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**Impact of Student-Teacher Relationships on the Academic Sense of Belonging of
Community College Male Students of Color: A Literature Review**

Stephen Oluwaseyi Maku

Texas State University, San Marcos, TX

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8310-3823>

Impact of Student-Teacher Relationships on the Academic Sense of Belonging of Community College Male Students of Color: A Literature Review

Introduction

This review of literature explores student-teacher relationships, and how this impact the academic sense of belonging of community college male students of color. The level and quality of student-teacher relationships in college is a major factor that shapes students' experiences, personal development, academic outcomes, and sense of belonging. These interactions are important in community colleges where a wide range of students including first-generation and other non-traditional students balance education with other life responsibilities. As the diversity in community colleges serves as enrichment, it also creates a challenge in creating an inclusive campus culture (Goering et al., 2022). Establishing a strong student-teacher relationship, especially for male students of color is not only important but necessary to address these challenges, as such connections can enhance their sense of belonging and integration within their academic community (Card & Wood, 2019).

Despite the growing emphasis on improving access and success for underrepresented populations, community colleges continue to experience challenges in enrolling and retaining male students of color, most of whom identify as Black, Latino, Native American, Southeast Asian or multiracial. These students enter community colleges with high expectations but are faced with institutional climates that do not build in them a strong sense of belonging nor adequately support their academic and social needs. A lack of meaningful student-teacher connection can leave male students of color feeling invisible and culturally out of place, which may result in diminished motivation, reduced engagement, or premature departure from college (Newman et al., 2015). As institutions try to close these gaps, the need for intentional policies that create an environment of validation and mattering is crucial, as mere invitations of welcome are insufficient for fostering true belonging (Turner & Zepeda, 2021).

In community colleges, male students of color often navigate environments where they have been historically and racially misrepresented, underserved, or excluded (Vasquez Urias, 2014). Although access to college has expanded, barriers faced by male students of color often originate long before they enroll in college. For instance, the zero-tolerance disciplinary policies in K–12 schools disproportionately push male students of color into the school-to-prison pipeline reducing college readiness (Castillo, 2013; CLASP: The Center for Law and Social Policy, 2012;

Woods, 2021). Lack of access to needed resources and support, lack of role models and advocates, and the presence of systemic issues such as inequalities in race and class also play a role in limiting available educational opportunities, potentially leading to tracking into less advanced programs (Dulabaum, 2016).

While in college, male students of color frequently encounter various barriers including stereotype threats which affects their academic performance and experiences, they internalize these negative stereotypes, leading to a self-fulfilling prophesy of failure. Without adequate academic and personal support, they perceive their institutions as adversarial, with feelings of unfair treatment and discrimination (Von Robertson & Chaney, 2015).

Financial, socioeconomic and basic needs insecurities are other major barriers that male students of color face in college (Dulabaum, 2016; Morgan-Petty, 2023). Addressing these issues is not only necessary for improving academic outcomes, but also for fulfilling community colleges' equity mission. Because faculty-student relationships are often the most direct points of contact students have with their institution; these relationships have the potential of reinforcing institutional belonging or intensifying feelings of marginalization.

This literature seeks to explore the question: "How and to what extent do student-teacher relationships impact the sense of belonging of community college male students of color?" Student-teacher relationships significantly influence the sense of belonging of male students of color in community colleges by shaping their academic engagement, cultural identity, and trust in the institution. A deeper sense of institutional connectedness is encouraged when students perceive that their teachers demonstrate care, validation, and cultural awareness, this will in turn enhance persistence and a better sense of belonging. The absence of these relationships, however, can perpetuate marginalization and disengagement.

Theoretical Foundation

Self-Determination theory (SDT) is used as a foundation for this inquiry because it incorporates belonging through the concept of relatedness. It identifies autonomy, competence and relatedness as the three basic psychological needs that are essential for self-determined motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within SDT, relatedness refers to a sense of connectedness and belonging that is satisfied through meaningful interactions and relationships, involving authenticity and unconditional acceptance (Turner & Zepeda, 2021).

This is important for my inquiry as SDT lay major emphasis on the fact that it is not the environment per se that matters, but rather what it means in terms of how the individual's major psychological needs are met in relation to the environment (Vallerand, Pelletier, & Koestner, 2008). It also offers a psychologically grounded explanation for why and how student-teacher relationships can affect the academic sense of belonging of male students in community colleges.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is a subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences (Allen et al., 2021). Strayhorn (2012) described sense of belonging as a basic human need, that is vital for optimal human functioning and critical for students' learning and development. This is also a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared understanding and faith that the needs of members will be met through their commitment to being together in the group. Establishing a feeling of belonging for college students involves various aspects and can be influenced by various factors (Duran et al, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Means & Payne, 2017). Particularly for college students of color, this need for belonging remains a priority (Strayhorn, 2019). Notable connection has been found between belonging and mental health, with a stronger sense of belonging leading to lower stress and depression level (Stebbleton et al., 2014).

Unlike *the need to belong*, which is a motivational human need to maintain interpersonal relationships and a positive social bond, sense of belonging is the subjective feeling that results when this need is fulfilled. Sense of belonging emerges because of individual's social, cultural, and emotional state within a specific environment or experience, and unlike the universal fundamental need to belong, one's sense of belongingness responds differently to emotional appraisals of interactions in different situations (Pardede & Kovač, 2023). For instance, one might feel a strong sense of belonging to family but not at work. Having explored the foundational understanding of sense of belonging, it is important to apply this concept to education.

Having an academic sense of belongingness refers to the extent to which students feel valued, accepted, and connected within their educational environment. It involves students feeling they are part of a larger group or educational community that values, respects, and cares for them, and to which they have something to contribute without having to change who they are fundamentally (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023). Academic sense of belonging links to motivation

and positive academic outcomes, particularly during transition to college for underrepresented student groups (Fink, Frey, & Solomon, 2020), and for underrepresented minority students in STEM fields, where a sense of belonging can counteract feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome (Sax et al., 2018).

Academic sense of belonging can enhance students' resilience and persistence in the face of academic challenges. Interventions that foster belonging, such as inclusive pedagogies, have been shown to improve academic outcomes and retention rates (Davishahl & Alqudah, 2020). Academic sense of belonging also strongly predicts improvements in academic performance. Students who have a sense of belonging are more likely to achieve higher academic grades, persist, and complete their degrees (Fink et al., 2020; Hansen, Palakal, & White, 2024).

For community college students, the first few weeks of college are critical for establishing a sense of belonging. Research identifies early connection as accounting for 38.8% of the variance in students' sense of belonging (Montgomery, 2022). Particularly for male students of color, academic sense of belonging is a complex concept that encompasses students' feeling connected, validated, and included within their academic community. This is shaped by various factors including, but not limited to interactions with faculty, academic engagement, cultural representation, and institutional support. Research indicates that the retention, persistence, and overall success of male students of color in community colleges is critically dependent on fostering a sense of belonging, and the key factors that influence their sense of belonging can be broadly categorized into academic, social, and institutional dimensions (Card & Wood, 2019; García & Garza, 2016; Newman et al., 2015; Turner & Zepeda, 2021; Vasquez Urias, 2014; Wood & Harris III, 2015).

Student-Teacher Relationships (STR)

Among the various factors that impact student sense of belonging, student-teacher relationships emerge as powerful contributors. *Student-teacher relationships* refer to the unique interactions, conversations and engagements between students and instructors within and outside the classroom, built upon mentorship, effective communication, and perception of teacher's approachability by the student (Karnita et al., 2017; Mara & Morar, 2014). These relationships play a crucial role in the educational process, impacting students' motivation, academic performance, and well-being as well as teachers' professional satisfaction and effectiveness (Wang, 2024).

Distinct from K-12 settings, student-teacher relationship in college exists between adults, creating a different dynamic that balances support with expectations of independence and maturity. Nonetheless, these relationships are multi-dimensional and vary significantly across different educational contexts. Seminars versus lectures for instance influence STR differently. Seminars provide more opportunities for interaction and relationship building compared to lectures (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

Research consistently demonstrates that positive student-teacher relationships improve academic performance. For example, faculty contact outside the classroom has been linked to higher GPAs and identified as an independent predictor of student intellectual development, even after controlling for students' prior educational experiences or abilities. College students who experience positive student-teacher relationships demonstrate better learning outcomes, and elevated performance, especially pronounced for average students who receive early faculty interaction in the first year (Guzzardo et al., 2021). When students develop a sense of belonging to their institution through connectedness, they are more likely to remain enrolled. This is particularly crucial during the first year of college when most drop-out decisions are made (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

For community college students, positive student-teacher relationships are very important in fostering a sense of belonging, which is not only essential for their academic success, but for their emotional well-being as well. Community college students perceive faculty behavior as a critical influence on their sense of belonging (Juarez, 2017). Early connection, academic and social support, high expectations, and having a clear academic plan have been identified as four primary areas that contribute to community college students in the first three weeks because of faculty interactions (Montgomery, 2022). However, as community college faculty continues to foster positive interaction and communication with their students, there is need to navigate interpersonal boundaries to maintain a professional yet supportive relationships with their students (Schmidt, 2017).

Looking particularly at community college male student of color, their relationship with faculty and instructors plays a pivotal role in shaping their academic outcome and sense of belonging. Research has consistently shown that positive student-teacher relationships can enhance academic performance, persistence, and overall educational success (Card & Wood, 2019). Student-teacher interactions also foster engagement and motivation which can impact

students' sense of belonging. Research suggests that beyond just participating in class activities and discussions, when male students of color feel supported by their teachers, they are more likely to seek help when needed and persist in the face of challenges (Wood & Harris III, 2015; Young, 2020). Faculty validation, which includes actions such as acknowledging students' efforts, providing feedback, and encouraging participation is another aspect of student-teacher relationships which proves to have a positive impact on community college male student of color's academic outcome (Card & Wood, 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2016). The following sections present an in-depth review and synthesis of literature on the student-teacher relationships and its impact on community college male students of color.

Review and Synthesis

The importance and impact of student-teacher relationships on students' sense of belonging, especially community college male students of color have been explored by several studies as reviewed in this paper. The reviewed body of work offers compelling evidence that proves student-teacher relationships are pivotal to fostering academic sense of belonging among community college male students of color. These relationships are often characterized by approachability, validation, and cultural responsiveness which serves as powerful predictors of belonging, engagement, motivation, and persistence.

A central conclusion across literature is that faculty validation plays an important role in shaping students' sense of belonging. For instance, Wood and Harris III (2015) surveyed 340 Black male students and found that validation from instructors through verbal affirmation and availability was a strong predictor of students' willingness to engage within and outside the classroom. This finding is reinforced by Newman et al. (2015), who conducted quantitative surveys across multiple sites. These studies which controlled various background characteristics, confirmed that validation, and frequency of academic interaction, were significantly associated with a stronger sense of belonging.

These findings are particularly robust because they converge data from multiple large-sample, multi-institutional studies that employ rigorous statistical controls. The sample size, response rate, and use of already established instrument further lend confidence to reliability. The repetition of this finding in both Newman et al. (2015) and Wood and Newman (2017) who further identified the moderating effect of racial/gender stereotypes, enhances the credibility and generalizability of the conclusion.

Culturally responsive faculty interactions deepen trust and sense of belonging as well. Beyond expressing support, several studies outline the unique power of culturally affirming faculty behaviors to cultivate belonging. Literature on Latino male students particularly shows how belonging is enhanced not only through validation, but through faculty practices that reflect students' cultural identities and lived experiences. García and Garza (2016). Rodriguez et al. (2016) and Rodriguez et al. (2019) provide phenomenological accounts of Latino males who felt more comfortable approaching and interacting with instructors who shared their racial/ethnic background or who adopted a community-centered, peer-like demeanor. These interactions enhance a sense of mutual understanding that increased students' sense of belonging.

The triangulation of both quantitative and qualitative data offers both breadth and depth of understanding. While García and Garza (2016) provide statistical evidence of the correlation between integration and belonging, Rodriguez and colleagues use narrative inquiry and thematic analysis to illustrate how students interpret and assign meaning to these interactions. Rivera Valles & Martirosyan (2024) expanded the lens by focusing on Latino males in developmental math courses. These findings detail how small but consistent faculty behaviors, like remembering names and availability outside of class contributed significantly to students' belonging in the classroom.

A third key conclusion is that student-teacher relationships are most fruitful when embedded within a broader institutional culture where belonging is supported. As important as faculty interactions are, the impact is magnified when students feel that their campus is welcoming and invested in their success. Rodriguez et al. (2019) and Turner & Zepeda (2021) both emphasize this point. Rodriguez et al. found that students describe their belonging as being co-created by faculty validation. Turner & Zepeda (2021) also revealed that a welcoming atmosphere and opportunities for cultural representation all worked together to shape student belonging. Interestingly, they also noted that students long for genuine, sustained, and culturally meaningful relationships, not just polite friendliness.

These findings are robust because of the careful attention to students' voice and the diversity of institutional context that was represented. For instance, Turner and Zepeda's study draw on rich interview data with findings strengthened by member checking and thematic saturation. The thematic alignment between their findings and those of Rodriguez et al. (2019)

across different racial/ethnic groups suggests the potential transferability of these insights across diverse student populations.

Commonalities exist across racial/ethnic groups just as culturally specific needs. While validation and responsiveness are universally important, the research also reveals race-specific nuances in how male students of color experience and interpret faculty relationships. Xiong & Wood (2020) found that faculty validation and intrinsic motivation predicted both engagement and use of other support services. This mirrors findings from Black and Latino student studies, yet it adds new perspective to it by highlighting how cultural perceptions of authority and help-seeking behavior influence student willingness to engage.

Implication of Findings

This body of research offers a foundation for theoretical development around culturally sustaining pedagogy. Future research may build on these findings using longitudinal designs and mixed-methods approaches to explore how students-teacher relationships evolve over time and its impact on outcomes like transfer, graduation or career readiness. For educational practitioners, this inquiry reiterates that faculty behavior matters. Beyond content delivery, how instructors relate to and humanize their students is very important to student success. Faculty workload policies should allow time and space for relationship building. For policy makers, these findings support focus in professional development and mentoring programs. Institution policies need to create structural conditions for meaningful engagement and not just expect faculty to “figure it out.” Finally, this inquiry reminds researchers to increase commitment to centering equity and lived experience in research and practice.

Conclusion

Evidence from over a dozen rigorous studies in this inquiry confirms that the student–teacher relationship is central to the college experience of male college students of color. Positive interaction has been shown to yield measurable benefits in belonging, motivation, engagement, and persistence, while negative or absent connections increase marginalization risks. However, simply increasing college enrollment for men of color is not enough, institutions must cultivate an environment where faculty intentionally build up these students. The way forward demands intentional faculty development, culturally informed mentorship, and institutional commitment to transforming relational norms on community college and postsecondary education campuses.

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