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Article

"What Keeps Me in School": Oregon BIPOC Learners Voice Support That Makes Higher Education Possible

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Abstract: A growing number of college students are nontraditional learners (age 21–65) who are people of color. These students face unique challenges in a higher education system increasingly shaped by neoliberalism and the ongoing context of institutionalized racism. In Oregon, policymakers have established ambitious goals to address racial disparities in educational attainment. In this study, focus groups and interviews were conducted with 111 Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) adult learners in Oregon to better understand their perspectives and experiences in regard to educational and career pathways. Participants included currently enrolled students, adults who had enrolled and left, and adults who had never enrolled in post-secondary education. Thematic analysis focused on support that facilitates educational access and persistence for these learners. Consistent with the existing literature, our findings revealed that support fell into three broad categories: economic, social/cultural, and institutional support. Recommendations focus on utilizing targeted universalism as a strategy for supporting non-traditional students of color to access and complete college through the expansion of economic support for students, shoring up relevant academic and career resources, and building more meaningful partnerships between higher education and communities of color. Limitations and directions for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: non-traditional students; BIPOC students; adult learners; higher education; educational access; Oregon; qualitative research

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1. Introduction

Higher education is increasingly influenced by neoliberalism, which emphasizes revenue generation in all aspects of operation, often to the detriment of students and faculty (Gaffikin and Perry 2009; Giroux 2013; Olssen and Peters 2005; Saunders 2010). Neoliberal ideology, policies, and practices have a significant bearing on the landscape of post-secondary education, including how students are able to access and complete higher education. Neoliberalism specifically affects the access and experiences of adult learners of color by making college unaffordable and inaccessible to many.

In addition, today's college students differ significantly from previous generations. This group of "21st Century Students" (Shapiro et al. 2017) tend to be people of color (42%), older people (37% are 25 or older), and first-generation people (46%) (Lumina Foundation 2019). Almost a quarter have children, 40% work full time, and 57% live independently. Across Oregon, one-quarter of all post-secondary students identify as people of color (Higher Education Coordinating Commission 2019a). Among the 445,378 post-secondary students in Oregon, 42% are unable to meet their expenses. The inability to meet college expenses with expected resources (family contributions, student earnings, and grant aid) was highest among Hispanic/Latinx (47%) and Asian American (53%) students. Forty

percent of Black/African American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and white students, as well as 38% of Native American/Alaskan Native students, were unable to meet college expenses.

Given the context of neoliberalism and the realities of today's students' lives, more information is needed about the support that facilitates post-secondary education for non-traditional students of color. This paper is focused on understanding the strategies that are effective to support the access, retention, or reentry of non-traditional students of color to higher education in Oregon. These data are drawn from a qualitative study to address the following questions: (1) What barriers do adult learners of color in Oregon face when pursuing, reentering, or considering higher education? (2) What strategies are effective to support the post-secondary retention or re-entry of non-traditional students of color in Oregon? (3) What recommendations do adult learners of color have to make post-secondary education more accessible to other adult learners in the state?

1.1. The "New Economics" of College: Neoliberal Higher Education and Students of Color

The challenges facing non-traditional students of color are compounded by the increasing influence of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is an economic theory, a political ideology, and a set of policies that favors privatization, market solutions to social problems, rejects governmental intervention into the economy, and promotes consumerism and the commodification of public goods, including higher education (Cole and Heinecke 2020; Davies and Bansel 2007; Taylor 2017). Tenets of neoliberalism intersect with higher education on multiple levels; for example, the reduction of state funding for public higher education, erosion of tenure and academic freedom, increased reliance on adjunct labor, rising tuition costs and student loan debt, emphasis on external research funding, and corporatization of public educational institutions (Giroux 2013; Saunders 2010). Neoliberalism significantly impacts all aspects of post-secondary education, and this is even more evident in our current context (as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic). Neoliberalism specifically affects the access and experiences of adult learners of color by making college unaffordable for many and leaving too many students with debt, many of whom do not complete a degree.

At a time when a college degree is more necessary than ever, the cost of college has skyrocketed as states cut funding and transfer costs to students in what Goldrick-Rab (2016) described as the "new economics" of college. The Great Recession led to a steep decrease in state and local taxes, an important source of financial support for public universities (Hamilton and Nielsen 2021). The defunding of higher education and the increase in the costs of college have coincided with growing college attendance among people of color, particularly Latinx and Black students. Students' ability to pay for college is a commonly cited barrier to completion for all students (Braxton et al. 2004). However, given the persistent racial wealth gap in the US (McKernan et al. 2017), cost increases especially hurt students of color (Baker et al. 2018; Xu and Webber 2016).

The neoliberal logic underlying contemporary American post-secondary education has made college too expensive for many (Goldrick-Rab 2016) at a time when labor market success often demands a college degree (Harris 2020). Hamilton and Nielsen (2021) use the term "postsecondary racial neoliberalism" (p. 20) to highlight the intersections of racism and classism in the dwindling access to higher education that is part of a project they deem "colorblind austerity" (p. 20). With a focus on the underfunding of public institutions, the authors highlight how decades of disinvestment have burdened BIPOC learners, who are more likely to attend schools with shrinking resources.

1.2. Navigating Institutional Racism

Years before entering college, many students are "priced out" by the high cost of college (McDonough and Calderone 2006). BIPOC learners also face exclusion from advanced placement and college preparatory coursework in high school, limited information about college, being targeted for the school-to-prison pipeline, and low teacher expectations

(Fleming 2012; Gaxiola-Serrano 2017). Klasik (2012) argued that each step in the process of accessing college (aspiring to college, entrance exams, meeting academic qualifications, and applying) presents an increasing barrier for many Black, Hispanic, and Native American students, reinforcing opportunity-to-learn gaps (Carrol 2020; Milner 2012) that shape life trajectories.

Ray (2019) outlined the centrality of organizations in perpetuating racial inequality as meso-level sites—workplaces, churches, and schools—are the spaces where institutionalized racism is enacted through prejudice, bias, and racial attitudes. In post-secondary education, historical legacies of exclusion live on today in the racist ideologies and narratives that BIPOC learners navigate as they access these spaces (Evans and Moore 2015). Whiteness is normalized through traditions, statues, paintings and murals, or buildings named after white university founders whose racist legacies go unquestioned (Bonilla-Silva 2012), including settler colonialism and genocide (Desai and Abeita 2017; Melendez et al. 2023). Color-blind racism is a prevailing discourse in higher education (Bonilla-Silva 2010).

Studies reveal the distance between color-blind racism and its diversity rhetoric and feelings of inclusion among BIPOC learners. BIPOC learners frequently experience racist microaggressions—often subtle but pervasive acts that communicate racist beliefs—on college campuses (Ballinas 2017; Bonifacio et al. 2018; Domingue 2015; Griffith et al. 2019; Hernández and Villodas 2020; Kim et al. 2017; McCabe 2009; Nadal et al. 2014; Robinson-Perez et al. 2020; Sanchez 2019; Solorzano et al. 2000; Spanierman et al. 2021; Williams et al. 2020). BIPOC learners describe discrimination in the classroom, fewer academic opportunities, alienation, and separation, both from other people of color and from white students (Fleming 2012; Xu and Webber 2016). Color-blind racism shapes white faculty members' mentoring of BIPOC learners in STEM fields, with some faculty treating all students the same, while simultaneously perceiving BIPOC learners as less prepared (McCoy et al. 2015).

Anti-Blackness is a common experience on campus (Domingue 2015; Griffith et al. 2019; McCabe 2009; Smith et al. 2016; Solorzano et al. 2000; Williams et al. 2020). Nearly half of the African American students, faculty, and administrators at a primarily white institution (PWI) surveyed by Fleming (2012) described a negative racial climate that was anti-Black. Jones (2020) interviewed Black student leaders at a PWI who described the "illusion of inclusion" (p. 30) and "structural diversity as a publicity tool". Anti-Blackness intersects with gender when African American males are treated as threats (McCabe 2009) and experience hypervisibility and surveillance (Smith et al. 2016). Black women report silencing (Domingue 2015) and working to disprove negative stereotypes (Griffith et al. 2019). Williams et al. (2020) identified new forms of anti-Black microaggressions on PWIs, including connecting through stereotypes, exoticization, and eroticization.

Non-Black learners of color also experience a range of microaggressions, including questioning of academic abilities, being perceived as foreigners, being subject to racist jokes, and having their national origin challenged among Mexican students in a northeastern PWI (Ballinas 2017), as well as being exoticized as sexually available (McCabe 2009) or pressured to outperform others academically due to the "model minority" stereotype (Pedraza 2023). Color-blind racism shapes institutions that are out of step with cultural norms of collectivism among Native American, Alaskan Native, and Pacific Islander learners (Chee et al. 2019; Uehara et al. 2017) and perpetuates widespread ignorance of immigration laws and policies which leave many BIPOC learners who are undocumented or have deferred action for childhood arrival (DACA) vulnerable (Muñoz and Vigil 2018).

The impacts on BIPOC learners are extensive. Turner Kelly et al. (2019) interviewed Black women at a historically white college/university (HWCU) and noted the various types of emotional labor they performed while navigating gendered racism, leading to anger, exhaustion, and alienation. Experiences with microaggressions create academic stress (Chee et al. 2019); negatively affect self-esteem (Nadal et al. 2014) and mental health, including anxiety and depression (Hernández and Villodas 2020; Kim et al. 2017); and cause psychological distress (Robinson-Perez et al. 2020), leading some BIPOC learners

to question their career decisions (Bonifacio et al. 2018). Some BIPOC learners describe "racial battle fatigue", a psychological stress response including frustration, shock, anger, disappointment, resentment, anxiety, helplessness, hopelessness, and fear (Franklin 2019; Smith et al. 2016).

BIPOC learners draw from a variety of support to cope with racism in higher education, including processing experiences on their own (Griffith et al. 2019) through various forms of coping (reflective, reactive, or suppressing) (Hernández and Villodas 2020). A study of African American and Mexican American learners cited the most common form of coping as "I accepted the reality of the fact that it had happened" (p. 600) and the second as receiving emotional support from others (Franklin 2019). Drawing from traditions of Black women's leadership, other support includes building supportive social networks, including formal mentors, white allies, and informal mentors (Domingue 2015; Griffith et al. 2019). BIPOC student activism is another form of support that challenges color-blind racism and maintains students' ties to their language, culture, and community (Desai and Abeita 2017). This support, while demonstrating the strengths of BIPOC learners, highlights the need for greater institutional support.

1.3. Non-Traditional Students

Also referred to as "adult learners", "mature" students, and "lifelong learners", non-traditional students generally include students older than the traditional-aged 18- to 24-year-old population (Shuetze 2014) and sometimes include members of working-class and/or BIPOC communities (Wong 2018). Non-traditional students tend to have family responsibilities, be self-supporting, and work in addition to attending school (Shuetze 2014). They are more likely to attend part-time and/or seek distance education, and also bring important strengths to the classroom, including greater resilience (coping with adversity, flexibility, and staying focused) (Chung et al. 2017) and confidence in interactions with instructors (Goncalves and Trunk 2014). The experiences of non-traditional students of color and of those who have never attended higher education are relatively unexplored and important to consider given the finding that racial disparities in completion rates shrink as students age (Shapiro et al. 2017).

1.4. Setting the Context: Exclusion of People of Color in Oregon

While Portland has earned the reputation of being one of the whitest cities in America through increasing gentrification (Fowler and Derrick 2018; Hannah-Jones 2011), policies and practices such as Sundown laws and racial covenants that exclude people of color are neither new (Gibson 2007) nor are they limited to the Portland metropolitan region (Imarisha 2015). These practices have resulted in limited concentrations of BIPOC communities in Oregon compared to sister states Washington and California. In Multnomah County, the Coalition of Communities of Color detailed disparities in educational attainment from early childhood through post-secondary education (Curry-Stevens et al. 2010). Nationally, 27.4% of white people and 23.8% of people of color have a university degree. In Multnomah County, 40.2% of white people and 20.8% of people of color hold a university degree. Student of color speak-outs in Oregon universities have highlighted numerous examples of the impacts of both racism and neoliberalism, including microaggressions in classrooms, curriculum, and their daily lives on campus (Arellano and Vue 2019; Rimel 2015; Trotchie 2016). Currently, people of color, low-income, and rural Oregonians face significant opportunity gaps in education, and lawmakers have committed to reducing these gaps by 50% by 2030 (Higher Education Coordinating Commission 2019b).

2. Results

This qualitative study asked what strategies were effective to support the post-secondary retention or re-entry of non-traditional students of color in Oregon. The realities of institutional racism and neoliberalism manifested in students' lives as high tuition costs, lower financial aid and scholarship support, increasing costs of living, reduced

academic support, and lack of cultural inclusion in higher education. Across the sample, and in line with previous research (Lumina Foundation 2019; Shapiro et al. 2017; Shuetze 2014), the majority of the study participants had complex, busy lives and were juggling many commitments, including school, parenting and family responsibilities, and, often, multiple jobs. There was notable consistency across the sample in regard to barriers and challenges as well as support that participants noted as helpful to their ability to complete post-secondary education.

Often in participants' narratives, the barriers and challenges learners discussed were somewhat addressed by the support that they were able to access. In this analysis, we specifically sought to better understand what was working and what resources were supporting students to enroll and finish college. It is important to note that many of the barriers named by participants pointed toward more structural and macro-level issues while support that was named was most often individual, interpersonal, or institutional in nature. Support that emerged from participants' narratives fell into three broad categories: economic, social/cultural, and institutional support. We recognize that these categories are discussed individually in our analysis and are lived as intersectional overlapping influences in participants' experiences and narratives. This support highlights institutional efforts to center the needs of BIPOC learners. It also underscores the critical role of families, culture, and community in supporting BIPOC non-traditional students as they pursue educational pathways that are—ideally—empowering, healing, and transformative.

2.1. Economic Support

Given the neoliberal context of higher education, school-related economic concerns were a primary barrier, and support that directly paid for college was paramount. Broadly, financial support covered one of two areas: tuition and other costs of attendance (e.g., textbooks, supplies, and living expenses). Currently enrolled students and those who had enrolled and left both shared that they were supported by grants, tuition assistance (i.e., GI bill or employer-sponsored), work-study, or on-campus jobs that came with tuition reduction or remission. As one participant who was receiving support from her employer shared, the benefits were not only for her, but for her employer as well. Her employer told her:

> *"We see a future in you, we see potential in you. We want to help you grow and achieve goals, as well as being a little self-sufficient on our end, by producing someone who is proficient in English and writing for our own corporate value." So for me that has taken a lot of the worries off my shoulders*.—Native American and South Asian female, currently enrolled, age 21.

These types of tuition support were not widely available. Those who were able to access such opportunities found them invaluable. Scholarships were a commonly mentioned source of paying tuition and costs associated with school, although participants noted that in order for scholarships to be useful, they needed information about access and applying. Many students noted that attending community college for all or part of one's education was a support due to the cost savings. Low-cost or no-cost textbooks, and classes that did not require textbooks at all, were another important resource. Given the number of participants who were parenting, childcare was another important source of economic support. Lastly, participants talked about the necessity of support to help them meet their basic needs, such as food and housing.

2.2. Social/Cultural Support

While economic support was critical, participants also drew from a variety of social and cultural support that fostered their persistence. Participants repeatedly shared personal, community, and interpersonal factors that contributed to their success. These include pre-college experiences, educational experiences that aligned with employment as well as support from family, and community. Notably, participants often imagined their persistence

as part of their broader membership in BIPOC community resistance and transforming power dynamics.

2.2.1. Support from Family and Friends

Family and friends were named by many participants as an important source of support, including providing childcare, housing, basic needs, and paying for school-related costs. Family and friends were also a source of encouragement and information about college:

> *My mom was in the process of going to college when I was an infant, and that was something she kind of drilled into me. . . My mom has always been super understanding and patient. . .. And she kind of placed it into my head like, this is something you have to do.*—Native Hawaiian female, currently enrolled, age 24.

But family support was not always framed as flowing from family members to participants; many participants spoke about being a role model for family members as a source of motivation that also kept them in school. As one participant voiced: "I want to show my daughter that you can get a higher education, you can finish school and be successful, you can be somebody"—Latina female, currently enrolled, age 47. Parenting children while attending school was a source of inspiration for many BIPOC learners, who saw their education as an important part of shaping their family's history. As participants enrolled in (and sometimes left) college, confronting institutional racism and neoliberalism, family and friends played an important role in supporting adult learners of color in various ways.

2.2.2. Access to College Campuses: Pre-College Experiences

For some participants, access-related support occurred during high school. This included campus tours that at times provided practical skills development around filling out FAFSA or college applications. Participants also gained valuable exposure to college through Running Start (which provides college classes to high school students) or AP coursework. Some participants were able to access campuses in other ways; for example, some participants were employed on campuses as service workers, which de-mystified post-secondary education. One participant shared that helping her child apply to college gave her the confidence to enroll in college. Another participant gained access to college while incarcerated:

> *I was introduced to a community college program that they were facilitating at Oregon State Penitentiary. And that really kind of solidified my agreement with myself that to really create opportunities to transition successfully back into the community and to be successful. . . to meet my social responsibility as an Indigenous person, as a human being on this earth. . . to fulfill that responsibility and help others, I have to be able to navigate in a world that's somewhat closed off to me unless I find the right access*—Native American male, currently enrolled, age 41.

Participants' stories revealed many possible avenues for facilitating the access that was often a first step in getting into college.

2.2.3. Alignment between Work and School

A powerful source of support for participants was the way they understood the purpose of college. It was particularly important for adult learners of color to see a clear connection between their schooling and current or future employment. Economic pressures made it hard for them to justify entering a degree program that did not have a clear path towards better employment. Participants with specific career goals believed their degree would lead to meaningful and/or living wage employment. This clear path towards a job also helped family members who had never gone to college understand the benefit of the degree choices their loved ones were making. Participants identified that it was meaningful to have supportive employers and to see co-workers getting degrees. A few participants noted that it was actually a bad job that motivated them to start or stay in school. As one

participant shared: "I had to do medical records and I've been doing it for seven years and was like, 'do I really want to be here for the rest of my life behind the desk answering phones?'—Hispanic female, currently enrolled, age 30.

Participants who had professional development experiences (resume creation, interview practice) or internships that built social capital also identified these as support in their school experience and these experiences had a direct connection to their future employment prospects.

2.2.4. Individual and Community Resilience

As people of color, many participants recognized higher education as a way of being heard and respected in a society that often discounts the voices and experiences of people of color. As one participant voiced:

> *College is very classist in my opinion. . .for someone in the outside world to take me seriously, who does not have the time to get to know me. I have to be able to provide credentials saying that I have a mind, I am educated and you should look into me* —Native American and South Asian woman, currently enrolled, age 21.

Participants contextualized their educational experiences as members of a broader community. One participant spoke about the importance of being a model for others in her community:

> *What keeps me in school is one: as an elder, all of the other people of color around me. If I get disheartened or drop out, chances are they will too. And when you're an elder in any branch of my culture, you have to live by a higher moral standard. And you have to bring that to the other people around you, so they can see* —Native American and Hawaiian woman, currently enrolled, Klamath Falls, age 64.

A prominent theme for Hispanic/Latinx participants was the role of immigration in their families' stories, and the purpose of immigration: to give them access to education. Common phrases from Hispanic/Latinx participants included "I needed to be the one to break the cycle. . .go to higher education" or that "families are depending on us. . ." and that education was "the ticket out of poverty".

Older participants felt their age and experience better positioned them to take advantage of their education; for example, they were more likely to talk to instructors or seek out tutoring. As one participant expressed: "I've learned more in my second time around going to school—Latina and South American female, enrolled and left, age 39.

2.3. Institutional Support

Participants also named things that institutions did that supported their persistence. Institutional accessibility efforts included physical aspects, such as satellite campuses that were closer to home, or online options. They also included modifications to curriculum or offerings, such as shorter programs with a quicker time to degree completion, and the ability for students to receive credit for prior experiences. English language support at community college was also named as important and more accessible than at four-year institutions.

Given the realities of institutional and interpersonal racism, participants named that faculty, staff, and classmates were important sources of support. Some adult learners cited smaller schools with lower faculty-to-student ratios as a reason for selecting a school and finishing. Participants also noted the importance of relatable faculty, especially in terms of age and race, and the significance of seeing faculty of color from their own communities. As one participant reflected:

> *I've only ran across one Black math teacher, out of all of them. That's a lot. Out of whole faculties at multiple different locations. . . .It's way better when you learn from people that resemble you, and they come from the background that you have*—Black male, enrolled and left, age 45.

Advisors and mentors were pivotal in supporting student success, and participants who found a community of peers from similar backgrounds often fared better. Formal

campus resources and programs such as TRIO, campus-based cultural resource centers, and programs for returning/non-traditional students were also named as helpful. One student shared her desire for more cultural resource centers, "…having multicultural events and clubs. Just having more stuff on campus that says "we see you" to people who aren't white. Make it so students of color know that college is an option for everyone!"—American Indian and Italian female, currently enrolled, age 43.

2.4. Potential Support for Those Who Had Never Enrolled in College

Never-enrolled participants in the sample shared stories that highlighted things that they saw as potential sources of support. As one participant shared, "When I see people, older than I… taking college courses and then I see how they're flexing their schedules, their life, they're all involved in school…it's never too late—Hispanic female, never enrolled, age 32. Some participants shared that support that fostered English language acquisition reduced barriers to applying for college. Never-enrolled participants also noted how other people's views of them would change for the better if they had a college degree. Bilingualism, their knowledge of community needs, and their ability to advocate for their communities were potential sources of strength and support. Seeing people of similar backgrounds successfully navigating college provided motivation and inspiration as well.

3. Discussion and Recommendations

Through this study, several lessons and related recommendations emerged regarding access, enrollment, and completion of post-secondary education for adult learners of color. These learnings are consistent with existing research and practitioner perspectives, including student of color speak-outs in Oregon (Arellano and Vue 2019; Rimel 2015; Trotchie 2016), that all provide guidance on how to make post-secondary education more accessible and meaningful for all students. Participants' narratives offer a place for us to consider how to create an expansive, inclusive college experience that pushes back against the constraints of neoliberalism and institutional racism. The recommendations presented here represent a synthesis of ideas shared by study participants as well as our systemic and structural analyses. The intended audience for these recommendations are higher education-coordinating bodies, administration, departments, and student services. Recommendations may be applied at the level of institutional policy and/or at a more individual/interpersonal level with students.

3.1. Targeted Universalism

John Powell defines targeted universalism as a strategy that is "inclusive of the needs of both dominant and marginalized groups, but pays particular attention to the situation of the marginalized group" (Powell 2012, p. 24). Targeted universalism posits that to address inequity, support must center the needs of the most negatively impacted groups, and all groups will benefit from this approach. Applying targeted universalism to guide support in higher education, the voices of non-traditional students and other members of communities of color in this study underscore three focus areas to improve access and meaningful engagement with higher education for communities of color: (1) expand financial accessibility of higher education; (2) shore up career and academic support available to learners of color to sustain their completion and transition to the workforce; and (3) move the university towards being a resource and partner with communities of color, including increasing the social and cultural inclusion of people of color as learners, faculty, staff, and integrated members of the higher education community. All students will benefit in some ways from these equitable structural changes; however, for non-traditional students of color, these targeted areas of support are critical to their success.

3.2. Expand the Accessibility of Higher Education

These findings highlighted potential support for non-traditional students of color, but they also pointed to the challenges posed by the neoliberal logic that guides the

"new economics" of college (Goldrick-Rab 2016). This logic promotes state and federal disinvestment in higher education and shifts the cost of college onto students. Financial aid has not kept pace with the increase in college costs, leaving many learners without college degrees—and even worse, with debt and no degree. Echoing others (Baker et al. 2018; Xu and Webber 2016), participants in this study consistently named that the costs of education (and fear of costs, loans, and debt) made it inaccessible and that economic support made a significant difference in their ability to enroll and complete post-secondary education. With a targeted universal approach, making college affordable is a vital step to improving educational access and retention of non-traditional students of color. This can be a multi-pronged strategy, including lowering the price of tuition; addressing the hidden costs of going to school, such as books, health insurance, school fines, and other fees; financial support for basic needs, such as housing, childcare, transportation, and food; access to scholarships as an ongoing part of college life; and financial support not linked to immigration status.

Many of the participants we spoke with had attended higher education for some duration and left. For many of these adult learners, economic support that addresses the burden of past debt and the realities of changing economic demands is paramount to their ability to return and persist in higher education. Institutions could reach these students by providing financial advice and practical assistance on how to pay off past debt and how to finance future academic debt with grants, scholarships, and work-study. Institutions must actively help non-traditional students of color identify and access short- and long-term funding to attend college. Further, institutions must educate themselves and build strategies for how to fund undocumented students.

There are examples within higher education that are modeling ways to attend to the economic and human needs of students as part of their academic success plan. In Texas, Amarillo College's Culture of Caring addresses the financial, non-academic barriers to completion (Bombardieri 2018; Schmalz and Mangan 2019). Similarly, the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, an advocacy organization, centers on students' basic needs and raises awareness about financial precarity among students (The Hope Center for College and Justice 2020). Assistance with meeting students' basic human needs can be the difference between leaving school and completing a degree.

3.3. Shoring up Academic and Career Support

To anchor non-traditional students of color in higher education, academic programs must orient themselves to the needs, desires, and potential of these learners. Participants in this study offered recommendations on how to improve their experience of higher education, and some concrete concerns about how to translate their education and degree into a more lucrative career. Participant voices point toward the need for flexible class scheduling, assistance with the pacing and workload of programs, clarity on credit transfers, and greater acceptance of credit for prior knowledge as critical to degree completion. As most of the people we interviewed worked, the need for evening classes, online classes, and multiple daytime options to take classes was salient, a common finding among all non-traditional students (Shuetze 2014).

Racism also has a heavy impact on mental health and students' concept of their place in higher education. This strain was experienced by participants from both racism and microaggressions experienced in the classroom (Fleming 2012; Jones 2020; Turner Kelly et al. 2019; Uehara et al. 2017; Xu and Webber 2016) and speaks to the need for more mental health resources, and this support needs to include culturally responsive care. In addition, students, families, and communities of color need accurate, culturally responsive information about higher education that believes in their success as learners of color. To do this, universities can provide advising, mentorship, and guidance (before and during college) that is holistic, informative, sensitive to non-traditional learners' experiences, and culturally responsive/reflective (Goncalves and Trunk 2014). This support includes assis-

tance for students of color who are academically struggling and culturally and linguistically appropriate resources for families and communities.

Participants who were English language learners consistently referenced the value of community college English language courses and support. English language learning resources are critical given the finding that participants who had never enrolled as students cited their inability to read, speak, or write English as a barrier to applying for college. Four-year institutions in Oregon need to develop their support systems around English language learners and can look to programs in place at community colleges. Oregon universities should consider investing in writing centers with a clear specialization in developing the academic writing skills of English language learners and improved tutoring and advising for this diverse population.

Given that non-traditional students desire a direct link between their education and their job prospects and employment goals, they need more assistance in connecting with potential employers through career-building work-study positions and internships in the broader community. Higher education must work to strengthen the pathway between education and employment outcomes for non-traditional students of color. Participants want to connect their academic pursuits with career opportunities. We recommend that academic and career counselors work more collaboratively to support students to prepare for careers and complete degrees sooner.

3.4. Higher Education as a Partner with Communities of Color

Participants' narratives clearly elucidated the need for higher education to shift its relationship with communities of color. Communities of color need to experience academic institutions as a place of learning and knowledge creation that reflects and serves their needs and as a community partner that prepares people of color for better employment. In line with participants' voices, we assert that schools need to address the factors that other students and push them out of our doors, such as the lack of representation of students and faculty of color and continued racism that harms students, faculty, staff, and communities of color. In addition, cultivating an inclusive campus of belonging can include working with middle and high schools to encourage them to send students of color to college.

Inclusion efforts require higher education institutions to address structural and interpersonal racism in admission, hiring, and operations practices. Meaningful inclusion of people of color on college campuses requires schools to actively challenge colorblind messages (Bonilla-Silva 2010, 2012) around who belongs in higher education and also in secondary education (Fleming 2012; Gaxiola-Serrano 2017). To do this, colleges must recruit and retain faculty and staff of color who reflect the student population. When asked about what would help support adult learners of color, participants in this study consistently spoke about the importance of BIPOC role models and mentors.

Institutions of higher education must also actively engage with race and racism and address how racism affects the experiences and retention of students, faculty, staff, and community members. Culturally specific recruitment and retention approaches are also a necessary component of inclusion strategies. This investment will enhance the reputation of Oregon schools as places that support students of color. For example, one interview participant worked as a university recruiter of Polynesian students. This culturally specific recruitment was geared towards establishing their university as a hub for students from this region. This recruitment strategy was also a retention strategy as it sought to develop a network of academic and community support that was responsive and specifically aimed toward Polynesian students.

3.5. Limitations and Future Research

Given the exploratory nature of our study and the lack of existing research on adult BIPOC learners in Oregon, we utilized the broad grouping of "people of color" for this project; however, our findings point to the need for more focused research to continue to build a deeper understanding of the specific and nuanced experiences of various groups

of adult learners. More targeted exploration of the experiences of people of color who have never enrolled in higher education is also needed to better understand the unique experiences of this group. A limitation of this research was that though we extensively reached out to non-traditional learners who had never accessed higher education, this group was low in study participation. Future research should engage different recruitment strategies to engage this population, as little is written about this group. Macro-level analyses would also complement the findings presented here, including research on campus climate, neoliberalism and the corporatization of higher education, university funding models and their effects on student experience, and impacts of labor and economic trends in various geographic regions on post-secondary enrollment and completion. Further research is needed to better understand the contemporary impact of historical trauma and different communities' relationship to higher education. Future work should also study the specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on adult learners of color.

4. Methods

Higher education is increasingly influenced by neoliberalism, which emphasizes revenue generation in all aspects of operation, often to the detriment of students and faculty (Gaffikin and Perry 2009; Giroux 2013; Olssen and Peters 2005; Saunders 2010). Neoliberal ideology, policies, and practices have a significant bearing on the landscape of post-secondary education, including how students are able to access and complete higher education. Neoliberalism specifically affects the access and experiences of adult learners of color by making college unaffordable and inaccessible to many. The goal of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of accessing and persisting in post-secondary education in Oregon for non-traditional students of color as well as people of color who had left college or never enrolled. The analysis presented here is specifically focused on strategies that support retention or re-entry. We believe that listening to non-traditional students and other members of communities of color is critical to centering their needs within higher education.

In this project, we strategically used the umbrella term "non-traditional students of color", though we recognize the limitations of such a broad grouping given the vast diversity within and between racial/ethnic groups. We defined our sample in this way because of the exploratory nature of the work and the dearth of literature on underrepresented students of color in Oregon. We also use the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), which embraces the unique historical and contemporary relationship Indigenous and Black peoples hold to whiteness, a relationship that has shaped how other people of color are perceived and treated in the United States. In this study, we included participants who identified as Black, Latinx, Native American/Indigenous, Asian/Asian American, and Pacific Islander.

Qualitative methods offer the best means for understanding how individuals both make sense of and enact their lived experiences (Lincoln 2005). In order to make study participation as accessible as possible, we used two methods of data collection: in-depth interviews and focus groups. Focus groups assume that meaning-making can occur collectively and in a culturally responsive way, and that building community with others who may have a shared experience can emerge as an additional benefit of the research process (Warr 2005; Rodriguez et al. 2011). Interviews, on the other hand, offer greater logistical flexibility as well as greater depth of sharing from individuals about their specific personal experiences (Ryan et al. 2009). We twice convened an advisory group of nine higher education professionals at the community college and university levels from across the state working at the intersections of communities of color inclusion and higher education access. The advisory group gave input on our outreach strategy, interview guide, and analysis findings.

4.1. Researcher Positionalities and Trustworthiness

Our diverse research team included three faculty members at an urban four-year university and one at a smaller rural institution who reflect a range of positionalities and lived experiences, including African American, South Asian, and white racial identities, as well as first generation, queer, middle-class, working-class, and parent communities. We also collectively share a commitment to racial equity within higher education. Our team of multiracial student research assistants represented African American, Latino, and white racial identities. We used field notes, team consultation, and regular debriefing to establish trustworthiness and reduce bias in our research and writing, including the analysis and interpretation of the data.

4.2. Recruitment

Participants were recruited from across Oregon and included people who were currently enrolled at a higher education institution, those who had enrolled and left, and those who had never enrolled in post-secondary education. Within these groups, targeted recruitment was focused on non-traditional students (age 24–65) who identify as Black/African American, Latinx, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and Indigenous/Native American.

We used purposive sampling, reaching out to 41 organizations across Oregon. These included both traditional higher education institutions (e.g., community colleges, regional universities) for currently enrolled students as well as a variety of community institutions for participants who had left college or never enrolled. For those participants who were not in college, we contacted organizations in the workforce or employment support (i.e., WorkSource, and large employers such as Initsu and Google), unions (e.g., AFSCME, SEIU, and the IBEW Electric Workers Minority Caucus), culturally specific organizations (e.g., Latino Network, Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization, Western Farm Workers Association), and child care and education (e.g., Head Start, Oregon Child Development Coalition, and local school districts). We also posted flyers in libraries, culturally specific grocery stores, and through informal networks. We cast a broad net to reach learners who had left or never enrolled in higher education.

4.3. Study Participants

There were a total of 111 participants in the study: 39 participants in seven focus groups and 72 individual interviews. Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest that focus groups reach saturation at three to four focus groups for each type of participant but we expanded our sample size to represent diverse communities of color across Oregon. The racial/ethnic identification of the sample generally reflected the broader demographics of the state and included a substantive representation of multiracial individuals, consistent with demographic trends in the region. Almost half of the participants were parents and approximately 21% of the total sample disclosed living with a disability.

While the majority of our sample (74%) was non-traditionally aged, approximately one-quarter included traditionally aged students (see Table 1 for a full overview of the study sample).

Table 1. Selected demographic characteristics (*N* = 111).

Characteristic	Status (*n*)	Percent
Enrollment status	Currently enrolled (79)	71%
	Enrolled and left (23)	21%
	Never enrolled (9)	8%
Primary Racial/ethnic identity	Latinx/Hispanic (61)	55%
	African American/Black (24)	21%
	Native American/Indigenous (18)	16%
	Pacific Islander (5)	4%
	Asian (4)	4%

Table 1. *Cont.*

Characteristic	Status (*n*)	Percent
Gender identity	Women (74)	67%
	Men (35)	32%
	Non-binary (1)	
Age	24 years and above (82)	74%
	18–24 years (29)	26%
Region	Portland and Salem metro (49)	44%
	Southern Oregon (34)	31%
	Eastern Oregon (17)	15%
	Central Oregon, Coast, Gorge (11)	10%

4.4. Data Collection

Interview and focus group questions explored motivations for higher education, how people learned about college, future goals, challenges, and recommendations for supporting adult learners of color to pursue and complete post-secondary education. Data were collected just prior to the onset of COVID-19; thus, questions did not reflect the specific needs created by the pandemic. Focus groups were held on college campuses, ranged from two to eleven participants, and were approximately 1.5–2 h in length. Interviews ranged from approximately 25 to 75 min and were held in a variety of accessible locations, including via video or phone, at workplaces, or in quiet public locations. Each participant received a USD 40 gift card upon completion of the focus group/interview.

The majority of interviews and focus groups were conducted in English (with two interviews conducted in Spanish) by members of the research team. Focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for this study, and all participants completed informed consent. We collected demographic information on participant age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability status, first-generation status, and whether participants were parents. For participants who were currently enrolled or enrolled and left, we asked about the higher education institutions attended and when they left, if applicable. Self-defined identity markers provided by participants are reflected in the quotes shared in the findings below. Participant confidentiality was maintained by removing personal identifiers from data and assigning unique participant codes.

4.5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis focused on understanding participants' perspectives regarding higher education, specifically barriers in accessing post-secondary education/training, support and resources that facilitated success, and recommendations of things that would support non-traditional students of color to enroll and stay in college. We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for conducting thematic analysis, first familiarizing ourselves with the dataset by reading transcripts and noting initial ideas. Next, we coded transcripts with initial codes, collecting extracts of data that exemplified each code and searching for possible themes. This generated a long list of potential themes, which we shared with our project advisory group for assistance with reviewing and defining our final themes. Given our epistemological assumptions and the heterogeneity of the sample, we were interested in the diversity and nuances that emerged from the interview data in addition to frequency and patterns.

5. Conclusions

We wrote this article in 2024 at a time when the US is emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. As a nation, we have experienced a racial reckoning—people of color are becoming the population majority, and due to inflation, higher education is increasingly becoming cost-prohibitive. Addressing neoliberalism in an academic setting requires that

we challenge the normativity of expensive higher education. Recent student activism emphasizes a future that is built on the economic security of students, staff, and faculty and fosters greater belonging and inclusion of people across identity groups (Cole and Heinecke 2020). Students are organizing for a post-neoliberal imagining that is explicitly focused on racial justice, intersectionality, democratic content and process, and inclusive community both on campus and in the surrounding community (Cole and Heinecke 2020). If we are serious about developing a formally educated multiracial populace in Oregon and in our nation, the findings here demonstrate that we must invest in higher education with the express intention of lowering the costs of public education.

Non-traditional learners of color in Oregon say that they want to participate in higher education. They need higher education to center them and want to serve them. This targeted universal approach begs higher education to center the needs of the most marginalized students, including BIPOC adult learners, and re-orient its priorities. To do so requires lowering the costs of higher education for all students; providing strong academic, career, and mental health support on campus; hiring and retaining faculty, staff, and administrators of color; and actively engaging higher education in anti-racism efforts to make college a place of belonging and opportunity. As colleges struggle with enrollments, we acknowledge that adult learners are clear that higher education remains a relevant aspiration. People want to come here. The more we can support them economically and socio–culturally to do so, the better for all of us.

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