Creating Networks That Facilitate Successful Transitions to the Second Year for African American Students at a PWI: Implications for Residence Life

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THE EXPERIENCE OF SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS has been the focus of many studies that have identified the broad concerns of the second-year experience, but limited attention has been given to how the experience differs for African American students. This study attempts to fill that gap. The research described here was part of a larger study examining the overall second-year experience for African American students. Utilizing Yosso's community of cultural wealth model, we examined the transition experiences of 11 African American students in their second year at a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the southeastern region of the United States and here address the findings relevant to residence life professionals.

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The first year of college is filled with several transitions, including adjusting to increased academic expectations, new peer groups, and a new living environment. These transitions are generally much easier for students who live in residence halls, for these living environments influence the degree to which students participate in campus activities, interact with peers and faculty, and promote positive perceptions of the campus social climate (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Engaging academically and socially with the collegiate environment in turn affects student retention (Tinto, 1993). While the first year of college has been a primary focus in the literature about student retention, what is less well known is how students experience collegiate environments beyond the first year.

According to the 2010 report by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 1.27 million African American students were enrolled in Title IV institutions in the fall of 2009. Despite the increased enrollment of this population in higher education, the attainment of bachelor's degrees for African Americans between 25 and 29 years old was 20 percentage points behind that of White students in 2013 (Newman, 2014). The existing literature lacks studies describing how African American students experience the collegiate environment, especially during the second year when students are more at risk for leaving postsecondary institutions (Lipka, 2006). Using Yosso's (2005) community of cultural wealth

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model, this study provides insight into how African American students at a predominantly White institution (PWI) navigate first-to-second-year transitions. Additionally, we highlight the growing body of literature on the second-year experience and African American students at PWIs and discuss practical implications for working with African American students living in university housing in their second year.

SECOND-YEAR TRANSITIONAL ISSUES

Early research on the second-year experience, or sophomore year, characterized it as a period of dissatisfaction and uncertainty in a student's life (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Furr & Gannaway, 1982; Lemons & Richmond, 1987). The term "sophomore slump," originally used to describe an athlete's decrease in performance from their first to second season, now applies to the second year in college (Lemons & Richmond, 1987; Taris, 2000). In 2000, several studies showed renewed interest in examining the second-year experience, and many focused on key areas contributing to dissatisfaction and uncertainty in the second year: indecision about majors and career choices, engaging in meaningful relationships, and establishing purpose in life (Boivin, Fountain, & Baylis, 2000; Gardner, 2000; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000; Schaller, 2005).

While the first year of college has been associated with transitional issues, such as finding a peer group and improving academic habits, the second year is often focused on decisions about careers and majors (Gardner, 2000). Students in their second year of college may have completed a portion of their general education requirements but may not have had

a chance to take courses in their academic major (Graunke & Woosley, 2005). Students who feel indecisive about their choice of major or career may disengage from the collegiate environment and forgo participating in academic and social opportunities (Gardner, 2000). Graunke and Woosley's (2005) study of 2,259 second-year students at a predominantly residential Midwestern public university found that second-year students who were committed to a major achieved higher grades and were most likely to persist to graduation. A study of the influence of college majors on the persistence of White and African American students in Indiana found that second-year African American students enrolled in majors associated with high earning potential in the labor market, such as health, business, and engineering and computer science, were more likely to persist (St. John, Hu, Simmons, Carter, & Weber, 2004). While this does not mean that all African American students should commit to majors in these fields, it does illustrate that exploring potential career earnings may help them decide on a major in their second year. As a way to help students explore majors, many colleges and universities have created living-learning communities focused on an academic major or a series of courses. Stassen (2003) examined the effects of three different types of living-learning community models on first-semester GPA, retention, and the first-year experience. All three models, each with a linked course living-learning community design, had positive effects on academic performance and persistence. Extending living-learning communities to second-year students may influence their commitment to the institution and their choice of a major.

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Scholars studying the second-year experience have also noted the importance of mentoring relationships during this time period. Mentoring relationships for second-year students can include those with peers, faculty,

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and staff. Through quantitative and qualitative studies of 4,845 traditional-age second-year students at 41 four-year institutions in the U.S., Schreiner (2012) found that second-year students thrived when they were connected to others, both faculty and peers, and other studies have shown that living on campus increases students' ability to be involved in curricular and cocurricular activities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994). In a quasi-experimental study at four universities, researchers wanted to determine the differences between a random sample of students living in a traditional residence hall and a random sample participating

in living-learning communities (Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, & Johnson, 2006). Not only did living-learning community students have more positive perceptions of the academic and social climate of their residence halls overall, but African American students specifically had positive perceptions of the residence hall climate and used residence hall resources at the highest level.

A study of 100 ethnic minority first-generation college students found that peer support, or the lack of needed peer support, was a strong predictor of grades and adjustment (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). For African American students at predominantly White institutions, a sense of belonging was a significant predictor of their ability to thrive (Paredes-Collins, 2012). In an earlier study, researchers examined the influence of social support, university comfort, and self-beliefs on decisions to persist among 98 Black students at a PWI and found that all three constructs significantly predicted persistence; however, social support and university comfort were the strongest predictors of persistence among African American students (Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999). Residence halls are uniquely positioned to provide social support through programs, peer mentors, and conversations with live-in staff members.

Establishing purpose in life is related to many of the developmental issues that college students encounter during their second year, such as their struggle to develop competence, create and maintain interdependent relationships, and establish identity (Boivin et al., 2000; Schreiner, 2010). Schaller's (2005) study of 19 traditional-age second-year stu-

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dents at a Midwestern university furthered the research on second-year students by outlining a four-stage process of development: "random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choices, and commitment" (p. 18). Second-year students begin in a stage of random exploration, lacking a sense of direction, and they defer making decisions related to major, relationships, and political and religious values. As they progress, their exploration becomes more focused and they start to make conscious choices, which culminates in their ability to commit themselves to such things as majors and careers, relationships, and values. During their second year, African American students are faced not only with establishing a sense of purpose, but also with the development of their racial/ethnic identity. Cross's

(1991) model of Nigrescence outlines African American identity development as a process of moving through several stages, beginning with an absence of knowledge about one's racial identity. As individuals move through the stages, specifically the immersion stage, they surround themselves with same-race peers to discover more about their own racial identity. In the final stage, they emerge with a sense of comfort about their own identity. Cross's model is not linear; individuals can move back and forth between the stages. African American students may be in or between different points of the racial/ethnic identity during their second year, which is important for residence life professionals to take into account in designing programmatic elements.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth provided the theoretical framework for this study. Along with Tierney (1992), Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) questioned the appropriateness of the idea of integration as presented in the literature on student transitions, especially for students of color. Integrating oneself into the collegiate environment implies shedding or leaving behind an identity, such as one's race/ethnicity, in order to successfully move through college; and as students enter postsecondary institutions, they have various forms of cultural capital that have shaped their understanding of how one should act in college (Bourdieu, 1971, 1973). Yosso built upon Bourdieu's forms of capital to acknowledge the forms of cultural capital associated with different racial and ethnic groups in society. By approaching the study of African American second-year students in terms of their cultural wealth, one can further under-

stand how various forms of cultural capital help African American students navigate the college environment.

Yosso (2005) describes six forms of capital that constitute cultural wealth, which are adapted here to identify what students of color can bring to the college environment: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. Aspirational capital refers to individuals' aspirations for themselves and the future and their ability to move toward these goals when facing barriers. Linguistic capital consists of the social, intellectual, and linguistic skills that students bring to their college environment. Familial capital includes the cultural knowledge preserved among members of a specific cultural group, and social capital consists of the networks of individuals and organizations that provide sources of emotional support during the college experience. Navigational capital refers to the skills needed to progress through social institutions not designed with students of color in mind. Finally, resistant capital refers to the ability to challenge the status quo and stereotypes about one's culture.

METHODS

Our study utilized a case study approach to examine the second-year experience for a group of African American students at a PWI in the southeastern region of the U.S. Focus groups served as the primary means of collecting data, and secondary sources of data, such as key informant interviews, observations at events, and artifacts, were also utilized (Yin, 2009). Compared to individual interviews, focus groups allowed participants to discuss their experiences at a PWI more freely among a group of peers (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Additionally, since the primary researcher's race is White, focus groups allowed for more candid discussion among a group of same-race peers.

A single case study site was selected for its ability to illustrate the phenomenon, the second-year experience for African American students, occurring within the context of a PWI. The research site is a large, public, residential, four-year research institution in the Southeast. The pseudonym given to the institution was Southeast University. During the year that data were collected, 15,643 full-time undergraduate students were enrolled at the institution and 14% of this population was non-White. Undergraduate students who identified as African American composed 6.4% of the undergraduate student body, according to the institution's records. During the time of this study, 2,648 domestic students returned for their second year at the institution, and approximately 1,324 of these students lived on campus. Out of this number, 16.4% of the second-year cohort was non-White, and 7.6% were African American.

Participants

All 201 African American students who were in their second year of college were sent email invitations to participate in this research. From this population, 11 African American students (10 females and one male) volunteered to participate in two focus groups on their second-year experience. Of the 11 participants, six lived in university housing. Two focus groups were conducted during the fall 2012 and spring 2013 semesters. All 11 participants attended the first set of focus groups in the fall 2012 semester. All but two of the 11 participants from the first

focus group returned for the spring 2013 focus groups. Attempts were made to contact the two participants who did not return for the second focus group, but they did not respond. Both individuals were still enrolled at the institution in the spring 2013 semester with one studying abroad. Table 1 gives an overview of participant details. All names are pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

Data from the two focus groups were transcribed and analyzed by constructing categories through the constant comparative method of data analysis (Merriam, 2009). The researcher listened to and reviewed the transcripts after conducting the focus groups in order to understand the participants' understandings and meanings of their second-year

Table 1

Participant Data

Name	Gender	Major	Age	Live on campus (yes or no)	Activities
Cora	Female	Environmental Engineering	20	No	Gospel Choir, Society of Women Engineers
Aubrey	Female	Psychology	19	Yes	Spirit Squad
Kirsten	Female	Political Science	19	Yes	Band, African & Caribbean Student Association, French Club, Students for Life
Brian	Male	Communication Studies	19	Yes	Peer Mentoring, Black Student Union, Council on Diversity Affairs, NAACP, Student Affairs, Student Advisory Board
Sophie	Female	Environmental Engineering	20	No	Black Student Union, VP of Finance for TOMS, Society of Women Engineers
Nadia	Female	Psychology	20	No	Club Soccer, Black Student Union, Psychology Club
Monica	Female	Chemical Engineering	19	No	Off-campus job
Thea	Female	Bioengineering	19	Yes	Peer Mentoring, Shades of Sisterhood, Active Citizenship Team
Tiffani	Female	Biological Science	19	No	Gospel Choir, Mosi, AED, off-campus job
Marika	Female	Genetics	19	Yes	Black Student Union, Band, Community Scholars, Civics and Service House
Carla	Female	Marketing	19	Yes	Alpha Kappa Alpha, Marketing Association, off-campus job

experience (Hycner, 1985). As the transcripts were reviewed, the data were coded by making comments next to the data in the focus group transcripts that were relevant to the study (Merriam, 2009). After reviewing the focus group transcripts, key informant interviews, and event data, these comments were grouped into categories, and themes were developed (Merriam, 2009). Participants were given the transcripts of the focus groups to review for accuracy and to validate the initial themes developed from the analyzed data.

Trustworthiness and Assurance

Trustworthiness in the data was achieved through triangulation, which included review of transcripts by the participants, other analysts, and data collected from different sources (Patton, 2002). First, participants were asked to review the themes derived from the transcriptions, known as member-checking (Creswell, 2009). Second, the clusters of meaning from the transcribed data were discussed and verified with a scholar educated in qualitative research methods and analysis. Third, a peer debriefer served as an independent reviewer for the research data to ensure that the researcher-created meanings were accurate (Creswell, 2009). Finally, key informant interviews, observations at campus events, and a review of key artifacts further served to triangulate the data from the focus groups and interviews (Patton, 2002).

FINDINGS

Four themes constructed from this study are relevant to student affairs professionals working in residence life: finding my community, the power of commitments, quest for balance, and strategizing for second-year student success. The theme of *finding my community* concerns how participants sought out activities and programs to help with their adjustment to a PWI. *Power of commitments* describes how participants made connections to a network that influenced their decision to remain at the institution. Participants indicated that their second year was a *quest for balance* among academic, social, and work obligations. Finally, they engaged in a forward-thinking mindset that enabled them to *strategize for second-year student success*.

Finding My Community

In both focus groups, participants indicated that they sought out peers who were like them in terms of race, values, and aspirations to navigate the initial culture shock of adjusting to a PWI and that they found that peer group networks including mentoring, band, and other activities were sources of strength. For example, Kirsten found her circle of friends in band. While band and her roommate served as sources of support, she indicated that it was difficult to find others who were similar to her in terms of interests and values. "I didn't have like a ton of friends, which isn't bad, but I had my roommate and some friends in band. . . . a lot of the girls were different than I was, I guess." Sophie was able to find a large circle of friends in her residence hall: "like, where I lived, it was . . . four Black girls, we lived next door to each other, because we got really, really close. And later on, we were friends with everyone on the hall." The initial networks created in the residence hall helped her become more comfortable at the institution and enabled her to establish more friendships within the residence hall community.

Brian and Thea described a peer mentoring

program specifically designed for students of color at Southeast University. Both individuals were members of this peer mentoring program during their first year and served as mentors for first-year students during their second year. Both noted that this mentoring experience helped to hold them accountable to their academics and to make them feel part of an important community. These findings confirm results from earlier studies, which found that sense of belonging and social support are important factors in African American students' ability to thrive and persist (Dennis et al., 2005; Gloria et al., 1999; Paredes-Collins, 2012).

Power of Commitments

Throughout data collection, nine out of the 11 participants indicated that they seriously thought of not returning for a second year. Three of them indicated that finances were a factor in deciding whether or not to return, two indicated grades as a factor, and one noted that it was a combination of money and grades. The remaining three participants indicated that family and campus culture were factors in their hesitation to return. The three who stated that finances were a consideration were out-of-state students and/or identified as being from a lower socioeconomic background. From a review of materials provided to incoming students and their families, out-of-state tuition was $16,000 per year more than in-state tuition.

The nine participants who indicated that they considered not returning started to ponder this decision during the second semester of their first year. All nine chose to return to school due to commitments they made to themselves, an organization, or a community. Thea described her commitment to the mentor-

ing program, which also had a living-learning community in residence life: "I can't let these people down. Lord, you know me, I can't just give up on these people." Brian, who was also involved in the mentoring program, indicated that his reasons for coming back were "solely, primarily 100% the people that I met . . . the people that I had met and became my circle . . . I wouldn't find anywhere else." Finding a supportive peer group was a commonality among all nine participants' decisions to return for the second year, which indicates how important social support is in determining persistence for African American students (Gloria et al., 1999). Additionally, these results partially confirm Schaller's (2005) commitment stage. Although participants were not struggling with the choice of a major or career, each made a commitment to an organization or community at the university.

Quest for Balance

The 11 participants indicated that their second year was better than their first year at the institution but that they searched for balance in the social and academic demands on their schedules. All belonged to one or more student organizations and were working a part-time job to pay for college. They kept describing a sense of pressure and competitiveness that they sensed in the institution's environment. Nadia stated, "everything is so competitive leaving college, so you feel like you have to be a part of every academic type of group and hold leadership positions." From their descriptions, engaging in several organizations seemed to be better than devoting time and energy to just one. Being a member of several organizations may indicate that these participants were in the random exploration stage of Schaller's (2005) model in

attempting to find activities to fit their needs. Sophie, however, stated, "sometimes a little bit of everything ends up being too much," indicating that she, in addition to other participants, believed she was over-extended in terms of time and effort.

Strategizing for Second-Year Student Success

At the end of the focus groups and interviews, participants were asked, "What do you think it takes to be a successful student here?" Common words and phrases used during the focus groups and interviews were hard work, determination, motivation, strong study habits, prayer, involvement, time management, a support system, and learning from your mistakes. While participants listed these traits as necessary for student success at the institution, they spent more time describing the non-cognitive aspects of student success. For example, Carla described the intrinsic motivation that was necessary for success at the institution, noting that it was up to her to succeed, not her parents or others. Brian also indicated that one has to be "forward-thinking"

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and have an orientation toward a future goal to avoid getting mired in day-to-day problems. The aspirations that participants had for themselves, in addition to the support networks they cultivated, were prominent in their personal definitions of what it meant to be a successful Southeast student.

DISCUSSION

The participants indicated that their second year at Southeast University was going better than their first year, which contradicts the experience of many other students, who undergo a sophomore slump (Lemons & Richmond, 1987; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000). While the findings indicate that participants succeeded in academic and social integration to the environment, their second-year experience is best described by three of Yosso's (2005) six forms of cultural capital: aspirational, social, and navigational. Aspirational capital refers to individuals' aspirations for themselves and their future and the ability to move forward when facing barriers (Yosso, 2005). Participants in this study explained the dreams and aspirations they had when they decided to attend the institution. Though nine of them indicated that they seriously considered leaving the institution prior to the beginning of their second year, they still returned because of the support networks they had created.

Social capital includes networks of individuals and organizations that provide sources of emotional support (Yosso, 2005). Peer groups, peer mentoring programs, student organizations, and residence hall communities allowed participants in the study to develop support networks that sustained them in their first and second year. The nine

participants who considered leaving after the first year indicated that the main reason they returned was due to their commitments to organizations and the supportive networks they created during their first year. These networks facilitated a sense of belonging to the institution, which affirms the results of other studies on the importance of social support for African American students at PWIs (Gloria et al., 1999; Paredes-Collins, 2012).

Navigational capital refers to one's ability to progress through social institutions (Yosso, 2005). In a follow-up interview Brian noted, "what I've realized is that it takes a very different kind of person to attend this institution and be really involved in this experience, especially if you're a minority, I will say." Other participants described key ways in which they navigated the campus environment, including asking others in their peer mentoring programs for assistance with classes, joining National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) groups, and obtaining leadership positions on campus. Connecting with others who shared the same interests and values enabled them to create peer groups that helped them find their way through a PWI.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESIDENCE LIFE

Residence halls are uniquely positioned to provide support to African American students at PWIs through programs, peer mentors, and conversations with live-in staff members. Several of our findings have significant impact for college and university housing professionals, who can help to create support networks for this population and to encourage their commitment and strengthen their ability to achieve

balance. Residence life professionals can take advantage of the first-year requirement to live on campus by connecting African American students with their peers on the floor. Resident assistants could create different programs, such as floor meals, which could bring individuals together to find common interests. Additionally, first-year mentoring groups could be developed to help African American students find a group of peers who can serve as a community of support. Each of the 11 participants in this study mentioned that connections made during their first year were pivotal in their ability to find a community of support. Connections to student organizations and peer groups are well researched in terms of their ability to facilitate a sense of connection to the collegiate environment (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Stronger connections between the first-year experience and second-year experience should be made so that students have continuing avenues of support and resources. Whether the commitment is to oneself, a peer group, or a student organization, the power of making a commitment at the end of their first year allowed these students to continue to grow and thrive during their second year.

Residence life professionals could also work to create second-year living-learning communities. Giving first-year students the chance to live on campus with other peers during their second year can help solidify social networks formed in the first year and to create a commitment to the institution, while exposing students to new networks and opportunities. Topics to address in this community could include time management, involvement, and motivation. Several institu-

tions have already started to create or are in the process of creating second-year living-learning communities. Clemson University has a suite-style residence hall for the second-year experience (Clemson University, 2014), while The Ohio State University has created a second-year living-learning community called STEP (Second-year Transformational Experience Program), which opened in the fall of 2014 (The Ohio State University, 2014b). The STEP living-learning community allows students to apply for a fellowship to engage in a cocurricular learning experience with the support of a faculty mentor. Several institutions have also established living-learning communities specifically for African American students. Ohio State's Afrikan American Learning Community offers resources and small-group opportunities for students to create peer networks (The Ohio State University, 2014a). Southern Illinois University (2014) and North Carolina A&T University (2014) have living-learning communities for African American male students designed to help ease the transition to college and to provide mentoring. The Central Black Student Union at University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign supports African American students living in the residence halls in addition to serving the campus community (University of Illinois, 2014). By creating second-year living-learning communities, residence hall professionals can help African American students create more networks to aid in navigating a PWI.

Residence life professionals can also help these students by incorporating structured reflection in hall programs and one-on-one conversations with students. The 11 participants in this study struggled with balancing

the academic, social, and work demands on their schedules. They noted that the process of participating in the focus groups gave them the opportunity to reflect on their college experiences. Simply asking questions like "What does this information mean to you?" or "How do you plan to use what you learned in this program?" at the end of a residence hall program can help students think about how to apply new ideas and concepts. Structured reflection activities can also help them iden-

Residence hall programs can and should allow students from underrepresented backgrounds to articulate their strengths within a culturally responsive framework.

tify where they may be over-extending themselves in terms of time so they can adjust their schedules to achieve balance. Residence hall programs can and should allow students from underrepresented backgrounds to articulate their strengths within a culturally responsive framework (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). These skills and abilities can be articulated into long-range goals that will help them strategize for a successful future and will contribute to their ability to thrive (Schreiner, 2010).

Finally, residence life professionals can expand their efforts by creating opportunities

for discussion of the second-year experience with other professionals at their institution. Representatives from the counseling center, multicultural affairs, academic colleges, and advising centers could come together in a collaborative network to discuss student transitions and the second-year experience. Bringing together individuals from various units in academic and student affairs would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the second-year experience. Professionals working in multicultural affairs and the counseling center could provide information on how the second year is similar and different for African American students and students from other underrepresented backgrounds. Campus networks can also help identify students who are struggling in terms of involvement, time management, and motivation and then determine ways to intervene.

LIMITATIONS

Participants in this study described their second year as better than their first year at the university, but that is not the case for all students. While the invitation to participate in the research study was sent to all African American students in their second year at the research site, those who did not have a positive experience at the institution may have decided not to participate. The lack of more African American male participants was another limitation. Additional efforts were made to contact African American male students to participate in the study, but they did not respond. Finally, we examined the second-year experience of African American students at only one institution, and their experiences may not be representative of those of similar populations at other institutions.

CONCLUSION

African American students in this study described their second-year experience positively, apparently avoiding the sophomore slump that some students experience (Lemons & Richmond, 1987; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000). While they indicated that their second year was better than their first, they still searched for ways to maintain balance among competing interests and priorities. In order to help these students grow during their second year of college, residence life professionals must provide opportunities for the creation and maintenance of support networks. By engaging in conversations with other professionals at the institution, residence life professionals can further understand the specific needs for underrepresented student populations during the second year.

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Discussion Questions

1. The authors suggest taking advantage of a first-year live-on requirement as a vehicle for supporting African American students by creating connections and providing opportunities for involvement in hall activities. For an on-campus student housing program that does not have a residency requirement, how might this research aid in marketing on-campus housing, especially to students of color?

2. The study participants identified having made a prior commitment to a campus program and/or organization as a factor in their decision to return to school. How might residence life professionals create situations where first-year students make a commitment of some sort related to their return for a second year?

3. Consider the research methodology used in this study. Discuss the advantages of using qualitative methods in understanding the experiences of students.

4. Consider the major themes of this study: finding my community, power of commitments, quest for balance, and strategizing for second-year student success. How might these findings be applied to other second-year students? In what ways are they unique to students in underrepresented groups?

5. The authors described an LLC that was designed around academic majors and a series of courses. Does your residence life program offer this type of LLC? What makes them particularly effective with second-year African American students?

6. What are some intentional ways that staff can foster a sense of belonging and social support for second-year African American students?