

Can you hear us now? Amplifying underrepresented voices through advising and mentorship initiatives

by

Annita Charlette White

B.A., University of Georgia, 1997

M.S., Capella University, 2021

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Special Education, Counseling and Student Affairs
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

Retention and transfer initiatives in higher education frequently emphasize measurable outcomes such as grade point average, credit accumulation, and degree completion while offering limited insight into how students interpret advising and institutional interactions during moments of uncertainty. This qualitative narrative inquiry examined how first-generation Black male students at a two-year college in the Southeastern United States narrated their experiences navigating advising, mentorship, and preparation for transfer to four-year institutions. Grounded in Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth framework, the study employed narrative interviews and Photovoice to explore how individuals leveraged aspirational, navigational, social, familial, linguistic, and resistant capital while interpreting institutional systems not originally designed with their experiences in mind. Findings indicate that advising encounters functioned as interpretive and relational sites where students assessed belonging, translated institutional messages, and negotiated persistence decisions. In response, this study introduces the Story-Conscious Advising Framework (SCaF), which extends Community Cultural Wealth by illuminating how cultural assets are narratively activated within advising relationships. Implications highlight the importance of relational, culturally responsive advising practices that support persistence and transfer for first-generation Black male students in two-year contexts.

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Approved by:

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Dr. Yang Yang

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Abstract

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the Black men across generations whose lives, stories, and possibilities shaped both my journey and the purpose of this research.

To my father, Eugene Sr., whose life reflected both the challenges and the resilience of a generation of Black men who did not always encounter open doors to educational opportunity. Your story continues to remind me why expanding access, support, and understanding in higher education matters.

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This work is offered in honor of Black men across generations—past, present, and future—and in the hope that their voices will continue to be heard.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

The experiences of first-generation Black male students in higher education are crucial to advancing equity and inclusion in student success initiatives. Despite growing attention to retention and completion efforts, such as guided pathways and structured frameworks, these students face unique challenges in navigating the college process. These challenges, including barriers related to access, retention, and engagement in advising and mentorship programs, are compounded by systemic inequities that disproportionately affect students from underrepresented backgrounds (AACC, 2019; Bailey et al., 2015).

First-generation Black male students at two-year colleges encounter distinct obstacles in accessing, retaining, and engaging with academic advising and mentorship programs. Systemic inequities and a lack of tailored support worsen disparities in their success (Baaqi, 2023; Watt, 2020). Although mentorship has been identified as a critical factor in fostering student success, limited research has explored how first-generation Black male students utilize these resources to navigate the college process (Hagler et al., 2021; Mills, 2021). Furthermore, institutional frameworks such as guided pathways do not always effectively address the specific needs of these students.

These challenges necessitate a deeper exploration of how first-generation Black male students draw upon their cultural resources to overcome barriers in higher education. Understanding how these students leverage their cultural wealth presents a critical opportunity to improve institutional practices and promote equity in student success outcomes (Martínez, 2022; Yosso, 2005). While advising and mentorship are widely recognized as vital to promoting student success, few studies have captured the lived experiences of first-generation Black male students, particularly within two-year colleges (Barr & Castleman, 2021; Jackson & Morton,

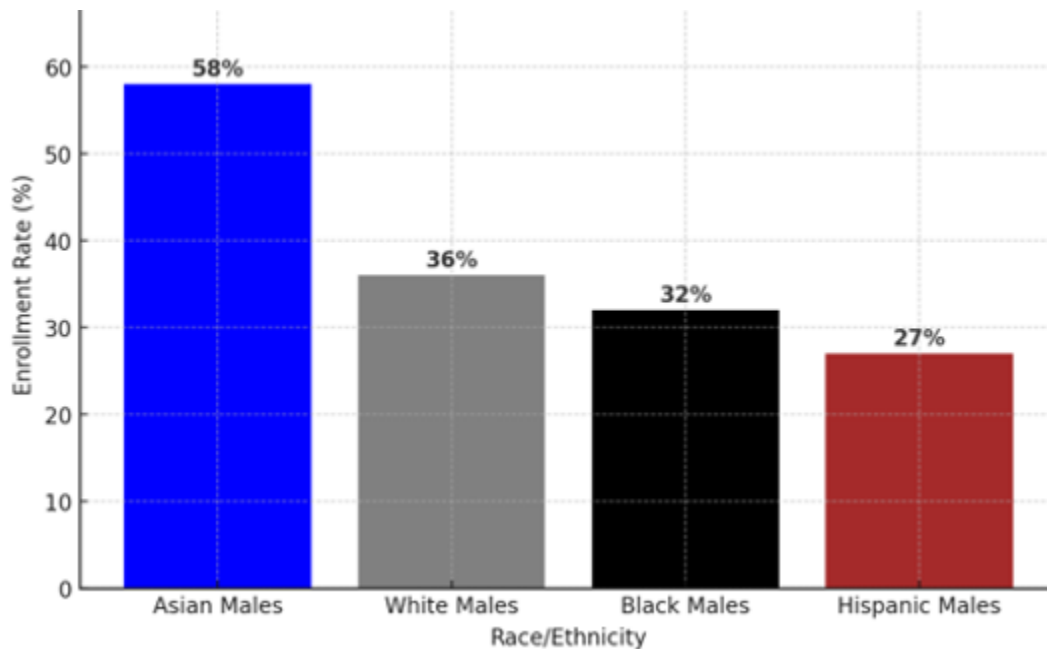
2023). This study seeks to fill this gap by amplifying the voices of these students, centering their cultural wealth as a lens to explore their experiences with academic advising and mentorship. By understanding their lived experiences through their own narratives, this study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of institutional practices designed to address equity gaps.

This research, guided by Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth framework (2005), illuminates how first-generation Black male students leverage their aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital to navigate challenges in academic advising, mentorship, and transfer preparation. Furthermore, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on advising, mentorship, and student success by centering the narratives of first-generation Black male students. By situating first-generation Black male students' experiences within the Community Cultural Wealth framework, this research informs policies and practices that promote equity, inclusion, and support for all students, particularly those from historically underserved populations.

As shown in Figure 1.1, disparities in college enrollment rates persist across racial and ethnic groups, with Black male students enrolling at lower rates than their Asian and White peers. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the overall college enrollment rate for 18- to 24-year-old Black males in 2022 was 32%, compared to 58% for Asian males and 36% for White males. While Black male enrollment rates slightly exceed those of Hispanic males (27%), the gap remains significant when compared to other groups (NCES, 2024). These enrollment patterns highlight the systemic barriers that Black male students face in accessing and persisting through higher education, reinforcing the need for targeted advising and mentorship initiatives to support their academic success. Figure 1.1 illustrates these enrollment disparities among racial/ethnic groups.

Figure 1.1

College enrollment rates of 18- to 24-year-old males by race/ethnicity (2022)



Note. Data in Figure 1.1 is sourced from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), College Enrollment Rates indicator, based on the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS), October Supplement (2012–2022). Figures represent the percentage of 18- to 24-year-old males enrolled in college or graduate school across racial/ethnic groups. Data exclude individuals in the military and institutionalized populations.

Background of Study

Community and technical colleges in the United States have long been regarded as gateways to higher education for diverse student populations. However, systemic inequities contribute to persistently low completion rates in community and technical colleges. According to NCES, only 13% of students enrolled in two-year public institutions graduate within two years, and just 28% graduate within four years (NCES, 2021). For transfer students, the outcomes are similarly troubling, with fewer than half of community and technical college students who transfer to four-year institutions ultimately completing their degrees (Smith, 2024).

These challenges are especially pronounced for African American students, who face disproportionately lower persistence, retention, and completion rates compared to their White peers. Institutions retain African American students at a rate of 56.6%, significantly below the national retention rate of 68.2% (NSC, 2023). Black college starters in fall 2022 experienced retention rate increases on par with national growth, a notable improvement compared to muted growth for the fall 2021 cohort. However, these gains have not closed the persistent retention gap, underscoring the ongoing challenges that institutions face in equitably supporting African American students and addressing systemic inequities in higher education.

Institutional practices often exacerbate these inequities by privileging students with prior knowledge of navigating educational systems. First-generation African American students are frequently disadvantaged when seeking accommodations and support (Hagler et al., 2021). For Black male first-generation students in community colleges, this disadvantage is further compounded by limited access to culturally responsive mentorship and advising, which are critical for their academic persistence and success (Watt, 2020). Many African American students also face financial barriers that force them to live and work off-campus, further limiting their academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993). These systemic obstacles, combined with restricted access to support networks, align with institutional norms and expectations that privilege assertive behaviors associated with White middle-class cultural values, thereby disadvantaging marginalized students (Hagler et al., 2021).

The challenges faced by African American male students within community and technical colleges are especially acute. For example, focus groups conducted at Greenville Technical College revealed that African American male students often experience self-doubt about their academic abilities, a lack of belonging, and hesitation to participate in class due to

fears of reinforcing stereotypes (Watt, 2020). These students expressed a desire for a sense of brotherhood and mutual support to navigate their academic journeys. In response, initiatives like the African American Male Scholars Initiative have emerged, offering personalized support services and case management aimed at improving outcomes and fostering leadership skills (Watt, 2020).

Despite these challenges, African American students possess rich cultural wealth such as aspirational, familial, and navigational capital that is often overlooked in traditional deficit-based narratives (Yosso, 2005). Recognizing and leveraging these assets is critical for fostering equitable student success. Intensive advising, for example, has been shown to significantly improve degree attainment. Barr and Castleman (2021) found that intensive advising during high school and college substantially increased bachelor's degree completion, highlighting its potential applicability in community and technical college settings. In the United States, the two-year colleges play a critical role in providing educational access to diverse populations, including many first-generation Black male students. With a mission centered on workforce development and open access, technical colleges are uniquely positioned to serve as gateways to upward mobility. However, like community colleges nationwide, these institutions face ongoing challenges in addressing equity gaps, especially for historically marginalized student populations.

The consequences of low completion rates extend beyond individual students. African American students who do not complete college face greater financial instability, higher rates of loan default, and reduced access to well-paying jobs, perpetuating cycles of economic inequality (Baaqi, 2023). Moreover, research indicates that individuals without a college degree are more

likely to experience unemployment and rely on government assistance, creating broader societal burdens (Baaqi, 2023).

Efforts to address these disparities, such as guided pathways, have shown promise by simplifying the student experience through structured course sequencing and enhanced advising (Baaqi, 2023). However, progress has been slow, and equity gaps persist. Institutional practices continue to privilege students with greater cultural and economic advantages, highlighting the need for systemic change.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth framework, which provides a lens for understanding the strengths and resources that historically marginalized students bring to their educational journeys. Developed by Tara J. Yosso (2005), Community Cultural Wealth framework challenges deficit-based narratives by focusing on their cultural wealth and its role in promoting academic success. This framework aligns with the themes of mentoring and advising by emphasizing the importance of recognizing and building upon the cultural assets students possess.

Furthermore, Community Cultural Wealth framework highlights the role of cultural capital in shaping educational and career trajectories, as well as the importance of counterspaces where students can leverage their cultural wealth to navigate academic and professional challenges (Bañuelos, 2021; Gil & Parnter, 2024). Reciprocal mentoring in community-based programs plays a key role in fostering these assets and supporting student success, particularly for students whose identities are often marginalized in mainstream academic contexts (Gil & Parnter, 2024). This study also explores how culturally sustaining mentorship practices and identity-affirming counterspaces shape students' advising and mentoring experiences.

Statement of the Problem

While two-year colleges are often heralded as steppingstones to economic mobility, first-generation Black male students face distinct challenges that undermine their ability to persist and succeed. These challenges include structural racism, cultural marginalization, and academic barriers, all of which contribute to disproportionately low completion rates for this group compared to their peers (Inside Higher Ed [IHE], 2019; NCES, 2021). These inequities are further compounded by limited access to critical support systems, such as academic advising and mentorship programs, which are essential for navigating the complexities of higher education (IHE, 2019; NCES, 2021).

Despite evidence demonstrating the transformative potential of mentorship and intensive advising in improving degree attainment (Barr & Castleman, 2021; Tinto, 1993), these interventions may fall short for first-generation Black male students when existing frameworks fail to reflect their unique cultural wealth and lived experiences (Yosso, 2005). This omission risks perpetuating deficit-based narratives that overlook their resilience and resourcefulness, including their aspirational, familial, and navigational capital (Oliver, 2022).

Research on first-generation students and mentorship in higher education has predominantly focused on four-year institutions or aggregated findings across demographic groups, failing to capture the nuanced ways in which Black male students navigate barriers within two-year colleges (Hagler et al., 2021). This gap limits the development of culturally responsive practices that affirm these students' identities and address their specific needs.

Moreover, the persistent underrepresentation of first-generation Black male voices in scholarship undermines ongoing efforts to advance equity and inclusion in higher education.

Without centering these narratives, institutions risk implementing well-intentioned but ultimately ineffective interventions that reinforce systemic inequities (Mills, 2021).

This study addresses these gaps by exploring how first-generation Black male students engage with academic advising and mentorship programs at community and technical colleges. Using the Community Cultural Wealth framework, the research amplifies their voices, challenges deficit-based paradigms, and contributes to equity-driven practices that honor their lived experiences. By highlighting their stories, this study informs the design of institutional initiatives that promote persistence, retention, and success for this historically marginalized population.

Addressing these critical gaps requires a focused exploration of how first-generation Black male students at two-year colleges navigate their educational journeys, with particular attention to their interactions with academic advising and mentorship programs through the lens of cultural wealth.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how first-generation Black male students enrolled in a two-year college narrate their experiences navigating the college process, with particular attention to how their cultural wealth and transfer student capital inform their interactions with academic advising, mentorship programs, and their preparation for transferring to a four-year institution. Building on longitudinal research that highlights the benefits of mentoring and academic advising for first-generation students (Hagler et al., 2021), this study explored how first-generation Black male students at two-year colleges leverage these supports to navigate institutional barriers.

This research explored the lived experiences of first-generation Black male students at two-year colleges by centering their voices and perspectives, which are often marginalized in higher education research. By analyzing their narratives, this study uncovered how institutional practices, policies, and support systems, particularly in academic advising and mentorship programs, shape their academic progression, interactions, and preparation for transferring to four-year institutions.

Through the lens of cultural wealth, the study examined how these students leverage cultural wealth to navigate systemic challenges and persist in their educational journey. In this study, collaborators, who are the participants themselves, actively engage as co-researchers, sharing their lived experiences and insights (Pope, 2020). The study explored how these collaborators draw on their cultural wealth to engage with academic advising, overcome barriers, and find support within mentorship programs. Additionally, the study examined how these cultural resources inform their preparation for a successful transition to four-year institutions.

By amplifying the voices of this underrepresented population, this research challenges deficit-based narratives and contributes to the development of culturally responsive and equity-focused advising and mentorship practices. The insights gained inform institutional policies and practices, fostering an environment that better supports the success and empowerment of first-generation Black male students in community and technical colleges.

Research Questions

The following research questions are at the center of this study:

1. How do first-generation Black male students leverage their cultural wealth to navigate the college process at a two-year institution?

2. How do first-generation Black male students draw on cultural wealth to engage with academic advising and overcome systemic challenges?
3. How does cultural wealth shape first-generation Black male students' experiences within mentorship programs at a two-year college?
4. How do first-generation Black male students utilize cultural wealth in preparing for a successful transition to a four-year institution?

Significance of Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform how two-year colleges can better support first-generation Black male students in navigating the college process. By exploring the role of cultural wealth in their academic advising, mentorship experiences, and preparation for transfer to four-year institutions, this research offers insights into how these practices can be more inclusive and tailored to diverse student identities. The findings may inform the development of culturally responsive and equity-focused policies that foster persistence, retention, and success for this underrepresented population (Jackson & Morton, 2023).

This study also recognizes the resilience and adaptive strategies these students employ, which are often overlooked in higher education literature. Moreover, this study challenges deficit-based perspectives by centering collaborators' voices as they share their lived experiences and insights (Pope, 2020). By centering their cultural wealth, this study highlights their resilience and resourcefulness, underscoring the need for asset-based approaches to student success. Through this approach, the research contributes to a broader understanding of the intersection of cultural wealth and student support services in two-year colleges, providing a foundation for future studies in this area (Hagler et al., 2021).

Definition of Terms

Academic Advising. Academic advising refers to the formal process through which students receive support from advisors in understanding course selection, academic progress, career goals, and institutional policies. Effective advising includes both informational guidance and relational support that fosters students' sense of belonging (Grites, 2013).

Collaborators. Collaborators are participants who actively engage in the research process beyond the role of traditional participants. Their involvement reflects the most active end of the participation spectrum in qualitative research. As co-researchers, they are recognized as "joint contributors" and "investigators" (Boylorn, 2008, p. 600), participating in multiple or all stages of the research project. This approach validates and privileges their experiences, acknowledging them as experts who contribute to gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data, thereby ensuring that their voices are integral to the research outcomes (Boylorn, 2008; Mealman & Lawrence, 2002).

Community College. "Community colleges are primarily public higher education institutions that strive to provide affordable education that's accessible to all. An associate degree, which takes about two years to complete full time, is usually the highest degree available, but community college students can also receive certificates and job training. Many students begin their postsecondary studies at community colleges before transferring to a four-year institution to pursue a bachelor's degree" (Wood, 2025, paras. 1–2).

Cultural Wealth. Cultural wealth is an array of knowledge, skills, strengths and experiences that are learned and shared by people of color and marginalized groups; The values and behaviors that are nurtured through culture work together to create a way of knowing and being. The six types of cultural wealth, Familial, Social, Aspirational, Navigational, Linguistic,

and Resistant capital, are interconnected, working together to strengthen an individual's ability to function in multiple environments. (Yosso, 2005).

First-Generation College Students. In this study, first-generation college students are defined as individuals whose parents or guardians have not obtained a four-year college degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This lack of familial higher education experience means these students often encounter the higher education system without the intergenerational knowledge and support that continuing-generation students may have.

First-Generation Student of Color. First-generation students of color are defined as individuals who identify as members of a racially or ethnically underrepresented group and whose parents did not earn a bachelor's degree. These students often face compounded challenges that arise from both racial and socioeconomic factors (Strayhorn, 2010).

Intersectionality. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality refers to the way social identities (e.g., race, class, gender) intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. In this study, intersectionality is operationalized to examine how the intersecting identities of being Black, male, and first-generation influence the students' experiences in higher education.

Mentorship Programs. Mentorship programs refer to structured initiatives where students are paired with faculty, staff, or peers for guidance, advice, and support in navigating academic and personal challenges. These programs aim to improve persistence, retention, and success, particularly for underrepresented students (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

Students of Color. Students of color refers to college students who identify as Black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, or any other non-white racial or ethnic group. In this study,

the focus is specifically on Black male students, who face distinct educational barriers due to systemic inequities (Morales & Hamann, 2021).

Underrepresented Students: Underrepresented students are students from groups that have historically faced barriers to access and success in higher education. This includes underserved racial and ethnic groups such as African American/Black, Asian, Hispanic, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Hawaiian Native, and multiracial students, as well as first-generation college students and low-income individuals. In specific contexts, underrepresentation may also extend to other groups, such as men in traditionally female-dominated disciplines. These students often face systemic and financial challenges, which can hinder their academic progress and overall educational experience (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2003; Cullinane & Leewater, 2009; Estrada et al., 2016).

Technical College. Technical colleges are institutions focused on providing high-quality, affordable education and training that prepare students for careers in high-demand industries. These colleges offer a range of programs, including associate degrees (the highest level of academic attainment), diplomas, and technical certificates of credit, with a strong emphasis on hands-on learning and workforce development. Technical colleges also serve as vital partners to local businesses and industries, delivering customized training solutions and addressing regional workforce needs (Soliz, 2023).

Summary

This qualitative study explored the experiences of first-generation Black male students at a two-year college, focusing on how they utilize cultural wealth to navigate the college process. Drawing on Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth framework (2005), the research examined how students leverage aspirational, familial, social, resistant, linguistic, and navigational capital in

engaging with academic advising, mentorship programs, and preparing for transfer to four-year institutions. By centering the perspectives of these marginalized students, the study challenges deficit-based narratives and contributes to the development of culturally responsive, equity-focused advising and mentorship practices (Martínez, 2022). Through semi-structured interviews and Photovoice activities, the study examined how cultural wealth informs students' interactions with support systems, helping them overcome systemic barriers and persist in their academic journeys.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution in understanding how two-year colleges can better support first-generation Black male students. By emphasizing the role of cultural wealth in academic advising and mentorship, the study offers insights on creating more inclusive practices tailored to diverse student identities. The findings may inform the development of equity-focused strategies to enhance retention and success for this underrepresented population (Jackson & Morton, 2023).

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of literature exploring the intersecting experiences of first-generation Black male students in two-year colleges, with particular attention to advising, mentorship, and transfer pathways. Grounded in Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, the review challenges deficit-based narratives by centering the strengths, knowledge, and resilience these students bring to their educational journeys. It examines how their experiences are shaped by structural inequities, institutional policies, and cultural dynamics, while also highlighting the ways students draw upon aspirational, navigational, familial, linguistic, social, and resistant capital to persist and succeed.

The chapter begins by questioning the meaning and impact of first-generation status, then turns to a critical exploration of how first-generation Black male students experience higher education, particularly the compounded barriers at the intersection of race, gender, and generational status. Following this, the chapter provides an overview of the history and mission of two-year colleges in the United States, tracing their evolution from early junior colleges rooted in elite academic preparation to more inclusive institutions shaped by economic demands and educational equity goals. In tandem with this institutional evolution, the chapter next explores a historical overview of academic advising and mentorship, with a focus on the evolution of relational and culturally responsive practices. The chapter concludes by evaluating the role of transfer pathways and support programs, and how they can either facilitate or hinder the academic mobility of marginalized students. Throughout, the literature is interpreted through an asset-based lens, affirming the cultural wealth and agency of first-generation Black male students in community and technical colleges.

First-Generation Black Male Student Experiences

The term first-generation college student typically refers to individuals whose parents or guardians have not completed a four-year college degree (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Pascarella et al., 2004). While widely used in policy and institutional discourse, the definition of first-generation status is neither standardized nor universally understood, often varying across institutions and research studies (Wildhagen, 2025). Wildhagen (2025) critiques the term's ubiquity, arguing that its overuse and lack of precision can mask the diverse experiences of students it attempts to describe. Rather than a monolithic group, first-generation college students represent a heterogeneous population shaped by intersecting factors such as race, class, and geography.

Bettencourt et al. (2020) emphasize that for many students, being first-generation is not just a classification but an evolving identity shaped by how they are perceived by institutions and how they navigate family expectations. Students often come to understand their first-generation student identity through institutional messaging such as programming, scholarships, or campus narratives that either validate or misrepresent their lived experiences (Bettencourt et al., 2020). As such, the meaning of being a first-generation student is co-constructed, negotiated across personal, familial, and educational contexts (Bettencourt et al., 2020).

Unique Challenges of First-Generation Students

First-generation students face a variety of challenges that can impact their academic and social integration into college. Ives and Castillo-Montoya (2020), in their systematic review, identify persistent disparities in academic preparation, access to college knowledge, and familiarity with institutional norms. These barriers are especially acute at two-year colleges, which often serve as the first point of entry for students from under-resourced high schools.

Many arrive at college with limited exposure to academic discourse, reduced access to rigorous high school curricula, and fewer opportunities for college counseling, factors that shape their transition into postsecondary learning environments (Schuyler et al., 2021).

Financial barriers are another major concern. First-generation college students are more likely to come from low-income backgrounds and thus face heightened pressures related to employment, debt aversion, and lack of financial safety nets (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). These pressures often lead students to make decisions out of necessity such as attending part-time, living off-campus, or working multiple jobs that may inadvertently reduce their academic engagement and persistence, particularly at commuter-based two-year colleges.

Culturally, first-generation students must often navigate a “hidden curriculum” of unspoken expectations and norms in higher education institutions. Bettencourt et al. (2020) note that first-generation college students are frequently caught between competing cultural worlds: their home and family life, where they may serve as translators, caregivers, or breadwinners, and the academic environment, which may not fully recognize or value those roles. This dissonance can foster feelings of isolation, imposter syndrome, or marginalization, especially when two-year colleges lack adequate cultural affirmation or mentorship tailored to students’ lived experiences.

Another barrier lies in the technological and data infrastructures that govern student support and engagement. Systems such as advising software, degree planning tools, and early alert platforms often lack the ability to capture the complex social and cultural realities of Black male students. As Gándara et al. (2024) argue, these systems are frequently developed without input from the communities they are intended to serve, thereby encoding bias into the very tools designed to improve equity. This contributes to a cycle in which data-driven interventions reinforce deficit-based assumptions rather than addressing structural conditions that impact

student success. Moreover, Porter et al. (2023) highlight how institutional technology units often operate without a clear framework for tackling systemic racism, making it difficult to implement tools that reflect inclusive pedagogical values—especially in resource-constrained environments such as two-year colleges.

Additionally, inequities in institutional funding, resource allocation, and access to technology further entrench these barriers. According to Porter et al. (2023), many equity gaps in higher education are sustained by deeply embedded policies and organizational norms that determine who benefits from innovation and who is left behind. Perna (2021) adds that institutional selectivity and program stratification also influence equity outcomes, reinforcing systemic disparities in graduation rates and post-college opportunity. These include differential access to high-impact practices, exclusion from decision-making processes, and institutional cultures that reward homogeneity over inclusion. For those who are from low-income backgrounds, these structural conditions, particularly prevalent at open-access institutions like community colleges, can severely limit opportunity, progression, and belonging (Gándara et al. 2024; Perna, 2021).

Taken together, these issues reveal that addressing educational disparities requires more than surface-level reforms. Institutions must critically examine and redesign their systems, technologies, and practices through an equity lens, ensuring that inclusion is embedded in both policy and implementation. This includes involving students from underrepresented backgrounds in the design of academic support structures, adopting data practices that capture strength-based narratives, and aligning institutional priorities with justice-oriented outcomes (Perna, 2021; Porter et al., 2023). For two-year colleges in particular where a significant number of Black first-

generation men begin their academic journeys, this means investing in advising and mentoring systems that are not only accessible, but also culturally sustaining and identity-affirming.

First-Generation Black Male Identity in Higher Education

First-generation Black male college students occupy a distinct and complex sociocultural position within higher education, one shaped by the intersecting forces of racial marginalization, gendered expectations, and limited familial collegiate experience. This intersectional identity presents compounded challenges that extend beyond the scope of race-neutral or class-neutral support structures, requiring institutions, particularly two-year colleges, to critically examine how their frameworks either support or hinder these students' academic and personal success (Crenshaw, 1991; Schuyler et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2015).

The concept of intersectionality, as introduced by Crenshaw (1991), explains how individuals at the crossroads of multiple marginalized identities, such as being both Black and first-generation, experience unique and amplified forms of oppression. In the context of higher education, this lens illuminates how support services, policies, and campus climates often fail to meet the nuanced needs of Black first-generation male students. These students not only grapple with the challenges of academic unfamiliarity and college navigation but also face persistent racial microaggressions, stereotype threat, and systemic exclusion—particularly within predominantly white institutions and under-resourced two-year colleges (Hutchings, 2024; Lee, 2023).

Black male students, even when granted access to college, frequently find themselves in environments where their identities are neither validated nor fully engaged. As Sanders (2023) and *Howard Magazine* (2023) highlight, this results in ongoing struggles with invisibility, disengagement, and a lack of belonging. Lee (2023), in a phenomenological study of African

American first-generation men at four-year Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), documents how participants often felt pressured to represent their entire race and gender, while simultaneously experiencing isolation and tokenization. Hutchings (2024) extends this analysis in his study of men of color mentorship programs, warning that without intentional intersectional frameworks, such initiatives may reinforce exclusion by recognizing only parts of students' identities, what he describes as "Blackness preferred, queerness deferred" (p. 1425).

Structural inequities also affect where Black male students enroll. Many select institutions based on affordability, proximity, and perceived support—factors that often lead them to community and technical colleges (Wood & Palmer, 2021). While two-year colleges play a critical role in expanding access, they often struggle with limited advising staff, underdeveloped mentorship models, and resource constraints that hinder the implementation of culturally responsive frameworks. As Cooper and Brohawn (2023) and Crumb et al. (2021) argue, the legacy of systemic inequities in K–12 education, coupled with geographic and socioeconomic constraints, contributes to under-preparedness and shapes college aspirations in ways that disproportionately disadvantage rural Black boys and young men.

Moreover, advising and mentoring programs, key mechanisms for student success, often fall short in meeting the needs of first-generation Black males, especially in two-year colleges where advisors manage high caseloads and may lack formal training in culturally affirming approaches. Research by Strayhorn (2015), Hutchings (2024), and Schuyler et al. (2021) reveals that these programs are frequently grounded in deficit-based models that overlook students' cultural wealth and resilience (Yosso, 2005, as cited in Crumb et al., 2021). While some students find persistence through informal mentorship and peer support, such resources are often serendipitous rather than systematically embedded within institutional practice. Emetu (2023)

stresses the importance of culturally responsive validation and intentional strategies to foster social integration—factors that are especially critical at two-year institutions serving high populations of underrepresented students.

Take together, higher education’s historical and ongoing failure to create inclusive, identity-affirming environments for Black men is rooted in institutional structures that were not designed with racial equity in mind. Perna (2021) and Gándara et al. (2024) assert that these inequities are not merely the result of individual bias but are embedded in systemic frameworks that perpetuate racial stratification. Without deliberate action and equity-minded leadership—particularly within access-oriented colleges such as community and technical institutions—educational systems risk reinforcing the very disparities they claim to address. Porter et al. (2023) further caution that many institutional leaders lack the training to implement structural equity, resulting in fragmented and ineffective interventions.

Resilience, Persistence, and Coping Strategies

Despite these challenges, first-generation students consistently demonstrate resilience and the capacity to persist in the face of adversity. Bettencourt et al. (2020) highlight how first-generation college students draw strength from their families, communities, and personal motivations, often viewing education as a pathway to social mobility not only for themselves but for future generations. Many adopt adaptive coping strategies such as help-seeking, peer networking, and identity reframing to support their educational journeys (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015).

Ives and Castillo-Montoya (2020) also document a range of student-initiated strategies that facilitate academic success, including building relationships with faculty, joining academic support programs, and developing academic self-efficacy through trial and error. These

strategies, while often invisible in institutional narratives, are critical to student persistence and should be acknowledged as valid forms of cultural and academic capital.

Two-Year Colleges in the U.S.

The foundation for two-year colleges was laid by the Morrill Act of 1862, which expanded public access to higher education through land-grant colleges, enabling broader participation among groups historically excluded from universities (Drury, 2003). However, it was not until the early 20th century that a more formalized system of two-year institutions, initially known as junior colleges, began to emerge. Led by educational reformers such as William Rainey Harper, then president of the University of Chicago, junior colleges were conceived as a response to the growing divide between research-oriented universities and the general educational needs of first- and second-year students. Harper's vision, influenced by the German education model, viewed the first two years of postsecondary education as an extension of high school, designed to filter and prepare students for more advanced university-level work (Drury, 2003; Ullrich, 2023). This early model did not prioritize vocational or workforce development but instead functioned as a selective gateway to elite academic institutions.

By the 1920s, junior colleges began to formalize as distinct institutions within the American higher education landscape. The founding of the American Association of Junior Colleges in 1920 signaled a growing recognition of their unique role, with the organization offering guidance on both the academic and civic purposes of these institutions (Ullrich, 2023). As the Great Depression gripped the nation in the 1930s, junior colleges experienced a rapid rise in enrollment, driven by widespread unemployment and a growing demand for accessible, practical education. In response, many junior colleges began incorporating vocational and technical training into their curricula, marking the beginning of a two-path model: one track

directed toward transfer to four-year institutions, and another aimed at immediate entry into the workforce (Drury, 2003). This expansion reflected a shift in the mission of two-year colleges—from selective academic gatekeeping to a more inclusive approach that also addressed regional economic needs. However, tensions remained between these dual purposes, foreshadowing ongoing debates about whether community colleges primarily serve to democratize access to higher education or function as a mechanism for diverting marginalized students from more elite academic pathways.

The post–World War II era marked a pivotal shift in the mission and scope of two-year colleges in the United States. With the passage of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (the GI Bill), millions of veterans accessed higher education, contributing to an unprecedented surge in college enrollment. Between 1945 and 1956, approximately 3.5 million veterans enrolled in technical or vocational programs, while 700,000 pursued agricultural studies (Ullrich, 2023). This rapid growth placed pressure on the higher education system to expand and diversify its offerings, a development that directly influenced the evolution of junior colleges into more comprehensive community colleges.

In 1947, the President’s Commission on Higher Education, known as the Truman Commission, formally advocated for the expansion of public community colleges. The Commission envisioned these institutions as accessible, low-cost options capable of serving specific geographic regions while providing both academic and vocational curricula. This policy vision reflected a national embrace of the community college model as a vehicle for broadening educational access and responding to regional economic needs (Ullrich, 2023). As noted in historical analyses, this period represented a transformation in the identity of two-year colleges,

shifting from institutions rooted in selective academic preparation to ones more closely aligned with democratizing education and strengthening local workforce capacity (Drury, 2003).

The development of two-year colleges in the United States reflects a series of turning points shaped by national policy, demographic change, and shifting educational missions. From their early emergence as junior colleges in the early 20th century (Drury, 2003; Ullrich, 2023) to their transformation into comprehensive community colleges in the post–World War II era (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2019; Ullrich, 2023), these institutions have continually adapted to balance academic preparation, workforce training, and the democratization of access to higher education (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2023; Brint & Karabel, 1989).

These developments collectively reflect a significant transformation in the purpose and perception of two-year colleges. The movement from junior to community college models, spurred by national policy shifts and postwar demographics (Drury, 2003; Ullrich, 2023), laid the groundwork for the complex and sometimes contradictory roles these institutions continue to play today both as engines of opportunity (AACC, 2019) and as gatekeepers within a stratified educational system (AAUP, 2023; Brint & Karabel, 1989).

First-Generation Black Male Students in Two-Year Colleges

Black male students occupy a unique and often marginalized position within the landscape of American community colleges. National enrollment patterns reveal concerning disparities: although Black students comprise roughly 13% of the U.S. population, they account for a disproportionate share of community college attendees, with Black men underrepresented even within this demographic (Camardelle et al., 2022). The Joint Center’s report underscores

that Black male students face multiple systemic barriers, ranging from underfunded institutions and racial bias to limited academic advising, that hinder persistence and completion.

According to the Joint Center's 2022 report, nearly 30% of Black undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges. Yet, Black men are significantly less likely than their female counterparts to complete degrees or transfer to four-year institutions. Factors contributing to these outcomes include poor K–12 preparation, lack of culturally responsive curriculum, and institutional practices that do not fully support the needs of Black male learners (Camardelle et al., 2022). Furthermore, Black men are overrepresented in programs that lead to lower-wage employment and underrepresented in high-return fields such as STEM. The intersection of race, class, and gender within these institutions creates a compound disadvantage that calls for targeted interventions and inclusive support strategies.

Despite these challenges, unique opportunities can yield transformative outcomes when institutions are intentional about engagement. Bush et al. (2022) offer a compelling example through their qualitative study of African American male community college students who participated in a study abroad program in Senegal. Drawing on African American Male Theory, Bush et al. (2022) illuminate how experiences outside the U.S. can reshape cultural, racial, and social identities. Themes such as “men to boys” and “not-so-distant cousins” capture the depth of self-awareness and personal growth participants underwent. The study abroad experience fostered a rare balance of vulnerability and affirmation, providing safe spaces for Black men to reflect, bond, and evolve. These findings align with previous research emphasizing the importance of culturally affirming and identity-conscious programming in fostering belonging and growth among Black male students (Emetu, 2023; Strayhorn, 2015).

Similarly, Stokes (2020) explores perseverance among Black student-fathers in community colleges through a phenomenological lens. These students often remain "invisible" within academic discourse and institutional planning. Stokes identifies perseverance not as a singular trait but as a multidimensional response to structural barriers, personal responsibilities, and institutional neglect. For Black student-fathers, the intersection of race, gender, and parental identity intensifies the challenge of navigating academic environments. Yet, their stories reflect resilience, often sustained by community support, internal motivation, and a vision for long-term stability for their children.

Academic Advising and Mentoring in Two-Year Colleges

Academic advising and mentoring have served as foundational practices in U.S. higher education, evolving in purpose and structure as colleges have responded to changing student needs, institutional missions, and societal demands (Cook, 2001; Garvey, 2023). Advising initially emerged as a faculty-led function focused on course selection and degree completion, while mentoring has roots in more holistic, relational traditions that support personal, academic, and professional development (Garvey, 2023; Rinfret et al., 2023). Together, these practices reflect shifting paradigms of student support, especially as institutions confront longstanding inequities in access, representation, and retention. These inequities are particularly evident in two-year colleges, where advising and mentoring structures are often under-resourced despite serving high proportions of first-generation and minoritized students, including Black men (Karp et al., 2020; Watt, 2020).

Historical Context of Academic Advising in Two-Year Colleges

Academic advising has long served as a guiding force in higher education, rooted in practices dating back to the Middle Ages when preceptors supported students' curricular

navigation (Cook, 2001). In the United States, the term “advisor” emerged formally by the 1870s at Johns Hopkins University. From these origins, advising was intrinsically tied to teaching and learning, as evidenced by early conceptualizations from Crookston (1972) and O’Banion (1972), who framed advising as a developmental, student-centered process rather than a purely transactional one. These foundational perspectives emphasized the advisor’s role as a facilitator of self-awareness, goal setting, and critical thinking, distinguishing advising as an educational endeavor.

This perspective gained renewed momentum in the early 2000s with Lowenstein’s (2009) “learning-centered paradigm,” which argued that advising should function analogously to teaching. He contended that “an excellent advisor does the same for the student’s entire curriculum that the excellent teacher does for one course” (p. 127). Similarly, Troxel (2015) extended this pedagogical framing by aligning scholarly advising with the broader scholarship of teaching and learning. These conceptions elevated the status of advising from clerical support to an intentional, learning-focused practice central to student development.

Despite these advancements, many institutions continued to implement advising in procedural terms limited to tasks such as course registration, degree audits, and compliance with institutional policies (Troxel & Kyei-Blankson, 2020). This is especially problematic at two-year colleges, where advising offices often operate with limited staffing and resources, leading to inconsistent student experiences (Karp et al., 2020). First-generation Black male students, in particular, face advising systems that may fail to recognize their cultural assets or unique pathways to college, reinforcing deficit narratives (Sabree, 2022; Watt, 2020).

However, increasing research attention has emphasized advising’s broader potential to influence retention, engagement, and student success, particularly when advising is grounded in

developmental theory and responsive pedagogy (Cole, 2025; Wei, 2022). The Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) Center for First-generation Student Success has noted that when community colleges embed advising into holistic student support frameworks and train advisors in culturally responsive practices, outcomes improve for students historically underserved by higher education (Karp et al., 2020).

The institutional recognition of advising as a high-impact practice has paralleled calls for its professionalization. McGill (2019) conducted a structured literature review tracing how academic advising has evolved into both a discipline and a profession, documenting the emergence of a distinct knowledge base, conceptual models, and professional competencies. His later work (McGill, 2021) proposed a grounded theory of academic advising, emphasizing the complexity and nuance of advising processes as informed by institutional structures, student diversity, and advisor positionality. NACADA (2006) contributed to this professionalization through its “Concept of Academic Advising,” which articulated advising as a curriculum (what is taught), a pedagogy (how it is taught), and student learning outcomes (what students learn), firmly embedding advising within the academic mission of colleges and universities.

Technology has also transformed the advising landscape. Institutions now rely on data analytics, degree audit tools, and early alert systems to track student progress and coordinate interventions. While technology offers efficiencies and supports capacity, researchers caution that its effectiveness depends on integration with human-centered advising practices and advisor agency in implementation decisions (Steele, 2018; Troxel & Kyei-Blankson, 2020). At community colleges, however, the digital infrastructure for advising may be fragmented or underutilized, which can further disadvantage students who already face navigational barriers

(Karp et al., 2020). As Thomas and McFarlane (2018) argue, it is not merely the presence of tools, but how advisors use them that drives student success.

Alongside theoretical and technological developments, advising is undergoing structural transformation within institutions. Persistent concerns about low pay, heavy caseloads, and limited career progression have led some institutions, such as the University of South Carolina, to implement advising career ladders that recognize and reward professional development (University of South Carolina, n.d.). These changes signal a shift toward legitimizing academic advising as a career pathway with cognitive and developmental complexity, rather than as an entry-level or clerical role. This shift is particularly critical in community colleges, where advising staff are often asked to serve a diverse, high-need student population without sufficient professional support or recognition (Sabree, 2022; Watt, 2020).

Historical Context of Mentoring in Two-Year Colleges

Following the historical development of academic advising, the evolution of mentoring in higher education reveals a parallel yet distinct trajectory shaped by cultural, philosophical, and institutional shifts. While advising has often been framed in terms of academic planning and institutional navigation, mentoring historically encompasses a broader, more relational form of guidance that attends to both personal and professional development. Understanding the historical roots of mentoring and its evolving role within higher education is essential to appreciating its current relevance, particularly for marginalized student populations.

The concept of mentoring can be traced to ancient Greece, where the character Mentor in Homer's *Odyssey* embodied the role of a wise counselor entrusted with guiding the young Telemachus (Garvey, 2023). This classical model of mentorship emphasized the transmission of knowledge, values, and leadership across generations. Over time, mentoring evolved beyond

heroic literature into practical frameworks within apprenticeships, religious instruction, and, eventually, formal education (Garvey, 2023). During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, mentorship relationships often occurred within guilds and religious institutions, reinforcing hierarchical models of learning where the mentor served as both moral guide and skill instructor (Rinfret et al., 2023).

In the context of American higher education, mentoring became more formalized in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the expansion of graduate education. Elite institutions such as Harvard and Johns Hopkins modeled the Germanic system of research apprenticeship, where students were mentored by faculty in their disciplines to prepare them for academic careers (Garvey, 2023; Rinfret et al., 2023). However, these mentoring structures were often limited to white, male students from privileged backgrounds, excluding women, people of color, and first-generation students from access to such relational capital (McZee, 2023).

The latter half of the 20th century saw a growing recognition of the importance of mentoring in promoting equity, especially for underrepresented and first-generation college students. As higher education became more diverse, mentoring began to be viewed not only as a tool for academic development but also as a critical intervention for retention, social integration, and empowerment (Plaskett et al., 2018). Peer mentoring, in particular, emerged as an effective strategy to support the unique challenges faced by students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds, offering culturally congruent support and fostering a sense of belonging (Plaskett et al., 2018). Community colleges have increasingly implemented peer mentoring programs to support first-generation Black men, often filling the gaps left by limited faculty representation or high advising loads (Karp et al., 2020; Watt, 2020).

More recently, scholars have called for a critical reframing of mentoring in ways that acknowledge structural inequalities and the lived experiences of marginalized students. McZee (2023), in his analysis of mentoring programs for African American males in community colleges, critiques deficit-based models that fail to affirm cultural identity or provide meaningful relational support. He argues for mentorship practices rooted in critical consciousness and racial uplift, challenging institutions to move beyond transactional models toward transformative, identity-affirming engagement. Sabree (2022) echoes these findings in his study of Black male athletes at Michigan community colleges, where students emphasized the importance of mentors who understood their unique challenges and identities both in and out of the classroom. This evolution in the conceptualization of mentoring highlights its enduring relevance and the need for intentional design, especially in community colleges and other access-oriented institutions.

Challenges and Barriers in Advising and Mentorship Relationships

Despite the recognized value of academic advising and mentoring as high-impact practices for student retention and success (Afzal et al., 2024; Museus, 2014; Museus & Kim, 2021), numerous challenges continue to constrain the effectiveness of these relationships, particularly for historically underserved populations such as first-generation students and Black male collegians (Hutchings, 2024; Strayhorn, 2015). Advising and mentorship interactions are often shaped by institutional structures, implicit cultural norms, and advisor role ambiguity — that is, the lack of consistent expectations and responsibilities assigned to advisors—all of which influence students' sense of belonging, trust, and academic engagement (Garriott, 2019; Garriott et al., 2018).

One persistent barrier is the dominance of transactional advising models, which prioritize administrative compliance over relational connection. Leek (2023) found that many advisors

operate under time-constrained, task-oriented paradigms that limit opportunities for students, especially first-generation and racially minoritized students, to build meaningful advising relationships. This dynamic reflects a broader institutional culture that undervalues affective dimensions of student support (Museus & Neville, 2012). Strayhorn (2015) similarly advocates for a shift toward relationship-based advising, arguing that students of color benefit from culturally engaging advising that affirms their identities and validates their lived experiences.

Cultural mismatch further complicates advising and mentoring interactions. Spector (2024) and McZee (2023) highlight how cultural values around family involvement, respect for authority, and decision-making styles often differ between students and advisors. Students from collectivist backgrounds or those navigating racialized experiences may be misperceived as disengaged or uncertain when in fact they are drawing upon familial or community-based support systems—forms of cultural capital often unrecognized in advising settings (Crumb et al., 2021; Yosso, 2005). When such dissonance occurs, students may feel misunderstood, unsupported, or even pathologized by the very systems meant to guide them (Emetu, 2023; Hutchings, 2024).

On the institutional side, advisors who aim to support marginalized students often experience tension between their commitment to equity and the structural limitations of their roles. Collins (2023), using a tempered radicals framework, describes how advisors frequently find themselves caught between institutional expectations and the desire to advocate for transformative change. This mirrors findings by Porter et al. (2023), who report that many advisors lack training in structural equity and are unsupported in their efforts to challenge normative advising models. As a result, well-meaning advisors may experience isolation or burnout, ultimately curbing the sustainability of equity-driven practices.

Finally, the siloed nature of advising and mentorship presents systemic challenges. Afzal et al. (2024) and Schuyler et al. (2021) emphasize that while mentoring is often heralded as crucial for student belonging and persistence, it remains inconsistently implemented within formal advising structures. Students, particularly those navigating transfer pathways or returning from academic probation, often receive fragmented or contradictory guidance (Cooper & Brohawn, 2023; Perna, 2021). Without intentional integration and cultural responsiveness, advising and mentoring risk replicating the very inequities they aim to disrupt.

Racialized Experiences of Advising and Mentorship for Black Men

Black men frequently encounter academic environments where advising relationships are shaped by racialized dynamics that negatively affect their sense of belonging and success. Johnson et al. (2023) describe how institutionalized practices and advising cultures often fail to recognize the unique experiences of Black male students. These students report being met with suspicion or assumptions about their academic ability, rather than being approached as capable and motivated learners. Similarly, McClain (2023) underscores how Black men navigating higher education, especially at two-year institutions, often feel unseen by advisors, faculty, and peers. These feelings of invisibility can lead to disengagement or even departure from college, especially when they are compounded by systemic inequities or a lack of culturally responsive support structures.

Means (2014) adds to this by exploring the psychological toll of advising interactions that frame Black male students as deficient or lacking. His findings highlight how these deficit-based narratives shape students' internal self-concept and decision-making about persistence. While all three studies have documented harmful advising experiences, they offer varying contexts, some focused on four-year universities (Johnson et al., 2023), others on two-year colleges (McClain,

2023), and still others on identity formation and retention (Means, 2014) highlighting that these issues persist across institutional types and settings.

In response to these racialized experiences, scholars such as Strayhorn (2015) argue for the importance of culturally sustaining mentorship practices and counterspaces—settings where Black men can authentically engage without fear of judgment or marginalization. These environments allow students to be seen as assets, not deficits. Strayhorn’s work positions belonging not as a passive outcome, but as a condition that must be actively cultivated through intentional advising and mentorship practices that honor students’ racial, cultural, and gender identities.

Taken together, these studies suggest that traditional advising models often fall short for Black male students, and that effective, culturally grounded mentorship models may offer more promising alternatives. However, few studies have closely examined how these mentorship initiatives operate within two-year institutions or how students themselves narrate these experiences. This gap highlights the need for deeper exploration into advising and mentorship structures that not only support but affirm and empower Black men throughout their college journeys.

Leveraging Cultural Wealth in Mentoring and Advising Interactions

Building upon the historical context of academic advising, recent scholarship has emphasized the urgent need to reimagine advising and mentoring through culturally responsive and relational lenses, especially for historically marginalized student populations. For first-generation Black male college students, advising and mentoring interactions are not only academic touchpoints but also potential affirmations of identity, community, and belonging. These students often navigate institutions that overlook or devalue their lived experiences.

However, many draw on cultural resources to succeed—resources that are now recognized under the conceptual framework of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Yosso's (2005) model identifies six forms of capital that marginalized students bring to educational spaces: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant. These capitals disrupt deficit-based narratives by framing students' backgrounds as rich sources of knowledge and resilience. Rather than perceiving students of color through what they lack, community cultural wealth highlights what they possess and how these assets can be leveraged in advising and mentoring contexts.

Vasu and Mino (2023) call for the integration of community cultural wealth in mentoring and pedagogy, especially within STEM fields where underrepresentation is persistent. Their findings suggest that culturally responsive mentoring affirms students' backgrounds and empowers them to draw strength from their cultural identities and community-rooted knowledge. When faculty and advisors intentionally build upon these assets, they create spaces of affirmation and support that foster persistence and success.

This approach is reinforced by over a decade of research by Museus and colleagues, who advocate for culturally engaging advising that centers relationship-building and validation (Museus, 2021; Museus & Kim, 2021; Museus & Neville, 2012; Museus & Smith, 2014). Such advising extends beyond transactional course planning to emphasize holistic support. Students who feel genuinely seen and supported by their advisors often express a stronger sense of belonging, academic motivation, and civic engagement. As one student shared, "They've invested so much in me—how can I fail them?" (Museus & Kim, 2021). This humanized advising practice affirms students' cultural identities and encourages them to remain committed to both personal and community uplift.

Strayhorn (2015) extends these ideas by conceptualizing advisors as cultural navigators who help students interpret, navigate, and ultimately thrive within institutional systems not originally designed for them. Through the lens of community cultural wealth, Strayhorn (2015) encourages advisors to recognize and incorporate students' familial stories, aspirational goals, and social resources as key elements of advising practice. For example, navigational capitals, the ability to skillfully move through bureaucratic structures, can be enhanced through advising conversations that affirm precollege experiences and community knowledge.

Tolbert Smith (2022) similarly found that Black men in engineering programs drew heavily on familial support, peer mentorship, and internalized messages of perseverance. These cultural forms of capital, rooted in precollege and community experiences, were crucial motivators for persistence and identity development. Her research underscores the need for advising and mentoring that actively elicit and validate these forms of invisible labor and support, particularly in technical colleges and two-year institutions where advisors often serve as a student's primary link to institutional resources.

Community Cultural Wealth as Coping Strategy

Rather than being defined by deficit-based narratives, many first-generation students draw upon forms of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) to navigate and persist through these challenges. Sussman (2020) found that first-generation students' use of familial, social, and navigational capital contributed significantly to their overall well-being, sense of purpose, and academic resilience. Participants who leaned into their familial support networks and internalized messages of perseverance passed down through their communities reported higher satisfaction with their majors and stronger commitment to their academic goals. These cultural forms of

capital, often rooted in collectivist values and cultural traditions, help first-generation students maintain a sense of belonging in spaces where they may otherwise feel marginalized.

Brown, Horton, and Henderson (2024) provide a vivid narrative example of a Black male engineering student who actively leveraged his aspirational, navigational, and familial capital to persist in a predominantly white and structurally exclusionary environment. Rather than viewing his lack of generational collegiate knowledge as a deficit, the student reframed his background as a strength, drawing on the encouragement of his mother and the tenacity modeled by family members to overcome institutional gatekeeping. Similarly, Grabsch et al. (2023) argue that when institutions recognize and affirm these assets through culturally responsive advising and mentoring, Black and Latinx students are more likely to persist. This asset-based framing of community cultural wealth not only challenges dominant narratives of deficiency but also affirms the lived experiences and strategic agency of first-generation Black male students as they resist and reimagine their place within higher education (Garriott, 2019).

In sum, first-generation Black male students navigate a higher education system loaded with intersecting barriers that span racial, gendered, geographic, and socioeconomic lines. Despite their resilience, the lack of comprehensive, intersectional support models in advising and mentoring continues to undermine their success. Literature underscores a critical need for culturally sustaining, identity-conscious practices that affirm and empower these students—not as exceptions, but as valued members of the academic community. Addressing this gap is not only an academic imperative but a moral one for institutions committed to true equity and inclusion.

Transfer Process in U.S. Higher Education

The transfer process in U.S. higher education has long served as a vital access point for students navigating non-linear educational pathways. Despite its importance, the process remains complex, inconsistent, and frequently inequitable. Transfer students, especially those moving from community colleges to four-year institutions, often encounter structural and informational barriers that hinder their progress toward a degree.

Recent analyses highlight how fragmented the transfer system has become. According to a 2023 *Inside Higher Ed* report, many students experience the transfer process as a “do-it-yourself” (DIY) endeavor, lacking adequate institutional support or guidance (Fain, 2023). Students are frequently left to interpret articulation agreements, navigate unclear credit evaluations, and reconcile conflicting institutional policies. This misalignment can lead to significant credit loss and delayed time to degree.

The American Council on Education further underscores the need for systemic reform. Their 2023 guide on *Effective Practices for Transfer Students* identifies critical institutional strategies, including the development of proactive advising, centralized transfer support services, and clearly mapped transfer pathways (ACE, 2023a). These recommendations are particularly important for addressing the needs of historically underserved populations, including first-generation students and students of color, who are more likely to experience transfer-related obstacles.

In *Reimagining Transfer for Student Success*, ACE emphasizes the broader policy and leadership actions needed to streamline transfer pathways across institutions (ACE, 2023b). The report calls for improved data sharing, inter-institutional collaboration, and inclusive advising frameworks that prioritize equity and completion. Institutions that take a student-centered

approach, offering transparent credit evaluation processes, structured orientation programs, and early academic planning, are more likely to retain and graduate transfer students efficiently.

Despite growing awareness, gaps in policy coherence and institutional practice continue to affect transfer student outcomes nationwide. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated effort that spans academic advising, admissions, registrar functions, and leadership at both sending and receiving institutions. As the transfer student population becomes more diverse and mobile, institutions must rethink legacy systems and design transfer processes that are not only efficient, but equitable and intentionally supportive.

The Transfer Process for First-Generation Community College Students

The transition from community college to a four-year institution presents numerous challenges, particularly for those who often lack the financial, social, and cultural capital to navigate the transfer system effectively (Marine Nin & Gutierrez Keeton, 2020; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Padgett et al., 2012). Although the community college pathway remains one of the most accessible routes to a bachelor's degree for historically underserved students, institutional support for transfer remains uneven and often ineffective (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Research indicates that while 80% of entering community college students aspire to earn a bachelor's degree, only 14% do so within six years (Jenkins & Fink, 2016), highlighting a persistent and troubling gap between intention and outcome.

Marine Nin and Gutierrez Keeton's (2020) qualitative study provides critical insights into the experiences of first-generation students who reached key "transfer momentum points"—benchmarks including 30 transferable credits, continuous enrollment across semesters, completion of gateway English and math, and maintaining a minimum GPA of 2.0. While students in this study met these benchmarks, they did so in the face of multiple structural and

personal barriers. The most commonly cited challenge was financial insecurity. Most participants worked full-time jobs to fund their education, which often came at the expense of academic engagement and performance (Novak & McKinney, 2011; Pascarella et al., 2003). These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that first-generation students are less likely to be aware of or apply for financial aid, which increases their likelihood of dropping out (Nakajima et al., 2012).

In addition to financial barriers, many students lacked awareness of critical campus resources, including tutoring, counseling, work-study programs, and book loans. Marine Nin and Gutierrez Keeton (2020) attribute this to the absence of cultural capital, echoing Padgett et al. (2012), who found that first-generation students often lack the informal knowledge necessary to navigate higher education successfully. While institutions may assume students will seek out help when needed, research shows that first-generation students often do not know who to ask or what questions to pose (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Students in the Marine Nin and Gutierrez Keeton (2020) study frequently discovered resources through peers or by accident, rather than through structured institutional outreach.

This sense of being "on their own" is echoed in journalistic accounts as well. According to *The Hechinger Report* (2022), many first-generation and low-income transfer students report feeling unwelcome and invisible at four-year institutions. Their experiences of exclusion can reinforce feelings of imposter syndrome and isolation, undermining academic motivation and persistence. These psychosocial challenges are compounded by a lack of structured mentoring and early academic interventions, both of which have been shown to significantly improve outcomes for vulnerable student populations (Bettinger & Long, 2005; Marine Nin & Gutierrez Keeton, 2019).

Nonetheless, many first-generation students demonstrate remarkable resilience. Marine Nin and Gutierrez Keeton (2019) document how students developed financial awareness, leaned on informal support systems, and maintained hope and motivation even when facing setbacks. These findings align with Ellis (2013), who found that many first-generation students remain committed to their educational goals as a means of honoring family expectations and aspirations. Additionally, students who had clear academic and career goals, despite not always having declared majors, were better able to sustain their motivation through obstacles (Ishitani, 2006).

Mentorship emerged as a particularly impactful intervention in both scholarly and applied contexts. Research suggests that structured mentoring programs, such as the Puente Project, increase student engagement and transfer rates among first-generation and underserved populations (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office [CCCCO], 2015; Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Marine Nin and Gutierrez Keeton (2019) emphasize the importance of expanding such programs, citing evidence that students who had access to one-on-one mentoring were more likely to utilize available resources and persist toward their transfer goals.

Furthermore, the implementation of early alert systems can help institutions intervene before students disengage or fail. As Hammond (2007) argues, effective early warning systems must be timely and actionable, providing students with clear feedback and directing them to appropriate support services. Moore and Shulock (2010) add that early alerts should also include educational components that help students understand academic policies and success strategies—critical for those with limited prior exposure to college.

Importantly, institutions must recognize the nonlinear and often extended timeline many first-generation students experience. The term “two-year college” is increasingly a misnomer, as many students take longer to complete their programs due to work, caregiving, and academic

delays (Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Marine Nin & Gutierrez Keeton, 2019). Flexibility in institutional policies and support structures is essential to meet these students where they are.

Finally, family engagement plays a crucial role. Marine Nin and Gutierrez Keeton (2019) recommend outreach efforts to educate students' families about college costs, financial aid, and the overall transfer process. When families are equipped with this information, they can better support their students emotionally and logistically. This approach aligns with Burdman (2005), who advocates for the integration of financial aid education into high school counseling practices to help first-generation families prepare for the transition to college.

Academic Advising, Mentorship, and the Transfer Pipeline

Academic advising and mentorship at two-year colleges play pivotal roles in preparing students, particularly first-generation and underrepresented students such as Black men, for successful transfer to four-year institutions. Unlike the linear path often presumed in traditional models, the transfer process is for many a complex academic, cultural, and social transition that demands intentional and sustained support (Hayes et al., 2020). In community and technical colleges, where advising caseloads are high and student needs are diverse, effective advising must go beyond course selection to include transfer planning, cultural validation, and the development of what Hayes et al. (2020) refer to as transfer student capital.

Transfer student capital encompasses both formal and informal knowledge including awareness of articulation agreements, navigation of admissions and financial aid processes, and the social confidence to advocate for oneself across institutional contexts. Advisors at two-year colleges are uniquely positioned to help students build this capital by providing early, consistent, and tailored guidance. However, Goemans and Kapinos (2024) found that while advising appointments in community colleges are positively associated with academic success metrics

such as GPA and retention, many students still underutilize these services, particularly those from historically underserved populations. This signals the need for more proactive or intrusive advising models, where advisors initiate and sustain engagement rather than waiting for students to seek help (Moran, 2023).

Moran (2023) adds to this picture by highlighting the critical connection between advising and students' completion of corequisite gateway courses—foundational courses that are essential for transfer readiness. His research shows that structured advising interventions can help students complete these courses more efficiently, reducing time to degree and increasing transfer viability. Importantly, Moran's findings align with Terry O'Banion's (as discussed in Kisker, 2022) developmental model of community college advising, which advocates for holistic, student-centered practices that support both academic and personal growth.

In addition to formal advising structures, mentorship, particularly peer and culturally responsive mentoring, is an increasingly recognized support mechanism in two-year colleges. Peer mentoring programs offer first-generation and underrepresented students relational, identity-affirming support that complements institutional advising efforts. Scribner (2019) found that peer mentoring significantly increases student satisfaction in two-year institutions by fostering belonging and providing academic and social guidance from relatable sources. Similarly, Patel, Calhoun, and Tolman (2024) demonstrated that culturally competent peer mentorship programs improve engagement and retention, especially for international and marginalized students. Their work underscores the value of integrating student development theory and cultural awareness into mentoring practices to ensure alignment with students' lived experiences.

Mentorship also contributes to the development of social capital, a critical component of transfer student success. Hayes et al. (2020) emphasized that peer and adult mentoring relationships play a powerful role in building the networks and confidence first-generation students need to persist in higher education. By closing gaps in access to social capital, mentoring can mitigate the effects of systemic inequities that often affect students of color in community college settings. Hayes et al. (2020) further emphasize that mentorship fosters academic self-efficacy and a transfer-oriented identity, particularly when advisors and mentors affirm students' cultural backgrounds and academic aspirations.

Moran (2023) reinforces the importance of intrusive and intentional mentorship within advising frameworks, noting that when advisors act as mentors—building rapport, following up intentionally, and advocating on students' behalf—students are more likely to persist and reach academic milestones. This type of relational engagement is especially crucial for Black male students, who often experience isolation and underrepresentation within institutional advising and mentoring systems (Hayes et al., 2020).

An illustrative example of such integrated support can be found in Harford Community College's pre-transfer program, which combines targeted advising, culturally responsive mentorship, and peer-led engagement to demystify the transfer process (Buenaflor, 2021). This model centers the development of transfer student capital through relationship-building and identity-affirming strategies, which are essential for two-year college students navigating multiple layers of transition.

In the technical college context, where advising structures often prioritize short-term certificate or degree completion, embedding long-term transfer goals within advising and mentoring conversations is essential. As Hayes et al. (2020), Moran (2023), and Scribner (2019)

collectively argue, institutions must design systems that not only inform but also empower students thus bridging both the informational and relational dimensions of the transfer journey. By integrating proactive advising, culturally sustaining mentorship, and a transfer-centered advising mission, two-year colleges can serve as launchpads for student success rather than endpoints.

The Role of Cultural Wealth in Navigating the Transfer Process

The transfer process can be complex and challenging, particularly for historically marginalized student populations. However, the concept of community cultural wealth offers a lens to better understand how these students leverage their existing knowledge, skills, and networks to navigate academic transitions. Community cultural wealth, as first conceptualized by Yosso (2005), shifts the narrative away from a deficit perspective and instead recognizes the rich array of cultural knowledge that students from underrepresented backgrounds bring with them into educational spaces.

In the context of transfer, navigational and social capital are particularly salient (Bañuelos, 2021). Students often rely on mentors, peers, and community networks to understand articulation agreements, meet academic requirements, and access advising services. These forms of capital are not just supplementary but essential, especially in institutional contexts where formal support mechanisms may be inconsistent or unclear (Bañuelos, 2021).

The need for clear and equitable transfer pathways is further underscored by Hutchison (2024), who argues that students are often under-informed about the transfer process and face systemic barriers that inhibit mobility. Hutchison introduces the concept of transfer capital—a subset of navigational capital that refers to the specific knowledge and support needed to transfer successfully. This includes understanding course equivalencies, application deadlines, and

financial aid options. When institutions fail to recognize or build upon students' existing cultural wealth, the burden of navigating these complex systems falls disproportionately on students, particularly those who are first-generation or from minoritized communities.

Del Real Viramontes (2020) examines how Latina/o transfer students draw upon community cultural wealth within institutions that are not always “transfer receptive.” He emphasizes the role of institutional agents—faculty, advisors, and administrators—in cultivating a transfer-receptive culture that acknowledges and affirms students' cultural assets. Without this recognition, students' navigational capital may be underutilized or even dismissed. Del Real Viramontes calls for a reimagining of transfer policies and practices that foreground equity and inclusion by honoring the cultural wealth students bring with them from their communities and previous educational experiences.

Partnerships between institutions also play a critical role in creating environments that harness and validate community cultural wealth. Voigt (2024) describes how STEM-focused partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions can create affirming spaces where students' cultural wealth is not only recognized but actively supported. These collaborations foster inclusive practices, such as culturally responsive advising and cohort-based mentorship models, that empower students to persist and succeed during the transfer process.

Taken together, these perspectives underscore the necessity of institutional practices that affirm and build upon students' community cultural wealth. When institutions recognize students as holders of valuable knowledge and experience rather than as empty vessels to be filled, the transfer process becomes more equitable, navigable, and affirming.

Theoretical Framework: Community Cultural Wealth

Community Cultural Wealth is a theoretical framework developed by Tara J. Yosso (2005) as a response to deficit-based models that dominate educational discourse and research, particularly in regard to students of color. In her seminal work, *Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth*, Yosso critiques traditional interpretations of cultural capital rooted in Bourdieu's theory, which positions the values, skills, and norms of dominant (often white, middle-class) communities as the benchmark for academic success (Yosso, 2005). Instead, Yosso argues that this approach pathologizes communities of color by failing to recognize the wealth of knowledge, skills, abilities, and networks they already possess.

Origins and Foundations of Community Cultural Wealth

Yosso (2005) grounds her conceptualization of Community Cultural Wealth within Critical Race Theory, a framework that seeks to challenge and dismantle dominant ideologies and structures that perpetuate racial inequities in education. Critical Race Theory prioritizes the experiential knowledge of people of color and asserts that racism is embedded within the fabric of educational institutions. By leveraging Critical Race Theory, Yosso reconceptualizes cultural capital not as a fixed commodity defined by dominant norms, but as a dynamic and multifaceted set of assets cultivated within communities of color. This paradigm shift allows for an asset-based lens that recognizes students of color, particularly first-generation students, not as lacking, but as richly resourced in ways that institutions often overlook (Bañuelos, 2021; Yosso, 2005).

The Community Cultural Wealth framework includes six forms of capital: aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic (Yosso, 2005). These capitals reflect the strategies students of color use to navigate social institutions, maintain cultural identity, and

resist systemic marginalization. For example, aspirational capital encompasses the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future despite systemic barriers, while navigational capital refers to the skills necessary to maneuver through institutions not designed for marginalized populations (Yosso, 2005).

Subsequent scholarship has built upon Yosso's foundational work to explore the utility of community cultural wealth across educational contexts. Bañuelos (2021) reviews the literature applying community cultural wealth in postsecondary settings and emphasizes the framework's utility for understanding the strengths of first-generation and minoritized students, especially in relation to career development and institutional support systems. Brown et al. (2024), in their narrative study of a Black male undergraduate engineering student, demonstrate how community cultural wealth provides a critical lens to recognize and validate the non-traditional assets that students bring to STEM education—assets that are often unacknowledged in dominant educational narratives.

Moreover, Adeyemo (2025) highlights the influence of familial and social capital within Black communities by examining parental involvement in Black male student-athletes' educational experiences. Her findings reinforce the idea that cultural wealth is not only personal but also collective, stemming from deeply rooted community networks and intergenerational resilience. Hiramori et al. (2024) extend community cultural wealth in a critically quantitative direction, offering ways to measure its dimensions through survey instruments and demonstrating that these forms of capital have statistically significant impacts on educational engagement and success for minoritized populations.

Together, these works underscore the importance of viewing student success through a strengths-based lens. Community Cultural Wealth, rooted in Critical Race Theory, enables

researchers and practitioners to center the lived experiences of students of color, affirm their assets, and push back against institutional narratives that frame them as underprepared or incapable (Adeyemo, 2025; Bañuelos, 2021; Brown et al., 2024; Hiramori et al., 2024; Yosso, 2005).

The Six Forms of Cultural Capital in Community Cultural Wealth

Tara Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework outlines six interrelated forms of cultural capital that communities of color utilize to navigate educational spaces. These capitals, aspirational, familial, social, navigational, linguistic, and resistant, collectively challenge the deficit-based perspectives embedded in traditional academic paradigms and recognize the assets that marginalized students bring to institutions that were not built for them. For first-generation Black male students in two-year colleges, several of these capitals, particularly aspirational, familial, social, and navigational, are instrumental in shaping their educational trajectories, especially as they engage with advising, mentorship, and transfer preparation.

Aspirational Capital

Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future despite facing systemic barriers such as racism, poverty, and educational inequities (Yosso, 2005). This form of capital is essential for first-generation students who often pursue academic goals in the absence of institutional familiarity or intergenerational college-going knowledge.

Sausner et al. (2024) highlight the ways marginalized students, including those underrepresented in STEM, exhibit aspirational capital through a sustained belief in their academic potential even in hostile or exclusionary environments. In their study, students repeatedly demonstrated internal motivation and a deep understanding of what they needed to

learn, rather than merely what was expected. This aspirational drive becomes especially salient in two-year college contexts where students must balance school, work, and often caregiving responsibilities while remaining focused on long-term goals such as transfer and career advancement.

For Black male students, aspirational capital often serves as a counter-narrative to prevailing stereotypes that question their academic commitment or capacity (Brown et al., 2024). Through their narratives, these students challenge deficit assumptions and assert their determination to succeed, even when institutions provide limited support.

Familial Capital

Familial capital encompasses the cultural knowledge nurtured within families and extended kinship networks that foster identity, community, and moral support (Yosso, 2005). This includes both biological and chosen families, as well as spiritual and cultural mentors who reinforce the value of education and perseverance.

In many Black communities, familial capital is rooted in traditions of resilience, mutual aid, and intergenerational learning (Adeyemo, 2025). Even when parents or guardians have not attended college themselves, they often play pivotal roles in encouraging educational persistence. For first-generation Black male students, familial capital may manifest through advice from elders, encouragement from siblings, or lessons passed down from family histories of overcoming adversity.

Yrigollen-Robbins (2022), in her testimonios of Latina immigrants, underscores how familial bonds provide a framework for navigating cultural and institutional challenges. While her focus is on Latina populations, the parallels in how marginalized families generate strength

and guidance highlight the relevance of familial capital across racially and ethnically diverse communities.

Social Capital

Social capital involves networks of people and community resources that offer emotional support, mentorship, and practical guidance (Yosso, 2005). These networks may include peers, faculty, staff, mentors, and others who help students navigate educational systems, access opportunities, and build a sense of belonging.

Brown et al. (2024) illustrate how social capital was critical for a Black male engineering student whose mentors and peers provided strategic support and affirmation in navigating a predominantly white academic environment. Similarly, first-generation Black male students at two-year colleges often rely on informal networks such as peer groups, campus staff, and community members to fill gaps in institutional support, particularly in advising and mentorship contexts.

Yrigollen-Robbins (2022) also emphasizes the importance of forming social networks beyond immediate family to access institutional resources and emotional solidarity. These findings reinforce the idea that social capital is not merely about who one knows, but how those relationships are cultivated and leveraged in response to systemic barriers.

Navigational Capital

Navigational capital refers to the ability to maneuver through social institutions such as schools and colleges that were not created to serve communities of color (Yosso, 2005). This form of capital includes both implied knowledge and learned strategies that enable students to access resources, advocate for themselves, and persist in the face of institutional neglect or discrimination.

For first-generation Black male students, navigational capital is critical in their interactions with advising and mentorship programs. These students often develop unique strategies for navigating bureaucracy, building relationships with staff, and accessing transfer pathways despite limited formal guidance (Bañuelos, 2021). Sausner et al. (2024) note how navigational capital intersects with aspirational capital, as students who envision academic success must also learn how to strategically navigate institutional hurdles to realize that vision.

Navigational capital is also dynamic and cumulative—it grows through experience, mentorship, and the sharing of knowledge within communities. As Yosso (2005) argues, students of color learn to "read" institutional culture and adapt, resist, or subvert it as needed to achieve their goals.

Linguistic Capital

Linguistic capital refers to the intellectual and social skills attained through communication in more than one language or through mastery of diverse communication styles, including storytelling, code-switching, and cultural expression (Yosso, 2005). While not a central focus of this study, linguistic capital may still be relevant, particularly in how students articulate their experiences during narrative interviews and how they use language to navigate both cultural and academic contexts.

Resistant Capital

Resistant capital involves the knowledge and skills that students develop through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality and oppression (Yosso, 2005). This includes participating in social justice efforts, challenging stereotypes, and asserting agency within institutional spaces. While not the primary focus of this study, resistant capital is interwoven with other forms of capital, as the decision to persist, seek advising, or transfer can itself be

understood as an act of resistance against systems that often expect failure. Together, these six capitals offer a holistic lens through which to understand the lived experiences of first-generation Black male students in two-year colleges. By centering aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital, this study foregrounds how students actively leverage cultural assets to succeed, persist, and prepare for transfer despite the barriers embedded in educational systems not built for their success.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the complex and intersecting experiences of first-generation Black male students in two-year colleges, highlighting the structural, cultural, and institutional dynamics that shape their educational trajectories. Drawing on Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, the literature rejects deficit perspectives and instead emphasizes the navigational, familial, aspirational, linguistic, resistant, and social capital these students possess and mobilize. Studies underscore that while advising, mentorship, and transfer support are essential to student success, they are often misaligned with the lived realities of marginalized students (Hayes et al., 2020; Hutchings, 2024; Strayhorn, 2015). Furthermore, while the transfer infrastructure has improved through articulation agreements and initiatives, inequities persist in implementation and access (Anderson et al., 2006; USG, 2023b). The literature also reveals gaps in research on how first-generation Black men specifically narrate their advising and mentorship experiences at two-year institutions. Addressing this void, the present study amplifies these voices and informs more culturally sustaining and equity-minded practices across the two-year college landscape.

Building upon the literature emphasizing the importance of story and voice in qualitative research, this study employed Narrative Inquiry as its guiding methodology and incorporated

Photovoice as a data collection method. This integration provided collaborators with multiple avenues to share their lived experiences both verbally and visually thereby deepening the understanding of how first-generation Black male students navigate academic advising and mentorship in two-year college settings.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology for exploring the lived experiences of first-generation Black male students at a two-year technical college focusing on their academic advising and mentorship experiences as they navigate the transfer process. In this study, I refer to the individuals who shared their narratives and images as collaborators rather than participants. Grounded in Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, this qualitative study employed narrative inquiry to amplify collaborators' voices, allowing them to share personal stories of persistence, aspirations, and challenges while navigating the two-year college experience with the intention to transfer. Photovoice complemented narrative inquiry by providing a visual dimension to their experiences, enabling collaborators to capture images that represent their transfer goals and institutional barriers.

This chapter details the research design, justifying the use of qualitative methods and narrative inquiry, and describes the study's population and sampling strategy. It also outlines the data collection process, including interview protocols and photovoice prompts, and discuss how Yosso's framework informs the study's structure and analysis. Additionally, the chapter addresses researcher positionality, researcher reflexivity, ethical considerations, and strategies to ensure trustworthiness and mitigate bias. Through this methodological approach, the study offers an understanding of how first-generation Black male students at a two-year college overcome systemic barriers and leverage mentorship opportunities to pursue their educational goals.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how first-generation Black male students at a two-year college narrate their experiences navigating the college process, focusing on how their cultural wealth informs their interactions with academic advising, mentorship

programs, and preparation for transferring to four-year institutions. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do first-generation Black male students leverage their cultural wealth to navigate the college process at a two-year institution?
2. How do first-generation Black male students draw on cultural wealth to engage with academic advising and overcome systemic challenges?
3. How does cultural wealth shape first-generation Black male students' experiences within mentorship programs at a two-year college?
4. How do first-generation Black male students utilize cultural wealth in preparing for a successful transition to a four-year institution?

Researcher Positionality

As a first-generation college graduate and higher education professional, I am deeply committed to amplifying the voices of underserved students, particularly first-generation, nontraditional, and Black male students navigating the college process. My passion for this work is both professional and personal. Growing up in a middle-class home with two supportive parents who encouraged my educational pursuits, I benefited from a strong foundation that valued academic achievement. However, as a shadow sibling who felt overshadowed by my sibling's achievements, I spent much of my childhood and early adulthood feeling unheard—an experience that shaped my understanding of what it means to be overlooked in critical spaces.

Now, as a leader in higher education, I am intentional about using my platform to advocate for students who have historically been unheard, ensuring their voices are recognized in academic and career planning. My work centers on ensuring that institutional structures are equitable, accessible, and responsive to the needs of students, particularly those facing systemic

barriers. My role has also provided me with firsthand insight into the critical role that advising and mentorship play in student success, particularly for first-generation Black male students. I have witnessed how institutional advising structures can either empower or alienate students, depending on how accessible and culturally responsive they are. Likewise, I have seen the transformative impact that mentorship, whether formal or informal, can have in fostering students' confidence, resilience, and sense of belonging. These experiences have reinforced my belief that effective advising and mentorship must center students' cultural wealth rather than force them to conform to dominant institutional norms. In my research, I approach these topics not only as a scholar but also as a practitioner who seeks to advocate for advising and mentorship models that truly support and uplift first-generation Black male students.

While I recognize the privilege of my education and professional status, I also bring lived experiences that allow me to relate to students facing financial and personal hardships. As a single mother of two adult sons, I understand the challenges of balancing family, work, and education. When I first began working in higher education, I was without a permanent home, living in a hotel and struggling to create stability for my family. This experience profoundly shaped my empathy for students, especially nontraditional learners, who are navigating higher education while facing financial insecurity, homelessness, or other life challenges.

Additionally, my experience as a breast cancer survivor has deepened my understanding of healthcare inequities and systemic privilege. I was fortunate to have access to comprehensive healthcare, which played a critical role in my survival. However, after losing my best friend Bernard, I was confronted with the harsh reality that access to adequate healthcare is a privilege, not a guarantee. This realization reinforced my awareness of how deeply systemic inequities

shape life outcomes, not just in healthcare, but in education, employment, and economic mobility.

In my research, I was acutely aware of my positional power as both a researcher and an institutional leader. While this afforded me access to data, decision-makers, and institutional resources, I was committed to centering the authentic voices of my collaborators, ensuring that their narratives are not overshadowed by institutional discourse. I actively engaged in reflexivity, continuously examining how my perspectives, biases, and experiences shape my interpretation of the data.

Ultimately, my goal was to use both my privilege and lived experience to amplify the stories of first-generation Black male students, advocating for policies and practices that foster their success in higher education. Their voices deserve to be heard, and I see it as my responsibility to ensure that their narratives are not just documented but also acted upon.

Research Design

This qualitative study employed Narrative Inquiry as the guiding methodological framework. Narrative Inquiry is grounded in the understanding that individuals make meaning of their lives through stories, and that these stories are shaped by personal, social, and institutional contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It privileges collaborators' lived experiences and emphasizes collaboration between researcher and collaborator in co-constructing meaning. Within this methodological framework, Photovoice was incorporated as a complementary data collection method alongside semi-structured interviews. Photovoice offered collaborators an additional way to represent their lived experiences visually, using photographs to illustrate aspects of their advising and mentorship journeys that might be difficult to express verbally. This

integration allowed for a richer and more multidimensional understanding of collaborators' experiences as first-generation Black male students in two-year colleges.

Narrative inquiry aligns with the study's purpose by prioritizing the personal stories of collaborators, enabling them to articulate their aspirations and challenges as they prepare for transitions to four-year institutions. This method not only uncovered the realities of systemic barriers and the strategies collaborators use to navigate these challenges but also mediated their experiences into meaning, highlighting the interplay between personal and social realities (Kim, 2016).

To deepen the inquiry, the study incorporated Photovoice alongside semi-structured interviews. Photovoice, originally developed by Wang and Burris (1994, 1997), is a participatory research methodology that enables collaborators to represent their experiences visually and narratively while engaging in critical reflection and dialogue. As a methodology, Photovoice is rooted in critical pedagogy and participatory action traditions, emphasizing collaboration, empowerment, and advocacy (Breny & McMorrow, 2022). Rather than positioning collaborators as passive subjects, Photovoice treats them as co-researchers whose images and narratives highlight both personal and systemic dimensions of experience (Macdonald et al., 2022).

Photovoice is particularly powerful in studies that seek to amplify marginalized voices because it creates a space for collaborators to tell their stories in ways that transcend conventional text-based narratives (Breny & McMorrow, 2023). Photovoice encourages critical discussion of structural barriers while also illuminating strengths, resilience, and community assets (Bagge-Petersen et al., 2025). By incorporating visual expression into narrative inquiry, Photovoice strengthened the study's capacity to uncover how cultural wealth, institutional practices, and systemic inequities intersect in shaping collaborators' educational journeys. While

Photovoice has been framed as a participatory methodology in some research traditions (Wang & Burris, 1997), in this study it is employed as a data collection strategy situated within a broader Narrative Inquiry design.

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework guided the analysis, reflecting collaborators' ability to overcome systemic barriers and capturing their hopes and dreams for furthering their education. Cultural capital was central to understanding how first-generation Black male students persist and prepare for transitions to four-year institutions. Guided by Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, this study employed Narrative Inquiry as the methodological approach, with Photovoice serving as a participatory data collection method that deepens collaborators' storytelling through visual expression. Together, these methods amplified the voices of first-generation Black male students by capturing both the narrative and visual dimensions of their lived experiences.

Narrative Inquiry centered their stories, while Photovoice enriched these narratives by illuminating their cultural assets and perspectives. The resulting field texts comprised of stories, photographs, and reflective discussions offered a multidimensional understanding of how collaborators navigated systemic barriers and pursued their educational aspirations, while Photovoice offered a participatory framework that positioned them as active meaning-makers. This integration challenged deficit-based narratives and ensured that the study not only documented experiences but also reflected collaborators' agency and perspectives in framing their own educational pathways (Nykiforuk, 2021; Yosso, 2005).

Population and Sampling Strategy

The target population of this study consisted of first-generation Black male students who were currently or recently enrolled at a two-year college. These students were defined as

individuals who identified as Black or African American, whose parents or guardians had not obtained a four-year college degree, and who had engaged with academic advising or mentorship programs at the college. This group was selected due to its unique position within the educational landscape, facing systemic challenges while also demonstrating resilience and cultural capital in navigating the college process.

This study employed a purposeful sampling strategy to recruit 10 collaborators who met the following criteria:

- Self-identified as Black or African American.
- Identified as first-generation college students.
- Were currently enrolled or had been enrolled at a two-year college within the past academic year.
- Had completed at least one semester at a two-year college.
- Had participated in academic advising sessions or mentorship programs at a two-year college.
- Had aspirations to transfer to a four-year institution.
- Were willing to participate in two rounds of semi-structured interviews and engage in Photovoice activities as part of the data collection process.

The purposeful sampling strategy was appropriate for this qualitative study, as it allowed the researcher to select collaborators with rich, lived experiences that aligned with the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Focusing on collaborators engaged in mentorship and advising initiatives provided insights into the role of institutional practices in shaping their academic journeys. This sample size was appropriate for a narrative inquiry approach, as qualitative inquiry prioritizes depth, richness, and meaning-making over numerical

representation, with sample adequacy determined by the capacity to generate meaningful, in-depth insights rather than by size alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Staller, 2021). Collaborators were recruited through IRB-approved outreach procedures designed to ensure voluntary participation and minimize undue influence. Recruitment consisted of email invitations sent directly to eligible students and digital flyers posted on social media platforms. All recruitment materials included a description of the study, eligibility criteria, and clear language emphasizing that participation was voluntary and would not affect students' academic standing, advising relationships, or access to institutional services. A screening questionnaire (Appendix A) was used to confirm eligibility and ensure the sample aligns with the study's criteria.

Protection of Human Subjects

This study adhered to ethical principles for the protection of human subjects as outlined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kansas State University. The following measures were taken to ensure the safety, dignity, and confidentiality of all collaborators. Prior to participation, each collaborator received a written informed consent form detailing the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights as collaborators. The form emphasized that participation is voluntary, and collaborators may withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence. For the Photovoice component, a separate consent form addressed issues related to the use of visual images and public dissemination.

All collaborators were assigned pseudonyms, and any identifying information including institutional names, specific program identifiers, or unique demographic details were removed or generalized in transcripts and written narratives. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on a password-protected computer and encrypted external drive accessible only to the

researcher. In cases where photographs are used, identifying features of individuals or locations were blurred or cropped unless explicit written permission is granted.

This study posed minimal risk to collaborators. Potential risks included emotional discomfort in recalling personal or educational challenges. To mitigate these risks, collaborators were reminded they may skip questions or stop the interview at any time. A list of campus and community counseling and support services were provided should collaborators wish to seek additional support. All data was securely stored.

Description of Research Participants (Collaborators)

In this study, collaborators did not simply respond to questions; they reflected intentionally, selected images with care, and interpreted those images in relation to their educational journeys. Several described the interviews as a rare opportunity to be heard and understood on their own terms. In this way, collaborators shaped not only the content of this study, but also how their stories are represented—ensuring their voices, interpretations, and lived realities remain central throughout this chapter.

The collaborators in this study consisted of 10 first-generation Black male students who were currently enrolled at or had recently attended a two-year college in the Southeast. First-generation status was defined as being the first in one's immediate family to attend college, and all collaborators self-identified as Black or African American. Each collaborator had completed at least one semester at the two-year institution and had engaged in academic advising and/or mentorship programming during their enrollment. All expressed aspirations to transfer to a four-year institution and were willing to participate in two rounds of semi-structured interviews as well as Photovoice activities. Purposeful sampling was used to identify individuals who could provide rich narrative insight into how first-generation Black male students navigate advising,

mentorship, and transfer preparation while drawing upon various forms of cultural wealth. To provide additional context for the collaborators whose narratives are presented in this chapter, Table 1 summarizes key demographic and academic characteristics of the 10 individuals included in this study.

Table 1

Participant Demographic and Contextual Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Field / Pathway	Academic Status	Mentorship	Key Context
Damon	50	Film Technology	Enrolled; preparing for transfer	Yes – institutional program	Father; reflective adult learner
Danny	26	Psychology	Enrolled; preparing for transfer	Yes – institutional program	Balancing work and academics
DJ	43	Nursing	Graduated; pursuing continued education	No – external mentor	Professional nurse advancing career
Andre	35	Nursing	Enrolled; preparing for transfer	No – strong advisor relationship	Single father balancing career and school
Ron	25	Social Work	Enrolled; preparing for transfer	No – academic advisor support	Navigating institutional pathways
Mitchell	24	User Experience and User Interface	Enrolled; preparing for transfer	No – guidance counselors	Caregiver balancing family responsibilities
Seth	25	Music Creative / Arts	Final semester; transferring Fall 2026	No – strong advisor relationship	Artistic; musically inclined
Eli	22	Communication	Recently transferred to 4-year institution	Yes – institutional program	Student Government Association (SGA) leader; high campus engagement

Dell	22	Business / Entrepreneurial	Enrolled; bachelor's pathway	Yes – institutional program	Entrepreneurial; campus speaker
Ken	22	Welding / Industrial Supervision	Completed or nearing completion	Yes – institutional program	Newly married; professional welder

Data Collection

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews and photovoice. The first round of interviews (approximately 60 minutes) focused on collaborators' initial narratives regarding their educational journeys, advising, and mentorship experiences. Following this, collaborators engaged in a photovoice activity, using photography to capture aspects of their lived experiences that they felt represented challenges, strengths, or sources of support. Finally, a second round of interviews (approximately 60 minutes) invited collaborators to reflect on their photovoice submissions and expand upon emerging themes from both their images and prior narratives. By structuring data collection in this way, collaborators were given multiple layered opportunities to articulate their experiences, first narratively, then visually, and finally through deeper reflection and meaning-making.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Two rounds of semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. This approach offered flexibility, allowing the researcher to act as a "traveler" on a journey of discovery, engaging with collaborators' responses and probing deeper into their personal narratives. In this metaphor, the researcher wanders through the landscapes of collaborators' lived experiences, engaging in conversations that unfold meaning organically rather than merely extracting predefined knowledge (Kvale, 1996).

This flexibility enabled the interviewer to explore emergent themes in real time while fostering a space where collaborators can share their experiences on their own terms. By following the cues of the conversation, the researcher and collaborator co-constructed meaning through the interview, allowing for a richer understanding of the collaborators' lived experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method because they provided both structure and flexibility. This format ensured alignment with the study's guiding framework, Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth, while also allowing for the exploration of emergent themes in real time. As Ruslin et al. (2022) emphasize, semi-structured interviews are "more powerful... because [they] allow researchers to acquire in-depth information... while maintaining their track," enabling adaptability without losing focus (p. 22–23). This adaptability fostered an environment where collaborators could narrate their experiences on their own terms. Mason (2002) highlights that semi-structured interviews produce situated and reconstructed knowledge rather than simply reporting facts, while Rubin and Rubin (2005) describe them as guided conversations balancing prepared questions with probes. Together, these perspectives affirm that semi-structured interviews offer the flexibility to follow collaborators' cues while cultivating a collaborative space that centers their voices and yields a richer understanding of their lived experiences.

The interview protocol was guided by Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, with a specific focus on navigational, social, and resistant capital to understand how collaborators leveraged their resources to persist in higher education. Navigational capital referred to students' ability to maneuver through institutional structures, including how they sought guidance from academic advising and mentorship programs to overcome systemic barriers. Social capital related to the networks of support that students accessed, including

relationships with faculty, advisors, and peer mentors that contributed to their academic and personal success. Resistant capital highlighted the ways in which students challenged systemic inequities, advocated for themselves, and persisted despite obstacles (Yosso, 2005).

The semi-structured interview protocol was grounded in Community Cultural Wealth, addressing forms of capital and their contributions to collaborators' persistence at the two-year college level (Lima, 2023). While qualitative descriptive methodologies may include focus groups, interviews, observations, and document reviews, individual interviews allow for deeper exploration of these themes and collaborators' unique experiences (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Lima, 2023). The interview questions (see Appendix B) were structured to align with the research questions and explored themes related to:

- **Navigational capital:**

How collaborators utilized academic advising, faculty relationships, and campus resources to navigate institutional challenges and stay on track toward their educational goals (Yosso, 2005).

- **Social capital:**

The role of peer and faculty mentorship, student networks, and community support in fostering a sense of belonging and academic persistence (Yosso, 2005).

- **Resistant capital:**

How collaborators challenged systemic barriers, self-advocated in academic spaces, and persisted in their education despite facing racial, economic, or institutional obstacles (Yosso, 2005).

- **Aspirational capital:**

How collaborators maintained hopes and educational aspirations for transfer and long-

term success despite encountering systemic barriers and uncertainty in their academic journeys (Yosso, 2005).

- **Familial capital:**

How family values, cultural knowledge, and encouragement from relatives and community members shaped collaborators' motivations, educational goals, and persistence in college (Yosso, 2005).

- **Linguistic capital:**

How collaborators used communication skills, storytelling, cultural expression, and language practices to articulate their experiences and navigate academic environments (Yosso, 2005).

- **Collaborators' aspirations to transfer to four-year institutions:**

Including their perceptions of institutional support, challenges in the transfer process, and strategies employed to overcome these obstacles (Berhane et al., 2024; Tinto, 1993).

This approach provided insight into the ways first-generation Black male students navigated institutional structures, built support networks, and persisted in their academic journeys.

Photovoice

In this study, Photovoice served as a participatory data collection method within the broader Narrative Inquiry design, allowing collaborators to visually represent and narrate their lived experiences. Photovoice, first developed by Wang and Burris (1997), is a participatory visual methodology that empowers collaborators to document and reflect upon their experiences through photography. As Wang (1999) further explains, Photovoice positions collaborators as knowledge producers, inviting them to construct and interpret images that reflect their realities.

Within this study, Photovoice functioned as a data collection method situated within the broader methodological framework of Narrative Inquiry. Consistent with photo-elicitation approaches (Harper, 2002), images were interpreted through collaborators' accompanying narratives rather than analyzed independently. As Bach (2007) suggests, visual artifacts operated as narrative texts through which individuals conveyed meaning and established relationships among people, places, and experiences.

Collaborators in this study were invited to take photographs that captured dimensions of their experiences with academic advising, mentorship, and transfer preparation at a two-year college. The photographs were not analyzed as visual artifacts in isolation but were used as elicitation prompts during follow-up narrative interviews (Harper, 2002; Wang & Burris, 1997). During these interviews, collaborators were encouraged to discuss the significance of their photographs, describe the stories behind them, and interpret what each image represented within their educational journeys.

This iterative process—taking photographs, discussing them, and collaboratively interpreting their meanings—aligns with the core tenets of Narrative Inquiry by emphasizing co-construction of meaning between collaborator and researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The photographs and accompanying narratives together formed the field texts that served as data for analysis (Bach, 2007; Bell, 2013). This approach allowed for a layered understanding of collaborators' experiences, blending verbal and visual storytelling to highlight aspects of identity, resilience, and cultural wealth that might otherwise have remained unseen or underexplored.

Pilot Testing

A pilot study was conducted prior to formal data collection to assess the clarity, sequencing, and appropriateness of the interview protocols for both rounds of interviews, as well as the photovoice instructions. One participant who met the same requirements as the target population completed the interviews and Photovoice activity. The pilot process allowed the researcher to identify questions that were overly closed-ended, required clarification, or needed rewording to encourage deeper reflection consistent with narrative inquiry traditions. Feedback from the pilot study informed revisions to the interview guide, including simplifying terminology, expanding probes, and reorganizing the order of questions to support a more natural storytelling flow. No data from the pilot study were included in the analysis of findings. The pilot served solely as an instrument refinement process to ensure methodological soundness and enhance the trustworthiness of the study design.

Data Analysis

This study employed a qualitative approach to data analysis, incorporating thematic and narrative coding, photovoice analysis, and triangulation to ensure a comprehensive understanding of first-generation Black male students' transfer aspirations. Field texts including interview transcripts and Photovoice narratives were analyzed holistically to identify patterns, themes, and storylines that reflect collaborators' experiences with advising and mentorship. Following Bach's (2007) and Bell's (2013) approaches to visual-based narrative inquiry, photographs were examined as narrative extensions of collaborators' stories rather than as separate visual data, allowing both textual and visual elements to inform the thematic and narrative coding process.

Thematic and Narrative Coding

Following Saldaña's (2016) two-cycle coding process, initial coding involved *in vivo* coding (using collaborators' own words as codes to preserve their voices; Delve et al., 2025) and descriptive coding to capture collaborators' language and categorize emergent themes. This was followed by pattern coding to condense data into meaningful categories that reflect students' navigational, aspirational, and resistant capital. Given this study's narrative approach, analysis focused on maintaining the integrity of collaborators' stories while also identifying overarching themes.

Narrative coding emphasized key turning points, embedded voices of others, emotional essences, and collaborators' agency within their own stories. This approach acknowledged the sequence and causality of events, allowing for a richer exploration of how collaborators construct meaning around their transfer aspirations (McAllum et al., 2019). Narrative analysis, unlike thematic coding, foregrounded the ways in which collaborators' experiences unfolded over time, providing an understanding of how personal histories and institutional contexts shape transfer aspirations (McAllum et al., 2019).

Simultaneously, thematic coding was systematically applied following the six-step process outlined by Naeem et al. (2023). This process included transcript creation and familiarization, keyword identification, code selection, theme development, conceptualization through the interpretation of keywords, codes, and themes, and finally, the development of a conceptual model. While narrative analysis sought to preserve the coherence of collaborators' stories, thematic analysis helped identify shared structural patterns and social influences across multiple cases (McAllum et al., 2019).

Utilizing Atlas.ti (desktop version), patterns were identified both at the individual level through narrative analysis and across collaborators through thematic coding. This dual-layered approach enhanced the study's ability to provide both in-depth personal narratives and broader thematic insights, allowing for a rigorous and transparent analysis of transfer narratives. By integrating both coding methods, the study acknowledged the interpretive role of the researcher and ensured that both the individual experiences and shared structural challenges of collaborators were meaningfully represented (McAllum et al., 2019).

Narrative Representation of Findings

In keeping with the narrative inquiry tradition (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016), this study recognized that analysis and representation are inseparable. Beyond coding and theme development, equal attention was paid to how collaborators' stories were re-presented in the dissertation. Findings were presented through a creative nonfiction narrative style that foregrounded collaborators' voices while also situating their experiences in the broader cultural and institutional context. This approach allowed the narratives to unfold with the pacing and depth of lived experience through scene, dialogue, and emotional resonance while maintaining fidelity to collaborators' words and meanings.

Consistent with Kim's (2016) emphasis on storied forms of representation, the study employed a hybrid structure that blended oral history elements (direct quotations and first-person accounts) with creative nonfiction techniques (scene setting, narrative arcs, and turning points). This genre choice positioned collaborators not as data points but as storytellers and knowledge holders whose voices guided the narrative.

Each collaborator's story was presented as a narrative episode, highlighting individual journeys while also weaving in collective themes of cultural capital. This method of

representation aligned with Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, as it emphasized agency, resilience, and cultural knowledge rather than deficit framings. The narrative form was not intended as embellishment but as a means of making visible the richness and complexity of collaborators' transfer aspirations in ways that resonate with readers while staying grounded in narrative inquiry. Each collaborator's story was presented as a narrative episode, written primarily in first-person voice to honor collaborators' self-authored meaning-making while incorporating analytic interpretation by the researcher.

Coding Transfer Narratives: The Six Cultural Capitals

All collaborators in this study either had transferred within the previous academic year or articulated clear aspirations to transfer to a four-year institution, including long-term goals such as graduate or professional study. All transfer narratives, drawn from both semi-structured interviews and Photovoice artifacts, were coded under the constructs of cultural capital as outlined by Yosso (2005). Aspirational capital codes captured how collaborators articulate their transfer goals, motivations, and long-term academic and career aspirations, even in the face of structural barriers. Navigational capital codes examined the strategies students use to maneuver systemic barriers in higher education, including persistence tactics and resource utilization that supported their transfer journeys. Resistant capital highlighted how students developed knowledge and skills through acts of resistance, challenging inequality and deficit framings within educational spaces.

Social capital was coded for the networks and supportive relationships—peers, mentors, faculty, advisors, and community connections—that students drew upon to access transfer opportunities. Familial capital emphasized the ways collaborators' cultural knowledge, kinship ties, and sense of collective responsibility informed their transfer pathways and decision-making.

Finally, linguistic capital codes captured how students use language, communication skills, and storytelling to make meaning of their experiences, advocated for themselves, and articulated their transfer narratives.

By employing both thematic and narrative coding approaches, the study ensured that collaborators' transfer narratives gathered through interviews and photo captions were analyzed both as unique, context-rich stories and as part of broader trends within first-generation Black male students' experiences in higher education. The visual images produced through photovoice were not subject to identical coding but were instead interpreted in conjunction with collaborators' accompanying narratives, serving as contextual evidence that highlights recurring symbols, settings, and representations. This approach aligned with the argument that different qualitative analysis approaches "author the data story differently," with thematic analysis provides commonalities and structural factors, while narrative analysis provides a platform for individual agency and meaning-making (McAllum et al., 2019, p. 358).

Trustworthiness

Critics often question the trustworthiness of qualitative research due to its differing approach to validity and reliability (Shenton, 2004). However, qualitative research prioritizes depth of understanding over generalizability (Ahmed, 2024). To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher followed Guba's (1981) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, data triangulation, and member checking. The researcher spent extended time with collaborators through semi-structured interviews and follow-up discussions. Triangulation was achieved through the use of

multiple data sources, including narrative interviews, Photovoice artifacts, and reflective discussions, which were analyzed through Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework. Member checking allowed collaborators to review and clarify their responses, ensuring accuracy and strengthening the trustworthiness of the findings.

Transferability

Transferability was supported through thick description, offering detailed accounts of the institutional setting, collaborator backgrounds, and contextual influences. While the findings were not intended to be universally generalizable, they may provide insights applicable to similar institutional contexts.

Dependability

Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting collaborator recruitment, data collection, and analysis. Peer debriefing ensured transparency, and reflexive journaling helped monitor researcher bias.

Confirmability

Confirmability was ensured by systematically documenting decisions and employing triangulation and member checking to verify findings. Reflexivity was a continuous practice, helping to acknowledge and mitigate potential biases.

During the interviews, the researcher documented detailed notes capturing observations, initial interpretations, and key aspects of the collaborators' narratives. These notes served to maintain an accurate record of each collaborator's profile and experiences, reducing the risk of misinterpretation or distortion that could arise from reliance solely on memory (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). Given the study's focus on first-generation Black male students at two-year colleges navigating advising, mentorship, and the transfer process, the

researcher remained particularly attentive to the ways collaborators articulated their lived experiences, institutional challenges, and personal aspirations.

To further ensure confirmability and mitigate potential biases, the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the study (Enworo, 2023). Reflexive journals provided a structured space to examine personal assumptions, perspectives, and positionality as a Black woman researcher studying the experiences of Black male students. As Merriam (2009) notes, reflexivity requires ongoing self-examination of one's worldview, biases, and theoretical orientation that may shape the research process. By consistently reflecting on interactions with collaborators, the researcher sought to center their voices and ensure that the study's findings emerge from their lived realities rather than the researcher's interpretations or expectations.

This ongoing practice of reflexivity was particularly crucial given the intersection of race, gender, and educational access in the study. Recognizing the historical and systemic barriers faced by Black men in higher education, the researcher remained committed to an ethical and empathetic engagement with collaborators, allowing their narratives to unfold in ways that honor their agency and perspectives. Through detailed researcher notes and reflexive journaling, this study aimed to authentically amplify the experiences of first-generation Black male students as they navigated academic advising, mentorship, and the transition from two-year to four-year institutions.

Summary

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of collaborators through a narrative inquiry approach, centering their personal stories to gain deeper insight into how they made meaning of their realities. To complement these narratives, the study incorporated photovoice, a method that invited collaborators to share their experiences through photographs, encouraging

expression beyond words and fostering a collaborative research process that valued collaborator voice and agency.

Collaborators were selected through purposeful sampling to ensure a range of perspectives that were relevant to the phenomenon under study. To support the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study utilized strategies such as member checking, triangulation of data sources, and maintaining a detailed audit trail. Throughout the research process, the researcher engaged in reflexive practice, critically examining how their own background, assumptions, and positionality may have shaped the research from collaborator interactions to data interpretation.

By centering collaborator perspectives and integrating creative, participatory methods, this study aimed to contribute to more inclusive and ethically grounded qualitative research practices. The findings offered insight into how individuals navigated their experiences and constructed meaning, with implications for fields that seek to amplify underrepresented voices and foster equity in research and practice.

Chapter 4 - The Stories Speak

For while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

— James Baldwin

In this narrative inquiry study, I explored how first-generation Black male students enrolled at a two-year college in the Southeast region of the United States narrate their experiences navigating advising, mentorship, and institutional systems as they prepare to transfer to four-year institutions. In this study, I refer to the individuals who shared their narratives and images as collaborators rather than participants. Collaborators shared stories reflecting how they made meaning of their college journeys while managing academic demands, institutional complexity, and personal responsibilities. The purpose of this chapter is to center collaborators' voices by presenting narrative episodes drawn from interviews and Photovoice artifacts that illustrate how collaborators experienced advising, mentorship, and transfer preparation within their educational pathways. Each collaborator participated in in-depth interviews and contributed visual artifacts that helped illuminate how persistence, belonging, and navigation unfolded across their college experiences. Through these narratives and researcher reflections, this chapter presents the lived experiences that form the foundation for the shared processes interpreted in Chapter 5.

Narrative inquiry provided the methodological framework for examining how first-generation Black male students in a two-year college setting make meaning of navigating college and the supports (and constraints) that shape that navigation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To ground this inquiry in lived experience, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eligible

collaborators who met the study's criteria. Twenty-three students who self-identified as first-generation Black men and were either currently enrolled in, or recent graduates (within one year) of, a two-year college completed the initial screening survey. From this pool, ten collaborators were selected based on eligibility criteria and study fit. The first round of interviews was scheduled at times most convenient for collaborators and averaged approximately 45–60 minutes. Following the initial round of interviews, each collaborator participated in a Photovoice component by selecting two to three images that symbolized their academic journey and then reflected on the meaning of those images in a follow-up interview.

Structure/Representation of the Findings

In keeping with the narrative inquiry's emphasis on storied forms of representation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016), the findings are shared through a hybrid structure that blends oral history elements (direct quotations and first-person accounts) with creative nonfiction techniques (scene setting, narrative arcs, and turning points). Specifically, each collaborator's story is presented as a narrative episode, highlighting individual journeys while also weaving in collective themes of cultural capital. This approach allows the narratives to unfold with the pacing and depth of lived experience through scene, dialogue, and emotional resonance while maintaining fidelity to collaborators' words and meanings (Chand, 2024).

The narratives in this chapter are presented as episodes, each centering one collaborator's story as a coherent account of how they made meaning of college, advising, mentorship, and transfer over time. Episodes are not intended to represent complete life histories, but rather focused narrative constructions that foreground pivotal experiences, decisions, and interpretations shared by collaborators themselves. Each episode is constructed from interview

dialogue, researcher fieldnotes/memos, and Photovoice reflection, then shaped into a coherent narrative while preserving the collaborator's meaning and language.

Photovoice images are embedded within each episode as tools for meaning-making rather than illustration; the images selected by collaborators serve as prompts for reflection and are interpreted through their own explanations and lived contexts (Wang & Burris, 1997). Following each episode, a brief researcher reflection offers analytic interpretation, connecting collaborators' narratives of advising, mentorship, and transfer experiences to the Community Cultural Wealth framework without displacing the story itself. All collaborators are identified using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality and relational trust, a practice that allows the narratives to remain grounded in lived experience while minimizing the risk of identification within institutional contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Saldaña, 2016). I begin with Ken and KJ because their stories illustrate two distinct routes into persistence—one shaped by a timely mentor who stabilized the ground beneath him, and one shaped by repeated self-advocacy when the ground kept shifting.

Collaborator Episodes

The Voice of Ken: Staying the Course

Ken didn't plan on college. He planned on survival. "I actually didn't plan on going to college at all," he told me. "When I was in high school, I honestly didn't see that in my future." At home, money moved in ways that made survival communal. Ken explained that his mother often had to stretch resources far beyond their original purpose. "My dad paid child support," he said, "but my mom was using that child support to take care of my sister's kids."

By the time Ken was nine years old, he already had a nephew. Soon there were more—nieces and nephews added to a household that was already doing the best it could. "You gotta

think about it,” he said. “I can’t eat and let my baby nephew not eat.” So Ken did what made sense. He worked. He earned. He filled the gaps that adults couldn’t always close in time.

Cutting hair became a way to stabilize what felt unstable—to make sure there was dinner, to make sure his younger brother was okay, to make sure someone was holding things together. Barbering wasn’t just income; it became evidence. Proof that he could take care of himself without waiting on institutions that had never taken care of the people he loved. It was work he was good at, work that paid immediately, work that didn’t ask him to borrow from a future he couldn’t afford to imagine.

“I said, ‘Man, I’m gonna just be a barber,’” he told me. “‘I’m really good at cutting hair. I won’t be in a suit. I won’t have student loans.’” Ken didn’t arrive at that conclusion casually. He arrived there by observation. “It sounds really bad,” he said, “but I had a lot of examples of what not to do.” He watched adults around him struggle. He watched systems fail people he loved. And instead of following, he studied outcomes. His decision-making wasn’t rooted in rebellion—it was rooted in pattern recognition.

When Ken moved from Arkansas to Georgia as a teenager, it wasn’t framed as opportunity. It was framed as escape. Back home, the future felt narrowed. “It was no future. It was no opportunity. It was only two places I was going to end up.” Even Georgia didn’t feel permanent at first.

Then came the talent show.

It was the first time his voice did something survival never could—it made someone pay attention long enough to stay. The talent show wasn’t strategic. It wasn’t calculated. Ken didn’t step onto the stage with a plan—he stepped onto it with something he needed to say. There was no music behind him. No beat to hide behind.

Figure 4.1

Black History Month Talent Show Performance Representing the Turning Point



“I said, ‘I don’t want any music,’” he told me. “‘Just let me say what I need to say.’” He performed a song he had written himself—raw, unfiltered, heavy with experience. The room responded immediately, but the moment that mattered came after the applause. A teacher approached him, not celebratory, but curious. “She said, ‘Who wrote that song?’” Ken remembered. “And I said, ‘I wrote it.’ She said, ‘No... it was too much pain in that for it to be written by a child.’” In the weeks that followed, the two began talking more. What started as recognition slowly turned into relationship. “I ended up bonding with that teacher at the school,” he said.

Through work-based learning, Ken completed high school. The teacher who had first noticed him at the talent show remained in his orbit—not hovering, not rescuing, but present. She was someone who knew his story and paid attention to where he might land next. Not long before graduation, a recruiter visited Ken’s high school and introduced students to the local two-year technical college. Welding and Joining wasn’t something Ken had imagined for himself, but the opportunity was concrete. Tuition covered. A clear pathway. A skill with immediate payoff.

He enrolled. Shortly after graduating high school—and just as he was preparing to begin technical college—a serious argument changed everything. “I got into a bad argument with my aunt... and I was on the way back to Arkansas.”

At that moment, Ken wasn’t thinking about welding or college. Once again, he was thinking about survival—about what happens when plans fall apart and there is nowhere solid to stand. The future narrowed again, the same way it always had. It was then that the same teacher from the talent show stepped in—not dramatically, not publicly, but decisively. When Ken lost his job and the situation at home made staying impossible, she offered him more than advice. She offered him stability. She offered him a place to stay so he could continue his education. “It’s honestly a miracle that I was even still in Georgia,” Ken said.

And it wasn’t the kind of miracle that arrives loudly. It arrived quietly—through timing, attention, and an adult who recognized how close he was to leaving and chose to intervene. What Ken didn’t know then was that this same woman would later become his mother-in-law. What he knew in that moment was simpler and more immediate: one performance, one relationship, and one person who paid attention had altered the course of his life. With housing stabilized and a clear path in front of him, Ken entered college through a black male initiative mentorship program and enrolled in Welding and Joining. His tuition was covered—but more importantly, the uncertainty that had followed him for years finally eased.

“The mentors in the program had the path laid out for me, literally,” he said. “All I had to do was tell them when I could walk it.” And this time, Ken stayed. He named the people at the college who made that possible with ease—mentors, instructors, advisors who worked together rather than in silos. “Miss Felicia... Miss Dana... Tim Mann... Miss Whitney,” he said. “I had a lot of people I could turn to.”

Ken didn't just receive support. He activated it. When the mentorship program meetings drew small crowds, he went back to his classes and recruited. "I seen the potential," he said. "So I went back and told people, 'They're setting this up for us to succeed. We need to show up.'"

He challenged exclusivity without erasing purpose. "You don't have to be an African American male to come," he told them. "Show up. Learn. Grow." Then he said the line that captured his ethic best:

"A win isn't gonna feel like a win if the other person didn't know we were playing a game."

Ken's discipline showed up in how he moved through the program. He built step-by-step action plans. Vision boards. Written goals. "I like writing things down," he said. "It's like signing a contract with myself." But discipline alone wasn't enough. "I truly can't say I had enough discipline on my own to see it through," Ken said. "But God... God opened every door."

Ken didn't describe faith as a destination. He described it as structure. Something that held him when outcomes weren't guaranteed. "The path wasn't hard," he said. "I just had to stay the course." That steadiness followed him into work. While still in school, Ken took an entry-level welding job. Within months, he became a lead. Then he managed multiple teams. Then—at twenty years old—he was asked to build and run an entire second shift as a production supervisor.

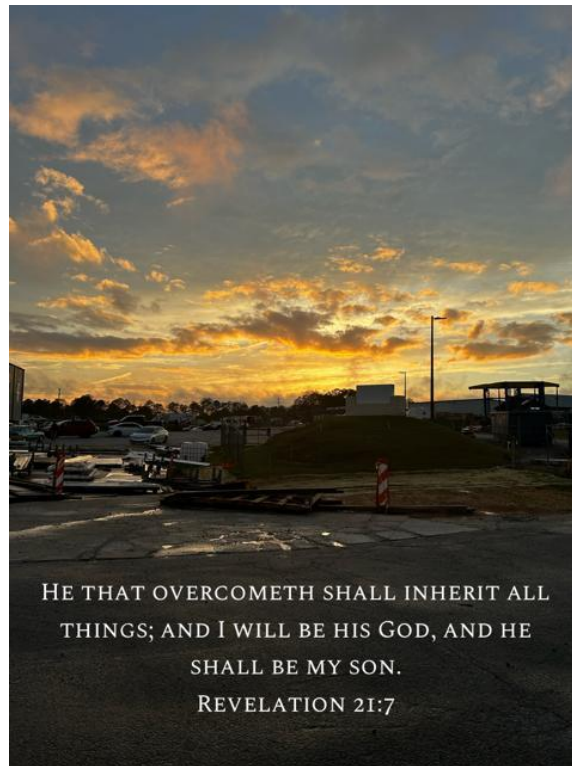
"They sent me... by myself," he said. "No supervisor experience. Just trust." The shift grew from seven people to thirty. Ken didn't credit technical mastery. He credited communication. "I didn't have the most welding experience," he said. "But I had leadership skills that were developed through the mentorship program. I knew how to talk to people." That same ability shaped how he thinks about mentorship for Black men. Ken believes representation

isn't symbolic—it's strategic. "When they see me," he said, "there's comfort. Like, 'He looks like me.' Tattoos. Long hair. Familiar presence—then substance. It's almost like I'm in disguise," he said. "I come in looking like one of us—and then I speak."

The second image Ken shared reflects the role of faith in sustaining his persistence. He described faith not as a distant belief, but as something that structured how he moved through uncertainty and opportunity. For Ken, spiritual grounding functioned as both reassurance and direction—something that held him steady when outcomes were not guaranteed. In this way, faith became intertwined with discipline and mentorship as a stabilizing force in his journey. It also shaped how he interpreted success—not as individual achievement alone, but as something guided, opened, and sustained beyond his own effort. This image, then, represents not only belief, but a framework through which Ken made sense of both hardship and possibility.

Figure 4.2

Faith-Centered Imagery Representing Spiritual Grounding and Perseverance



The final image Ken shared shows the outcome of years of intention: welding tools, journals, written goals, and evidence of financial stability. “This doesn’t impress everybody,” he said. “But when people see the results... then they want to know how I did it.” Now, the student who once never imagined college as part of his future is preparing to transfer to a four-year institution to pursue an MBA—another step in a path he once believed wasn’t meant for him.

And Ken pointed them back—not to shortcuts—but to process. Mentorship. Faith. Discipline. “If you can develop those three things,” he said, “you have nothing to worry about.”

Ken’s story isn’t about luck. It’s about interruption. About a life that could have gone one way—but didn’t. A microphone. A mentor. A path cleared. And the decision—over and over again—to stay the course.

Figure 4.3

Visual Map of Discipline: Goals Written, Skills Sharpened, and Outcomes Made Visible



Researcher Reflection

Ken's episode illustrates how mentorship, leadership development, and faith operate as critical supports for first-generation Black male students navigating education through nontraditional pathways. Although Ken described limited engagement with formal academic advising, his experiences demonstrate how relational mentorship can fulfill many advising functions by providing guidance, stability, and direction at pivotal moments.

Ken's leadership within the college's black male initiative mentorship program further illustrates social and resistant capital as he encouraged broader participation and reframed success as collective rather than individual. His story ultimately underscores how timely, culturally attuned mentorship can serve as an informal advising infrastructure, enabling persistence and leadership development even when formal advising engagement is limited.

The Voice of DJ: Pain, Purpose, and Standing on Business

DJ didn't announce his enrollment in college. He didn't post it on social media or celebrate it out loud. He carried it like something fragile—something you protect until it's finished. "My family didn't even know I was in college until a month before I completed the program," he told me. "They didn't know what I was doing. I kept that secret." When he finally handed out invitations to his pinning ceremony, the reaction was confusion. "They were like, 'Oh... what's this?' They didn't understand what it was."

By then, DJ wasn't just enrolled. He was preparing to graduate and begin his career as a registered nurse. What surprised him most wasn't his family's shock—it was realizing that people had been watching all along. Cousins later told him they were inspired by him, even though he had never told them he was in school. He had been doing what he always did: encouraging other people while trying to stay encouraged himself. "I was motivating them," he said, "but in the process, also encouraging myself."

During his interview, DJ spoke about his future with clarity. He is now working as a registered nurse, with plans to complete a BSN online and then continue on to graduate school as a family nurse practitioner, with a long-term interest in infectious disease practice. He listed the steps like they are already waiting on him—University of Texas, then Middle Georgia or Auburn State. But DJ's story didn't begin with a plan. It began with a push.

That push came from a mentor named Dr. Malcolm Taylor. DJ described Malcolm as someone who made him look at his own life differently. "When I was in the streets, it was all about the clubs and the streets," he admitted. "But the more time I spent around Malcolm, the more I felt drawn toward something steadier." Malcolm didn't flatter DJ. He instructed him. "DJ, you got to get it together," he told him. "You got to go back to school."

Malcolm gave DJ a book—Letters to a Young Brother: MANifest Your Destiny—and something shifted. “When I read that book,” DJ said, “I said, ‘No, I gotta go back and get my high school diploma.’” Then DJ revealed to me what he says most people don’t know. “I was a high school dropout.” DJ didn’t accept that as the end of his story. “I saw a commercial for Penn Foster, did my research, and completed the program. I finished in about a year and a half,” he said. “Got my high school diploma in 2009.” That moment became his first real proof that starting again was possible—a lesson he would draw on later when the stakes were higher and the obstacles more physical than academic.

Nearly a decade later, when DJ enrolled at a two-year college, the path forward still refused to move in a straight line. With the help of his academic advisor, he registered for prerequisite courses for the college’s very competitive nursing program. Along the way, he navigated the weight of living with a stigmatized disease and eventually confronted the reality that back surgery would be unavoidable—experiences that reshaped not only his health, but how he had to move through school itself.

In the first photo DJ shared, the story is written not in words but in his body. The image shows the surgical scars running along his spine—the physical evidence of the pain he carried while trying to remain in school. “Before surgery, I had a lot of difficulties,” he explained. “Concentrating, sitting, standing, walking—everything hurt.”

The scars mark more than a medical procedure; they represent the period when simply showing up to class required endurance. Sitting in standard chairs became impossible, and he relied on cushions and softer seating just to make it through the day. The photo captures what persistence looked like for DJ: continuing forward while his body demanded relief, determined not to let pain decide the outcome of his education.

People told him to stop going to school. “Stop, stop, stop,” he remembered—words he described as carrying negative energy. But stopping was not neutral. “My GPA would be at risk. Financial aid would be a problem,” he said. “I can’t.” Even in the hospital, he stayed tethered to what came next. “I had my laptop open,” he recalled, “trying to register for the following semester.” Nurses asked him what he was doing. His answer was urgent, not emotional. “I gotta register. I don’t want the class to drop.” Pain didn’t stop him. It just changed how he had to move.

Recovery didn’t look like rest for DJ. He recalled the confinement of healing—six weeks “downstairs”, a home health nurse twice a week, a CNA assisting with basic care. “I couldn’t do anything,” he said. He pointed to his foot. “It dropped.” First a walker, then a cane, then a hiking stick. Under his clothes, he wore a back brace no one could see. “Nobody knew,” he said. “My nursing instructors knew.”

It was a quiet kind of support: being seen by the people who mattered. When classes shifted online during COVID, DJ called it a blessing. “I was home on my couch,” he said. “Still rehabbing. Still hurting. Still doing the work. Still talking with my advisor.” He didn’t wait to feel better. He kept going while he hurt. Then came the year he didn’t get in.

When DJ applied to the nursing program the first time, he believed he had done enough. His advisor, whom he had trusted for guidance all along, delivered the decision—a denial made elsewhere, but carried into her office. “I thought I wasn’t good enough,” he admitted. He left her office, crossed the street to the medical building, and pulled an instructor out of a meeting. “I got a 3.62 GPA,” he said. “Why didn’t I get in? Explain it to me.”

Figure 4.4

Spinal Surgical Scars Representing the Physical Cost of Persistence



The answer didn't comfort him. It instructed him. He needed to repeat his sciences and math, earn A's, retake the TEAS, and reapply the following year. "Next year?" he said. "Can you believe that?" What stung wasn't just the work—it was how casually a year of his life was treated. Time was framed as expendable. He held himself together in front of her, but on the drive home, he cried. "Like a newborn baby to God," he said. "Why?"

Then DJ did what he always does when the answer is not yet. He built a strategy. Tutors. Extra help. Research. "I had to get those grades," he said, "and get me a seat in the program."

When he reapplied the next year, the outcome reframed everything. "You were number two," A nursing instructor told him. Second-highest score. Out of more than two hundred

applicants. He had done exactly what was asked. He didn't just qualify—he excelled. It was then DJ realized that that extra year wasn't a pause. It was preparation.

Figure 4.5

New Growth Emerging: Recovery and Renewed Academic Momentum



Once inside the program, DJ didn't rely on hope. He relied on structure. "I made a calendar—a plan for myself every day," he told me. "Study before school. Study after school. Review. Questions. It was like my mind and body was programmed by a piece of paper." He broke the workload down into hours and minutes and treated his accommodations the way he treated his calendar—without apology. "I didn't treat accommodations like shortcuts," he said. "They were tools."

But once DJ started doing well, the attention didn't only come as encouragement. It also came as suspicion. He described a moment when classmates began questioning how he was succeeding—suggesting he must have been using something he "didn't have no business" having." He understood the accusation as twofold: that his academic performance was illegitimate, and that his accommodations were an unfair advantage rather than an equity tool.

The implication was clear: that his grades weren't earned, that he had access to unauthorized resources, that he was cutting corners. DJ was adamant about what it was not. "I did not cheat through no nursing school," he told me. "I didn't have no cheat sheets. I didn't have tests. None of that."

What he did have was a system. When the concerns reached program leadership, DJ was called in and asked—plainly—what he was doing. He didn't debate. He brought evidence. He opened his calendar and pointed back to the expectation the program itself had set: roughly 33 hours of studying a week, broken down into daily blocks, mapped down to minutes. "This is what you told me to do," he said. In that moment, the accusation lost oxygen. The story shifted from suspicion to clarity. DJ wasn't hiding a shortcut—he was showing his structure.

Still, he said the tension didn't disappear. Some of it, he believed, was connected to the visibility of his disability accommodations—extra time, a separate testing space, and the reality that instruction sometimes had to pause until his testing environment was ready. "They didn't understand what that meant," he explained. Eventually, he watched classmates seek accommodations too, not as a judgment, but as an illustration of how quickly resentment can turn into imitation when people finally learn what support looks like.

And then came the second fight, one that was not about rumors, but about policy, process, and consequence. DJ described an off-site respiratory exam where the conditions never settled. Because he tested through disability services in a separate location, he relied on an institutional laptop and the site's internet connection. What should have been straightforward became unstable—delays, connectivity issues, a computer shutting down mid-assessment. In the moment, he reported the disruption and remembers being told he would be "fine." But afterward, he believed the interruptions had cost him.

What intensified the situation, DJ explained, was what happened next. He requested a retake and was denied, yet he recalled seeing messages indicating other students were allowed another attempt, with the higher score recorded. By the end of the term, DJ said he was short by two points. Two points wasn't a grade to him; it was a door closing.

He did not accept "just reapply next year" as a neutral solution. Instead, he documented what he had seen, met with program leadership, and filed an academic appeal, not to argue for special treatment, but to ask for procedural clarity and equitable application of course policies, especially given that his original testing conditions had been compromised.

When a retake was eventually approved, DJ said the disruptions followed him again. He described being moved between rooms and proctors mid-process, losing significant time to internet outages and computer failures. At that point, he escalated his concerns, naming the possibility of legal action, not as a threat for attention, but as a last resort to protect his progression. Later, he reported receiving a call from the instructor acknowledging that the process had not helped. He was offered a paper-based exam instead. DJ completed it successfully, earning 80%.

In DJ's interpretation, this wasn't only about one exam. It was a lesson in what high-stakes programs demand from students who cannot rely on the system to respond the first time: persistence, documentation, and the willingness to keep advocating until the process becomes livable. In the third photo, his foot rests on a stack of nursing books. "Those books were business to me," he said. "Didn't nobody do it for me." Then he said it again. "I stood on business for myself." He didn't describe an easy road. He described a decided one. He stayed—and became an example without trying to. "I'm the first nurse in my family," he said. Only later did he realize people had been watching.

Following his graduation ceremony, DJ went downtown to celebrate. Nothing elaborate—just a bar, a drink, a moment to exhale. He stood there, letting the night settle around him, when he looked to his right. “It was Dr. Malcolm Taylor.”

Figure 4.6

Standing on Business: Nursing Textbooks as Evidence of Earned Success



They embraced and caught up in that brief, disbelieving pause where the past and present collide. They talked. Laughed. Filled in the years since the streets, since the book, since the push that started everything. And then DJ did what he always does when words aren’t enough.

He reached for his phone. He pulled up the photo of him in a black cap and gown, standing where he once could not imagine standing. He held it out like an offering. Proof made visible. Malcolm scrolled through the images and said what mentors sometimes say when they don’t realize how far their words have traveled: “Wow! I had no idea.” But DJ did. Because DJ was the evidence of the idea.

That moment clarified something DJ had been carrying for a long time. Mentorship, he said, “is not an extra.” It is a need. It is the difference between being told to stop and being told to keep going. Between being seen as a risk and being seen as capable. Between silence and instruction. Without it, too much is left to chance.

To wrap up our interview, DJ spoke of pain and purpose—of Harriet Tubman and freedom not as metaphor, but as outcome. “My taste of freedom,” he said, “was walking across that stage and getting my degree. That was my promise land.” The final line of DJ’s interview wasn’t about survival. It was about belonging. “I feel like I’m supposed to be here in the room.”

Researcher Reflection

DJ’s episode illustrates how persistence for first-generation Black male students may depend on sustained self-advocacy when institutional support feels inconsistent or conditional. His narrative demonstrates how determination, strategic planning, and direct engagement with decision-makers function as survival strategies within high-stakes academic pathways such as nursing education. Rather than relying on institutional processes alone, DJ learned to make himself visible, ensuring his needs and efforts could not be overlooked.

Ultimately, DJ’s narrative shows how mentorship, when present, can shift outcomes—but how students often continue forward by persistently advocating until institutional support becomes accessible or responsive. Early mentorship redirected his trajectory, while later institutional relationships helped sustain his progress within demanding program structures.

The Voice of Dell: Don’t Count Me Out

Dell didn’t describe college as a straight line. For him, it was construction. “Brick by brick,” he told me—“foundation first, then height. Not rushing. Not guessing. Building.” His goals sounded precise: return to as close to a 4.0 GPA as possible, earn a PhD, and keep moving

forward. But when Dell talked about *why*, the story widened. He wasn't studying just to qualify for something. He was studying to create something.

"A serious entrepreneur," he said—emphasis on *serious*. "Not one business, but multiple models. Startups. Mentorship. Infrastructure for the next wave." Dell imagined himself as the person telling another student, *You can do this*, because he'd already built the proof.

At the time of our interview, Dell had just completed his first semester as a transfer student at a four-year university. He was a marketing major with a concentration in consumer psychology because, as he put it, he wanted to "understand humans more." But what stood out most during our time together wasn't his major. It was his mindset.

"You versus you," Dell said, naming the principle he returns to when things get uncertain. Still, he admitted something many high-achieving students rarely say out loud: his first semester at a four-year institution almost ended early. Not because he couldn't handle the work, but because he didn't yet understand the system. The Dean's List screenshot Dell shared looks clean and official—the kind of message that usually signals ease. In his story, it represents recovery instead. Proof that a shaky start doesn't get the final word. Dell told me he began the semester with a 30% average in one of his courses. "It's my first semester, and I have a 30 in a class," he said. "I was like... I might drop out." Transfer had already felt like a risk, and failing in his first semester made him worry he might have moved too soon—or worse, wasted an opportunity he wasn't sure he would get again.

The reason wasn't academic inability. It was three missed syllabus assignments—zeros that landed before his confidence did. Orientation had been online. The platform was unfamiliar. No one had stood beside him to show how quickly a small oversight can snowball into something heavier. Then Dell did the thing that changed everything. He spoke to his professor.

“I asked straight up,” he said. “Is there a way I can turn this around?” The professor gave him a path—extra credit, a dropped grade, and a boundary Dell heard clearly: *don’t mess up again*. So, with the help of his academic advisor, Dell rebuilt his system. “I triple-checked my academic calendar,” he told me. “MacBook. iPad. iPhone. Every calendar I had.”

The screenshot doesn’t just announce success. It holds evidence of a process learned, a routine formed, and a decision made: one mistake would not become a pattern.

Figure 4.7

Dean’s List Notification Representing Academic Recovery and System Mastery



When I asked what made him comfortable enough to approach the professor, Dell didn’t call it bravery. He called it strategy. He sits in the front of the class—close enough to be seen, close enough to be remembered. “I always sit right next to the professor,” he said. “To show—I’m trying.” Effort, Dell learned early, isn’t just internal. Effort is visible. “Talk is cheap,” his grandfather told him. “So you got to show them.”

Academic recovery wasn’t the only moment Dell saw momentum shift. Dell described this image as reflective of how he approached his first FBLA competition while attending a two-year college; and, more broadly, his academic and leadership journey. He did not enter the

competition expecting recognition. He went because a peer mentor in the college's black male initiative told him he would "kill it," and Dell trusted that affirmation without overthinking the moment. He simply showed up.

That decision marked a turning point. Dell placed first in impromptu speaking and fourth in another event, but what stayed with him was not the trophy. It was the shift—walking into a room where nobody knew his name and leaving with people watching him. "Everybody knew who I was right after that," he said. Sitting down after the announcement, he became aware of the eyes in the room and realized that recognition can arrive suddenly rather than gradually.

The chessboard image Dell submitted features the queen positioned prominently among the other pieces, signaling both potential and restraint. "In chess, the queen is the most powerful piece on the board—capable of moving in multiple directions and influencing the outcome of the game, yet her impact depends on timing and positioning rather than immediate dominance."

In this context, the queen symbolized Dell's transition from preparation to activation. Like the queen entering play at the right moment, Dell's success was not the result of spontaneity, but of readiness—of having observed the room, learned the system, and moved with intention when the opportunity appeared.

On his wrist the day of the competition was a band bearing the logo of the mentorship program he was part of—a reminder that he was not representing himself alone. He was representing what Black men can do when they are given space to speak—and when they refuse to be small within it.

Figure 4.8

Chessboard With Queen Prominently Positioned, Symbolizing Strategic Readiness



Dell offered another observation without bitterness, just clarity. “The room doesn’t lean in until you win.” After he beat a state officer in impromptu speaking, the energy shifted. A dean from another institution approached him and a fellow classmate. Dell didn’t frame this as resentment. He framed it as reality. “The room pays attention when you disrupt its assumptions.”

At his first pitch competition, the technology failed. Slides wouldn’t load. The clicker didn’t work. He plugged in his MacBook and directed someone in the back. “Next slide.”

His partner hadn’t prepared. He had no note cards—because note cards meant penalties. Dell pitched anyway. He placed fourth, but he didn’t describe that as a loss. He described it as ignition. What began as a competition project did not end when the event was over; instead, it clarified the direction he wanted to pursue next.

The business he pitched in the competition has a name now: *Water For All*. He has an LLC, is working on intellectual property, and is building partnerships. He also described a nonprofit arm—*Water for Atlanta*—focused on community distribution and access. He talked

about it like someone who has lived in “the best of both worlds”—lower-income neighborhoods and the suburbs—and refuses to pretend the gap between them doesn’t matter.

Then Dell said something that sounded like a thesis sentence. “You don’t go through this much adversity on an idea that doesn’t mean nothing.”

For Dell, that adversity did not emerge from conflict with a professor or confusion about policy. It emerged from his involvement in the two-year-college’s Black male initiative mentorship program where he served as founder and first-year president. Dell also wrote bylaws alongside the program’s director and learned what it means to push for resources when people don’t think your organization deserves them. He described a budgeting meeting where resistance showed up in ways that made Dell realize not every space is eager to fund Black male leadership. Even someone connected to the initiative argued against it—a moment that clarified alignment. Dell didn’t back down. “We stood ten toes down,” he said. “Didn’t back down.”

Figure 4.9

Image Representing Leadership Development and Public Confidence Through Mentorship



Dell didn't frame his critiques of institutional advising and mentorship programs as complaints, but as expansions. While enrolled at the two-year college, he heard consistent messages about safe jobs and stable, conventional career paths, but far fewer affirmations of entrepreneurship as a legitimate or supported outcome. He was not rejecting work or stability; rather, he was noticing the absence of institutional language that validated innovation, ownership, and self-directed economic futures.

"What about students who don't see themselves doing the American tradition?" he asked—20 years, retirement, 401k. "That's a peaceful way to protect your peace." Then he smiled. "Being a business owner is nowhere near peaceful." The point wasn't preference. It was possibility. Black men deserve mentorship that makes space for multiple futures—not just the safest one.

When I asked Dell what advice he'd give other Black men entering college, he didn't start with motivation. He started with structure. "Build an academic plan," he said. "Find an advisor that cares about your professional development." Then he said the line that carries the whole episode: "Never count yourself out." And then, quietly: "Don't count me out."

Researcher Reflection

Dell's episode illustrates how academic and entrepreneurial momentum often develops through strategy, not confidence alone. His narrative highlights how learning institutional expectations—whether through early academic setbacks, competition experiences, or student leadership—enabled him to position himself for opportunity rather than disengage when systems felt unfamiliar or exclusionary.

Importantly, Dell's story also expands how success is imagined within advising and mentorship contexts. Rather than pursuing only conventional career pathways, he articulates

entrepreneurship and community-based innovation as viable futures, underscoring the importance of advising relationships that validate multiple trajectories for Black male students. His episode ultimately shows how persistence emerges not only through resilience, but through access to relationships and spaces that allow ambition to evolve into action.

The Voice of Damon: Chipping Away

Damon didn't come to college looking for permission. He came looking for a door. When he found one, he didn't just walk through it—he kept looking back, already thinking about who might need it next.

Damon is attentive in a way that matters. He notices what gets celebrated and what gets overlooked. He listens for what isn't being said. He carries himself with humor, cultural awareness, and a quiet kind of intention—like someone who learned early that opportunity doesn't always announce itself. For him, film isn't a hobby. It's a language. A system. A way of understanding how stories get told—and whose stories get space.

When he talked about his career goals, he didn't sound vague. He sounded mapped out. And the map wasn't fame—it's logistics. He's drawn to film production office work—the part of the industry that keeps the moving pieces moving: location scouting, coordinating details, communicating with actors and staff, managing what people don't see but always feel when it's done well. “It's all under one umbrella,” he explained—“different avenues and different departments.” He described wanting real on-the-job exposure, not just classroom theory. He had already seen how it could work through his internship with the city, where he supported citizen engagement and observed the relationship between community partnerships and film activity.

Damon's point was simple: when companies come to town and set up base camp, students shouldn't only watch from a distance. They should be invited into the process—so by

The first photo Damon shared wasn't of a person. It was a classroom board titled *Elements of Success*, where words like integrity, patience, focus, resilience, determination, accountability, optimism, and self-awareness were arranged almost like a system. He photographs it as a reminder to himself—something he could return to as he prepares to transfer to the Savannah College of Art and Design. “I took a picture of it,” he said, “so I could reference it later.” Not motivation. Instruction. A personal system he returns to when momentum dips.

“Elements of Success” Classroom Board Representing Steady Academic Construction



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The board wasn't something he noticed in passing. He saw it while he was doing the kind of behind-the-scenes work that kept him steady—tutoring, staying after class, and finding quiet places on campus where he could actually focus. “That was kind of like when I was going to tutoring,” he explained, “doing after schoolwork and finding a quiet place.” He said he took the photo because college wasn't only about willpower—it was about learning what to return to when focus slipped: integrity, self-awareness, patience, optimism. In other words, support wasn't abstract. It was routine.

Damon spoke about growing up in an urban environment where he experienced bullying from other Black peers. Those moments stayed with him. They shaped how safe it felt to trust people—especially people who looked like him. He said he was quieter than others—less aggressive, more reserved. Over time, that made him cautious. A loner. And yet, he still wanted connection. He said it plainly: he wanted leadership and brotherhood.

That's why the Black male initiative mentorship program mattered. For Damon, it wasn't just “involvement.” It was the first campus space that felt like what he had wanted growing up: leadership and brotherhood. He said he came in determined to build a social network—“a support system”—because in his earlier schooling he had always learned best when he wasn't isolated.

Still, he didn't romanticize it. Early on, he questioned whether it was worth it. He described it as slow at first—“not much going on”—and he had to practice patience and perseverance before the community fully took shape. When his confidence dipped, he didn't disappear; he kept showing up. And when he needed reassurance, he sought it from people who could steady him—faculty mentors who gave him what he called a “firm hand on the shoulder,” reminding him that something better was coming if he stayed.

Over time, Damon learned that persistence wasn't only internal—it was procedural. He began to treat college like something you can learn to operate: ask questions, find the right person, return to the right place. The goal wasn't independence for its own sake. The goal was a steady system.

He gave an example from public speaking—how he failed the first presentation, felt the anxiety rise, then made a choice. He went looking for a quiet place on campus—not isolation, but grounding. Somewhere he could “gather [his] thoughts” and reset. He found comfort in spaces where other people were present but not pressing—where he could hear typing, see people working, and remember he wasn't alone. The next presentation? He passed “with flying colors.” The lesson wasn't just academic. It was emotional: when the nerves start talking, you don't have to let them drive.

The second photo Damon submitted is the one he called Hidden Gem. It shows a quiet park—water, trees, light, a kind of calm that feels tucked away. Damon described it as beautiful and restful, but also easy to miss if you don't know where to look. That's why it represents the film program.

To Damon, a film program at a technical college can feel like that park: real, valuable, life-giving—and still somehow hidden beneath what gets centered most often: trades, technical pathways, and programs that are easier to “sell” because people already understand them. The park isn't loud. It doesn't demand attention. But once you find it, you wonder how it stayed invisible for so long.

Figure 4.11

“Hidden Gem”: Park Image Symbolizing the Film Program’s Overlooked Value



Damon’s own entry into the film program was not a straight pathway. He stumbled into it—almost accidentally—because his storage garage was nearby and curiosity pulled him further down the hallway. He described the film area as looking “a little deserted,” until he met someone and heard about a project. And then it clicked: this is what I’ve been looking for. “Forget everything else,” he said. “I’m going for this.” The hidden gem photo holds two truths at once: gratitude that the program existed for him, and frustration that students shouldn’t have to stumble onto purpose by accident.

For his third photo, Damon attended a recent basketball game at the college and took a picture beside the tiger mascot. The image reads as playful school spirit, but he described it as something deeper. To him, the tiger symbolizes a fighting spirit—integrity, self-reliance, and refusing to give up. That symbolism became even more meaningful as he stepped into leadership roles on campus. Because leadership changed what showing up meant.

He wasn’t attending events only for himself anymore. He was showing up as someone representing something larger—“being part of something more than yourself,” as he put it. In his story, leadership isn’t a title. It’s visibility. It’s making appearances. Supporting others.

Practicing the kind of presence that doesn't disappear when it's time to be seen. The tiger photo is his reminder that the version of you who stays home is not the same version of you who leads.

Figure 4.12

Tiger Mascot Photograph Representing Campus Pride and Leadership Visibility



Damon's episode isn't only about persistence. It's also about advocacy, because he noticed what was missing. He noticed Career Day—booths for departments, pathways clearly displayed. And he noticed what wasn't there: film. He spoke up — not because he wanted attention. He spoke up because he wanted visibility for the students who would come after him. He had stumbled into the film program himself, and he didn't want the next "future me" to have to find possibility by accident. So, he asked the question out loud: where is our department? He wasn't asking for special treatment—he was asking for legibility, so students could make informed choices instead of accidental ones. "How do people even know we're here?"

That moment matters because it shows what Damon is becoming. Not just a student trying to make it through, but someone willing to protect a program—someone willing to say, this belongs here, too. Damon’s story is built on a pattern: noticing, staying, and speaking.

He noticed what gets highlighted and what gets hidden. He stayed long enough to learn the system and find his rhythm. And when something mattered—when a program that had “saved a good part of [his] life” was being overlooked—he spoke up. Chipping away is not just how he studies. It’s how he moves through institutions: patiently, strategically, and with purpose. His role becomes clear: to walk through the door—and hold it open.

Researcher Reflection

Damon’s episode illustrates how persistence can develop through supported routines rather than immediate confidence. His narrative shows him building navigational capital by locating tutoring, identifying productive study environments, and learning what to return to when momentum dips.

Importantly, Damon’s story suggests that culturally affirming spaces and mentorship can transform cautious participation into purposeful engagement—shifting persistence from individual survival to collective responsibility.

The Voice of Andre: Break Every Chain

Andre didn’t describe nursing school like a dream. He described it like a fight—not loud or dramatic, just constant. The kind of pressure that settles in your chest and resurfaces every time a single exam determines whether you move forward or get pushed back.

“Break every chain,” Andre said. He didn’t mean it as a slogan. He meant it as a strategy. Andre is navigating nursing education in stages—LPN completed, now bridging toward the

ASN, with the BSN in his long-range view. He is a single father who works overnight shifts and measures progress by a single question: Can I keep going without regret?

Andre's first attempt at college was not rooted in choice. "I went in 2007–2008 because my mom kind of forced it," he told me. "I won't say it was good or bad—it just wasn't what I wanted." At the time, he was unsure of his direction. Nursing was a possibility, not a commitment, and the program he entered reflected his mother's vision more than his own. That disconnect mattered. "What she sent me to college for wasn't something I wanted to do," he said. "That's what led me to drop out."

He also became a father during that period. Responsibility arrived before clarity. Overnight shifts, childcare, and financial survival left little space for uncertainty. College paused—not because Andre couldn't do it, but because it did not yet mean enough to compete with the immediate realities of fatherhood and work. At that time, finishing school felt optional; providing stability for his son did not.

When he returned to school later, it was different. "This time, it was by choice," he said. "And it was for nursing." Andre tied that decision directly to his son. They made a pact: when his son graduates high school, Andre will become an RN. "That's my accountability," he said. "We'll graduate together."

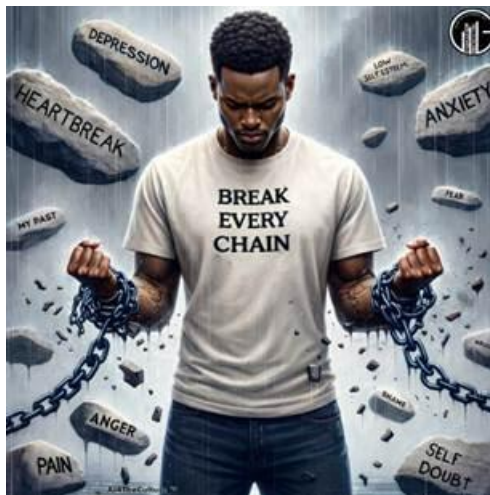
Andre chose to submit an AI generated photo that places the internal battle on the outside. Words surround him—anxiety, depression, self-doubt, anger, shame—with BREAK EVERY CHAIN centered across the image. "Nursing school," Andre explained, "tests more than knowledge. Progression policies are rigid, timelines fragile, and a single failed exam can reset everything." Andre described studying after overnight shifts, fighting exhaustion while knowing

that one poor performance could delay graduation by months or force him to repeat courses he had already sacrificed to complete.

The pressure was rarely loud, he explained—"it was quiet and constant," sitting in the background of every exam and every clinical evaluation. Anxiety becomes the anchor of starting something new—and when something goes wrong, the fear rarely stays academic. It activates everything underneath.

Figure 4.13

AI-Generated Image Depicting “Break Every Chain” as a Metaphor for Personal and Systemic Barriers



“It wasn’t that I wasn’t receptive,” Andre said. “The learning style was different for me, and I had to learn how to adapt to it.” That distinction matters. Andre does not frame difficulty as inability; he frames it as adaptation. Chain-breaking, for him, is not a singular moment. It is repeated recalibration.

The second image is a ladder—Andre’s personal order of operations: consistency → discipline → hard work → rejection/redirection → sacrifice → patience → risk → reward → success. This ladder is not aspirational; it is tactical. Andre described how he manages

overwhelm through printed schedules, weekly goals, vision boards, and breaking content down until he can explain it “like a fifth grader.” For Andre, overwhelm is not neutral. “Overwhelm can set me up for failure,” he said. So, he chooses structure intentionally.

Figure 4.14

AI-Generated Ladder Illustration Representing Andre’s Structured Progression Toward Success



Andre’s chain metaphor is not only academic; it is cultural. He grew up in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, where mental health is often shunned and emotional suppression normalized. In that context, breaking chains also means breaking silence—not shrinking emotions, not letting others define success, and not remaining in patterns that limit growth. He even extends the language outward, encouraging those close to him to “cut them chains loose” when relationships become constraining. In Andre’s story, success requires discipline—but it also requires disentanglement.

Andre’s strongest advocacy moment came during COVID. He contracted COVID during clinicals and entered a system where absence was treated as failure. “You can’t miss any days,”

he recalled being told. Andre pushed back, arguing that exposure through the program should be met with support, not punishment. At that moment, the issue wasn't only attendance—it was momentum. Missing clinical hours could delay progression, financial stability, and the timeline he and his son had built together. Andre described feeling caught between protecting his health and protecting his future. “Rules are rules,” he remembered hearing—until a human being intervened. A nursing instructor created space, allowing virtual meeting platform attendance and a later exam. Andre framed that moment as the difference between policy as a barrier and policy as a bridge. Without flexibility, he believes his momentum could have ended there.

In our second interview, Andre described “finding my voice,” language his therapist helped him name. But he also acknowledged the risk. Advocacy can come out as anger, and in institutional spaces, tone can matter as much as truth. “It’s not what I’m saying,” Andre explained. “It’s how I’m saying it.” He is not only learning to speak up—he is learning how to do so in a way that protects his progress.

Andre described advising experiences that varied widely by institution. At the first two-year college he enrolled in, he encountered engaged advising—people who helped students move through systems and understand their options. At another institution, the experience felt far less personal. He recalled being handed a document outlining program requirements and essentially being told to figure it out on his own. “Some students already know how college works,” he explained. “Others need someone to walk them through it.”

Andre rejected that model. To him, advising is not optional; it is responsibility. When asked how advising and mentorship could better support Black students, he emphasized compassion, active listening, and what he called “boots on the ground” support—advisors who

do more than provide information, but who walk students through unfamiliar processes. In his framing, advising does not simply inform—it stabilizes.

Andre’s story frames persistence as repeated liberation—not one breakthrough, but a series of returns: breaking chains of anxiety, shame, silence, and rigidity that treat students like machines. Andre keeps climbing anyway—through exhaustion, setbacks, and moments where quitting would be easier to justify than continuing. Because the goal is not only completion—it is becoming the kind of man, and the kind of father, who does not quit on himself. And in that sense, every step forward is not just academic progress, but generational interruption.

Researcher Reflection

Andre’s episode illustrates how persistence within high-stakes academic pathways is sustained through intentional self-management alongside emotional endurance. Rather than relying on a single breakthrough moment, his progress emerges through repeated recalibration—adjusting strategies, managing overwhelm, and continuing forward despite institutional and personal setbacks.

Importantly, Andre’s experience also reveals how institutional flexibility and compassionate intervention can transform rigid policy into opportunity. His story underscores that persistence in demanding programs is not solely an individual achievement, but is often made possible when institutions function as bridges rather than barriers.

The Voice of Mitchell: Designing Access

Mitchell didn’t tell his story like someone remembering. He told it like someone building—carefully, deliberately. He paused often, not because he didn’t know what to say, but because he wanted the words to be accurate, as if testing them for clarity before releasing them.

Mitchell is a first-generation Black male student pursuing an associate degree in UX (User Experience) UI (User Interface) design, with long-term plans to move into human-computer interaction (HCI). He didn't describe technology as a fascination with screens or code. He described it as a question: Who is this built for—and who gets left out when no one asks that? For Mitchell, design is not just creativity. It is ethics.

Mitchell's "why" began at home. He talked about watching his mother struggle with digital systems—not because she lacked intelligence, but because the systems were not built with her in mind. Poor eyesight. Limited accessibility. Interfaces that assumed everyone could see, click, scroll, and interpret information the same way.

Mitchell learned something early: technology can expand someone's world—or quietly shrink it. Watching his mother struggle with systems other people used easily made him realize that design failures are not minor inconveniences; they decide who gets access and who gets left behind. He remembered moments when tasks that took others minutes left her frustrated or dependent on someone else's help—small reminders of how easily technology can limit independence when accessibility is ignored.

That realization pushed him toward UI/UX and eventually toward HCI as a deeper destination. He wanted to design systems that account for disability, visual impairment, and real-world users—not ideal or "perfect" ones. Real people.

Mitchell did not navigate college like someone hoping things work out. He navigated like someone studying the system. When something became difficult, he started with peers, then moves strategically—tutoring, counseling, or administrative offices—depending on what the situation requires. His communication shifted as well: in-person when urgency matters, email when documentation matters, online appointments when structure matters.

Mitchell didn't always feel comfortable approaching instructors directly. Over time, that changed—not because his personality changed, but because his skillset expanded. Mitchell learned that professional growth sometimes looks like doing the uncomfortable thing on purpose: asking questions, clarifying expectations, and naming what isn't working before it costs you.

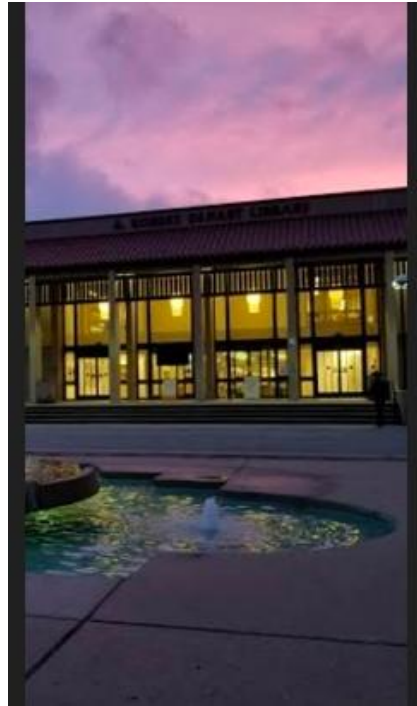
Mitchell described advising as complicated. He acknowledged that academic pathways are generally standardized—there are boxes to check and requirements to meet. But he made a distinction that felt important: advising can be present and still fail to meet the moment.

He noted that advising often becomes less responsive when challenges are tied to identity, representation, or race—particularly in tech spaces where Black male advisors are rare. He also described moments when instructors struggled to fully understand concerns rooted in lived experience. One example involved AI-based image processing tools that rendered his work inaccurately due to algorithmic bias related to skin tone—an issue he felt was minimized when he raised it. When the issue was minimized, Mitchell described feeling caught between knowing the problem was real and realizing he still had to perform within a system that did not fully recognize it. The burden shifted back to him—to adapt, correct, and keep moving.

Mitchell's story suggests that navigating college is not only about completing assignments. Sometimes it is about translating your reality into language the institution can hear. And sometimes, even then, the institution does not hear it. His first photo shows the campus library glowing against the dark sky. He didn't describe it romantically. He described it practically. "This represents how I balance work and school," he said. "I work during the day, so nights are when I catch up." The library became a strategy: extended hours, quiet space, reliable technology, fewer distractions. In Mitchell's telling, this is not sacrifice. It is design—a student redesigning his environment so he can keep going.

Figure 4.15

Campus Library at Night Representing Strategic Time Management

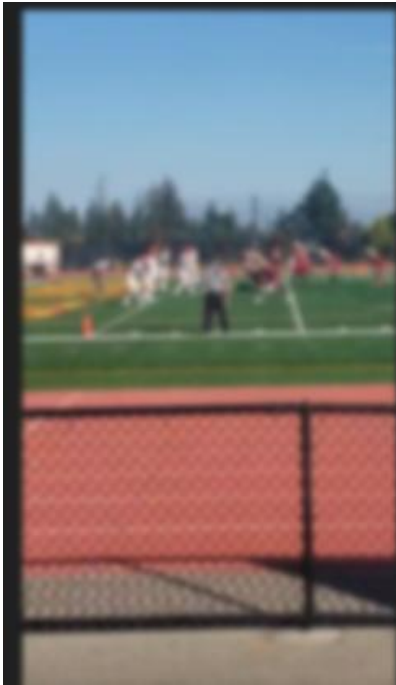


The second photo shows a football practice—but the image is blurred, and that blur matters. On the surface, players gather on a field. Beneath it, the meaning deepens. “This is where I learned how to connect with different people,” Mitchell said. He described working with the football team by taking training materials—often dense, text-heavy, and easy to ignore—and translating them into visuals that made sense to players with different learning styles. In that space, UI/UX became communication. Design became translation.

The blur also carries symbolism. It mirrors what Mitchell has seen repeatedly: people who are present, capable, and working hard, yet still difficult to “see” clearly within systems not built for them. It echoed his mother’s experience as well—how limited visibility shapes how you move through the world, and how often accessibility is treated as an afterthought rather than a requirement. The photo becomes a reminder: if you don’t design for clarity, you design confusion. If you don’t design for access, you design exclusion.

Figure 4.16

Blurred Football Practice Image Symbolizing Visibility and Access in Design



Mitchell’s final image is the University of Washington campus. “This is motivation,” he said. “It reminds me where I’m headed.” He was not chasing prestige for its own sake. He was chasing a space where he could deepen his expertise and expand his impact. He spoke about HCI not only as a discipline, but as a lever—one that can influence policy, privacy, and accessibility. He was especially critical of government and educational technologies, noting how poorly designed systems often harm immigrants, multilingual populations, and marginalized communities. For Mitchell, transfer represents more than advancement. It represents agency—the opportunity to design systems that serve the public more equitably.

Figure 4.17

University of Washington Campus Representing Transfer Aspiration and Future Impact



Mitchell’s story reads like a student moving through college with two roles at once: participant and analyst. He is learning, but he is also evaluating the system as he learns—testing it, noticing where it fails, and noticing who it fails. Mitchell does not frame persistence as endurance alone. He frames it as design: the continual adjustment of strategies, environments, and supports to meet both present demands and future aims. Underneath everything is the same purpose that shaped his story from the beginning—to build technology that does not assume one kind of user, and to design access so people like his mother do not have to fight a system just to use it.

Researcher Reflection

Mitchell’s episode illustrates how persistence can emerge through intentional adaptation rather than endurance alone. His academic progress reflects a continual process of adjusting environments, strategies, and support systems to meet changing academic and personal demands while sustaining his long-term transfer goals.

Importantly, Mitchell’s story reveals how personal experience can shape academic purpose, positioning persistence not simply as completion, but as preparation to build more

accessible and equitable systems for others. His trajectory illustrates how first-generation Black male students may move through college not only as collaborators, but as critical observers and future designers of the institutions and technologies they encounter.

The Voice of Danny: Where Focus Meets Freedom

Danny didn't grow into learning easily. As a child, school was a struggle long before it became a goal. "I was diagnosed with ADHD when I was younger," Danny told me. "I struggled with my academics so much growing up. College seemed out of reach." Danny revealed that for a long time, learning felt like something other people were good at—something measured by classrooms, deadlines, and attention he was told he didn't have enough of. Focus was framed as a deficit. Difficulty was treated as a limitation.

Danny carried that story with him into adulthood. For a long time, it shaped what he believed was possible. His grades suffered early, and college quickly began to feel like confirmation of what he had been told growing up—that academic success might simply not be for him. At one point, he seriously considered walking away. "I almost dropped out," Danny admitted. "I didn't think college was possible for me."

After finishing high school, his family encouraged a more immediate and practical path.

"They told me I should just get a job at Walmart and start working," he said. College felt uncertain; steady income felt safer. For a time, that future seemed more realistic than higher education. For a time, steady income felt more realistic than higher education. Learning still felt out of reach.

But somewhere along the way, Danny began to question that story instead of accepting it.

Danny learned early that effort alone wasn't enough—he had to make his effort visible.

“As a kid in school, I wasn’t bad at the work,” Danny explained. “I was bad at doing it the way they wanted me to. I finished my work really fast but missed instructions, or understood material verbally but struggled to show it on paper. My assignments would come back with a big incomplete written on the top. Teachers assumed that I couldn’t do the work. Sitting still was treated as evidence of engagement; eye contact as proof of attention. I struggled with both.”

When he finished assignments early, the response was rarely praise. “If I finished fast,” Danny said, “they thought I didn’t take it seriously.” And when his attention looked different—eyes drifting, body shifting—the interpretation was immediate. “If I wasn’t looking right at you,” he added, “people assumed I wasn’t paying attention—even when I was.”

What frustrated him most was the gap between understanding and recognition. “I understood what was going on,” he said. “I just didn’t always show it the way school wanted.” That gap stayed with him longer than any single grade or comment ever did. “It followed me from classroom to classroom—knowing I understood, but always wondering how to prove it. Over time, that frustration turned into curiosity.”

Years later, that question would resurface with more urgency than doubt. The same student who once tried to make his thinking visible in ways school would accept began wondering what might happen if he learned to understand his thinking instead.

Psychology didn’t start as a career choice. It started as a search for language—for himself. He wanted to understand how his mind worked. As a psychology major, Danny doesn’t describe college as a checklist of requirements. He described it as mental training—an opportunity to learn how to learn. Danny didn’t just want answers about his mind—he wanted direction for his future. But direction was harder to find than he expected.

At his two-year college, advising feels procedural. Meetings are brief, focused on forms and course sequences. Helpful, but distant. No one asks how he learned, what motivated him, or what he hoped to do beyond the next semester. For someone who had spent years being misunderstood in classrooms, the silence around how he actually learned felt familiar. Danny said he learned to come prepared with his own questions because otherwise the conversation stayed on the surface. He noticed the difference between being scheduled and being supported.

What he wanted was someone to say: Tell me how you think. Tell me what works for you. But those conversations rarely came. Advising feels transactional—sign here, take this class, stay on track. As a result, Danny has begun mentoring himself in small ways. He researched transfer options on his own. He watched how other students navigated the system. He paid attention to the instructors who explained concepts in multiple ways—the ones who seemed to understand that learning didn't look the same for everyone.

That's when the idea started to take shape. He didn't just want to study psychology for himself. He wanted to become a teacher. The kind who understands some students are learning deeply even when they aren't performing visibly.

Transferring to a four-year institution isn't just about a degree—it is about getting closer to that goal. Closer to a classroom where he could be the educator he once needed. "All three photos," he said, "kind of represent my life, especially recently. I've chosen to read more books—expand and grow my knowledge."

That choice mattered.

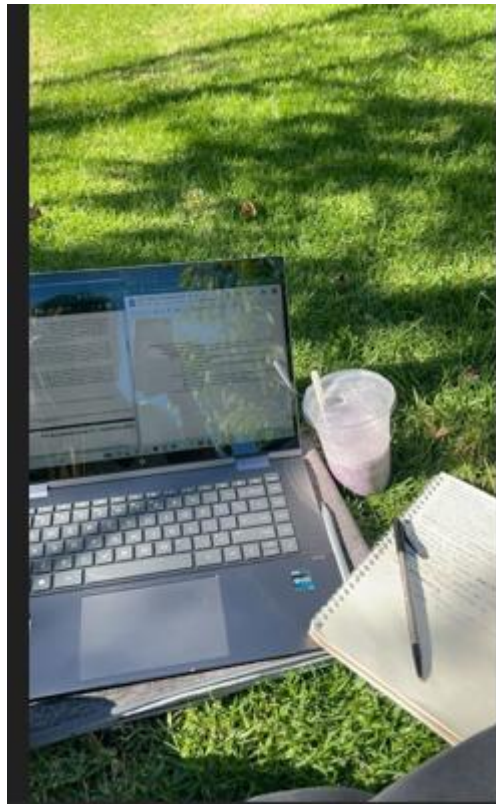
For Danny, learning isn't something confined to classrooms or syllabi. It is something he actively designed—quietly, intentionally, and in ways that allowed him to stay engaged without burning out. The first photo shows a laptop resting on the grass, a handwritten notebook nearby,

a drink within reach. It's an academic setup—but not a rigid one. “It represents me striking a balance,” Danny explained, “between reading and connecting with the outside world... easing academic pressure while still engaging in academic activities.”

Studying outdoors wasn't about avoidance. It was about regulation. Danny described learning environments as something he now curates. Being outside gave him room to think, to reset, to focus without the weight he associated with traditional academic spaces growing up. In this image, focus isn't forced. It's allowed.

Figure 4.18

Outdoor Study Environment Representing Balanced Engagement and Focus



Danny's second image shows a collection of books—psychology, personal development, finance, self-growth. None of them are accidental. “Even before becoming a psychology major,” Danny explained, “I was reading books that helped me better understand behavior and the systems people operate within.”

Danny spoke directly about what his habits represent—especially as a Black man.

“There’s this stereotype of us not being serious students,” he said. “But I’m actively seeking knowledge.” His pursuit of “book knowledge” wasn’t loud or performative. It was consistent. Intentional. Self-directed. In that way, Danny’s story resists two narratives at once: the idea that ADHD limits intellectual capacity and the stereotype that Black men are disengaged from academic growth. Danny didn’t overcome learning by becoming someone else. He learned how to learn as himself.

Figure 4.20

Library Study Space Representing Access and Continued Academic Growth



When I asked Danny how he hoped his story would end, he didn’t talk about grades alone. “Achieving all I set out to achieve,” he said, “making it an inspirational story.”

Not inspirational because it was easy. Inspirational because it was designed.

Researcher Reflection

Danny’s episode illustrates how academic persistence can emerge when students learn to redesign their learning environments rather than forcing themselves to conform to narrow

institutional expectations. His early academic struggles and near decision to leave college reflect how institutional norms can reinforce doubts about belonging before students have opportunities to discover how they learn best. Instead of framing ADHD as a limitation, Danny ultimately reframed it as a cue to build strategies that supported focus, balance, and sustained engagement on his own terms. His story highlights how students may cultivate navigational capital independently, identifying resources, adjusting study environments, and developing learning routines without waiting for institutional direction.

The Voice of Seth: Staying in Time

Seth didn't wander into college unsure of who he was. He arrived with something already tuned—music. "I'm a vocalist," he told me, stating it as plainly as breathing. "Music is just how we are. It's always around us. It's family. It's culture. It's home." At 21, Seth was completing an associate degree in interdisciplinary studies at a technical college. At the time of our interview, he had recently been accepted into a four-year university music program, a competitive space that would allow him to refine his craft and move closer to a future in musical theater.

Music was never a fallback plan. It was inheritance and intention. Seth wrote songs, sang across genres that often sit outside traditional expectations of Black masculinity, and imagined a career built around voice, story, and performance. College, for him, was not about discovering identity; it was about staying aligned while moving forward. Music did not exist in isolation for Seth—it lived in rooms full of people.

During our interview, he shared images from a family Thanksgiving gathering where food covered the tables, conversations overlapped, and a jazz band played softly in the background. "This is normal for us," he said. That normalcy mattered. It meant Seth entered college without needing permission to love music. He was not inventing himself from scratch; he

was extending something already affirmed and expected. What he needed from college was not motivation but structure—a way to move through the institution without losing rhythm.

Figure 4.21

Family Holiday Gathering Representing Music as Culture and Foundation



“This is my work,” Seth explained. “My original music. This is what I’m building toward.” Music here represents discipline, preparation, and future intention. That structure began on day one. Seth enrolled with his mother beside him, another music lover fluent in the language that shaped his life. When they met his advisor, connection formed immediately. “When my

mom started talking to her about music,” Seth said, “I was like... okay. I can trust her.” His advisor was creative as well—someone who understood artistry as discipline rather than distraction. She did not ask Seth to translate his aspirations into something smaller or more practical. Trust did not build slowly; it arrived whole.

That advisor became Seth’s primary point of contact, not because she was assigned, but because she felt safe. Later, Seth brought both of his parents back to meet her—not out of obligation, but because it felt right. “She was helping me,” he said. “I wanted them to meet her.” Advising was not separate from his life; it was woven into it.

Routine turned that trust into stability. “I used to see my advisor every Thursday,” Seth said. “Like clockwork. After class, I’d go straight there.” Not only when something went wrong. Not only when he had questions. Every Thursday. Those meetings were never rushed or reduced to academic checklists. Seth talked about his courses, his plans to transfer, and the music he was writing that week. “She always wanted to hear it,” he said. That mattered. In that space, Seth did not have to compress himself into academic categories. His creativity was not a liability; it was evidence of purpose. “Every Thursday,” Seth said. “That’s when I saw my advisor.”

The institution itself did not always move in time. As a first-generation student, campus employment wasn’t extra income—it was part of how he expected to stay in school. Seth described applying repeatedly for work-study positions, only to learn the opportunities were no longer available. For a moment, he wondered if he had misunderstood how the system worked—or whether opportunities simply moved past students who didn’t know the right questions to ask. “I kept thinking, am I doing something wrong?” he said. It wasn’t failure—it was uncertainty. Not lack of ability, but lack of clarity. What is striking is what did not happen next. Seth did not disengage or withdraw. Instead, he returned to the one place that had already proven steady. “I

didn't really know who else to ask," he said. "But I knew I could go to my advisor." Routine gave him somewhere to land.

Figure 4.22

Notebook Representing Weekly Advising Rhythm and Transfer Preparation



Transfer, however, did not unfold as smoothly as Seth first imagined. His original plan was to attend the University of Georgia, a program with a competitive application and audition process. Confident he could manage the process on his own, Seth began navigating deadlines and requirements independently. But the process proved more complicated than expected. Application timelines, audition requirements, and submission steps did not align as clearly as he assumed, and by the time he realized what he had missed, key deadlines had already passed.

"It felt like I messed up my own opportunity," he admitted. For a moment, uncertainty replaced momentum. Transfer suddenly felt less like expansion and more like a setback.

It was then that Seth returned to the person who had consistently helped him make sense of institutional processes—his advisor. Together, they reviewed options, timelines, and programs that still aligned with his goals. With clearer guidance and renewed direction, Seth applied again,

this time successfully gaining admission into a university music program that allowed him to continue moving forward.

Looking back, Seth did not frame the moment as failure. He framed it as learning when to stop navigating alone. Advising, once routine, became strategic. Persistence, he learned, sometimes means knowing when not to navigate alone.

As we talked about his journey, Seth shared something that stayed with me about the 2/4 time signature. “It’s one of the most common time signatures in Western music,” he explained. “It’s steady—you feel it.” Then he smiled. “It kind of reminds me of going from a two-year college to a four-year one.” Two beats to four beats. Same music, expanded measure. For Seth, transfer was not an interruption; it was continuation.

By the time of our interview, the acceptance letter had already arrived. Holding it made the future tangible. “This is when it felt real,” he said. “Like, I’m actually doing it.” The letter did not mark an ending; it marked a shift into a larger space where his voice could continue to grow. “This is when it felt real.” Forward motion made visible.

Seth’s story isn’t dramatic, and that’s precisely its power. He didn’t wait for crisis to seek support; he built relationship before confusion arrived. Advising wasn’t a last resort—it was a rhythm. Music grounded him, family affirmed him, and advising guided him forward, voice intact and future in view.

Researcher Reflection

Seth’s episode challenges the assumption that first-generation Black male students engage advising only during moments of crisis. Instead, advising functioned as a steady and affirming structure, supporting his progress before challenges escalated. Regular meetings

created a rhythm that mirrored the discipline of his musical training, allowing him to navigate institutional processes without losing connection to his identity or long-term goals.

Relational safety emerged early through shared cultural understanding, signaling that Seth's creative aspirations would be taken seriously rather than redirected. This foundation allowed advising conversations to move beyond course selection and into discussions of transfer planning, career goals, and personal development. Routine advising meetings then functioned as navigational capital, providing a predictable point of return when institutional processes felt confusing or inconsistent.

Finally, Seth's framing of transfer—from two-year to four-year college—as moving from 2/4 to 4/4 time illustrates how upward transfer can be experienced as expansion rather than disruption when consistent relationships remain in place. Seth's narrative suggests that when advising is reliable and culturally responsive, it sustains not only persistence, but alignment, voice, and forward motion.

The Voice of Ron: Permission Granted

Ron's story does not unfold gradually. It turns in a moment—an email, a screen, a pause that stretches longer than it should. Unlike some of the other stories in this chapter, which build through routine advising relationships and steady momentum, Ron's experience centers on interruption. Movement stops before he fully realizes it has happened. At the time, Ron was a first-generation Black male student using a two-year college as a fresh start, a place to recover from a lackluster high school GPA and rebuild academic confidence before transferring to Georgia State University. His long-term goal was clear: he wanted to become a social worker, someone who could help others navigate crises like the ones he had witnessed in his own community. He often spoke about wanting to become the kind of adult young people in his

neighborhood could turn to when things fell apart. College was supposed to be the first step toward that future. He had not planned to leave school, nor had he decided to stop. Life intervened first.

During the semester, Ron's father passed away unexpectedly, and the loss shifted everything. Coursework, deadlines, attendance—all of it felt distant compared to the grief unfolding at home. Ron returned to class physically, but emotionally he was elsewhere. "I just wasn't there, I couldn't focus on nothin," he explained. Assignments piled up, and emails from professors went unanswered—not because he didn't care, but because he did not know how to ask for help. "I didn't know what to say," he told me. "I didn't want to sound like I was making excuses."

Without language for self-advocacy or knowledge of how to request extensions, silence felt safer than saying the wrong thing. Work went unfinished, courses slipped away, and by semester's end, his grades reflected absence more than ability. Ron also did not know academic standing could be appealed or that institutions sometimes create pathways for students navigating personal crises. No one explained the process, and he did not know to ask. So when the next message arrived, it felt final.

The email appeared without warning—formal language, a subject line that felt definitive: academic suspension. Ron read it more than once, trying to understand what it meant and what he was supposed to do next. He explained that the message did not explain whether the status was temporary or permanent, did not outline appeal options, and did not name a person to contact. "I didn't really know how to take it," Ron said. "I just saw the words and figured that was it." Without explanation, the message did not feel informational; it felt conclusive. For a

student already trying to rebuild his academic identity after high school, the notice felt like confirmation that his second chance had ended.

When Ron selected his photovoice image, he did not choose a classroom or textbook. He chose a barricade. The photograph shows a road blocked by a large sign reading ROAD CLOSED, bright orange lights flashing at the top, with no arrows, no detour signs, and no explanation of how long the closure might last. The road continues beyond the barrier—visible, intact—but unreachable. Ron explained that the image captured exactly how suspension felt: not confusion about what happened, but uncertainty about what was still possible. The sign does not say slow down or construction ahead; it signals finality. Forward motion stopped—not because Ron chose to stop, but because he believed he was no longer permitted to move. The absence of a detour mirrored the absence of relational guidance in the institutional message. Possibility still existed—the transfer dream, the goal of becoming a social worker—but without direction, it felt inaccessible.

The pause might have lasted indefinitely until the phone rang. An advisor reached out—not to reprimand him or reference suspension, but simply to ask whether he planned to register for the upcoming term. “When he called,” Ron said, “it felt different. It didn’t feel like I was in trouble.” The call created space for questions, clarification, and possibility. Through conversation, Ron learned that suspension was not necessarily permanent, that appeal processes existed, and that there were people who could help him return.

Figure 4.23

Road Closed Barricade Representing Perceived Finality of Academic Suspension



More importantly, he learned he was still seen. “It made me feel like I still mattered,” he reflected. The future he imagined—earning strong grades, transferring to Georgia State University, and eventually working as a social worker—had not disappeared. It had only paused.

The second image Ron shared captures a small plant pushing through a crack in the pavement. For Ron, the image represents what followed that conversation: the realization that progress was still possible even after interruption. What once felt like a permanent stop began to look like a path forward. Just as new life forces its way through concrete, Ron began to see continuation where he once saw closure. Re-engagement did not erase what happened, but it allowed growth to resume. The image reflects resilience—and the importance of someone creating the conditions for that growth to return.

Figure 4.24

Plant Emerging Through Pavement Representing Re-Engagement and Renewed Possibility



Later in the interview, Ron named the part that matters most. “I would have done nothing,” he said plainly. “If he hadn’t called, I would’ve just stopped.” Not because he did not want to continue, but because he believed he no longer could.

Ron’s experience shows how disruption often begins long before institutional consequences appear. Grief, uncertainty, and lack of procedural knowledge combined to produce outcomes that reflected circumstance rather than capacity. Suspension, when communicated without relational context, became interpreted as final rather than procedural. His initial silence was not apathy—it was a rational response to uncertainty and loss. Re-engagement became possible only after relational outreach transformed an automated message into a human exchange. Where some students experience advising as routine or recognition, Ron experienced advising as authorization—the moment he learned he was still allowed to respond. His story

challenges assumptions that non-response signals disengagement, showing instead how engagement often depends on whether students feel invited, informed, and permitted to continue.

As Ron explained, “Sometimes you don’t move because you don’t know if you’re allowed to.” Now, when Ron talks about transferring and becoming a social worker, he speaks less about proving himself and more about helping others find their way back when life interrupts their plans.

Researcher Reflection

Ron’s episode illustrates how institutional communication, when delivered without relational context, can unintentionally halt student momentum. Academic suspension functioned less as procedural status and more as perceived finality because Ron lacked both clarity and a trusted point of contact to help interpret his options. His silence was not disengagement but a response to grief, uncertainty, and limited knowledge of institutional processes. Proactive advising outreach disrupted that stillness by restoring relational safety and authorizing re-engagement.

The Voice of Eli: The Fifth Doctor

Eli wasn’t always the loud one. That surprises people now, because he is everywhere. On campus. In rooms that matter. On microphones. On social media. In leadership roles that assume confidence. But when Eli first arrived at his college, he didn’t come to be seen. He came to get through. “Get in. Get out,” he told me. “That was the plan.” College, at first, wasn’t a place to belong. It was a step, something to complete so he could move on to work and responsibility.

He described his early days as quiet. “When I first, first, first got to [the college], I was very shy,” he said. “I had no confidence.” He talked about how people read him now and assume he’s always been this way, but that wasn’t true. “People don’t realize... I’m still a little shy,” he

admitted. “People will never realize that because it’s the confidence that built up.” Back then, he said, he didn’t know how to take up space. “I was nervous. I was scared,” he told me. “I was scared to sit down.” In his telling, the campus version of Eli—the visible Eli—was not who he was when he arrived. It was who he became through relationships.

At home, the stakes felt clear. His sister had already earned a degree, and Eli wanted something specific: to become the first man in his immediate family to earn a bachelor’s degree. Not just for the title, but for what it would signal. “Proof travels,” he said, and he spoke about education as something that could change the way people see what is possible—not only for him, but for others watching.

The shift did not happen all at once. It happened through people. Eli talked about his two-year college as a place where support felt reachable—not hidden behind layers of offices or unanswered emails. “I didn’t have to do anything on my own,” he said. “Like anything at all at a school.” He described how quickly he learned that he could reach out, call, text, stop by—because he had names and relationships, not just departments. “If I had something going on,” he explained, “I knew who to reach out to about what.” He said that was the difference between survival and navigation: “It was like community.”

When I asked who he turned to for guidance and support, Eli began listing names so fast it felt like he was flipping through a contact list in his mind. “Tony—Leah—Miracle Willis... both of the Sharons... Miss Stella... Miss Leslie in the library... Miss Teresa... Miss Jessica...” and then he paused to say what mattered most to him: “These doctors are real special to me,” he said, because he could name “at least four Black male doctors that I can reach out to.” He listed them with pride: “Dr. Harris, Dr. John Henry, Dr. Smith... Dr. Peters.” Then he explained why it

mattered: “I just think it’s real cool that I know Black male doctors that did the same thing I did... and where they are now.”

He didn’t describe them as distant role models. He described them as reachable. “They keep their hands on me,” Eli said. “They keep pushing me. They don’t be on me texting me every day... they trust me. But they trust that I do the right thing.” That balance created something Eli didn’t have when he arrived: confidence. “When you get out and meet like-minded people,” he said, “and you realize... you can look yourself in the mirror when you see them... you like, I’m just like that. Like you start feeling better about yourself.”

This is where the phrase emerged. “I’m going to be the fifth,” Eli told me. Not as a joke. Not as a motivational slogan. As a direction. As lineage. He was talking about becoming the fifth Black male doctoral-level leader—a continuation of what he could now see up close.

The first image Eli shared is not a portrait of him standing in the spotlight. It’s a photograph of cords and stoles—evidence of mentorship and belonging that he carried into graduation. The cords represent visible accumulation: effort, involvement, completion. But the stoles tell the deeper story. Eli shared that the two stoles represent mentorship programs he participated in—spaces where he was not just advised, but held. In his words, they “kept their hands on me.” They didn’t just help him finish; they helped him become.

Figure 4.25

Cords of Commitment: Visualizing Campus Involvement



The second image shifts away from graduation and toward leadership: Eli's SGA blazer laid across the back of a chair pulled up to a table. The photo is quiet, but the symbolism is unmistakable. It represents the moment Eli stopped asking if he belonged in decision-making spaces. He didn't need to announce confidence anymore—his presence carried it. Eli described learning that leadership is not about personality; it is about consistency and relationship. "Remembering someone's name... remembering one fact about they self... that goes a long way," he said. "It shows that you care." For Eli, care was not soft—it was strategic. "Only time people talk to professors... is at the end when stuff almost too late," he said. "That ain't the way to go." Instead, he built relationships before urgency. "If you can remember someone's name," he explained, "people gonna help you... because they feel that helps you." The blazer across the chair becomes a symbol of that earned seat—relationship, reputation, responsibility.

Figure 4.26

SGA Blazer Representing Earned Leadership and a Seat at the Table



The third image is a microphone at a podium in an empty auditorium. This photo represents Eli's public voice, but it also represents the path it took to get there. He described becoming "the first ever Voice of the Tigers," not through a formal application process, but through relationship and trust. "I stopped in his office, talked to him... every day," Eli said, describing how he built rapport with the athletic director. Then one day he was invited to "pull up to the game." He arrived and was handed headphones. "He told me... 'Hey, just start talking about what you see in the game,'" Eli recalled. "And then I started doing it." He had watched basketball his whole life, so the role clicked quickly. Later, the coach gave him a trophy: "It's called the Voice of the Tigers," Eli told me. "I was the first ever Voice of the Tigers." What matters here is not only that Eli became a commentator at the athletic events; it is that someone trusted him with a microphone before he had fully learned to trust himself. That trust became

momentum. When Eli transferred to his four-year institution this semester, he was given an opportunity to do similar work again—continuing his path of speaking, representing, and being visibly positioned as a campus voice.

Figure 4.27

Podium and microphone representing Eli’s emergence into public leadership and voice



Eli’s story is not about sudden transformation. It is about invitation. He entered college expecting to “get in, get out.” What changed was not his ambition—it was his environment. Advising, mentorship, representation, and leadership opportunities did not appear as separate services; they worked together, creating relational safety and expanding what Eli believed was possible. Eli said it best when he described why connection mattered: “Black men... we always feel like we got to do things alone. We got to feel like we got to be Superman.” His experience offered an alternative. “You gotta have relatable people,” he said. “People they can ease their mind like, ‘bro, I relate. I can relate to you.’” Eli’s line—“I’m going to be the fifth”—captures the expansion that followed. It is not only a goal. It is a promise to himself and to the students coming after him that access matters, mentorship matters, and excellence multiplies when it is

shared. Now, when Eli talks about his future, he speaks less about getting through college and more about making sure the next student doesn't have to figure it out alone.

Researcher Reflection

Eli's episode illustrates how confidence and leadership emerge through relational access rather than individual determination alone. His experience highlights the importance of mentoring networks and visible representation, particularly access to Black male doctoral-level leaders who modeled achievement while remaining personally reachable. These relationships allowed Eli to build confidence gradually, transforming initial uncertainty into sustained leadership and campus visibility.

Summary

The episodes that preceded illuminate how advising, mentorship, and transfer are experienced and narrated in relation to identity, history, and institutional context. This inquiry is situated within persistent inequities in college access, advising experiences, mentorship support, and transfer outcomes for first-generation Black male students—inequities that are particularly pronounced within two-year colleges, where their engagement is often interpreted through institutional metrics rather than lived experience (Harper, 2012; Means, 2014; Strayhorn, 2015; Wood & Palmer, 2015;). By centering narrative accounts, this study shifts attention from performance indicators to meaning-making, foregrounding how students interpret their navigation of institutional structures that were not originally designed with them in mind.

Chapter 5 - Narrative Episodes to Structure: The Emergence of the Story-Conscious Advising Framework (SCaF)

The purpose of this chapter is to move from individual narrative episodes to cross-case interpretation, examining the shared processes that emerged across collaborators' experiences. Building upon the findings presented in Chapter 4, this chapter synthesizes key patterns related to cultural wealth, advising interactions, mentorship, and transfer preparation. It then introduces the Story-Conscious Advising Framework (SCaF) as a theoretical contribution grounded in these findings and situates the framework within existing advising and higher education literature. The chapter concludes with implications for practice, research, and institutional policy.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to understand how first-generation Black male students enrolled in a two-year college in the Southeast United States narrate their experiences navigating the college process, with particular attention to how cultural wealth and transfer student capital inform their interactions with academic advising, mentorship programs, and preparation for transfer to a four-year institution. The study sought to illuminate how students draw from multiple forms of cultural wealth while navigating institutional structures that are often unclear or difficult to access, positioning advising and mentorship relationships as critical sites of interpretation, support, and meaning-making.

Data were generated through narrative interviews and Photovoice artifacts, allowing collaborators to communicate their experiences through both spoken stories and visual representations. Together, these methods provided insight into how students interpret institutional messaging, negotiate belonging, and make decisions about persistence and transfer within complex educational environments.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do first-generation Black male students leverage their cultural wealth to navigate the college process at a two-year institution?
2. How do first-generation Black male students draw on cultural wealth to engage with academic advising and overcome systemic challenges?
3. How does cultural wealth shape first-generation Black male students' experiences within mentorship programs at a two-year college?
4. How do first-generation Black male students utilize cultural wealth in preparing for a successful transition to a four-year institution?

Building upon the narrative episodes presented in Chapter 4, this chapter shifts from individual stories to cross-case interpretation, examining shared processes that emerged across collaborators' experiences and introducing the Story-Conscious Advising Framework (SCaF) as a theoretical contribution grounded in these findings.

Interpreting Cultural Wealth Across Narratives

Viewing collaborators' narratives through a Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) lens (Yosso, 2005) shifted the interpretation of their experiences from one centered on barriers to one grounded in strength, strategy, and meaning-making. Rather than positioning students as lacking preparation or knowledge, this lens illuminated the multiple forms of capital collaborators actively leveraged to navigate complex institutional systems. Across narratives, cultural wealth did not operate as isolated traits but as dynamic, interacting resources that shaped how students interpreted challenges, engaged with advising, and sustained their aspirations.

Navigational Capital as Strategic Interpretation and Coordination

Navigational capital emerged as one of the most consistently demonstrated forms of cultural wealth across collaborator narratives. Students described actively interpreting institutional systems, policies, and pathways—often without clear or consistent guidance. This included coordinating academic requirements alongside work and family responsibilities, making strategic enrollment decisions, and, at times, reconstructing pathways when institutional processes became barriers. These patterns suggest that navigating college was not a passive experience but an ongoing process of interpretation, decision-making, and adaptation. Collaborators relied not only on formal institutional instruction but also on lived experience, observation, and trial-and-error to determine how to move forward.

Aspirational and Resistant Capital as Persistence and Advocacy

Resistant and aspirational capital frequently operated together, particularly when collaborators encountered institutional barriers or moments of disruption. Students described advocating for themselves, questioning policies that threatened their progress, and persisting despite setbacks, all while maintaining long-term academic and career goals. Expressions such as “standing on business” and “don’t count me out” reflect how persistence was not simply endurance but an active process of negotiation. In these moments, aspirational capital sustained belief in future possibilities, while resistant capital enabled collaborators to challenge systems that complicated access to those possibilities. Together, these forms of capital highlight how students engaged institutional structures with both determination and agency.

Linguistic Capital as Meaning-Making and Strategy

Linguistic capital appeared not only in communication but in how collaborators made meaning of their experiences. Students frequently used metaphor, phrasing, and personal maxims

to interpret challenges and guide their decisions. Language functioned as a form of strategy—organizing experience, reinforcing discipline, and, at times, reframing institutional interactions as spaces where agency could be exercised. Statements such as “you versus you” or “a win isn’t gonna feel like a win if the other person didn’t know we were playing a game” illustrate how collaborators translated lived experiences into frameworks for understanding competition, progress, and persistence. In this way, language operated as both interpretation and instruction.

Social and Familial Capital as Relational Support Systems

Social and familial capital were often intertwined, particularly in how collaborators drew support from relationships and community-based affirmation. Family responsibilities, encouragement, and early life experiences shaped how students approached discipline, responsibility, and long-term planning. At the same time, relationships with mentors, peers, and support programs provided access to institutional knowledge and opportunities that were not always readily visible. These networks functioned as both emotional grounding and strategic support, reinforcing collaborators’ ability to remain engaged even when institutional pathways felt unclear or difficult to navigate.

Importantly, these forms of cultural wealth did not operate independently. Across narratives, collaborators demonstrated how different forms of capital (Yosso, 2005) interacted in response to specific challenges and opportunities. Navigational strategies were often reinforced by social support; aspirational goals were sustained through linguistic framing; and resistant actions were grounded in both personal conviction and relational encouragement. This interaction underscores that cultural wealth is not a static set of traits but a dynamic process through which students make meaning of their experiences and determine how to move forward within complex institutional environments.

Taken together, these patterns illustrate that collaborators were not navigating college empty-handed; rather, they brought a complex set of tools that shaped how they interpreted, responded to, and persisted through institutional experiences. However, what became equally important was not only what students brought with them, but how those forms of capital were recognized, supported, or constrained within advising and mentorship interactions. This insight becomes central to the cross-case findings that follow, particularly in understanding how institutional actors influence the translation and expansion of students' existing strengths.

Discussion of Findings

This study explored how first-generation Black male students at two-year colleges in the Southeast narrate their experiences navigating advising, mentorship, and institutional structures as they prepare to transfer to four-year institutions. While Chapter 4 presented collaborators' stories as individual narrative episodes, this chapter shifts toward interpretation, examining shared processes that cut across those experiences. Across interviews and Photovoice narratives, collaborators consistently described navigating institutional systems, relationships, and environments that required them to interpret messages about belonging, ability, and possibility while making strategic decisions about persistence and transfer.

These findings suggest that student success is shaped not only by academic preparation or access to resources, but also by the ways students draw from multiple forms of cultural wealth to navigate institutional systems that are often unclear or difficult to access. The following sections interpret these shared processes and situate them within existing advising and mentorship literature while introducing the Story-Conscious Advising Framework (SCaF) as a lens for understanding how advising interactions influence student narratives of persistence and transition.

Although this study was guided by four distinct research questions, the findings are presented in an integrated manner. Within narrative inquiry, experiences are not lived or interpreted in isolation; rather, advising, mentorship, institutional navigation, and meaning-making emerge as interconnected dimensions of students' stories. Collaborators did not separate these experiences into discrete categories, and their narratives often addressed multiple research questions simultaneously. Presenting the findings holistically honors the storied nature of their experiences and avoids artificial fragmentation of themes that are deeply intertwined across advising encounters, mentorship relationships, and persistence decisions.

Interpreting Institutional Messaging

Advising interactions emerged as a central mechanism through which institutional expectations, pathways, and possibilities were communicated and interpreted. However, these interactions were not experienced uniformly. This section examines how institutional messaging is interpreted through advising, focusing on three key dimensions: advising as translation versus transaction, the role of navigational capital in coordinating complex academic and personal demands, and the relational and cultural dynamics that shape how institutional messages are understood and acted upon.

Advising as Transaction vs. Translation

Across collaborator narratives, advising interactions often served as the key conduit through which institutional expectations and pathways were communicated. However, collaborators described experiencing advising differently depending on whether advisors simply conveyed requirements or actively translated institutional processes in ways that supported understanding and decision-making. Students frequently interpreted advising encounters as signals about their preparedness, possibilities, and likelihood of success, suggesting that how

institutional information is delivered shapes how students understand their place within college systems. These interpretations reflect students' navigational capital as they make sense of institutional systems not originally designed with their experiences in mind (Yosso, 2005).

Damon's account shows how institutional messages often arrive to students through advising, but the meaning of those messages depends on whether an advisor simply delivers a schedule or translates the system in a way that supports decision-making. When Damon's faculty advisor created his schedule and Damon deferred, "I guess y'all know best," the advising interaction functioned as a one-way institutional transaction rather than a learning moment. In contrast, Kesha, the professional academic advisor, "broke it down," explained workload and sequencing, and helped Damon see how an alternative course path could protect his momentum and confidence. Damon's story illustrates advising as a form of teaching by helping students understand requirements, anticipate challenge points, and make informed choices rather than merely prescribing enrollment (Crookston, 1972; Lowenstein, 2009). This aligns with NACADA's framing of advising as an educational process that supports students' goals through informed planning and decision-making (NACADA, 2006) and echoes literature that meaningful advisor contact is associated with student attitudes and judgments consistent with success (Museus, 2020; Strayhorn, 2015).

Importantly, Damon does not describe "translation" as only academic knowledge; he describes it as relational pacing, explanation, and cultural readability—someone taking time, not rushing, and making the system feel navigable. He connected the professional advisor's approach to earlier experiences of needing "extra time to explain it," suggesting that when advisors slow down, name what matters, and clarify options, they reduce the chance that students interpret difficulty as personal inadequacy. In this way, advising-as-translation becomes an equity

practice: it interrupts the hidden curriculum of college navigation and helps students access pathways that are technically available but not equally legible to all students (Martínez, 2022; Strayhorn, 2015). Damon's comparison also reinforces that students are continuously interpreting how the institution speaks to them through tone, explanation, and follow-through, and those interpretations shape whether advising feels like a gatekeeping encounter or a supportive guide through complexity (Jackson & Morton, 2023).

Navigational Capital as Strategic Coordination

Collaborators demonstrated navigational capital not only through interview narratives but also through Photovoice artifacts capturing how they actively organized their academic and personal lives in preparation for transfer. Ken's notebook, for example, contained work schedules, advising notes, and academic plans layered together as tools for survival and persistence, revealing how students simultaneously managed institutional requirements, employment responsibilities, and long-term goals. These artifacts illustrate that navigating college required strategic coordination rather than passive participation in institutional pathways. Seth likewise described carefully coordinating coursework, employment responsibilities, and advising guidance as part of preparing for successful transfer. Similar patterns appeared across collaborator narratives. Andre described relying on advisors to clarify pathway options when institutional processes felt unclear, while BJ initially interpreted program rejection as personal inadequacy until advisors explained specific criteria and next steps. Walter similarly described gradually learning to navigate institutional policies through advising interactions that helped clarify processes that initially felt confusing and difficult to interpret. Navigating institutional systems often required collaborators to interpret policies and processes while also managing

assumptions about academic readiness commonly placed on Black male students (Museus, 2021; Stanton et al., 2022).

Across these accounts, students were not merely receiving institutional information; they were interpreting what institutional messages suggested about their preparedness, possibilities, and futures. Advising interactions therefore functioned not only as informational exchanges but as moments in which students made meaning of their place within higher education, shaping decisions about whether to persist, reengage, or reconsider transfer pathways (Lowenstein, 2009; Stanton et al., 2022). Ron likewise emphasized how access to supportive advising influenced his decision to continue pursuing transfer despite moments of uncertainty. These interpretations reflect students' navigational capital as they make sense of institutional systems not originally designed with their experiences in mind.

Relational and Cultural Dynamics in Interpreting Institutional Messaging

Advising interactions were not only shaped by the information shared, but also by the relational and cultural contexts in which that information was interpreted. Collaborators described how decisions to engage with advising and institutional resources were influenced by perceptions of trust, belonging, and cultural understanding. These dynamics shaped not only how institutional messages were received, but whether students felt positioned to act on them.

Relational Safety as a Precondition for Help-Seeking

Concerns about confirming negative stereotypes frequently shaped collaborators' hesitation to seek help, demonstrating how racialized perceptions influenced decisions about when and where to disclose academic struggles. Several collaborators described internalizing challenges before reaching out for help, preferring to resolve problems independently rather than risk appearing unprepared or incapable. This pattern reflects broader research suggesting that

students' willingness to engage institutional supports is shaped by whether they experience environments as affirming and validating (Cole, 2025; Strayhorn, 2015). For many first-generation Black male students, navigating college involves managing both academic demands and relational risk, particularly in spaces where they are uncertain how they will be perceived or treated (Museus, 2021). This strategic management of help-seeking reflects resistant and navigational forms of cultural wealth, as students learn to protect themselves while still pursuing academic goals.

Collaborator narratives illustrated how students often delayed seeking support until they felt relational safety had been established. Andre described first attempting to resolve challenges privately, mapping out options independently before consulting advisors or mentors, noting that he often sought confirmation only after reaching personal conclusions. Similarly, BJ described concealing disappointment after initially being denied entry into the nursing program, processing his frustration privately before returning to advising spaces to seek clarity on next steps. Eli also described cautiously testing campus spaces before developing trust in advisors and support staff, noting that repeated positive interactions allowed him to view advising offices as welcoming rather than evaluative spaces. Across narratives, help-seeking followed relational reassurance rather than preceding it.

Mentorship and Counterspaces

Collaborators not only needed safety, they needed spaces and relationships that actively sustained them. Mentorship relationships and culturally affirming spaces played a central role in collaborators' persistence, reflecting broader research demonstrating that supportive relationships contribute significantly to students' sense of belonging and academic resilience (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Strayhorn, 2015). Across collaborator narratives, mentorship relationships

and participation in culturally affirming spaces emerged as critical supports shaping students' persistence and sense of belonging.

Mentorship as Guidance and Stabilization

Mentorship relationships often countered experiences of invisibility or misrecognition, offering guidance from individuals who recognized collaborators' potential beyond deficit assumptions frequently attached to Black male students. Carey described relying on mentor encouragement during periods when academic setbacks made persistence feel uncertain. While institutional systems often appeared complex or impersonal, collaborators consistently described mentors, peer communities, and identity-affirming programs as environments where they felt seen, encouraged, and guided through challenges that might otherwise have disrupted their educational journeys.

Counterspaces as Sites of Belonging and Identity Affirmation

These counterspaces functioned not only as sites of support but as places where students could process institutional experiences, build confidence, and develop strategies for navigating academic and transfer pathways (Yosso, 2005). For many collaborators, counterspaces offered relief from navigating predominantly white or culturally unfamiliar environments, providing spaces where racial identity did not require explanation or defense. Danny similarly described finding confidence through peer communities that helped normalize academic challenges encountered during his transition into college. Mentorship relationships frequently expanded students' social and navigational capital, providing access to institutional knowledge and opportunities otherwise difficult to access while also serving as stabilizing forces that helped collaborators persist through uncertainty and sustain aspirations beyond immediate obstacles.

Collaborator experiences further illustrate how mentorship functioned in multiple ways across their college journeys. For Damon and Andre, mentors often served as navigational guides, helping them interpret academic requirements, course pathways, and transfer decisions that otherwise felt unclear. Advisors and support staff translated institutional expectations into actionable steps, allowing students to make informed choices rather than relying on guesswork. For BJ and Andre, mentorship also provided emotional stabilization during moments when academic setbacks or uncertainty threatened persistence. After experiencing disappointment or confusion, returning to trusted advisors or mentors helped them move from frustration toward renewed planning and forward movement. At the same time, Eli and Damon described counterspaces, particularly programs and offices where they felt culturally affirmed, as environments that fostered belonging and confidence beyond academic advising alone. These spaces allowed them to process challenges collectively, develop leadership skills, and see themselves as contributors rather than merely recipients of support.

From Support to Agency and Institutional Engagement

Eli's progression from a hesitant new student to a campus leader advocating for resources for his peers further demonstrates how mentorship relationships and counterspaces not only support persistence but also cultivate agency and institutional engagement (Parnther et al., 2019; Robinson, 2021; Stanton et al., 2022), reshaping how students see their place within higher education. Across these processes, collaborators repeatedly demonstrated aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational, and resistant forms of cultural wealth as they persisted toward transfer despite institutional complexity (Yosso, 2005).

Race as an Underlying Context of Navigation and Meaning-Making

Across collaborator narratives, race did not appear only in isolated incidents but operated as an underlying condition shaping how students interpreted institutional messages, assessed relational safety, sought mentorship, and decided whether to persist. As first-generation Black male students navigating institutions not originally designed with their experiences in mind, collaborators described continuously interpreting whether spaces were welcoming, resources were accessible, and pathways remained viable. Race therefore functioned not simply as background identity but as a contextual factor influencing belonging, navigation decisions, help-seeking behaviors, and persistence across their postsecondary trajectories (Johnson & Manyweather, 2023; Stanton et al., 2022). Persistence decisions were therefore not only academic choices but also responses to racialized experiences that shaped whether students believed institutional spaces supported their continued success.

Introduction to The Story-Conscious Advising Framework

The findings of this study reveal that students' persistence decisions are shaped not only by academic performance, but by how they interpret institutional experiences, assess relational safety, and make meaning of moments of disruption throughout their college journeys. Across collaborator narratives, advising interactions emerged as critical spaces where institutional confusion was clarified, isolation reduced, and pathways forward made visible. These findings suggest that advising functions not simply as course selection or policy enforcement, but as a relational and interpretive process through which students reframe challenges and reposition themselves within institutional systems (Crookston, 1972; Lowenstein, 2009). Story-conscious advising becomes particularly significant in contexts where students must navigate racialized institutional environments, as advising encounters can either reinforce or disrupt narratives

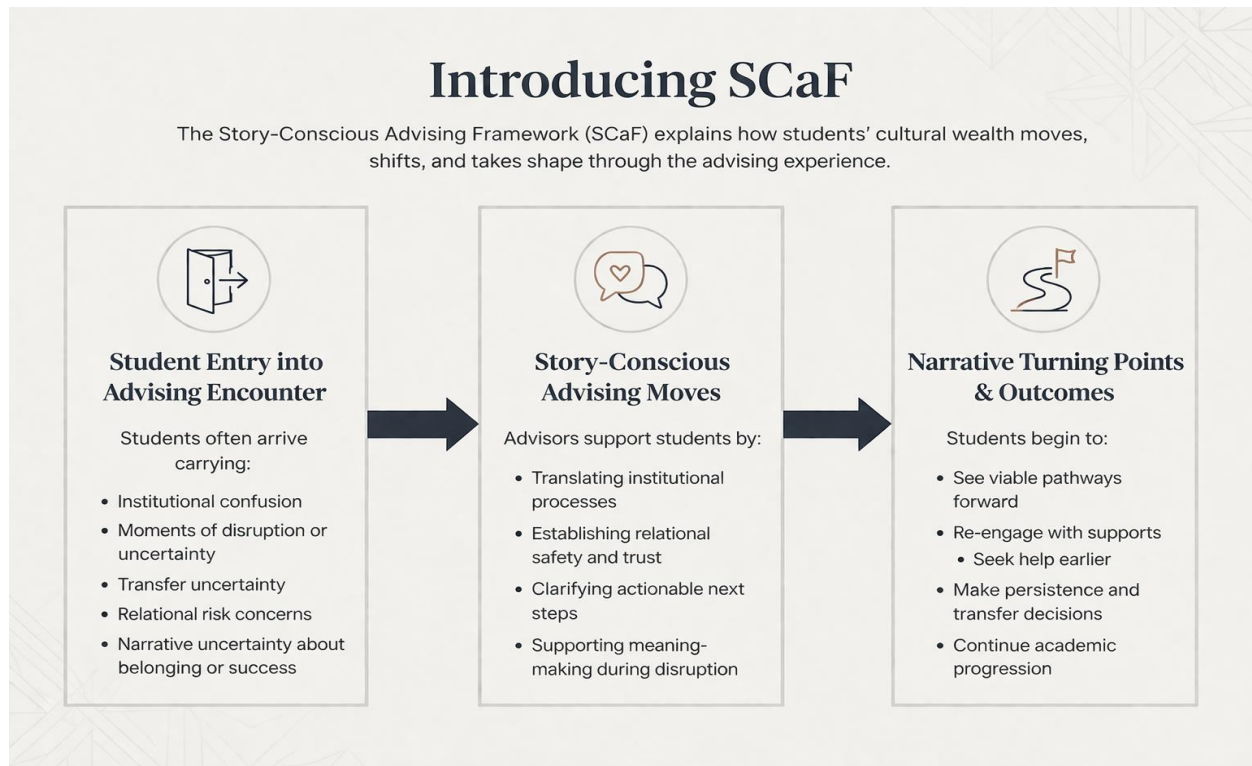
shaped by marginalization and misrecognition. Photovoice artifacts further illuminated this dynamic, frequently capturing moments where institutional processes became narrative turning points.

In response to these findings, this study proposes the Story-Conscious Advising Framework (SCaF) as a conceptual lens for understanding advising encounters as narrative-shaping moments. SCaF positions advising as interpretive and relational work in which advisors help students translate institutional messages, establish relational safety, and navigate moments of uncertainty that might otherwise disrupt persistence. Within this framework, moments of institutional confusion or setback are understood as story ruptures—points at which students' persistence narratives are threatened and require interpretive advisor intervention. The framework contributes to advising scholarship by centering student meaning-making and positioning advising interactions as sites where persistence narratives can be reinforced or reshaped.

Figure 5.1 illustrates the Story-Conscious Advising Framework. The framework demonstrates how students often enter advising encounters carrying experiences of institutional confusion, risk management, and uncertainty. Through story-conscious advising moves such as translating institutional processes, establishing relational trust, and helping students identify actionable next steps, advisors facilitate narrative turning points in which students begin to see pathways forward rather than dead ends. These moments frequently lead to increased engagement, earlier help-seeking behaviors, and persistence decisions that support continued enrollment and academic progression.

Figure 5.1

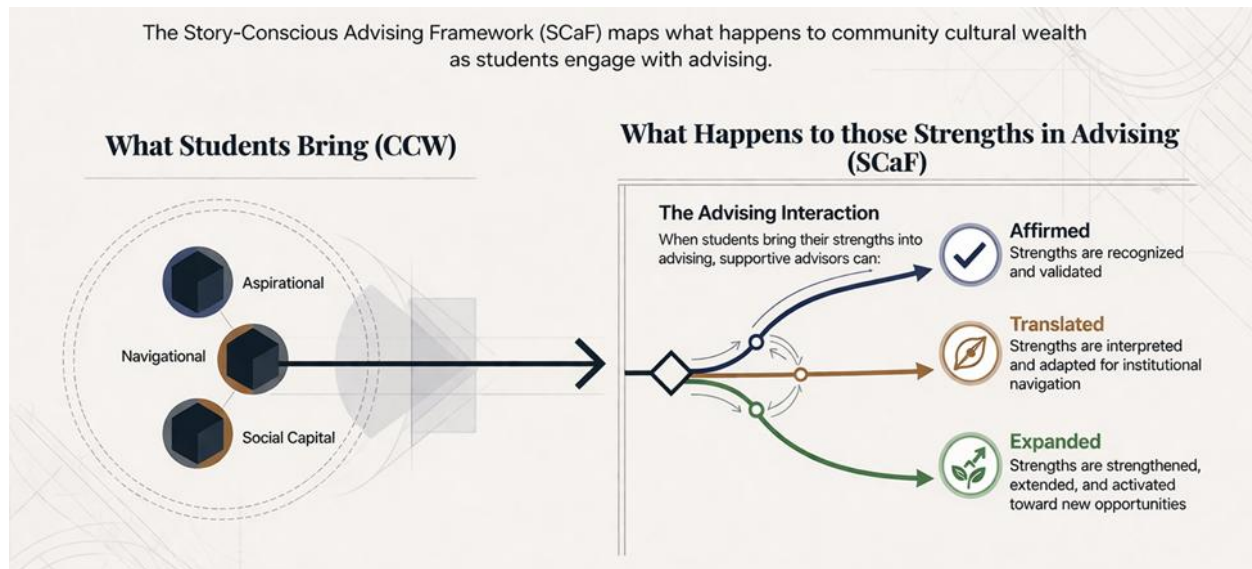
The Story-Conscious Advising Framework (SCaF)



Theoretically, the Story-Conscious Advising Framework extends Community Cultural Wealth (CCW, Yosso, 2005) by illuminating the interpretive processes through which cultural capital is activated within advising encounters. While CCW identifies the forms of capital students possess, it does not fully account for how those assets are mediated through relational interactions with institutional agents. SCaF builds upon CCW by situating advising as a narrative site where aspirational, navigational, linguistic, social, familial, and resistant capital are affirmed, translated, or constrained (see Figure 5.2). In doing so, SCaF operationalizes CCW within advising contexts and foregrounds interpretation as the mechanism linking cultural wealth to persistence decisions. Rather than challenging CCW, SCaF deepens its application by demonstrating how cultural assets are mobilized through relational and institutional engagement.

Figure 5.2

The Story-Conscious Advising Framework (SCaF) within Community Cultural Wealth



Implications for Advising Practice

Findings from this study suggest that supporting first-generation Black male students requires advising and student support practices that move beyond transactional course planning toward relational, interpretive, and culturally responsive engagement. The Story-Conscious Advising Framework offers practical guidance for advisors and support staff seeking to support students navigating institutional complexity, relational risk, and racialized campus environments.

Collaborator narratives demonstrate that students do not disengage solely because of academic difficulty, but often because institutional systems remain unclear, relational trust is uncertain, and/or moments of disruption are interpreted as signals that they do not belong. Advising interactions therefore function as critical sites where students interpret institutional messages, assess whether support is safe to access, and decide whether persistence remains viable.

These findings reinforce existing advising scholarship while extending it by demonstrating how advising interactions shape how students interpret institutional experiences

and make persistence decisions during moments of uncertainty. The Story-Conscious Advising Framework (SCaF) offers one approach for translating these insights into advising practice by positioning advisors as active participants in helping students reinterpret challenges and identify viable pathways forward. The following sections outline key implications for advising practice and institutional structures emerging from these findings.

Findings from this study suggest that advising and student support practices must intentionally address how students interpret institutional messages, assess relational safety, and access mentorship and counterspaces when navigating college. The following implications outline practical considerations for advisors and student support professionals seeking to better support first-generation Black male students pursuing transfer pathways.

Together, these implications suggest that advising practice must attend not only to academic planning but also to how students interpret institutional experiences and construct persistence narratives. Story-conscious advising positions advisors as partners in helping students navigate complexity while sustaining momentum toward transfer goals.

Advising as Institutional Translation

Findings from this study suggest that advising must move beyond simply delivering course requirements toward actively translating institutional processes in ways that support student understanding and decision-making. Across collaborator narratives, advising encounters often served as the primary space where institutional expectations were communicated, yet students experienced these interactions differently depending on whether advisors simply conveyed requirements or helped make institutional systems understandable and navigable. When advising interactions focused only on course selection, students frequently deferred to institutional authority without fully understanding the implications of their choices. In contrast,

when advisors slowed down, explained options, and clarified pathways, students reported greater confidence in their academic planning and persistence decisions.

These findings reinforce advising scholarship positioning advising as a teaching and learning process rather than a transactional activity (Crookston, 1972; Lowenstein, 2009). Within this study, advising functioned most effectively when advisors helped students interpret course sequences, workload expectations, and transfer requirements in ways that supported informed decision-making. Such translation work is particularly critical for first-generation students who often navigate institutional systems without access to informal knowledge networks that make college processes legible to more privileged student populations (Strayhorn, 2015). When advisors assumed students already understood policies or pathways, collaborators described confusion or delayed progress; however, when advisors explained not only what courses to take but why sequences mattered and how choices affected transfer timelines, students felt better equipped to persist.

From a practice perspective, advisors and student support professionals should intentionally incorporate institutional translation into advising conversations. This includes clearly explaining course sequencing decisions, discussing anticipated workload challenges, clarifying transfer and program requirements early, and making implicit institutional expectations explicit. Advisors should avoid assuming familiarity with academic terminology, policies, or planning processes, recognizing that students may lack prior exposure to college navigation practices. Supporting students in anticipating potential academic challenges also allows them to prepare strategically rather than interpreting difficulty as personal inadequacy when challenges arise.

Viewed through the Story-Conscious Advising Framework, institutional translation represents a critical advising move in which advisors help students reinterpret complex or intimidating systems as navigable pathways rather than insurmountable barriers. By helping students understand how institutional systems function, advisors contribute to narrative turning points in which students shift from uncertainty toward confidence and forward planning. In this way, advising becomes not merely a scheduling function but a practice that supports students in constructing persistence narratives grounded in understanding rather than confusion.

Relational Safety

Findings from this study indicate that students' willingness to engage advising and institutional support services depends not only on availability of resources but on whether those spaces are perceived as relationally safe. Collaborators frequently described assessing whether advisors or support offices were welcoming, affirming, and nonjudgmental before disclosing struggles or seeking assistance. In many cases, students initially attempted to resolve challenges independently, delaying engagement with institutional resources until relational trust had been established. These patterns reflect that students are more likely to seek support when they experience institutional environments as affirming and validating (Museus, 2020; Scott & Popovich, 2022).

For many first-generation Black male students, seeking help involves relational and identity-based risk, particularly in environments where they are uncertain how they will be perceived or whether their struggles will confirm negative stereotypes about academic readiness (Museus, 2021). Several collaborators described hesitating to seek help out of concern that doing so might signal weakness or lack of preparation. Positive advising encounters where advisors demonstrated patience, understanding, and respect gradually reduced this hesitation, allowing

students to view advising offices as supportive spaces rather than evaluative ones. Help-seeking behaviors therefore followed relational reassurance rather than preceding it.

Practice implications emerging from these findings suggest that advisors must intentionally cultivate relational safety as a prerequisite for effective advising. Advisors and student support professionals should prioritize building rapport early, demonstrating patience, and communicating care in ways that reduce perceived judgment. Simple practices such as allowing space for students to express concerns, acknowledging challenges without assigning blame, and inviting students back for follow-up conversations can significantly influence whether students view advising as accessible. Advisors should also recognize that trust is often built over multiple encounters rather than a single appointment, particularly for students navigating racialized institutional environments (Museus, 2021).

Within the Story-Conscious Advising Framework, establishing relational safety represents another critical advising move that shapes narrative interpretation. When students perceive advising spaces as safe, moments of disruption or uncertainty are more likely to be interpreted as manageable challenges rather than evidence that they do not belong in college. Advisors who create environments where students feel seen and supported contribute to narrative turning points that encourage persistence and continued engagement. In this way, relational safety becomes not simply an interpersonal courtesy but a structural component of effective advising practice.

Mentorship and Counterspaces

Findings from this study demonstrate that mentorship relationships and culturally affirming counterspaces function as critical persistence infrastructure for first-generation Black male students navigating two-year college environments. While advising interactions helped

students interpret institutional processes, mentorship relationships and counterspaces sustained students emotionally and socially across longer stretches of their academic journeys.

Collaborators consistently described mentors, peer communities, and identity-affirming programs as spaces where they felt recognized, encouraged, and supported through challenges that might otherwise have disrupted persistence. These findings align with research demonstrating that supportive relationships significantly influence students' sense of belonging and academic resilience (Robinson, 2021; Stanton et al., 2022; Strayhorn, 2015;).

Mentorship functioned in multiple ways across collaborator narratives. For some students, mentors served as navigational guides, helping interpret academic requirements and transfer pathways that otherwise felt opaque. For others, mentors provided emotional stabilization during moments of disappointment or uncertainty, helping students move from frustration toward renewed planning. Counterspaces, particularly culturally affirming programs and offices, also played a crucial role by providing environments where students could process challenges collectively and experience belonging without needing to explain or defend their racial identities. For many collaborators, these spaces offered relief from navigating predominantly white or culturally unfamiliar environments, allowing them to build confidence and persistence alongside peers with shared experiences.

Practice implications emerging from these findings suggest that institutions should view mentorship and counterspaces not as supplemental programming but as integral components of student success infrastructure. Advisors and student support professionals should actively connect students to mentorship opportunities and culturally affirming programs early in their college experience. Collaboration between advising offices and mentorship programs can help ensure students receive both academic guidance and relational support necessary for persistence

(Lopez et al., 2025; Robinson, 2021). Additionally, institutions should invest in programs that support leadership and advocacy development (Stanton et al., 2022), as illustrated by collaborators who moved from receiving support to becoming advocates for peers, thereby strengthening campus communities overall.

Within the Story-Conscious Advising Framework, mentorship and counterspaces contribute to sustaining positive narrative trajectories over time. Advising encounters may initiate narrative turning points, but mentorship relationships and community spaces help maintain momentum between advising interactions. These relationships reinforce students' interpretations of themselves as capable and belonging within higher education, strengthening persistence decisions across successive challenges.

In this way, mentorship and counterspaces operate as narrative stabilizers that help students sustain forward movement toward transfer and degree completion. Across these processes, collaborators demonstrated multiple forms of community cultural wealth, including aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital, as they navigated institutional complexity while sustaining commitments to family, community, and future opportunity.

Implications for Policy and Institutional Practice

Findings from this study point toward several institutional shifts necessary to better support persistence and transfer outcomes for first-generation Black male students. While implications for advising practice highlight immediate relational applications, institutional policy and structural design require longer-term coordination and redesign.

One important implication concerns the development of advising models that integrate relational, interpretive, and culturally responsive approaches rather than relying primarily on

transactional advising structures. As advising models evolve, institutions should consider how advising systems intentionally support students during moments of disruption, such as program admission decisions, academic setbacks, and transfer preparation. Redesigning advising touchpoints to ensure students encounter advising not only at registration but also at key academic and personal transition points may strengthen continuity of support (McGill, 2021; NACADA, 2006; Wei, 2022).

Institutions must also address the broader structural challenges students face when navigating transfer pathways (Jabbar et al., 2021). Collaborator narratives demonstrate that persistence often depends on coordinated academic, relational, and community-based support rather than isolated interventions, reinforcing research highlighting the importance of belonging and validation in student persistence (Cole, 2025,; Dumas et al., 2026; Strayhorn, 2015). Creating integrated support networks in which advising offices collaborate more intentionally with mentorship programs, cultural centers, and student success initiatives may provide more consistent and culturally sustaining support across academic and co-curricular spaces.

In addition, students in this study frequently encountered uncertainty regarding program requirements and transfer pathways, suggesting the need for clearer articulation agreements, earlier transfer advising, and accessible planning tools that help students visualize long-term academic trajectories. Research on articulation and transfer policy similarly emphasizes that unclear transfer pathways frequently disrupt student progression (Anderson et al., 2006; Jabbar et al., 2022). Continued collaboration between two-year and four-year institutions may help streamline transfer processes and reduce information gaps that contribute to persistence uncertainty.

Addressing structural barriers alone, however, is insufficient without preparing advisors and support professionals to effectively engage students navigating racialized institutional environments. Professional development initiatives should therefore focus on culturally responsive advising practices, mentorship engagement, and narrative-based advising approaches, as culturally responsive environments significantly influence students' sense of belonging and engagement (Museus, 2021; Strayhorn, 2015). Such efforts can help ensure advising interactions function as supportive turning points rather than reinforcing moments of uncertainty or disengagement.

Recommendations for Future Research

Findings from this study suggest several directions for future research related to advising, mentorship, and persistence among first-generation Black male students attending two-year institutions. While prior research has examined persistence and transfer outcomes, this study underscores the importance of understanding how students interpret institutional experiences and how advising interactions influence persistence decisions during moments of uncertainty.

First, additional research is needed to examine advising interactions through narrative and qualitative approaches that center student meaning-making processes. Although much advising research has focused on quantitative outcomes such as retention, GPA, and credit accumulation (McGill, 2021), fewer studies have explored how students interpret advising encounters and construct meaning from those interactions. Longitudinal qualitative studies following students across transition points such as program entry, academic setbacks, and transfer preparation may provide deeper insight into how advising interactions shape persistence trajectories over time.

Second, future studies should examine how advising and mentorship practices operate across diverse institutional contexts, including different types of two-year colleges, four-year

institutions, and transfer partnerships. Comparative research may illuminate how institutional size, advising structures, and campus climate influence students' experiences of relational safety and navigation support. Research examining how transfer students experience advising after moving to four-year institutions could further clarify how persistence narratives evolve across institutional transitions.

Third, continued investigation into mentorship programs and counterspaces is warranted. While mentorship initiatives are widely implemented, additional research is needed to understand how these programs influence long-term persistence, leadership development, and transfer outcomes. Studies exploring how mentorship relationships evolve over time and how peer and professional mentorship intersect may offer valuable insights for program refinement.

Finally, future research should continue examining how race and identity shape advising and persistence experiences, particularly for students navigating institutions historically designed without their experiences in mind. Research exploring how students from diverse racial, socioeconomic, and first-generation backgrounds experience advising differently may support the development of more responsive institutional structures. Additionally, studies investigating how advisors interpret and respond to student narratives may further illuminate how advising practices influence persistence outcomes.

Taken together, these directions highlight the importance of continued qualitative and mixed-methods research that centers student meaning-making. Such work may further refine advising theory and practice while supporting institutions seeking to improve persistence and transfer outcomes for historically underrepresented student populations.

Limitations

The limitations of this study reflect intentional methodological choices rather than design deficiencies. As a qualitative narrative inquiry situated within specific two-year college contexts in the Southeast, the findings are not intended to be generalizable but instead offer analytically transferable insights into how first-generation Black male students utilize cultural wealth in navigating advising, mentorship, and transfer preparation. Because the study draws on experiences from a limited number of participants within particular institutional settings, findings may not capture the full diversity of experiences among first-generation Black male students across two-year colleges nationally.

Additional limitations include self-selection bias, retrospective sense-making, and the interpretive nature of narrative and visual data. While Photovoice artifacts provided important insight into collaborators' lived experiences, not all dimensions of students' academic journeys can be captured visually, and artifact selection necessarily reflected participants' comfort, access, and perceptions of what aspects of their experiences were most meaningful to share.

Conclusion

Grounded in an asset-based approach, this study sought to understand how first-generation Black male students attending a two-year college narrate their experiences navigating advising, mentorship, and institutional systems as they prepare to transfer to four-year institutions. By centering student narratives and Photovoice reflections, this research highlights how persistence decisions emerge not only from academic performance but from how students interpret institutional experiences, assess relational safety, and access mentorship and community support while navigating complex educational pathways. Collaborators' stories reveal

persistence as an ongoing interpretive process shaped by belonging, navigation, mentorship, and moments of disruption encountered along the college journey.

Across narratives, advising interactions emerged as critical spaces where institutional expectations were clarified, pathways became visible, and students reconsidered their futures during moments of uncertainty. Students consistently demonstrated navigational, social, aspirational, and resistant forms of cultural wealth as they worked to interpret institutional messages, build trusting relationships, and sustain forward momentum toward transfer goals. Mentorship relationships and culturally affirming counterspaces further provided environments where students could process challenges, develop confidence, and experience belonging in spaces that supported rather than questioned their presence in higher education. These findings reinforce that persistence is not simply an academic outcome, but a relational and interpretive process shaped by how students experience institutional environments.

In response to these findings, this study introduces the Story-Conscious Advising Framework (SCaF) as a conceptual lens for understanding advising encounters as narrative-shaping moments. SCaF positions advising as relational and interpretive work through which advisors help students translate institutional complexity, establish relational safety, and navigate uncertainty in ways that support persistence. Advising interactions, when approached as opportunities to support student meaning-making, can function as turning points that help students reinterpret challenges as manageable rather than insurmountable. In this way, advising becomes not only a mechanism for course planning but a site where students reshape their understanding of what remains possible within higher education.

At the center of this study remain the collaborators themselves, students who navigated institutional complexity while sustaining aspirations for themselves and their families. Their

narratives illustrate how persistence often requires continuous negotiation between personal goals and institutional realities, particularly within environments not originally designed with their experiences in mind. Yet, collaborators also demonstrate agency, resilience, and leadership, moving from uncertain entrants into college spaces toward students capable of advocating for themselves and others. Their stories underscore the importance of institutional environments that recognize students not merely as recipients of support but as contributors to campus communities and future professionals preparing to transfer and continue their educational journeys.

Ultimately, this study invites institutions and advising professionals to reconsider how advising, mentorship, and student support structures function in shaping persistence outcomes. When advising spaces translate complexity, cultivate relational safety, and connect students to communities that affirm belonging, students are better positioned to sustain engagement through moments of disruption. As institutions continue seeking ways to improve persistence and transfer success, centering student narratives and meaning-making processes offers a pathway toward practices that recognize persistence not simply as staying enrolled but as sustaining belief in one's future within higher education.

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Appendix A - Demographic and educational background

1. Age

- ☐ Under 18 (ineligible)
- ☐ 18–24
- ☐ 25–34
- ☐ 35–44
- ☐ 45 and older

2. Gender Identity

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female (ineligible)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (ineligible)
- ☐ Other (please specify) (ineligible): _____

3. Do you identify as Black or African American?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No (ineligible)

4. Do either of your parents or guardians have a four-year college or university degree (a bachelor's degree)?

- ☐ No, neither parent/guardian has a bachelor's degree (eligible)
- ☐ Yes, at least one parent/guardian has a bachelor's degree (ineligible)

5. Which two-year college are you currently attending?

6. What is your enrollment status?

- ☐ Full-time (12 or more credit hours)
 - ☐ Part-time (11 or fewer credit hours)
7. Have you participated in academic advising at your college?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
8. Have you been involved in a mentorship program at your college?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
9. Are you planning to transfer to a four-year institution?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Undecided

Instructions for Submission

Please complete this questionnaire. If you meet the eligibility criteria, you may be contacted for a follow-up interview.

Appendix B - Interview protocol

Q#	Question	Interview	Aligned Capital(s)	Notes
1	What are your academic and career aspirations?	1	Aspirational	Baseline vision and goal setting
2	How has your family influenced your decision to attend college?	1	Familial	Captures family influence, cultural values
3	Who are the people on campus or in your community that you turn to for guidance and support?	1	Social	Establishes relational context and networks
4	When something in college feels hard to figure out, what do you do next?	1	Navigational	Surfaces problem-solving and persistence
5	How do you use communication to navigate college—like asking for help, emailing instructors, advocating for yourself, or expressing who you are?	1	Linguistic	Explores language as strength/cultural wealth
6	Have you ever felt you needed to speak up, push back, or advocate for yourself because something at the college felt unfair, unclear, or didn't work for you?	1	Resistant	Captures resistance and advocacy behaviors

7	How would you describe your experiences with academic advising at your college?	1	Social / Navigational	Advising as formal support structure
8	What improvements would you suggest for advising and mentorship programs to better support Black male students?	1	Social / Resistant	Student-centered critique of advising systems
9	Tell me about this photo and what it represents in your college journey.	2	All Capitals	Broad entry to Photovoice reflection
10	How does this image reflect your aspirations for the future?	2	Aspirational	Ties photo to long-term vision
11	In what ways, if any, does this photo connect to your family or cultural values?	2	Familial	Links Photovoice to family influence
12	Who or what communities does this photo remind you of that have shaped your journey (family, friends, mentors, faculty/staff, coworkers, church/community groups)?	2	Social	Visual evidence of connections/mentorship

13	How does this photo show the strategies you use to navigate college?	2	Navigational	Concrete examples of problem-solving
14	How does this photo connect to the way you communicate or express yourself?	2	Linguistic	Captures cultural/expressive identity
15	Do you see resistance or advocacy represented in this photo?	2	Resistant	Visual representation of resistance
16	Looking across your photos, what story do they tell about your college and transfer journey?	2	All Capitals	Integrative meaning-making
17	Based on what these photos represent, what advice—or “what I wish I had known”—would you share with other first-generation Black male students starting this journey?	2	Aspirational / Resistant	Wrap-up reflection and peer advocacy

Appendix C - Photovoice prompts

Please take two or three photos that represent meaningful aspects of your experience navigating college as a first-generation Black male student in a two-year college setting.

Your photos may reflect one or more of the following areas:

- A challenge you have faced while navigating the college process
- How your cultural background or lived experiences support your success
- Your experience with academic advising or other institutional support systems
- Mentorship, leadership, or community involvement
- Resilience or persistence in the face of systemic barriers
- Your goals related to transferring to a four-year institution
- Sources of inspiration that keep you motivated
- A policy, program, or practice that has helped you—or that you believe could better support students like you

You do not need to address every area. Instead, take photos that feel most significant to your story. During the follow-up interview, you will have an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of each image and how it connects to your college journey.