).

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research using secondary data analysis was reviewed and approved by Abilene Christian University's Institutional Review Board and has been identified as non-human research (see Appendix A for approval letter). Privacy of data and confidentiality have been maintained and secured prior to data collection through informed consent. While all data sets have been deidentified, the researcher complies with ethical standards for the storing of data. All data was accessed exclusively by the principal investigator and thesis chair. Following the completion of the study, the data was removed permanently from its secured location.

### **Analysis Plan**

The secondary data was analyzed using the SPSS, a statistical software. Descriptive statistics were utilized for all demographic characteristics of the sample and the distribution of the major variables for the whole group and the two groups (students of color and White students). Additionally, independent-samples *t*-tests were run to compare the mean scores of continuous variables between the two groups. Regression analyses were conducted to examine which factors have statistically significant association with Student Success.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### **Description of Sample**

Data were collected from April 11, 2018, to April 25, 2018. From the 1380 cases that were reviewed from the sample, 269 cases were removed due to missing pertinent demographic data, leaving the working sample of the study at 1111 cases.

#### **Sociodemographic Information**

As seen in Table 1, study participants range in age from 17 and younger to over 50, with the largest response rates from the age ranges of 18-20 ( $n=768$ , 69.1%) and 21-23 ( $n=329$ , 29.6%). The response from each classification of students was similar, with the exception of the seniors who responded relatively smaller. The descriptive statistics show that male students accounted for 27.3% of the total, with female students reporting notably higher at 72%. Of the samples' respondents, the majority of the students identified as White (70.6%), while students of color followed (Latino/Hispanic, 15.3%; Black, 6.3%; Asian American/Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 3.2%).



Table 1

*Characteristics of the Sample: Sociodemographic Information (N =1111)*

Variable	Category or Range	<i>Whole Sample</i>		<i>Students of Color</i>		<i>White Students</i>	
		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Age	17 or younger	3	0.3	1	0.3	2	0.3
	18-20	768	69.1	234	71.1	534	68.3
	21-23	329	29.6	87	26.4	242	30.9
	24-26	4	0.4	2	0.6	2	0.3
	27-30	2	0.2	2	0.6		
	35-38	2	0.2	1	0.3	1	0.1
	over 50	3	0.3	2	0.6	1	0.1
Classification	First-year	320	28.8	101	30.7	219	28.0
	Sophomore	309	27.8	92	28.0	217	27.7
	Junior	311	28.0	87	26.4	224	28.6
	Senior	165	14.9	48	14.6	117	15.0
	Other (Please Specify)	6	0.5	1	0.3	5	0.6
Gender	Male	303	27.3	73	22.2	230	29.4
	Female	800	72.0	252	76.6	548	70.1
	Other	8	0.7	4	1.2	4	0.5
Race	African American / Black	70	6.3	70	21.3		
	American Indian / Alaskan Native	8	0.7	8	2.4		
	Asian-	36	3.2	36	10.9		
	American/Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander						
	Caucasian / White	782	70.6			782	100
	Latino / Hispanic	169	15.3	169	51.4		
	Other (specify)	25	2.3	25	7.6		
	Prefer not to respond	18	1.6	18	5.5		

### Student Status and Institutional Engagement

As noted in Table 2, enrollment for this sample was found to be majority non-transfer (92%), full-time students (99.3%) who live on campus (63.4%). The majority of the sample was reported as non-international students (95.9%), however, international students were more prevalent within the students of color sampling (11.2%) in comparison to the White student sampling (0.6%). A significant portion of the sample reported that the institution they are currently attending was not their primary choice for

college (33.5%). Within the student of color sample, 46.5% state that their reported institution was not their first choice, in comparison to the White student sample which reported around half of that (28%).

Table 2

*Characteristics of the Sample: Student Status & Institutional Engagement (N =1111)*

Variable	Category or Range	<i>Whole Sample</i>		<i>Students of Color</i>		<i>White Students</i>	
		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Enrollment	Part-time student	8	0.7	1	0.3	7	0.9
	Full-time student	1103	99.3	328	99.7	775	99.1
International student	Yes	42	3.8	37	11.2	5	0.6
	No	1066	95.9	289	87.8	777	99.4
Transferred	No	1022	92.0	305	92.7	717	91.7
	Yes	86	7.7	22	6.7	64	8.2
Athletic team	No	1024	92.2	306	93.0	718	91.8
	Yes	84	7.6	20	6.1	64	8.2
Institution first choice	No	372	33.5	153	46.5	219	28.0
	Yes	735	66.2	173	52.6	562	71.9
Living on campus	No	401	36.1	109	33.1	292	37.3
	Yes	704	63.4	216	65.7	488	62.4

### **Academic Achievement and Intention**

As reflected in Table 3, the sample reports that their high-school grades averaged mostly As and Bs (41.1%) or mostly As (43.6%). The overall sample reports that their current average grades are mostly As and Bs (41.2%) or mostly As (29.7%). Both of the students of color sampling and White student sampling report similar average grades with the exception that more of the White student sampling reports higher on mostly As (34.1%) in comparison to the students of color sampling (19.1%). While the majority of the sampling are undergraduate underclassmen, a large majority reported having intentions of pursuing degrees post undergraduate (43.8%), and even post-graduate and

professional degrees (27.3%). These trends tend to be congruent across both racial samplings of students, with the exception that there were 6.6% more students of color who reported interest in achieving a medical or law degree in comparison to their White peers. Both samples report overall being very sure (54.3%) or sure (27.5%) of their chosen major.

Table 3

*Characteristics of the Sample: Academic Achievement & Intention (N =1111)*

Variable	Category or Range	<i>Whole Sample</i>		<i>Students of Color</i>		<i>White Students</i>	
		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Highschool Avg Grades	below a C average	2	0.2	1	0.3	1	0.1
	mostly Cs	10	0.9	2	0.6	8	1.0
	mostly Bs and Cs	65	5.9	24	7.3	41	5.2
	mostly Bs	87	7.8	30	9.1	57	7.3
	mostly As and Bs	457	41.1	161	48.9	296	37.9
Avg Grades	mostly As	484	43.6	108	32.8	376	48.1
	below a C average	3	0.3	1	0.3	2	0.3
	mostly Cs	19	1.7	7	2.1	12	1.5
	mostly Bs and Cs	131	11.8	58	17.6	73	9.3
	mostly Bs	167	15.0	58	17.6	109	13.9
Academic Ambitions	mostly As and Bs	458	41.2	139	42.2	319	40.8
	mostly As	330	29.7	63	19.1	267	34.1
	none	16	1.4	11	3.3	5	0.6
	bachelor's	267	24.0	68	20.7	199	25.4
	teaching credential	25	2.3	7	2.1	18	2.3
	master's degree	487	43.8	124	37.7	363	46.4
	doctorate	172	15.5	57	17.3	115	14.7
	medical or law degree	131	11.8	54	16.4	77	9.8
	other graduate degree (specify)	11	1.0	6	1.8	5	0.6
Assurance of Major	Very Unsure	30	2.7	6	1.8	24	3.1
	Unsure	19	1.7	6	1.8	13	1.7
	Somewhat Unsure	26	2.3	13	4.0	13	1.7
	Somewhat Sure	124	11.2	41	12.5	83	10.6
	Sure	305	27.5	94	28.6	211	27.0
	Very Sure	603	54.3	166	50.5	437	55.9

### Descriptive Statistics of Student Success

Table 4 presents the five sub-sections of student success utilizing the *Thriving Quotient* scales of Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Positive Perspective, Social Connectedness, and Diverse Citizenship. The overall mean for all the scales for the entire sampling as a whole revealed to  $M=4.56$ ,  $SD=0.65$ .

In order to examine whether there was a difference in success between students of color and White students, an independent-samples  $t$ -test was conducted. In terms of the overall success, there was a statistically significant difference between the students of color ( $M=4.46$ ,  $SD=0.67$ ) and White students ( $M=4.60$ ,  $SD=0.63$ ),  $t=3.455$ ,  $p=0.001$ . Revisiting the research question “What is the difference in thriving between students of color and White students on campus?”, independent samples  $t$ -tests for each sub-categories show that White students report higher scores of student success in comparison to students of color across three sub-scales of thriving: Engaged Learning ( $t=-2.61$ ,  $p=.009$ ), Academic Determination ( $t=-3.52$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and Social Connectedness ( $t=-3.00$ ,  $p=.003$ ). For the rest of the sub-scales (positive perspective and diverse citizenship), White student’s mean were higher than those of the students of color, but the differences were not statistically significant. Therefore, it is concluded that there would be no difference in the mean of those areas between these two groups in the study population.

Table 4

*Student Success*

Sub-scale & Overall	Whole		Students of Color		White Students		Diff	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Overall Scores</i>	4.56	0.65	<b>4.46</b>	0.67	<b>4.60</b>	0.63	<b>-3.46</b>	0.001
• Engaged Learning	4.64	0.93	<b>4.53</b>	0.95	<b>4.69</b>	0.92	<b>-2.61</b>	0.009
• Academic Determination	4.76	0.83	<b>4.62</b>	0.83	<b>4.81</b>	0.82	<b>-3.52</b>	0.000
• Positive Perspective	4.54	1.02	<b>4.45</b>	1.04	<b>4.57</b>	1.01	<b>-1.76</b>	0.079
• Social Connectedness	4.10	0.97	<b>3.96</b>	0.95	<b>4.15</b>	0.97	<b>-3.00</b>	0.003
• Diverse Citizenship	4.76	0.74	<b>4.69</b>	0.83	<b>4.79</b>	0.70	<b>-1.93</b>	0.053

Note: Possible range: 1 (strongly disagree) through 6 (strongly agree)

### An Exploration of Factors on Student Success

The previous independent-samples *t*-tests showed the difference in success outcomes between White students and students of color, except for two sub-categories. However, the group difference may be attributed to other compounding factors (e.g., higher income for a group than the other). Therefore, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to explore the influence of potential factors on each outcome variable considering the complicated relationships among the variables. Table 5 shows the results of regressions for each outcome variable. Note that each of the two columns presents the results of each multiple linear regression to explore significant factors of the outcome in the heading, for the whole group as well as including race as a variable for one of the predictors.

When looking at overall success scores, which indicates the mean of all of the sub-categories of student success outcomes (Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, etc.), race is a statistically significant factor ( $t=3.91$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), even after controlling for the effect of other significant factors such as spirituality ( $t=26.09$ ,

$p < 0.001$ ) and being female ( $t = 1.94, p = .05$ ). The positive  $t$ -value indicates that White students had higher overall success scores than the counterpart. This addresses the research question pertaining to what specific determining factors play a role in thriving for students on campus.

Looking further, the influencing factors of students' success were different for sub-categories. Race was a statistically significant factor for three sub-scale outcomes (Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, and Diverse Citizenship) but not for two outcomes (Positive Perspective and Social Connectedness). The following is information of the sub-scale outcomes that are influenced by race. When looking at Engaged Learning, White students continued to be more successful than students of color ( $t = 3.17, p < 0.001$ ), even when controlling for the statistically significant effect of being female ( $t = 2.31, p = 0.02$ ), whether or not they intended to pursue a graduate degree ( $t = 2.77, p = 0.01$ ), their given income level ( $t = -2.60, p = 0.01$ ) or spirituality ( $t = 15.23, p < 0.001$ ). White students were also more successful within the sub-category of Academic Determination ( $t = 3.31, p < 0.001$ ) after controlling for the significant factor of classification ( $t = 2.47, p = 0.01$ ), intention of completing a graduate degree ( $t = 2.33, p = 0.02$ ), and spirituality ( $t = 19.08, p < 0.001$ ). This continues to be true for White students' success in regards to Diverse Citizenship ( $t = 2.56, p = 0.01$ ) after being controlled for the significant impact of being female ( $t = 3.41, p < 0.001$ ), classification ( $t = 4.01, p < 0.001$ ), reported income level ( $t = -3.79, p < 0.001$ ), and spirituality ( $t = 21.27, p < 0.001$ ).

Table 5

*Multiple Linear Regression Model of Student Success: Overall Outcome and**Subcategories*

	Overall		Engaged Learning		Academic Determination		Positive Perspective		Social Connectedness		Diverse Citizenship	
	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
White (0/1)	<b>3.91</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>3.17</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>3.31</b>	<b>0.00</b>	1.75	0.08	1.78	0.08	<b>2.56</b>	<b>0.01</b>
Female (0/1)	<b>1.94</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>2.31</b>	<b>0.02</b>	1.62	0.11	-0.68	0.50	0.29	0.77	<b>3.41</b>	<b>0.00</b>
International (0/1)	0.55	0.58	1.15	0.25	0.64	0.52	0.67	0.50	0.34	0.73	-1.55	0.12
1 <sup>st</sup> generation (0/1)	-0.04	0.97	-0.52	0.60	-0.01	0.99	0.83	0.41	-1.01	0.31	0.87	0.38
Classification (1~4)	1.34	0.18	0.75	0.45	<b>2.47</b>	<b>0.01</b>	-0.17	0.86	0.62	0.54	<b>4.01</b>	<b>0.00</b>
Seek Graduate Degree (0/1)	<b>2.77</b>	<b>0.01</b>	<b>2.72</b>	<b>0.01</b>	<b>2.33</b>	<b>0.02</b>	0.20	0.84	0.87	0.39	0.13	0.90
Income level (1~5)	-0.64	0.52	<b>-2.60</b>	<b>0.01</b>	0.33	0.75	-0.41	0.68	<b>3.30</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>-3.79</b>	<b>0.00</b>
Spirituality (1~6)	<b>26.09</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>15.23</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>19.08</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>19.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>9.69</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>21.27</b>	<b>0.00</b>

Schreiner et. al (2013) suggests that certain pathways of thriving, or student success, are experienced differently between differing race groups. As a way of such investigation, the researcher compared the difference in predictors of student success between students of color and White students. Table 6 presents *t*-values in various regressions model of these two groups. To present the information concisely, the statistically significant factors ( $p < .05$ ) are presented in bold. Note that each column presents the results of each multiple linear regression, to explore significant factors of the outcome in the heading for the separate racial groups. A higher *t*-value indicates a stronger predictor.

The overall success of students of color was influenced by spirituality ( $t=16.32$ ) and classification ( $t=3.07$ ). The significant factors were different for White students. Their overall success was influenced by spirituality ( $t=20.17$ ), being female ( $t=2.85$ ), and

whether or not they plan to seek a graduate degree ( $t=1.97$ ). The significant factors varied across the subscales. Under the sub-category of Engaged Learning, students of color's success were influenced by classification ( $t=2.28$ ), reported income level ( $t= -1.78$ ), and spirituality ( $t=9.63$ ). Meanwhile, White students' success was influenced by both being female ( $t=3.29$ ) identifying as an International student ( $t=2.51$ ), and spirituality ( $t=11.62$ ). Within the sub-scale of Academic Determination, the notable influences that are significant for students of color reported as classification ( $t=2.35$ ) and spirituality ( $t=12.21$ ). This differed from White students whose influential factors of success under Academic Determination were their intention of seeking a graduate degree ( $t=2.80$ ) as well as spirituality (14.54). For Positive Perspective, both racial groups reported spirituality as the only statistically significant influence on success. Social Connectedness for students of color was solely influenced significantly by spirituality ( $t=3.38$ ), while both spirituality ( $t=9.37$ ) and reported income level ( $t= 2.67$ ) influenced the success for White students. Diverse Citizenship for students of color is primarily influenced by spirituality ( $t=15.68$ ) and their classification ( $t=2.81$ ). However, White students were influenced most in this sub-category by being female ( $t=4.80$ ), their classification ( $t=2.60$ ), reported income level ( $t= -3.55$ ), and spirituality (14.86). As the study sought to understand the role that spirituality plays in student thriving, it is important to note that spirituality was a significant influencing factor overall, and across all sub-categories for both racial groupings.



Table 6

*Predictors of Student Success between Students of Color and White Students (Significant  
t-values in Bold)*

	Overall		Engaged Learning		Academic Determination		Positive Perspective		Social Connected-ness		Diverse Citizenship	
	SC	W	SC	W	SC	W	SC	W	SC	W	SC	W
Female (0/1)	-0.56	<b>2.85</b>	-0.78	<b>3.29</b>	-0.01	2.16	-0.74	-0.14	0.29	0.10	-0.54	<b>4.80</b>
International (0/1)	0.06	1.21	0.17	<b>2.51</b>	-0.02	1.21	0.15	1.35	0.71	-1.07	-1.29	-0.25
1 <sup>st</sup> generation (0/1)	0.63	-0.70	0.12	-1.04	-0.52	0.25	0.37	0.60	0.28	-1.54	1.94	-0.30
Classification (1~4)	<b>3.07</b>	1.17	<b>2.28</b>	1.54	<b>2.35</b>	1.25	1.25	-1.11	1.17	0.20	<b>2.81</b>	<b>2.60</b>
Seek Graduate Degree (0/1)	-0.50	<b>1.97</b>	-0.22	1.14	-0.04	<b>2.80</b>	-0.21	0.38	-0.59	1.36	-0.44	0.69
Income level (1~5)	-0.86	-0.03	<b>-1.78</b>	-1.69	-1.16	1.18	-0.95	0.25	1.72	<b>2.67</b>	-0.99	<b>-3.55</b>
Spirituality (1~6)	<b>16.32</b>	<b>20.17</b>	<b>9.63</b>	<b>11.62</b>	<b>12.21</b>	<b>14.54</b>	<b>11.75</b>	<b>14.71</b>	<b>3.38</b>	<b>9.37</b>	<b>15.68</b>	<b>14.86</b>

*Note.* SC: Students of Color, W: White Students

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore the concept of student success through the lens of thriving, as it pertains to students of color on a private, faith-based university. Looking to understand the differences in success and student experience between students of color and White students, the concept of thriving was explored as a more in-depth and holistic approach to measuring student success. With the study being conducted on a faith-based institution, the role of impacts of spirituality was also explored on student success. The *Thriving Quotient* scale was utilized to examine five domains of success, and what Schreiner (2009) has identified as thriving; Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Positive Perspective, Social Connectedness, and Diverse Citizenship.

#### **Discussion of Major Findings**

Independent sample *t*-tests determined that there were higher means of reported success for White students in comparison to students of color in three domains: Engaged Learning, Academic Determination and Social Connectedness. This was congruent based on the reviewed literature that students of color report lower levels of sense of belonging (Museus et al., 2017) as well as the detrimental impacts of lacking meaningful relationships with diverse faculty and staff on their learning environment (Doan, 2011) and thriving outcomes (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Schreiner (2014) emphasizes that pathways to thriving and success are experienced differently for students of color, primarily through their interactions with faculty, their campus involvement, spirituality

and sense of community on campus. This provides contextual evidence for the variations of success between the racial groups within the sample as they pertain to differing subscales.

For the subscales of Diverse Citizenship and Positive Perspective there was not a statistical significance in differences between the success of students of color and White students. While there is not literature that explains the reported data, the specific campus culture and environment may provide context for these results, including the positive impact that the effects of spirituality have on thriving (Astin et al., 2013; Derrico et al., 2015) on a faith-based campus.

Through multiple regression analysis the researcher found that race, and in this case, being White, had a statistically significant impact on student success on campus, even after controlling for outside factors that may have an impact on student's success. Other statistically significant factors that contributed to student success for White students within the sample were being female, seeking a graduate degree, and spirituality. This is consistent with the environment of campus as it is a predominantly White, faith-based institution with the majority of the student body being female.

For students of color these factors were spirituality and classification. This aligns with Schreiner's (2014) assertion that spirituality is twice as impactful on student thriving for students of color in comparison to their counterparts. Spirituality was also found to be a statistically significant factor in regard to success for all students, regardless of race. However, the spirituality scale included seeks more to understand how their sense of spirituality impacts their success and how the scales perception of spirituality infiltrates aspects of their lives. It does not reflect that having higher levels of spirituality equates to

having higher levels of student success. This is congruent with the literature that points that spirituality plays a role in student success and sense of belonging (Derrico, Tharp & Schreiner, 2015; McIntosh, 2012; Rockenback & Mayhew, 2014; Schreiner, 2014).

### **Implications of Findings**

As higher education seeks to create learning environments that foster success for all its students, it is imperative that the diverse experiences of underrepresented students are not only sought after but become the baseline of which their universities begin to serve them. The literature has shown that despite the increase of students of color that are being admitted into universities, universities struggle to retain and graduate these students (Brown, 2015; Shapiro et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 1996 & 2016), an area in which faith-based institutions have also continued to fall short (Ross et al., 2012). Knowing that various elements of thriving play a large role in the retention of students and their success (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Schreiner et al., 2009), the results of this study allow for implications at both practice and policy levels of higher education.

### **Implications for Practice**

In seeking the ways educators and practitioners within higher education can grow from this study, it is important to recognize the gap within the institutional environment that exists and is experienced by students of color. This study uncovered that students of color are not reaping the same benefits from their learning environment that their White peers are. Their reported success at the institution is marked by their spirituality and their classification. In comparison, their White peers, particularly White females, are experiencing success at higher means in every category, most notably with statistical significance on Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, and Social Connectedness.

This implies that the institutional environment within the university may not be intentionally or systemically designed for students of color to succeed and thrive.

**Supportive programming and spaces.** The White students within the sample are thriving as reported through feelings of academic fluency (Academic Determination), psychological and behavioral engagement with their learning process and environment (Engaged Learning), and in areas that show meaningful connection to peers, faculty and staff, and their sense of belonging within the campus community (Social Connectedness). In order to promote an equitable environment for learning for students of color, educators and practitioners must seek to provide supportive programming and resources at their institutions that are evidenced-based and focus on serving diverse students. This includes increasing the representation of diversity on campus, as it is known that lack of representation in both the student body and faculty and staff have a negative impact on the retention of students of color (Guiffrida, 2005) and can rob students of the opportunity of being inspired by meaningful influences that reflect and represent them (Smith, 2015). Educators within the university setting should be critically assessing their classroom curriculum and pedagogies, making sure that it expands far past euro-centric teaching methods and content. Inclusion of diverse perspectives and curricular content allows for students of color to thrive academically (Lundberg, 2010; Schreiner, 2016) and to feel connected and engaged with the learning content and their faculty, thus promoting quality relationships and trust with educators that will benefit them (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Faculty and staff should be creating learning environments and spaces that appropriately engage with the issues surrounding race, being educated and aware of how to protect and empower their students of color.

It is critical that there are safe spaces on campuses for students of color to not only meet, but also be empowered. It is the responsibility of the university to ensure that these spaces not only exist but are valued. Listening to the experiences and needs of the students within these groups, resources and systemic changes should be considered. Allowing the students to lead the way in the process of what spaces and resources they need can ensure equitable practices for supportive programming. This reflects a larger need for policy change within higher education that will be discussed further below.

**Spirituality.** With spirituality being significantly influential for all students, and twice as impactful for students of color as it pertains to their success (Schreiner, 2014), it is vital that educators have a working knowledge of the role they play when it comes to fostering a learning and living environment, while making sure to hold space for students' diverse spiritual needs. At a faith-based institution, spirituality becomes a part of the campus culture and the social environment. This can promote spiritual growth, which leads to overall satisfaction, academic gains, psychological wellness and leadership development (Astin et al., 2011). However, if the spiritual climate is perceived negatively by students of color, something so formative can be to their detriment, causing feelings of isolation and exclusion (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2014). Having spaces that allow for spiritual expression that aligns with their cultural worldview can be a way of implementing inclusionary practices that promote a positive impact on their view of the campus spiritual climate (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2014), while also allowing for spiritual growth and connectedness. As it is implied through both literature and this study, spirituality can be utilized by faith-based institutions as tool for creating more

meaningful and equitable learning environment that promotes success and thriving for students of color.

### **Implications for Policy**

Although the need for educators and practitioners to adopt practices that are equitable and inclusionary for diverse learners is ongoing, the environment of thriving that needs to be created must start with policy change at the institutional level of higher education. There is a need for institutions to shift away from outdated metrics of evaluating student success and academic aptitude as research has shown these methods are open to racial bias and fail to account for the opportunity gaps caused in part by an inequitable educational system. This allows for the responsibility of success to primarily be on the institutions, looking towards understanding institutional barriers to success as opposed to individuals' deficits. Universities should revisit the value they place on ACT scores, SAT scores and even the desire for specific extra-curricular activities when looking for student recruits and consider outside factors such as job experience. Looking towards contemporary metrics for student success, such as thriving, institutions must evaluate the responsibility that they possess for creating an environment for students with diverse backgrounds and needs to succeed and adapt their recruiting and admittance policies accordingly.

When admitting students of color, the institution has a responsibility to the cultural engagement of those students and can do so by utilizing a model such as Museus' (2014) model for creating culturally engaging campus environments. This alone allows for universities to create spaces that are both culturally responsive and relevant, while also influencing students sense of belonging. Universities must evaluate how their

campus traditions and cultural norms contribute to their campus environment and consider how it may be creating or perpetuating and exclusionary space for students of color.

It is also imperative that there is careful consideration to the hiring policies for faculty and staff, particularly those surrounding the hiring and retaining of faculty and staff of color, making sure to provide accurate representation of diversity throughout all levels of the institution's organizational chart. While it is critical that hiring committees are compositionally diverse, universities must be intentional about the specific hiring practices and environment as they look to recruit more faculty of color. Implicit bias training in the context of hiring will benefit the search committees as they can reevaluate how their views can unconsciously impact how they view incoming candidates. Positions should be created to help faculty recognize biases and correct practices in order to mitigate any potential issues or barriers. This includes the need to move away from seeking solely specialized hires and allowing for practices such as cluster hiring to be implemented so that the need for specific positions and diverse perspectives is met. In order to increase the potential for diverse candidates, it is recommended that universities create relationships with PhD programs or Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) to recruit diverse graduates. Allocating permanent budgetary resources for diverse hires for each department can help ensure an equitable hiring process that invests in faculty of color. Faculty of color must be supported and invested in with the same consideration and commitment as students of color. This requires the integration of their perspectives while also being sure to not disproportionately commit them to serving on all boards. Universities must engage and value their faculty of color while understanding the



challenges that lead to them leaving and seeking to provide supportive resources. While there are many practices that can help recruit and retain faculty of color, the need for intentional investment requires both financial and structural commitment.

In order to properly diagnose the underlying issues that are preventing students of color from thriving and retaining, institutions should engage in campus-wide testing for its racial climate. This seeks to better understand the impacts of the campus' history with racism and exclusion, the psychological and behavioral climate of campus, and the representation of diverse learners and groups on campus (McClain & Perry, 2017). Due to the widespread impacts that racism and educational inequity have had on the foundational history of higher education, racial climate testing and anti-bias/anti-racist training should be implemented as a part of the institution's yearly training and surveying. Through the implementation of testing and training, further adjustments should be made to campus policies, programs, and potentially even structural changes in order to reallocate the appropriate resources to bring educational equity for students of color. While testing is important in diagnosing the barriers for both students and faculty of color, the ongoing actionable steps taken from that diagnosis to remedy them is the most important piece. The commitment to this process is ever changing and ongoing as the adoption of equitable learning becomes a lens for the university to function through, as opposed to goal of success to meet.

### **Implications for Research**

Several limitations to this study should be noted. First, generalizability for this study is limited. While this study seeks to provide meaningful data for faith-based higher educational institutions, convenience sampling was utilized at one private faith-based

institution in Texas and therefore generalizability is limited. However, the sample seems to reasonably reflect demographics at similar institutional size. There is potential for antecedent-consequent bias due to the use of the cross-sectional survey design. Overall the study's response rate was 41%. It should be noted that females were overrepresented within the sample, comprising 72% of the responses, while the enrollment at that given semester was only 62% female. White students were also overrepresented in the sample by 6.5%, leaving students of color underrepresented. The effectiveness of the results of this study could have been improved if the samples groups were more accurately representative of the institutions enrollment. However, despite the issues with generalizability, the findings of this study can serve as foundational evidence that there is a disparity in reported success and thriving between students of color and their White peers on campus.

The spirituality sub-scale that was utilized within the *Thriving Quotient* survey also poses as a limitation as the psychometrics or validation of the scale was not provided in any of the subsequent research. Furthermore, the scale lacked efficacy as it only provided three statements to measure spirituality, all of which fail to capture a diverse perspective of spirituality. This sub-scale appears to measure spirituality as it pertains to a western cultural lens; therefore, construct validity must be considered. This has the potential to skew the results for any student whose spiritual practices are not similarly defined. More research is needed in developing an appropriate scale to measure a broader view of spirituality, especially as it was shown to have such a large influence on success within this study. It is also worth noting that being at a faith-based institution can create

bias in responses within the sample, and ultimately the results as the environment of the sample incorporates Christian beliefs and practices within all aspects of campus culture.

While this study identified that students of color reported lower levels of success in comparison to their White peers, it does not identify conclusively the institutional or personal reasonings. Only inferences can be made based off of the distinct domains of thriving that were reported by the sample. Therefore, further research should be conducted before adopting practices or policies to improve the success and retention for students of color.

Despite the limitations of this study, this study contributes to social work knowledge by providing valuable insight to practitioners and service providers within higher education in order to provide foundational support for furthering and creating ethical and equitable practices surrounding students of color. While admittance for students of color and students with diverse backgrounds is ever increasing (Brown, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 1996 & 2016), the importance of understanding the college experience through their lens has never been more pertinent. While this study was explorative in nature, the evidence produces grounds for further needs assessments to be conducted surrounding the barriers to students of color in faith-based universities. Further research should be exploring not only the institutional barriers that students of color face on a faith-based campus, but studies that help to identify effective policies, programs and practices that lead all of their students to thrive, and ultimately graduate.

## **Conclusions**

This research study sought to explore the concept of thriving as a metric to student success as it pertained to the student experience for students of color on a private

faith-based institution. By looking at key factors of the student experience through the five domains of thriving (Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Positive Perspective, Social Connectedness, Diverse Citizenship) and incorporating the concept of spirituality, the researcher is able to see how students' experiences of success may differ across racial identifiers. Through an exploratory cross-sectional survey study, the researcher was able to identify that White students on campus report higher levels of success through the lens of thriving, in comparison to students of color, with statistical significance surrounding the domains of Engaged Learning, Academic Determination and Social Connectedness. Further analysis revealed that race was found to be a statistically significant factor to the students' overall success and thriving, thus confirming Schreiner's (2013) assertion that pathways of thriving are experienced differently between differing racial and ethnic groups.

Spirituality proved to be a significant influencing factor when it came to students' success and thriving overall. Faith-based institutions can benefit from understanding and shaping the impacts that faith and spiritual practices will have on their students' success, particularly their students of color. Allowing for diverse understandings of spirituality and creating space for accepting environments that foster spirituality for various cultural and ethnic needs, may prove to have a larger impact on the retention and graduation of minority students.

Despite the limitations to this study, implications for private faith-based institutions were drawn. If implemented, the recommendations could be utilized to help students of color to thrive and succeed on their campuses, while promoting and creating more culturally engaging and responsive learning environment. Further research should

be conducted to analyze institutional barriers that impact thriving for students of color and ultimately their success.

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## APPENDIX A

### IRB Approval Letter

#### ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

**Office of Research and Sponsored Programs**

320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885

December 5, 2019



Hannah Choquette  
Department of Social Work  
Abilene Christian University

Dear Hannah,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Thriving on a Faith-Based Campus: an Exploratory Study of Sense of Community & Spirituality for ACU Students of Color",

(IRB# 19-156 ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects as:

- ☐ Non-research, and
- ☒ Non-human research

Based on:

The research does not involve interaction or intervention with living individuals, and the information I am collecting is not individually identifiable [45 CFR 46.102(f)(2)]

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs