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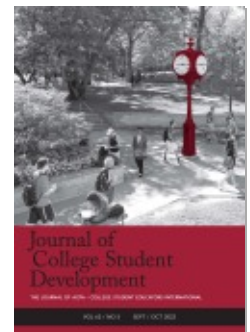
## Connecting on Campus: Exploring How Different Interactions Predict Thriving for College Students of Color

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# Connecting on Campus: Exploring How Different Interactions Predict Thriving for College Students of Color

Ryan Erck    Rishi Sriram

*The interactions that Students of Color have in college have been shown to influence numerous outcomes. Previous research has not proposed and validated a model for student success with this population that concurrently measures multiple types of interactions with multiple constituents. The purpose of this study was to assess how academic, social, and deeper life interactions with peers, faculty, and staff influence thriving for Students of Color. Employing a quantitative approach, we used survey data from 279 undergraduate students at large research universities to analyze the relationships among interaction and thriving variables. By confirming a predictive structural model, we established the value of using student interactions to further understand the experiences of Students of Color and to explore what leads to different factors of success in their academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains. Implications for practice and future research are also discussed.*

Students of Color often experience and respond to their campus in unique ways from White students (Harper & Quaye, 2015). These different experiences can reveal themselves in the interactions Students of Color have with faculty, staff, and peers. The interactions that Students of Color have with faculty are vital to their ability to navigate educational systems that have historically excluded them (McCoy et al., 2017). Martin and Seifert (2011) advocated that future research on the impact of student

interactions with student affairs professionals should investigate the potential conditional effects of race. Scholars have also emphasized the value of interacting with diverse peers (Gurin et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2009; Torres, 2003). It is evident that whether students are interacting with faculty, staff, or peers, scholars and practitioners should not assume that these relationships impact Students of Color in similar ways to White students (Park, 2009).

Models for understanding the college student experience that mostly draw from a majority perspective are limited in their ability to support Students of Color. One avenue to explore how Students of Color succeed is to examine how their interactions with different campus constituents influence their levels of thriving (i.e., their success in academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains; Schreiner, 2010). In their critique of Tinto's (1993) theory of college student departure, Hurtado and Carter (1997) suggested "the need to assess specific forms of students' interaction in college, and perhaps researchers' conceptualizations of integration, by using a conceptually distinct measure that captures the individual's view of whether he or she feels included in the college community" (p. 327). Studying the quality of student interactions and the connection between student interactions and holistic measures of student success provides needed knowledge on how campus leaders can foster a better college experience for Students of Color.

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## PURPOSE

Efforts to support Students of Color should not be confined to the classroom or laboratory but, instead, should embody holistic care, such as through fostering student thriving, defined as success in the academic, social, and psychological domains of a student's life (Schreiner, 2010). The current study developed and validated a model for understanding how academic, social, and deeper life interactions with faculty, staff, and peers influenced thriving in Students of Color. Such a comprehensive view is critical for coordinating programs and policies that are inclusively designed to promote student well-being. Using the findings from this study, college leaders can work toward strategically building programs that promote success for Students of Color and help actualize an educational experience that goes beyond only helping them persist to graduation.

Previous research has not examined how different types of interactions (i.e., academic, social, and deeper life) with different types of constituents (i.e., peers, faculty, and staff) address different types of outcomes (i.e., academic, social, intrapersonal well-being) for Students of Color in a single study or model. Some studies have targeted parts of this framework, but research combining them into one model would allow for a more rigorous and sophisticated understanding of influences and outcomes. Specifically, this study addressed the following research question: How do academic, social, and deeper life interactions with peers, faculty, and staff influence thriving for Students of Color?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Importance of Interactions with Different Campus Constituents

Students often define their college experience by the relationships they cultivate on campus with

peers, faculty, and staff (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014). Mayhew et al. (2016) underscored that “overall peer interactions” (i.e., regardless of with whom they occur) exert a powerful influence on the college experience. They summarize that peer interactions positively influence learning, cognition, racial identity, academic self-concept, autonomy, well-being, moral development, retention, graduation, and career outcomes (Mayhew et al., 2016). Some scholars have emphasized that interaction with diverse peers extends these benefits to also include higher moral reasoning, increased cognitive development, leadership skills, and improved self-confidence (Antonio, 2001; Denson & Chang, 2009).

Scholars have highlighted the beneficial ways that faculty interaction can lead to outcomes such as academic motivation, perceived institutional support, well-being, engagement, and sense of community (Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Sriram, Weintraub, et al., 2020; Trolan et al., 2016). Additional studies have detailed how unique approaches to student–faculty interaction (e.g., formal, mentoring, out-of-class) produce relatively consistent positive results regarding the impact on students (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Sriram et al., 2011). Using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) found that faculty interactions can have a positive effect on student learning. However, the authors also noted that, in terms of perceived care on campus, “students appear to seek their support from sources other than faculty” (p. 174), such as student affairs professionals. This reinforces the notion that, while student interactions with peers and faculty are crucial to student success, student–staff interactions are often overlooked in the literature.

According to Martin and Seifert's (2011) research, staff are crucial to student learning during the college years. Controlling for students' background and precollege characteristics,

they found that first-year students' interactions with student affairs professionals were positively associated with increases in students' need for cognition, positive attitude toward literacy, and academic motivation (Martin & Seifert, 2011). Additionally, Graham and colleagues (2018) posited that "access to professional staff makes spontaneous conversation and emotional support available, benefits that are immeasurable but believed to add significant contributions to learning and development" (p. 256). For this study, we argue that such benefits can, in fact, be measured, albeit indirectly, through measuring the quality of students' interactions with peers, faculty, and staff. Although interactions with staff may be characterized separately in the literature from interactions with faculty, students do not always distinguish between the two groups. In fact, depending on the type of interaction, faculty and staff can be equally influential in student success (Sriram, Haynes, Cheate, et al., 2020).

In an effort to capture the responses of students who were well-positioned to interact with faculty, staff, and peers, we sought to use survey data from Students of Color who were residing in living-learning communities at large research universities. We measured the quality of interactions for these students across campus, regardless of where they occurred. However, knowing that their residence emphasized a blend of curricular and cocurricular experiences allowed us to have confidence that they were positioned to interact frequently with all three groups of interest (faculty, staff, and peers). In addition to these distinct groups, the types of interactions students had on campus also informed our study.

### How Different Types of Interactions Influence Student Success

Scholars have typically examined interactions within either the academic or social domains of college students' lives (Tinto, 1993). Academic

interactions are characterized by overt educational themes, often promoting intellectual stimulation through connections to classes, majors, or academic support. In turn, social interactions are characterized by informal and light-hearted themes, often through greetings or casual conversation topics. Although this traditional two-category framework has proven helpful for supporting students in practice (Cotten & Wilson, 2006), it can be limiting because interactions occur beyond these two dichotomous categories.

Clydesdale (2015) advocated for faculty and staff to have deeper conversations with students about their life and purpose. Astin et al. (2011), using the term spirituality, depicted the importance of the resulting reflection that occurs for students from such interactions. Sriram and McLevain (2016) introduced the concept of *deeper life interactions* as a needed construct to more fully explain these deeper relationships students have on campus. Deeper life interactions concern discussions about meaning-making, identity, spirituality, or relationships (Sriram, Haynes, Weintraub, et al., 2020). This third category of interactions is a valid and reliable construct that is statistically distinct from both academic and social interactions (Sriram, Haynes, Weintraub, et al., 2020; Sriram & McLevain, 2016).

Deeper life interactions add a more sophisticated understanding to the traditional bifurcation of the student experience. Examining all three types of experiences matters because academic, social, and deeper life interactions influence and build upon each other to impact variables that contribute to student success, such as sense of community (Sriram, Weintraub, et al., 2020). A growing number of studies using distinct populations confirm the validity of measuring interactions through this three-category framework and the connections they have to student outcomes (e.g., Beckowski & Gebauer, 2018; Sriram, Haynes, Cheate,

et al., 2020; Sriram, Haynes, Weintraub, et al., 2020; Sriram & McLevain, 2016; Sriram, Weintraub, et al., 2020).

In addition to different types of interaction emerging in the literature, some scholars emphasized the importance of evaluating quality over quantity when measuring student interactions. Though frequency is important (Parker & Trolan, 2020), different student sub-populations often interact with faculty at different frequencies (Trolan & Parker, 2017). This is a critical distinction because the depth of interaction can have significantly different influences on both the student and faculty member (Cotton & Wilson, 2006). Studies related to peers and staff likewise have emphasized that just because interactions happen frequently does not necessarily mean they are beneficial to student success (Kuh et al., 2010; Martin & Seifert, 2011). In one study, Trolan et al. (2020) found that perceived quality of interactions is specifically important for students' well-being. Examining the quality of academic, social, and deeper life interactions with peers, faculty, and staff together in one model can provide further knowledge on how the quality of student interactions influences their holistic success.

### **Thriving as a Holistic Measure of College Student Success**

Thriving students experience optimal functioning in three domains that contribute to success and persistence: (a) academic engagement and performance, (b) interpersonal relationships, and (c) intrapersonal well-being (Schreiner, 2010). Although success measures, such as grades and graduation rates, are important and needed, the thriving construct was created in response to the need for a conceptual framework offering greater attention to the quality of students' experiences that foster success. Thriving is comprised of five unique factors that represent the academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains: academic determination,

engaged learning, social connectedness, diverse citizenship, and positive perspective (Schreiner et al., 2020).

Academic determination encompasses the attitudes and behaviors that empower students to persevere through difficult academic situations and endure challenges associated with attaining academic goals (Schreiner, 2010). Engaged learning is defined as meaningfully processing material, actively thinking about one's learning, and feeling energized by the learning process. The social connectedness factor is an element of the student experience woven together by friendships and community. Diverse citizenship is based on valuing differences in others combined with active participation with others to make the world better. The positive perspective factor represents a thriving student's outlook on life. This outlook includes not merely an optimistic view but also seeing reality honestly in order to cope with what is real versus what is expected (Schreiner et al., 2020).

Thriving offers a framework that takes into consideration a combination of established success theories. However, as "pathways to thriving for students of color are fewer and differ in significant ways from those of white students" (McIntosh, 2015, p. 18), there is also a need to see how students experience these types of interactions when considering race.

### **Student Interactions and Thriving for Students of Color**

Several scholars have researched student interactions specifically for Students of Color. Many of these studies note that while Students of Color may not interact as frequently with faculty, the interactions they do have are often positively associated with valuable outcomes, such as academic performance or GPA (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Chang, 2005; Kim & Sax, 2009). Cole (2010) also showed that three types of faculty interaction were significantly correlated



to GPA for Students of Color. Course-related contact and mentoring relationships were positive, but advice and criticism were negatively related to GPA for these students. Regarding the connection to staff members, Torres (2006) researched Latinx students' and found that staff connections influenced students' retention and social development. Out-of-class interactions were shown to be generally beneficial in a study by Einarson and Clarkberg (2010) who found that African American students experienced comparatively larger benefits from engaging in research with faculty. Social interactions with faculty helped improve outcomes for Latinx students.

In a study of almost 8,000 students across 59 institutions, McIntosh (2015) examined pathways to thriving for Students of Color. Psychological sense of community emerged as the largest predictor of thriving, and spirituality was shown to be highly predictive of sense of community for these students. In that study, between one third and one half of the variation in psychological sense of community among Students of Color was explained by their sense of spirituality (McIntosh, 2015). McIntosh noted that spiritual beliefs intersect with meaning-making, which is a direct connection to the construct of deeper life interactions. Students of Color find affinity within the campus environment when they have "a greater understanding of their life's meaning and purpose" (McIntosh, 2015, p. 19), and campus leaders need to "equip faculty and student affairs professionals for conversations with students about meaning and purpose" (McIntosh, 2015, p. 20). Additional research has demonstrated the important role faculty play in thriving for Students of Color (Vetter et al., 2019).

Schreiner (2014) emphasized the need to continue exploring pathways to thriving for Students of Color. The type of interaction and with whom the interaction occurs are important for understanding the factors leading to student

success for these students. Previous research has demonstrated the value of studying different interactions with different individuals (e.g., faculty or staff). However, no previous study has examined student success for Students of Color by including interactions with peers, faculty, and staff in one model. Moreover, no previous research has explored the relationship between academic, social, and deeper life interactions and thriving for Students of Color. This is important because a collective model will not just demonstrate how Students of Color thrive but will offer a nuanced way to address the question of what types of interactions with what types of individuals will lead to specific elements of student success. With this gap in the literature in mind, we researched how different types of interactions with different constituents can predict thriving in Students of Color.

## METHOD

We employed a post-positivistic epistemology and a cross-sectional, correlational methodology to explore the research question: How do academic, social, and deeper life interactions with peers, faculty, and staff influence thriving for Students of Color? We applied a survey design approach in this study by using item scales from two existing instruments: (a) the Academic, Social, and Deeper Life Interactions Instrument (Sriram, Haynes, Cheate, et al., 2020) and (b) the Thriving Quotient (Schreiner, 2010). Both of these instruments have demonstrated concurrent validity and have been included in multiple studies with different populations (e.g., Beckowski & Gebauer, 2018; Schreiner et al., 2020; Sriram, Haynes, Weintraub, et al., 2020; Sriram & McLevain, 2016). We also provide information on the validity and reliability of these instruments for the current study below.

Scale items on the interactions instrument assessed the quality of students' interactions

(academic, social, and deeper life) related to their relationships with peers, faculty, and staff. Through exploratory factor analysis, Sriram, Haynes, Cheadle, et al. (2020) validated the following eight factors: (a) academic interactions with peers, (b) academic interactions with faculty, (c) academic interactions with staff, (d) social interactions with peers, (e) social interactions—greetings with faculty/staff, (f) social interactions—time with faculty/staff, (g) deeper life interactions with peers, (h) deeper life interactions with faculty/staff. The analysis revealed that students do not distinguish between faculty and staff when it comes to social or deeper life interactions, but they do make a distinction between faculty and staff for academic interactions. The following are examples of interaction items from the instrument used:

There are faculty or staff at my institution with whom I can have casual or light-hearted conversations.

When I have a question relating to academics (course selection, resources, academic tips, etc.), I know students at my institution I can talk to.

I have discussions with faculty or staff that cause me to examine or reflect on my own beliefs or values.

If I was having a crisis, I know other students at my institution I can talk to.

The thriving instrument measures the malleable psychological processes that enable students to succeed based on distinct factors in the academic, social, and emotional areas of their lives. The five factors that comprise thriving are academic determination, engaged learning, social connectedness, diverse citizenship, and positive perspective. The following are examples of thriving items from the instrument used:

I can usually find ways of applying what I'm learning in class to something else in my life.

I know how to apply my strengths to achieve academic success.

I feel content with the kinds of friendships I currently have.

I value interacting with people whose viewpoints are different from my own.

I look for the best in situations, even when things seem hopeless.

## Data Collection and Sample

We collected data from undergraduate students at eight large (5000+ students) research universities across four states in the US. We first recruited colleagues at each institution to voluntarily distribute the survey to living-learning community (LLC) residents on their campus. This delimiter was intentional as students in LLCs are often exposed to numerous opportunities to interact with peers, faculty, and staff in both curricular and cocurricular settings. LLCs as a sample parameter allowed us to examine the experiences of students who were frequently exposed to different types of interactions with different individuals. Upon closing the survey, we had a 27.2% response rate. After accounting for partial data, 977 cases remained. We filtered out students who identified as White, leaving a sample of 279 Students of Color who self-identified as a race other than White. Additional information about the sample is offered in Table 1.

## Data Analysis

We executed the analysis for this study in two steps. We first created measurement models to assess the integrity of all latent variables through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The CFAs tested and verified that all constructs met the level of statistical viability needed for inclusion in our final analysis. For the second step, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) as a primary statistical technique. SEM is a collection of tools for analyzing the unique connections between various concepts to expand general knowledge or solve a problem. As SEM helps



Table 1.  
Demographics of Sample (*n* = 279)

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	78	28.0
Female	192	68.8
Prefer not to answer	9	3.2
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian /Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian	8	2.9
Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander/South Asian	77	27.6
Black/African American	49	17.6
Hispanic/Latino(a)(x)	82	29.4
Multiracial/multiethnic	42	15.1
Other	21	7.6

facilitate this process by testing theories, we created a hypothetical model based on the review of literature that predicted how interaction variables would relate to thriving factors for Students of Color. Goodness-of-fit measures were used to test the fit for this model at the CFI > .90 and RMSEA < .06 thresholds (Byrne, 2016).

The SEM approach embodies two key procedural components: (a) the causal processes under study are represented by a series of structural (regression) equations, and (b) these structural relationships can be modeled pictorially to enable a clearer conceptualization of the theory under study (Byrne, 2016). As such, the following section details results from the structural equations under study as well as the visual model to help conceptualize the extent of how interaction and success variables were related.

## RESULTS

In order to confirm adequate psychometric properties for variables, reliability was assessed through a scale analysis in SPSS. Each variable had sufficient reliability, with Cronbach's alphas ( $\alpha$ ) ranging from .70 to .94. All factor loadings

were above the threshold of .40, indicating that each item loaded onto its respective latent variable adequately. A total of 10 CFAs were performed, assessing eight interaction variables and two thriving variables (first- and second-order). We analyzed thriving factors together as a first-order test to allow covarying of terms. We then ran a CFA on a second-order thriving variable, which allowed us to see that the five factors loaded onto a thriving construct with adequate strength. Results of fit indices for all variables showed satisfactory fit for all CFAs.

After validating that the current data fit the specified measurement models, we started the SEM process to confirm a theoretical causal model. Resulting CFI and RMSEA output on the model initially indicated sub-standard fit for the sample. To rectify this matter, we consulted all pathways for significance ( $p < .05$ ) and analyzed standardized residual covariance output for any threshold issues. Although covariance pathways were all significant, 8 of the 24 regression equations from the initial model were non-significant. For the final model, we removed these regression pathways sequentially, which also helped reduce the complexity of the

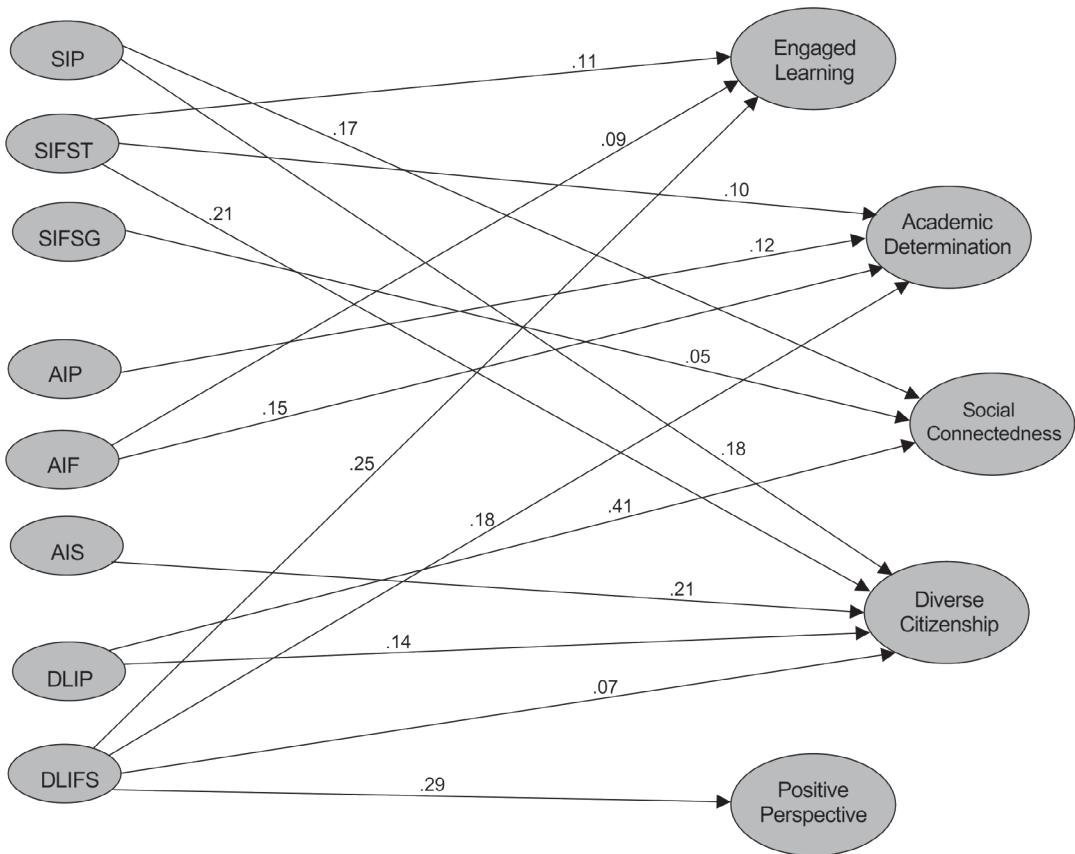


FIGURE 1. Final Structural Equation Model of Thriving Factors

Note. SIP—social interactions with peers; SIFST—social interactions with faculty or staff time; SIFSG—social interactions with faculty or staff greetings; AIP—academic interactions with peers; AIF—academic interactions with faculty; AIS—academic interactions with staff; DLIP—deeper life interactions with peers; DLIFS—deeper life interactions with faculty or staff.

Table 2.  
Squared Multiple Correlations ( $R^2$ ) From SEM

Variable	Estimate
Engaged learning	.46
Academic determination	.50
Social connectedness	.30
Diverse citizenship	.45
Positive perspective	.44

model. This process allowed for 16 direct pathways between interactions and thriving variables for Students of Color.

To further refine the model and improve fit measures, we analyzed modification indices to investigate additional options for respecification. Understanding how important it was to evaluate software improvement recommendations with the study's relevant conceptual framework in mind, we covaried a small number of error terms from similarly worded items and added regression equations among thriving factors (which also allowed us to maximize the SEM process to observe indirect effects). Model respecification resulted in a final structural model that was more parsimonious and an improvement from the initial version. This was confirmed through acceptable fit indices [ $\chi^2 = 2106.86$  ( $df = 1216$ ,  $p < .001$ ), CFI = .921, RMSEA = .051] and represented pictorially in Figure 1.

Important results include accounting for the percentage of variance in thriving variables explained by interaction variables. Squared multiple correlations ( $R^2$ ) provide these results from the model, and they are summarized in Table 2. The following thresholds were used for the interpretation of these effect sizes: .05 as small but notable, .10 as medium, and .20 as large. For standardized regression coefficients, recommendations from Mayhew et al. (2016) were used for the interpretation of effect sizes: .06 as small but notable, .12 as medium, and .20 as large.

This study proposed and validated a model that established unique pathways from college interactions to thriving for Students of Color. Path coefficients (standardized direct effects) are summarized in Table 3. In confirming this predictive structural model, we established the value of using student interactions to further understand the experiences of Students of Color and to explore what leads to different factors of their success.

## DISCUSSION

The following discussion explains the results of our analysis framed within the central domains of student thriving (academic, interpersonal, intrapersonal). In doing so, we discuss the most salient interaction results in a way that situates them in the literature and presents them as opportunities for building recommendations that lead to these thriving outcomes.

### Academic Pathways

Academic thriving consists of the variables engaged learning and academic determination. The model that was confirmed in this study explained 46% of the variance in engaged learning. Deeper life interactions with faculty and staff demonstrated a strong effect on this outcome ( $\beta = .25$ ). Although Sriram, Haynes, Weintraub, et al. (2020) found that race was not a significant predictor in explaining deeper life interactions with faculty and staff, our results indicate that when these interactions do occur, they are powerful in influencing engaged learning for Students of Color. As a result of these interactions, Students of Color feel energized by their classes and are more readily able to apply course concepts to other areas of life (Schreiner et al., 2020). Social interactions—time with faculty and staff ( $\beta = .11$ ) approached a medium effect, and academic interactions with faculty ( $\beta = .09$ ) had a small effect on engaged learning.

The model also explained 50% of the variance in academic determination. Students who are academically determined have attitudes and behaviors that empower them to persevere through difficult academic situations and endure the associated challenges. Within this endogenous variable, four interaction paths were significant ( $p < .05$ ) in the model. The most notable effect was from deeper life interactions with faculty and staff ( $\beta = .18$ ). Academic determination in Students of Color can be positively influenced through discussions

Table 3.  
Summary of Interaction Contributions to Thriving in Final SEM

Thriving Outcome Variable and Interaction Predictors	Standardized Effects
Engaged learning	
Social interactions—time with faculty/staff	.11
Academic interactions with faculty	.09
Deeper life interactions with faculty/staff	.25
Academic determination	
Social interactions—time with faculty/staff	.10
Academic interactions with peers	.12
Academic interactions with faculty	.15
Deeper life interactions with faculty/staff	.18
Social connectedness	
Social interactions with peers	.17
Social interactions—greetings with faculty/staff	.05
Deeper life interactions with peers	.41
Diverse citizenship	
Social interactions with peers	.18
Social interactions—time with faculty/staff	.21
Academic interactions with staff	.21
Deeper life interactions with peers	.14
Deeper Life interactions with faculty/staff	.07
Positive perspective	
Deeper life interactions with faculty/staff	.29

Note. Effect size thresholds: .06 as small, .12 as medium, and .20 as large.

about meaning and value. These interactions can also lead Students of Color to engage more with learning, try harder, and meet high academic expectations (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Additionally, academic interactions with peers ( $\beta = .12$ ) and academic interactions with faculty ( $\beta = .15$ ) both had a medium effect, which are findings similar to those confirmed in previous literature (Dennis et al., 2005; Hurtado, 2007). Social interactions—time with faculty and staff ( $\beta = .10$ ) also approached a medium effect, reinforcing the value of measuring academic and social spheres of college life together. In total, the model produced seven significant pathways

from interactions to academic thriving domains in Students of Color.

### Interpersonal Pathways

Interpersonal thriving is made up of the variables social connectedness and diverse citizenship. The model explained 30% of the variance in the social connectedness factor of thriving. The path from deeper life interactions with peers was a strong predictor ( $\beta = .41$ ). In fact, this pathway demonstrated the strongest effects throughout the model. The social ties between peers that can be strengthened through deeper life interactions have been previously

shown to positively influence the process of adjusting to college and increase retention for Black students (Fischer, 2007). Additionally, when Students of Color engage in frequent, meaningful connections with peers, they are more likely to experience a sense of belonging, involve themselves in the college socialization process, and persist at their institution (Hausmann et al., 2009; Otero et al., 2007). Social interactions—greetings with faculty and staff ( $\beta = .05$ ) had a small effect on social connectedness, and social interactions with peers ( $\beta = .17$ ) had a moderate effect. Student-peer interactions have been previously established as influencing sense of belonging for Students of Color (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Sriram, Weintraub, et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2012), which directly influences social connectedness. Additionally, a lack of such connections with peers for Students of Color has been found to inhibit social adjustment to college (Dennis et al., 2005).

The final model indicated that 45% of the variance in diverse citizenship was explained through five interaction pathways. Social interactions—time with faculty and staff ( $\beta = .21$ ) and academic interactions with staff ( $\beta = .21$ ) both demonstrated strong effects. These findings corroborate results from Pascarella et al. (1988) that highlight how students' familiarity with faculty and staff has a significant direct effect on the development of humanitarian and civic involvement values. In further stressing the importance of staff, these authors comment, "Of all constituencies on campus, student personnel professionals may be in the best position, both in terms of inclination and knowledge of student development, to speak to the issue" (Pascarella et al., 1988, p. 430). They noted that the work staff engage in regarding the development of citizenship values critically determines the extent to which the institution influences student development in this area. Social interactions with peers ( $\beta = .18$ ) and deeper life interactions with peers ( $\beta =$

.14) had a positive, medium effect on diverse citizenship, which is consistent with previous findings about the power of peer interactions for Students of Color (Gurin et al., 2002). Deeper life interactions with faculty and staff ( $\beta = .07$ ), though producing a small effect, often occur in a more personal space, which confirms Bowman's (2011) conclusion that interpersonal experiences with diverse interactions can have a greater effect on civic attitudes and behaviors than curricular experiences. The final model produced a total of eight significant pathways from interactions to interpersonal thriving domains.

### **Intrapersonal Pathways**

Intrapersonal thriving is measured through the variable positive perspective, and the model explained 44% of the variance. Deeper life interactions with faculty and staff had a large effect ( $\beta = .29$ ). This was the single significant pathway from interactions to intrapersonal thriving produced in the model. Through an optimistic view, students with positive perspective keep trying and remain confident in their ability to achieve their goals and persevere in the face of challenges (Schreiner, 2010). Similarly, thriving students expect good things to happen and reframe negative events into learning opportunities. This is a critical connection for Students of Color, as they represent a population with greater levels of unmet mental health needs relative to White students (Lipson et al., 2018). The pathway demonstrated that deeper conversations about meaning, value, and purpose could help students stay optimistic during the challenges that college presents. Further, these results reinforced the need to study the experiences of Students of Color beyond traditional academic and social domains, as deeper life interactions alone contributed to intrapersonal well-being.

In summary, there were multiple interaction pathways that strongly predicted factors

of thriving in Students of Color. The model confirmed in our study was comprised of five regression paths with large effects, eight regression paths with medium effects, and three regression paths with small effects. The model demonstrated that different interactions with different constituents lead to different aspects of success for Students of Color. Multiple implications can be drawn from these key findings.

## Limitations

As with all research studies, the current project had limitations that should be considered when deciphering the results and discussion. First, the study's sample was strictly comprised of students who lived on-campus in living-learning communities. This was an intentional parameter for data collection, as students in LLCs are exposed to numerous opportunities for interactions with faculty, staff, and peers within both in- and out-of-class environments. Nonetheless, this limits an understanding of how interactions lead to success for students who live off campus or in non-LLC housing. For these students, interactions may be experienced in different ways, and the pathways to thriving through interactions may have manifested differently. Therefore, this study may not be representative of all experiences for Students of Color within higher education. Future research should include samples of students in different programmatic environments. Although this limitation is important, it does not lessen the study's usefulness for understanding and supporting Students of Color in college.

Additionally, as this study focused broadly on the experiences of Students of Color, it did not include other conditional characteristics that may have influenced the model. This allowed the model to be more parsimonious, as it included many variables, but it also withheld measures that might have mediated the ways interactions influence thriving. For example, some studies point out that interactions are

facilitated differently based on specific race/ethnicity or gender (Cole, 2008; Cole, 2010; Cole & Griffin, 2013). How might a model of interactions and thriving for Students of Color change if gender was included as an exogenous variable? Future research on interactions and success for such students should consider how additional demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, specific race/ethnicity) and intersectionality may influence the outcomes of similar models. Although this study was limited by taking a broad approach instead of multiple narrow approaches, it contributes to a greater understanding of the power of interactions for Students of Color, which will prove valuable to researchers and practitioners in their efforts to support these students.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Understanding the broad web of connections that students engage with during college can give faculty and administrators a clearer perspective to support their success. Felten and Lambert (2020) articulate the importance of such connections:

Individual relationships can be educationally powerful, but a network of overlapping relationships is more likely to meet a student's evolving needs than any single mentor can. A web of student-student, student-faculty, and student-staff relationships creates a more resilient resource for a student to draw upon when the going gets tough—and offers institutions a more scalable approach to reaching every student, because faculty and staff can contribute their distinct expertise to support students. (p. 15)

Student interactions are important for promoting success generally. However, they are specifically helpful in promoting success for Students of Color due to this population's frequent encounters with campus environments not



attuned to their needs (Quaye et al., 2015). We offer three recommendations to better support these students and encourage their thriving.

The first recommendation is to increase opportunities for Students of Color to engage in deeper life interactions, which accounted for three out of the five interaction groupings that produced strong effects in influencing thriving factors. Specifically, the strongest reported relationships in the final model, based on standardized beta weights, were deeper life interactions with peers influencing social connectedness (.41), deeper life interactions with faculty and staff influencing positive perspective (.29), and deeper life interactions with faculty and staff influencing engaged learning (.25). These findings make it clear that deeper life interactions are a powerful predictor of student thriving measures in the academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains of the college experience for Students of Color. With this in mind, we recommend faculty and administrators explore creative ways to promote deeper life interactions with their Students of Color.

Efforts toward this end could include faculty taking time during office hours to engage in conversation on topics such as meaning, value, relationships, spirituality, and purpose. Other staff, such as academic advisors or success coaches, are also positioned to engage with students on these topics. Regardless of where it happens, “these matters,” as Clydesdale (2015) emphasized, “are too important not to be engaged, debated, or evaluated” (p. xxii). Mentoring relationships are likewise a convenient entry point to discuss deeper life themes, as such conversations often build slowly from connections of mutual trust and rapport. Multiple scholars have emphasized the benefits of mentorship for Students of Color (Cole, 2010; Cole & Griffin, 2013; Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

Formalized mentor programs specifically designed for Students of Color can increase opportunities for deeper life interactions, in

addition to academic and social interactions, to occur. Mentor programs can focus specifically on connections with peers. For example, Ball State’s (n.d.) REACH, Loyola University Chicago’s (n.d.) STARS, and University of Wisconsin–Green Bay’s (n.d.) BIPOC R.I.S.E. programs help first-year Students of Color connect with older peers for personal and group mentoring. Advisors of such groups could weave deeper life initiatives into their mentor curriculum, with the expectation that such conversations are enacted with mentees. Participating mentors should also be informed about the value of different interactions and trained to ask questions that help students explore their meaning and purpose.

Other programs, such as Muhlberg College’s (n.d.) Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) pairs faculty and staff with Students of Color. Even at a predominately white institution, Muhlberg’s ELP has proved successful due to its focus on wraparound mentoring for academic and interpersonal success. Such a structure offers an excellent opportunity for faculty and staff to go deep with students, helping them reflect on things such as spirituality, relationships, or identity. In pursuing this opportunity, however, it is important for faculty and staff to understand the potential hazards of having deeper life interactions. Engaging in deeper life conversations might elicit emotional responses, which could inflict unintentional harm on the student. For example, a discussion about relationships might provoke extreme grief for a student whose sibling or significant other recently passed away. A student who feels their parents are forcing them to study a particular academic discipline might grow angry at a faculty member trying to discuss purpose related to their major.

Faculty and staff should not consider themselves trained counselors but rather allow conversations to grow deeper if the student is able and willing to engage. The students should direct the conversation, and faculty/staff should

make themselves available to listen to students (Kardas et al., 2021). Faculty and staff should also read information on the issues Students of Color face, as well as resources on how to navigate similar conversations with these students. The book, *Crucial Conversations*, by Patterson et al. (2012) is one such resource that could be invaluable.

Our second recommendation is to expand peer connections for Students of Color. Although students have endless organic opportunities to interact with peers, structured processes for promoting peer interactions address a targeted approach to advancing student success (Kuh et al., 2010). Peer interactions occur with other students who share both experiences and stages of development, and these similarities can help students better identify with and learn from shared information (Mayhew et al., 2016). This process of identifying and seeking acceptance is important for Students of Color due to the significant link between interactions and perceptions of a positive campus racial climate (Harper & Quaye, 2015).

Organized peer networks are one structured process that can supplement students' casual peer interactions. As an example, Quaye et al. (2015) identified the value of periodic forums for Students of Color to develop connections with peers. These forums can serve as a space to candidly discuss the challenges and positive experiences of studying at predominately white institutions, in addition to sharing academic success strategies (Quaye et al., 2015). Small group and individualized programs—such as study groups or peer mentoring connections—can contribute to success for Students of Color and serve as spaces for reflection on meaning and purpose (Martinez Alemàn, 2010). Our analysis showed that interactions with peers positively influence the academic determination, social connectedness, and diverse citizenship factors of thriving. When faculty and administrators promote peer interactions for

Students of Color, they foster opportunities for these students to succeed holistically.

One avenue to enact this recommendation is to invest in student organizations already focused on connecting Students of Color. This could include programs sourced from a multicultural affairs office designed to specifically support these students on campus. Administrators might devote specific resources to the National Pan-Hellenic Council, National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations, and National Multicultural Greek Council initiatives. In doing so, administrators are capitalizing on the social networks for Students of Color and building support structures based on the evidence in this study that shows how valuable peer connections are for these students.

Our final recommendation is to incorporate holistic measures of success, such as thriving, into assessment initiatives that center on the experiences of Students of Color. One of the fundamental arguments of this study is that student success should be defined and measured beyond merely GPA or graduation. Student success is a holistic outcome, and the construct of thriving is an evidence-based way to measure that outcome. For the staff member, it might consist of asking what success means beyond program participation for these students. How might cocurricular strategies reinforce the academic mission? For faculty members, course grades are a clear mark of success. But what would it look like to simultaneously encourage engaged learning, diverse citizenship, or positive perspective with Students of Color? For the administrator, it could mean being proactive with retention by strategically exploring what programs, policies, and places related to the student experience contribute most to thriving—a precursor to student persistence. This also means studying first-year Students of Color who persist to understand the psychological and social influences on their success. But students who return for their second year and have a

high GPA might actually be severely struggling. If success is limited to singular outcomes, the collective work of faculty, staff, and administrators might continue to be siloed.

One way to ensure holistic measures of success is to incorporate them into the institutional research data collection process. Some colleges and universities regularly use the Thriving Quotient to collect data on students. If more institutions participated in distributing psychometric surveys on their campuses, they would be more thoroughly equipped to disaggregate data and examine holistic measures for Students of Color. They could then direct interventions accordingly in an evidence-informed way. The result would be to work toward supporting their Students of Color not just to retain them for another year and ensure they persist to graduation but to demonstrate care for the academic, social, and psychological domains of their lives.

## CONCLUSION

Thriving encourages thinking beyond simple and easily measured metrics to offer a holistic approach that incorporates behavioral, cognitive, and psychosocial components (Schreiner et al., 2020). However, Students of Color often have different pathways to thriving than White students (McIntosh, 2015; Park, 2009). These differences prompt the need for research to specifically examine what leads to holistic success for Students of Color. In doing so, a greater support system can emerge for the needs of the growing majority-minority population. The current study produced a model that details how different types of interactions with different constituents influence thriving for Students of Color. Academic, social, and deeper life interactions all had large effects on components of thriving for students. These findings can be used to drive change for supporting Students of Color and their success during college.

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