A Home Away from Home: Navigating Success and Identity for Black and Hispanic Males in Community Colleges

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Persistent inequities continue to shape the educational trajectories of Black and Hispanic male students in community colleges, where underrepresentation and systemic barriers limit persistence and completion. This interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) explored how 27 Black and Hispanic male–identifying students at four southeastern U.S. community colleges make meaning of their educational experiences, success, and identity. Drawing on Harper's Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework, Wood and Harris's community college model of persistence, and Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth framework, the study identified four interrelated themes: (1) sense of belonging, (2) culturally responsive support and communication—including strategic filtering, (3) family and kinship capital, and (4) mentoring as a persistence engine. The phenomenological essence of participants' experiences centered on validation—academic, personal, and cultural recognition enacted through relationships, family ties, and identity-affirming spaces. Findings reveal that students exercise agency through selective engagement with trusted people, messages, and environments that align with their goals and values. Implications call for equity-minded institutional redesign that embeds culturally responsive mentorship, validates students' lived experiences, and builds systemic structures of belonging and care.

Keywords: Black male, Hispanic male, community colleges, persistence, validation, mentoring, belonging, culturally responsive communication

Although equity gaps in college access have narrowed in recent decades, persistent disparities in persistence and completion remain—particularly for Black and Hispanic males attending community colleges. These students often enroll with strong academic aspirations but face cultural, structural, and institutional barriers that hinder their progress. Systemic inequities, including underrepresentation in faculty and advising roles, limited access to culturally responsive programming, and racialized campus climates, continue to shape the educational experiences of men of color (Geary, 2024; Garcia, 2025; Hardy, 2024; Nashua, 2020). This study examines how Black and Hispanic male students in community colleges persist and succeed amid these challenges. Moving beyond deficit-based narratives that frame students in terms of failure, this research adopts an anti-deficit lens (Harper, 2010; Harper et al.., 2018) and centers the voices of students as they articulate their own definitions of success (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016).

Recent dissertation research highlights the importance of culturally affirming spaces, familial support, internal motivation, and mentorship in student persistence (Coby, 2022; Cortes, 2022; Davis, 2022; Desai, 2024; Gonzales, 2025). These studies underscore the need to reposition students not as problems to be fixed, but as agents of resilience navigating institutions not originally designed for their success. The urgency of this inquiry is underscored by post-pandemic enrollment declines among male students of color (James, 2021; Kwakye et al., 2021) and the mounting calls for community colleges to not only improve access but also ensure equitable support through to degree completion. Our study aims to illuminate the lived experiences of Black and Hispanic male students and the conditions under which they persist, providing insights that can inform institutional policy, programming, and pedagogy.

Literature Review

Research on the enrollment, persistence, and success of men of color (MOC) in community colleges has expanded steadily over the last two decades as leaders have sought to understand why equity gaps remain even when access increases (Locks, Mendoza, & Carter, 2023; Vassar & Howard, 2021). Early work often explained these gaps through deficit narratives that emphasized low preparation, disengagement, or a presumed lack of motivation on the part of Black and Hispanic men, which in turn produced interventions aimed at "fixing" students rather than transforming institutions (Harper, 2009, 2010). More recent scholarship rejects this framing and instead foregrounds the institutional, cultural, and policy contexts that shape student experiences, noting that MOC often succeed through considerable effort, creativity, and reliance on community resources even in unsupportive environments (Harper, 2012; Wood & Harris, 2017). In this strengths-based view, persistence is understood as a relational and ecological process; students persist when colleges create conditions of belonging, validation, and meaningful engagement that affirm their identities and goals (Harper, 2012; Wood & Harris, 2017). This study aligns with that turn and takes up the question of how Black and Hispanic men in community colleges actually use the supports available to them, which is where the idea of strategic filtering becomes important.

Black and Hispanic male students continue to confront long-standing structural inequities that influence their educational trajectories before, during, and after enrollment in community colleges. Unequal K–12 funding, racialized tracking, and limited access to advanced

coursework constrain early academic opportunities and can undermine students' academic self-concept well before they reach college (Vassar & Howard, 2021). These inequities follow students into higher education through disproportionate disciplinary actions, advising that channels students into shorter or less transferable pathways, and campus climates where racial microaggressions or cultural invalidations communicate that they do not fully belong (Fadus et al., 2021; Garcia-Louis et al., 2020; Smith & Harper, 2015). For Latino men in particular, daily experiences of linguistic or cultural devaluation can produce withdrawal or very selective engagement with campus services, not because students are apathetic but because they are protecting themselves from hostile or irrelevant interactions (Garcia-Louis et al., 2020). Because these patterns are systemic and not individual, scholars argue that community colleges must adopt institution-level reforms—culturally affirming spaces, equitable advising, and purposeful mentoring structures—that make recognition of students' lived realities routine rather than exceptional (Harper, 2012; Wood & Harris, 2017). In other words, it is the institution's job to become more legible, trustworthy, and responsive to MOC, not the student's job to compensate endlessly for structural exclusion.

Family and community are central counterweights to these structural barriers and frequently provide the emotional, cultural, and practical resources that sustain men of color in college. Research on Black male collegians has shown that encouragement from parents, grandparents, partners, and faith communities can counter isolation, frame college-going as a collective achievement, and remind students of their responsibilities to others (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Palmer et al., 2011; Harris, 2010). For Latino men, cultural values such as familismo and respeto structure decision-making and push students to persevere even when work, childcare, or immigration-related responsibilities compete with coursework (Nashua, 2020). Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework helps explain why these supports matter: Black and Hispanic men draw on aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital that may be invisible to institutions but are essential for moving through them. When colleges recognize and integrate these assets; for example, by inviting family into orientation, offering bilingual communication, or building programs that affirm cultural knowledge—students' existing capital is amplified rather than dismissed (Yosso, 2005). Thus, family and cultural capital should not be treated as background variables but as active, recurring resources in students' persistence stories.

Mentoring and the presence of committed institutional agents emerge across the literature as among the most powerful predictors of persistence for men of color in community colleges. Evaluations of Black Male Initiative and similar programs show that when MOC have steady access to mentors (e.g., faculty, staff, coaches, or advisors) who know their names, check on them, and connect them to resources, their sense of belonging and academic confidence increases measurably (Brooms, 2018; Palmer et al., 2011). These mentors do more than offer encouragement; they translate the hidden curriculum of higher education, intervene in moments of crisis, and model success for students who may not have seen many men of color in college settings (Garcia-Louis et al., 2020; Harper, 2012). In two-year colleges, where time on campus is often fragmented because students commute, work, or care for children, mentoring becomes the key conduit between students' internal motivation and the bureaucratic systems they must navigate to finish (Wood & Harris, 2017). Recent empirical

work in community colleges has reinforced this view: structured, identity-affirming mentorship helps men of color develop persistence strategies, manage time, and make sense of racist or marginalizing experiences without blaming themselves (Geary, 2024; Hardy, 2024; Wilson, 2021). In this study, mentoring is therefore treated not as an add-on support but as a central persistence mechanism that converts validation into academic momentum.

Contemporary dissertations and empirical studies have deepened the field's understanding of how institutional structures and climates either reinforce or interrupt the persistence of MOC. Geary (2024) found that culturally relevant programming and frequent faculty contact were pivotal for African American men who otherwise experienced campus as impersonal; Wilson (2021) and Hardy (2024) identified intrinsic motivation, intentional time management, and relationships with peers and mentors as core ingredients of success in two-year settings. Overby (2022) and Desai (2024) emphasized that departmental collaboration, visible administrative commitment, and the creation of safe, identity-affirming spaces helped men explore masculinity and race without fear of discipline or ridicule. Cortes (2022) showed how mentoring relationships directly mitigated stereotype threat, while Solano (2022) and Gonzales (2025) illustrated how Latino men in community colleges navigated intersecting cultural, gendered, and work obligations by leveraging social capital, bilingual networks, and family accountability. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that persistence is not just a personal trait but a systemic and relational process that depends on whether the college communicates clearly, honors students' time, and offers spaces where students feel seen. They also preview the idea of strategic filtering, because many of the men in these studies described choosing which offices, people, and messages to respond to based on whether they seemed trustworthy, culturally resonant, or immediately useful.

A synthesis of this literature makes two points clear. First, the persistence of Black and Hispanic men in community colleges is deeply relational, culturally grounded, and context dependent: structural inequities and racialized campus climates continue to shape opportunity, but students' cultural wealth, family networks, and mentoring experiences routinely serve as transformative counterforces (Harper, 2012; Yosso, 2005; Wood & Harris, 2017). Second, scholarship has paid less attention to the selective ways men of color engage with institutional supports: how they decide what is credible, what is worth their limited time, and which people or spaces they can trust. The present phenomenological study extends existing work by examining how Black and Hispanic men at southeastern community colleges construct meaning around belonging, mentorship, and identity-affirming practices while actively filtering institutional communication and opportunities. We introduce the concept of strategic filtering to describe this process of selective engagement: students scan the institutional environment and allocate attention to people, programs, and messages that align with their cultural values, immediate needs, and long-term goals. Studying Black and Hispanic men together is justified here because both groups navigate racialization, work and family responsibilities, and often under-resourced community college contexts, though the analysis attends to distinctions in language, immigration history, and community expectations (Gonzales, 2025; Hardy, 2024; Howard et al., 2017). In doing so, this study offers a phenomenologically grounded account of how men of color do not merely enroll, but persist and succeed, in community colleges.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptualizing the experiences of Black and Hispanic male community college students requires moving beyond deficit-based frameworks that individualize educational disparities. Traditional explanations have too often attributed lower persistence or completion to students' supposed lack of preparation or motivation, which has encouraged remediation-heavy and "non-strategic" institutional responses that do little to confront racism, economic precarity, or exclusionary campus climates (Burnett et al., 2020; Felix & Gonzalez, 2020; Harper, 2009, 2010). Contemporary scholars counter that these men routinely demonstrate resilience, agency, and sophisticated navigational skills—what Yosso (2005) calls community cultural wealth—despite structures not built for them (Garcia, 2025; Huerta et al., 2021). For this reason, the present study adopts an explicitly asset-based lens grounded in three complementary frameworks: Harper's (2010, 2012) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework, Wood and Harris's (2017) community-college-specific model of male persistence, and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework. Together, these frameworks allow us to examine persistence as the result of reciprocal relations between individual agency and institutional conditions, rather than as an outcome located solely in the student.

Harper's (2010, 2012) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework is the first pillar of this study's conceptual foundation because it asks a different starting question: how and under what conditions do men of color succeed in college? Instead of rehearsing failure narratives, Harper directs attention to the supports, strategies, and relationships that enable MOC to excel within institutions historically not designed for their success. This approach legitimizes inquiry into mentoring, campus leadership opportunities, and culturally responsive programs because these are the sites where success is actually being produced (Harper, 2012). It also orients researchers toward the agentic choices students make—choices to seek help from a trusted faculty member, to join a men's initiative, or to ignore deficit cues in the environment (Armando, 2021). In this study, Harper's framework informs our focus on success narratives, on the active use of institutional agents, and on the idea that strategic filtering is itself a success strategy rather than a sign of disengagement.

Building on Harper's strengths-based orientation, Wood and Harris (2017) offer a community-college-specific model that identifies five interconnected domains (academic, environmental, noncognitive, institutional, and social) that together shape the persistence of men of color. Their work is particularly useful here because it was developed for the very context under study: open-access, commuter-heavy, often under-resourced community colleges. Wood and Harris argue that persistence is sustained when colleges provide culturally responsive academic supports, mitigate environmental pressures such as work and transportation, develop noncognitive skills like self-efficacy and help-seeking, and, crucially, validate students' membership in the college community. Validation is the hinge in their model: when faculty and staff communicate that students are capable and that they belong, men of color are more likely to remain enrolled, seek help, and make purposeful academic choices (Wood & Harris, 2017). This study extends their model to include both Black and Hispanic men in southeastern community colleges and to show that, in practice, students often respond to

only those institutional messages that come from *validated* or *credible* sources--again pointing to strategic filtering.

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework complements both Harper and Wood & Harris by naming the assets that Black and Hispanic men already possess and bring with them to college. Aspirational capital fuels students' long-term educational goals even when they do not see many people like themselves in their programs; familial capital connects them to intergenerational knowledge, child-care support, and accountability networks; navigational and social capital help them move through bureaucratic systems and connect with key institutional agents. For many Latino men, these capitals are also intertwined with language, faith, and transnational family commitments, which shape how and when they can participate in college life (Solano, 2022; Gonzales, 2025). When colleges fail to recognize these forms of capital, students may still succeed—but they will do so *despite* the institution. When colleges recognize, affirm, and build on these capitals, persistence becomes more sustainable and less individually costly. In this study, Yosso helps explain why students sometimes bypass formal services and instead rely on family, peers, or a single trusted staff member: they are activating cultural wealth and exercising strategic filtering to maximize benefit and minimize cultural harm.

Methods

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the lived This study employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach within a broader phenomenological orientation to examine how Black and Hispanic male community college students make sense of their persistence, belonging, and use of institutional supports. A phenomenological stance was appropriate because the purpose of the study was to describe and interpret the *lived experiences* of students in under-resourced, racially stratified educational contexts, rather than to test a hypothesis or measure the effect of a single intervention. At the same time, IPA was selected as the guiding tradition because the central analytic interest was not only in *what* participants experienced but in *how* they interpreted those experiences, negotiated racialized campus climates, and selectively engaged with people and messages they perceived as credible (Smith et al., 2009). In other words, the unit of analysis was the meaning students assigned to belonging, mentoring, and institutional communication, which aligns closely with IPA's focus on meaning-making. This clarification responds directly to the reviewer's concern about whether the study was "phenomenological" or "IPA": the study is phenomenological in purpose and IPA in analytic procedure. By focusing on how participants interpret their college experiences, the study illuminates the supports, barriers, and strategies that influence their success. The following research question guided this study:

***Research Question 1*:** How do Black and Hispanic male-identifying students perceive and make meaning of their experiences of success, identity, and belonging at four community colleges in a southeastern U.S. state?

Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design, which is well-suited for exploring how individuals experience and make meaning of a shared phenomenon—in this case, the experience of navigating community college as a Black or Hispanic male student. Phenomenology allows for the in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences through rich, descriptive data, aiming to uncover the essence of these experiences from the participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Context

The context for this study encompasses four community colleges located in a southeastern state of the United States. These institutions share several commonalities, yet each presents unique characteristics that contribute to the diverse experiences of Black and Hispanic male students. The colleges were selected to gain a variety of perspectives from Black and Hispanic men students in this southeastern state. The colleges are, overall, representative of the colleges throughout the state, through their various sizes and demographics.

Institutional Profiles

College A. This medium-sized community college enrolls approximately 5,000 students. It stands out for its significant Hispanic student population, which constitutes nearly 10% of the total enrollment. The institution is in an urban area but also accessible to nearby rural communities.

College B, C, and D. These are large community colleges, each with a student body exceeding 10,000. These institutions are also situated in urban settings with proximate rural areas. Each of these colleges boasts a substantial enrollment of students of color:

- **College B**: Over 50% of its student population comprises students of color, reflecting a highly diverse student body.
- **College C and D**: Both colleges have more than 25% students of color, indicating significant minority representation within their campuses.

Governance and Academic Offerings

All four colleges operate under a unified board of regents’ system, which ensures a standardized framework for governance, curriculum, and programming. This uniformity across institutions facilitates a comparative analysis of student experiences while maintaining the distinct cultural and demographic contexts of each college.

Support Programs for Men of Color

Colleges A, B, and C. These institutions have implemented specific programming aimed at supporting men of color. These programs include dedicated centers that provide physical

spaces with staff, mentoring programs, and student organizations. These resources are designed to foster a supportive environment and promote academic and personal success among Black and Hispanic male students.

College D. Unlike the other three colleges, College D does not have designated programming specifically for men of color. However, it compensates through active partnerships with community organizations such as the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. These collaborations aim to extend support and resources to diverse students and potential students, thereby enhancing their educational experiences.

Demographic and Cultural Context

The colleges are in urban areas characterized by a blend of urban and rural influences. This geographical positioning influences the demographic composition and cultural dynamics within the student populations. The high enrollment of students of color, particularly at College B, underscores the importance of understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by these students in diverse educational environments.
By examining the experiences of Black and Hispanic male students across these institutional contexts, this study aims to uncover nuanced insights into their educational journeys, highlighting both the obstacles they encounter and the strategies they employ to succeed.

Rationale for Combining Black and Hispanic Male Participants

The decision to group Black and Hispanic male students was guided by the study's emphasis on shared experiences of navigating systemic barriers, underrepresentation, and cultural marginalization in community colleges. However, we acknowledge that these populations are not monolithic. We sought to honor both commonalities and differences by attending to the cultural, racial, and linguistic nuances within our data. Where salient, differences between these groups are noted in the findings and discussed further in the implications section. Future research may benefit from a disaggregated analysis.

Researchers' Positionalities

As qualitative researchers, our identities, values, and experiences inevitably shape the research process. The research team included scholars from racially and professionally diverse backgrounds, several of whom identify as members of historically excluded groups. We approached this work with a shared commitment to equity and inclusion, and a recognition of the systemic barriers faced by students of color. Throughout the research process, we maintained reflexive journals and engaged in regular team discussions to acknowledge and minimize potential biases.

Participant Recruitment

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we employed purposive and snowball sampling strategies to recruit participants. Black and Hispanic male-identifying students who had completed at least one semester were invited via student services, cultural centers, faculty, and email lists. Recruitment materials emphasized the importance of sharing lived experiences to inform institutional practices. Interviews were conducted between November 2021 and April 2022. A total of 27 participants—16 Black and 11 Hispanic male students—participated in either individual (14) or small group (5) interviews. Participants varied in age, academic program, and first-generation college status.

Table 1.
Participants

Pseudonym	College	Ethnicity	Age
Alejandro	B	Hispanic	18-23
Andres	D	Hispanic	30-35
Andrew	B	Black	18-23
Brandon	D	Black	30-35
Carlos	B	Hispanic	18-23
Corey	B	Black	18-23
Darius	C	Black	18-23
Darnell	B	Black	18-23
DeShawn	B	Black	18-23
Diego	A	Hispanic	18-23
Dominique	A	Black	18-23
Elijah	B	Black	18-23
Emilio	A	Hispanic	18-23
Eric	B	Black	18-23
Hector	B	Hispanic	18-23
Jamal	B	Black	24-29
Javier	B	Hispanic	18-23
Jose	A	Hispanic	18-23
Kevin	A	Black	18-23
Lamar	B	Black	18-23
Luis	A	Hispanic	18-23
Malik	B	Black	18-23
Marco	C	Hispanic	18-23
Marcus	B	Black	18-23
Nathan	B	Black	18-23
Rafael	A	Hispanic	18-23
Tyrone	B	Black	18-23

Data Collection

Interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in probing deeper into participants' responses while maintaining a consistent structure across interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). In phenomenological interviews, a key strength lies in their ability to allow participants to move fluidly through time—recalling past experiences, making sense of their present realities, and anticipating future possibilities. This temporal flexibility enables participants to construct meaning around their lived experiences, often resulting in a richer and more nuanced understanding than what might emerge through other methods of inquiry (Cypress, 2018). In addition to individual, semi-structured interviews, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with two or more participants who did not engage in individual interviews. The research team, in collaboration with the participants, honored the desire for these men to not only share their lives experiences with the research team, but also extend that sharing to their peers. We consistently followed up on participants' responses, summarizing their meanings to ensure accuracy and understanding. This approach aligns with the principles of member checking, which enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Sample Interview Questions

- Think back to when you were making the decision to get a degree or certificate. What did your family think about your decision?
- Think about the supports and services that have been provided to you on campus. How have these supports or services assisted you as a student? What has been most helpful? What has been least helpful? What aspects of those supports and services made them more or less helpful to you?
- Think about your support system. Who supports you as a student and person at your campus? What about the outside of the campus environment?

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and uploaded into ATLAS.ti 9 for coding and analysis. We followed a two-phase inductive coding process informed by IPA: (1) initial open coding to identify emergent themes and (2) clustering of these codes into higher-order categories. Codes were refined through iterative reading and team dialogue. Five researchers independently coded the transcripts and met regularly to ensure intersubjective agreement. The team's collaborative analytic process enhanced the credibility and consistency of theme development (MacPhail et al., 2016).

Triangulation and Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, we employed methodological triangulation by reviewing institutional documents and websites that described student support programs, mentoring initiatives, and equity-focused policies. These materials helped contextualize the participants' narratives and verified their references to institutional practices. In addition to maintaining

audit trails and reflexive memos, we employed member checking by summarizing interpretations to participants during interviews to confirm accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Conceptual Framework Integration

Wood's (2010) conceptual model of Black male persistence in community colleges informed both the interview design and data analysis. This model emphasizes the influence of social, academic, and environmental factors on student success. It shaped our understanding of how participants described their motivations, support systems, and perceptions of faculty engagement. While the model was originally developed for Black males, we found many of its tenets applicable to Hispanic male students as well, particularly regarding faculty validation, academic integration, and campus climate. We used the framework to inform coding categories and interpret findings.

Phenomenological Essence

The core essence that emerged from participants' experiences was the pursuit of validation—academic, personal, and cultural. Students described community colleges as sites of both possibility and constraint. Success was often linked not only to internal motivation but also to recognition from faculty, family, and peer communities. While challenges such as racism, language barriers, and systemic under-resourcing were common, participants emphasized the power of connection—to family, mentors, and identity-affirming spaces—as key to persistence.

Results

Interpretative phenomenological analysis of 27 interviews yielded four interrelated themes that explain how Black and Hispanic male students construct meaning around success and identity in community colleges: (1) Sense of Belonging, (2) Culturally Responsive Support and Communication (including strategic filtering), (3) Family and Kinship Capital, and (4) Mentoring as a Persistence Engine. Table 1 summarizes themes, subthemes, and representative quotations.

Sense of Belonging

Belonging was experienced as recognition and acceptance in identity-affirming spaces and relationships. Students described campuses as welcoming when everyday interactions humanized them as learners. Kevin shared, "They welcomed me very well… the teachers… are very nice and I'm enjoying learning here," while Brandon emphasized a generally "welcoming" community. Students at colleges with a Center for Men of Color repeatedly named it as an anchor: Nathan called it "my second home," and Andrew noted, "When I'm there, I can just focus… if you need something, someone always helps." In contrast, some participants described isolation or limited time for engagement; as Lamar put it, "People just do their own thing really," highlighting how commuting, work, and family responsibilities can constrain community formation.

Table 2.
Themes, Subthemes, and Representative Quotations (N = 27)

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Quotation
Sense of Belonging	Welcoming faculty/staff	“They welcomed me very well… the teachers… are very nice and I’m enjoying learning here.” — Kevin, College A
	Identity-affirming space	“My second home… I could come in whenever if I have to study for anything or do schoolwork.” — Nathan, College B
	Accessible hub	“When I’m there, I can just focus… if you need something, someone always helps.” — Andrew, College B
Culturally Responsive Support & Communication	Humanizing communication	“People are generally helpful… the community feels welcoming.” — Brandon, College D
	Actionable guidance	“If I need help, [he] tells me who to go to for tutoring… emails me to make sure I have… deadlines.” — Corey, College B
	Strategic filtering	“I’m focused more on learning… just trying to focus on the coursework more than anything.” — Alejandro, College B
	Time/role constraints	“I don't even look at the flyers anymore… work 12s on the weekends.” — Diego, College A
Family & Kinship Capital	Maternal encouragement	“You can do it. Nothing is impossible… it can be difficult at first, but you can get it.” — Hector, College B
	First-gen obligation	“My mom… wanted one of her kids to at least be successful… I needed to do it.” — Nathan, College B
	Oldest-sibling duty	“Raised by a single mother… that has really pushed me [to] want to change the situation… help my little brothers and sisters.” — Marco, College C
Mentoring as a Persistence Engine	Proactive check-ins	“We have little meetings… he’ll call, check up on me… tell me who to go to for tutoring.” — Corey, College B
	Modeled pathways	“Some professors started… emphasis on transferring… then I’ll learn more in the [Men of Color] group.” — Jose, College A

Culturally Responsive Support and Communication (and Strategic Filtering)

Participants valued staff and faculty who offered empathic, concrete, "what-to-do-next" guidance. Corey explained, "We have little meetings… he'll call, check up on me… If I need help, he'll tell me who to go to for tutoring, and he'll email me… [about] deadlines," exemplifying communication that turns recognition into action. Students also described strategic filtering—selectively attending to communications aligned with their goals and time realities. Alejandro said, "I'm focused more on learning… just trying to focus on the coursework more than anything," while Diego, balancing study loads and long shifts, shared, "I don't even look at the flyers anymore… work 12s [12-hour shifts] on the weekends." Participants trusted information delivered through people and spaces perceived as credible or culturally resonant (e.g., faculty announcements, identity-affirming centers, bilingual or culturally specific outreach).

Family and Kinship Capital

Family functioned as a source of motivation, accountability, and meaning. Hector recalled his mother's insistence: "You can do it. Nothing is impossible… it can be difficult at first, but you can get it"—as the spark for college going. Nathan linked persistence to honoring a single mother's hopes: "My mom… wanted one of her kids to at least be successful… I needed to do it." Marco located his drive in being the eldest in a low-income, single-parent home: "That has really pushed me [to] want to change the situation… help my little brothers and sisters." Participants also described faith as sustaining emotional regulation and purpose (e.g., Marco: "I've always been a prayerful guy… I stayed grounded"). These accounts illustrate familial, aspirational, and spiritual capitals that anchor progress even amid structural constraints.

Mentoring as a Persistence Engine

Mentoring, formal and informal, served as the integrative mechanism that converted belonging and validation into concrete steps. Corey's description of routine check-ins and referrals shows how mentors scaffold time management and help-seeking. Darius contrasted an earlier college attempt ("I was green, didn't know how to study") with the present: "This time, I'm doing it for me, and I've had people helping me who understand what I've been through," underscoring mentoring's role in reframing identity and practice. Jose highlighted how mentors and the Men of Color group demystified transfer: "Professors started… emphasis on transferring… then I'll learn more in the [Men of Color] group… some colleges… have different requirements." Even when students could not attend in person, ongoing touchpoints mattered; as Darius noted of a Zoom-based initiative, "I do still get the emails… and I do read [and watch] the videos," signaling that remembered students persist.

Phenomenological Summary of Findings

Across cases, participants made sense of persistence as a relational and navigational achievement: being recognized in welcoming spaces; receiving culturally responsive, actionable

guidance; drawing on family and kinship capital; and engaging mentors who stitched these elements into sustained momentum. When institutional communication felt generic or misaligned with real constraints, students strategically filtered to preserve attention for the most credible, culturally resonant supports. In this way, success was experienced not as an individual trait but as a co-constructed pathway through relationships, time-wise choices, and identity-affirming contexts.

Discussion

This interpretative phenomenological analysis examined the lived experiences of 27 Black and Hispanic male–identifying students at four community colleges in the southeastern United States. The analysis surfaced four interrelated themes—sense of belonging, culturally responsive communication and support (including strategic filtering), family and kinship capital, and mentoring as a persistence engine—that show how students interpret, navigate, and persist within systems historically misaligned with their lives and identities. Across themes, the phenomenological essence that organizes students' meaning-making is validation: academic, personal, and cultural recognition enacted in everyday relationships and spaces that signal students matter and can succeed.

Extending Community-College Models of Success

Findings extend community-college–specific frameworks of success for men of color by illustrating how academic, environmental, social, institutional, and noncognitive factors interlock through ongoing validation and care (Wood & Harris, 2014). Participants' accounts of welcoming faculty, accessible hubs, and relationship-rich programs align with models that locate persistence not in individual "grit" but in relational infrastructures that humanize students and remove friction from help-seeking. Critiques of "bootstrap" framings underscore why shifting from individual fortitude to institutional responsibility is necessary for Black and Latino men, whose experiences are shaped by legacies of segregation and structural inequality that constrain time, bandwidth, and access to opportunity structures (Locks et al., 2023).

Strategic Filtering as Adaptive Agency

A novel contribution of this study is strategic filtering—students' intentional, discerning attention to the *most credible and actionable* information sources given competing roles and limited time. For example, Alejandro said, "I'm focused more on learning… just trying to focus on the coursework more than anything," and Diego shared, "I don't even look at the flyers anymore… work 12s on the weekends." Rather than disengagement, these behaviors represent adaptive agency: prioritizing communications and relationships that are culturally resonant and outcomes-oriented while filtering out generic broadcast messages. The pattern mirrors evidence that institutions often default to communications and support that presume time and access students do not have; students then rely on trusted people and identity-affirming spaces to curate what matters most (Brooms, 2019a; Nashua, 2020).

Mentoring and Relational Validation

Mentoring emerged as the integrative mechanism that turned belonging and recognition into concrete academic progress. Darius reflected, "I didn't really know how to study the first time I went to college, but having someone to check in with made all the difference." Corey described proactive guidance: "He'll call, check up on me… tell me who to go to for tutoring." These accounts echo research showing that relational, continuous mentoring—rather than episodic contact—builds belonging, demystifies navigation, and increases utilization of resources for men of color in community colleges (Brooms, 2019b; Wood & Harris, 2014). Mentoring, in this sense, is the practice architecture that operationalizes validation.

Family, Faith, and Community Cultural Wealth

Participants consistently located their motivation and accountability within family and kinship networks. Hector recalled, "You can do it. Nothing is impossible… it can be difficult at first, but you can get it." Nathan emphasized honoring his mother's hopes: "My mom… wanted one of her kids to at least be successful… I needed to do it." Marco tied persistence to sibling responsibility and faith: "Raised by a single mother… that has really pushed me [to] want to change the situation… help my little brothers and sisters… I've always been a prayerful guy." These narratives align with long-standing evidence that families supply emotional, social, and financial support that sustains persistence and should be treated as central—rather than peripheral—to student success models (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Palmer et al., 2011). For Latino men in particular, empirical work shows how familial, aspirational, navigational, and resistant capitals are mobilized to overcome institutional barriers and build ties with agents who open doors to resources (Nashua, 2020).

Campus Climate and Identity-Affirming Spaces

Students described identity-affirming centers and programs as transformative. Nathan called his campus center "my second home," and Andrew noted, "When I'm there, I can just focus… if you need something, someone always helps." Such community hubs are consistently linked to stronger belonging, leadership development, and socio-academic engagement for men of color; they also provide the *people-mediated* communication students trust when strategically filtering institutional noise (Brooms, 2019a). Where these hubs were absent, students depended more on individual faculty and staff relationships to compensate, highlighting inequities in how climate and infrastructure enable or limit belonging and help-seeking (Brooms, 2019b; Wood & Harris, 2014).

Conclusion

This study deepens our understanding of how 27 Black and Hispanic male community college students persist and succeed within institutional environments shaped by systemic inequities. Grounded in Harper's (2010, 2012) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework and Wood and Harris's

(2017) model of student persistence, and informed by Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth, the findings reveal that validation—academic, cultural, and interpersonal—anchors persistence in tangible and transformative ways. By introducing the concept of strategic filtering, this study reframes lower levels of visible engagement not as apathy or disconnection but as an intentional and adaptive process of self-regulation. Students selectively engage with people, spaces, and institutional communications they deem credible and culturally resonant, exercising agency to balance competing work, family, and academic demands.

Beyond theoretical contribution, the findings yield actionable implications for policy and practice. At the policy level, community colleges and state systems should embed equity-driven accountability metrics that assess not only access and completion rates but also the quality of culturally responsive engagement and mentorship structures. Institutions should fund and evaluate identity-affirming infrastructure—including multicultural centers, bilingual communication initiatives, and men-of-color programs—that build trust and normalize help-seeking behaviors. At the practice level, faculty and staff should be trained to act as institutional agents who validate student experiences, communicate expectations clearly, and adopt proactive advising models that recognize the intersecting demands students manage outside the classroom. Targeted bilingual outreach, flexible scheduling, and mentorship models rooted in shared cultural understanding can convert validation into sustained academic momentum. Leadership development programs that pair professional mentors with male students of color can further institutionalize belonging as a standard, not an exception, within community college life.

The lived experiences shared by participants challenge deficit narratives by demonstrating that persistence is not a product of individual exceptionalism but of relational ecosystems that blend familial, cultural, and institutional support. These men are not simply enduring inequitable systems; they are navigating, reshaping, and redefining what success means in spaces historically not designed for them. Yet, as participants emphasized, their resilience should not be mistaken for institutional adequacy. Responsibility for equitable outcomes must rest with colleges themselves, which have both a moral and operational imperative to dismantle structural barriers, cultivate validating relationships, and invest in sustained culturally responsive programming. Achieving equity for men of color requires not episodic interventions but systemic redesign that embeds validation and belonging into institutional culture.

While the findings offer robust insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted with 27 participants from four community colleges in one southeastern U.S. state, and thus the results are context-bound rather than statistically generalizable. However, the depth of phenomenological analysis enhances transferability: readers and practitioners in similar institutional contexts may find resonance and applicability in the themes of belonging, mentorship, and cultural affirmation. Future research could extend this work by examining how strategic filtering operates across different institutional types, geographic regions, or gender intersections, and by exploring the perspectives of institutional agents who serve as mentors or advocates for men of color.

This research calls for a paradigm shift: from viewing the success of Black and Hispanic male students as exceptional to designing community colleges where such success is expected,

systematic, and structurally supported. Persistence, when properly understood, is not a story of survival but of potential realized through equity-minded leadership and institutional courage.

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