

Article

# Systemic Response: Developing a Strategic Response to Support Young Men of Color during COVID-19 Pandemic

Eligio Martinez, Jr. <sup>1,\*</sup>, Derrick R. Brooms <sup>2</sup>, William Franklin <sup>3</sup>, Matthew Smith <sup>3</sup>, Andre Bailey <sup>4</sup> and Markel Quarles <sup>5,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Educational Leadership Department, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, CA 91768, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology & Africana Studies, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996, USA; dbrooms@utk.edu

<sup>3</sup> Division of Student Affairs, California State University, Dominguez Hills, Carson, CA 90747, USA; wfranklin@csudh.edu (W.F.); matt.smith@csudh.edu (M.S.)

<sup>4</sup> Educational Opportunity Program, California State University, Rohnert Park, CA 94928, USA; andre.bailey@sonoma.edu

<sup>5</sup> Division of Student Affairs, California State University, Bakersfield, CA 93311, USA

\* Correspondence: eligiom@cpp.edu (E.M.J.); mquarles1@csusb.edu (M.Q.)

**Abstract:** The aim of this work is to provide insight into the California State University Young Men of Color Consortium (CSU YMOC), which was created to explore the unique challenges young men of color face during their postsecondary experiences, as well as advance effective approaches to better support them. Specifically, we focus on CSU Male Success Initiative programs and detail how campus partners worked collaboratively to support men of color during the previous academic year amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the ways that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education across the P-16 spectrum, the MSIs were positioned uniquely to support some of the challenges that students endured. Recent reports reveal that the pandemic has exacerbated a number of difficulties, both old and new(er), that men of color experience in their college years, from accessing and transitioning to matriculating and persisting in higher education. We provide an overview of the CSU YMOC Consortium and present details about one program element (Critical Conversations) we incorporated this year as a measure to be responsive to challenges brought on by the pandemic. Finally, partners at three institutions share reflections on how their MSI shifted their efforts to meet students' needs and provide support.

**Keywords:** diversity and equity; equity in higher education; males of color; culturally responsive higher education practices; empowering marginalized groups; minority serving institutions



**Citation:** Martinez, E., Jr.; Brooms, D.R.; Franklin, W.; Smith, M.; Bailey, A.; Quarles, M. Systemic Response: Developing a Strategic Response to Support Young Men of Color during COVID-19 Pandemic. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 800. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11120800>

Academic Editors: Sylvia Hurtado, Krystle Palma Cobian and Eleanor Dommett

Received: 1 September 2021

Accepted: 2 December 2021

Published: 9 December 2021

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2021 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

The trajectories of men of color into higher education differ greatly compared to the rest of their peers and will often be influenced by home and community factors [1–4]. Once on campus, students encounter a number of challenges that shape the experiences and opportunities that men of color will have. Scholars have documented the impact that race and gender have on the experiences of men of color on college campuses, which often include being hyper-visible and invisible at the same time [5–7]. The lack of a welcoming and supportive environment often leads to men of color attempting to address their needs on their own without seeking proper support from their institution [8,9].

Huerta and associates [10] argue that the needs of men of color go beyond academic support, and include social, psychological and personal factors. Thus, while success rates for men of color may be lower compared to their peers, a major contributing factor may not be academic performance, but rather how the campus climate and institutional culture neglect the needs of men of color. Prior research has demonstrated the benefits of student involvement in campus activities and student organizations for men of color. While campus

engagement with peers has a positive impact on graduation, retention and satisfaction, student centered engagement removes responsibility from institutions to commit resources towards supporting men of color [11,12]. Huerta and Dizon [13] highlight the need to redistribute resources and develop initiatives that address the needs of men of color in higher education. Similarly, Harper [14] outlined five things that campuses can do to meet the needs of men of color, including the need to recognize the unique differences amongst men of color and the need to develop programs and support services that take their needs as men into account. While men of color share experiences with the rest of their college peers, their unique experiences and backgrounds warrant intentional engagement to ensure their personal and academic well-being.

#### *Engaging Men of Color in Higher Education*

Within the higher education landscape, a number of institutions have developed, engineered, or engaged in efforts to support men of color through the fashioning of a male success initiative (MSI) program. MSI programs are typically housed at a higher education institution and include a range of activities, events, and student-centered programming aimed at increasing access, retention, and graduation for men of color. MSIs are also often developed to meet students' local needs by taking into account local and surrounding environment [15]. Some of these efforts also include system-wide initiatives that are charged with improving students' experiences and outcomes across a collection of institutions, such as City University of New York's (CUNY) Black Male Initiative, the University of Texas Project MALES (Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success), and the California State University Young Men of Color Consortium. The CUNY Black Male Initiative is a university-wide student development initiative that facilitates more than 30 projects across the system focused on improving retention and graduation rates for underrepresented students, particularly men of color. According to the Initiative, the BMI "is one expression of CUNY's commitment to access and diversity" [16]. Relatedly, Project MALES was launched in 2010 as a research and mentoring initiative within the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin. Project MALES encompasses three interrelated initiatives that include "an ongoing research project focused on exploring the experiences of Latino males across the education pipeline, a mentoring program that aims to cultivate an engaged support network for males of color, and a new statewide P-16 Consortium focused on leveraging shared strategies to ensure the success of males of color across Texas" [17] (p. 76).

As noted in the brief program profiles above, many MSIs are housed in and supported by campus units such as student affairs, diversity and community engagement, residence life, and multicultural affairs. These programs typically receive some form of institutional funding, sometimes considered seed funding, with a charge to raise additional funding through external partnerships, local funds from philanthropic entities, or grant funding. As it relates to organizational structure, programs are led and supported by staff and faculty (e.g., directors, coordinators, or advisors) and may receive assistance from volunteers both within the institution and across local communities. Recently, scholars have highlighted that engagement with faculty and staff play a critical role in ensuring success of men of color in college [18]. In regard to students, MSIs may target specific student populations (e.g., first-generation, first-year, or transfer male students of color) for their programming efforts and may be organized through cohort models based on student classifications. Additionally, programming may include coordinating mentoring programs (near peer mentoring or through connections with institutional agents), academic coaching and support, personal and professional development, and one-on-one and small group meetings, as well as socioemotional support, identity development, and leadership [17–22].

Given the challenges and obstacles that men of color face in both accessing and navigating higher education, as discussed above and elsewhere, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their education in a number of ways. Generally, as has been reported in news media outlets and other discussions, enrollment in higher education has

decreased over the past year for students overall. For instance, Marcus [23] reported that men's enrollment in college has declined for years and also during the pandemic. For men of color, multiple factors have contributed to this decline, namely lack of academic preparation and educational support during their secondary school years (and prior), lack of access to college-going information and knowledge, and economic and financial needs of their families, to name just a few. The pandemic has exacerbated these and other factors. As an example, men of color experienced significant barriers with accessing technology for virtual instruction and learning while also struggling with meeting basic needs [23–25]. In response, staff members and leaders of the Male Student Success Initiative (MSSI), which serves men of color through peer networking and a success mentor, "prioritized making sure that students had the necessary technology to stay engaged with schoolwork and the MSSI community" via which they helped students secure laptops for their schoolwork and gain access to Wi-Fi hotspots [24]. Given the various ways that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has impacted this student population very specifically, there is a grave need for institutional and programming efforts to meet their needs to help facilitate and support their educational engagement and success.

## 2. Research to Practice

In an attempt to discuss how institutions addressed the challenges that men of color faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, we discuss the work that the California State University Consortium for Young Males of Color and campus partners engaged in the 2020–2021 academic year. To do so, Drs. William Franklin and Matthew Smith from Cal State Dominguez Hills provide an overview of the work of the Consortium along with CSU Dominguez Hills' institutional response. Derrick Brooms and Eligio Martinez, Jr. (the lead authors), who serve as senior research associates for the Consortium, discuss the purpose and scope of the Critical Conversations held with campus partners, one of the major activities of the Consortium, and frame the work of the Critical Conversations from a Critical Race Praxis approach. Finally, two additional campus partners, Andre Bailey from Sonoma State, and Markel Quarles from Cal State Bakersfield, discuss how their respective programs responded to the needs of young men of color this past year.

### 2.1. Critical Race Praxis

Critical Race Theory scholarship emerged as a critique to liberal ideology that challenged the limitations of Civil Rights Law [26,27]. CRT legal scholars were committed to challenging race and racism that was institutionalized and protected by the law [26]. Within the field of education, Ladson-Billings and Tate [28] introduce Critical Race Theory to education grounded on the notion of property rights as a defining feature of American society, which serves as a mechanism to exclude and deny opportunities for students of color in education. Ladson-Billings and Tate ground CRT in Education on the notions of: (a) racism is endemic and deeply ingrained in American life, including in the field of education; (b) the need to reinterpret ineffective civil rights law; (c) a challenge to neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness and meritocracy; and (d) the intersection of race and property.

Initially conceived by legal scholar Eric Yamamoto [29], Critical Race Praxis calls for the bridging and translating of abstract theory about race, cultural and law into practical ideas. As defined by Yamamoto, Critical Race Praxis "combines pragmatic socio-legal analysis with political lawyering and community organizing for justice practice by and for racialized communities" (p. 875). Thus, central to Critical Race Praxis is the notion of racial justice as a form of anti-subordination practice. Within education, Stovall [30] argued for the need for researchers to spend more time in on the ground work by engaging researchers with practitioners, students and community members. This can take the form of changing how institutions of higher education train teachers and school leaders and providing alternative certification programs [30]. Critical Race Praxis can also help educational leaders redefine their roles by forging new relationships with parents, students and educators [31].

## Engaging in Critical Race Praxis

As former practitioners who coordinated male success initiatives, and now as researchers who focus on MSIs and the experiences of men of color in higher education, these experiences informed the process for how we wanted to engage with program coordinators. Recognizing the need to engage with research, theory and practice simultaneously, the Critical Conversations provided a perfect opportunity to engage in Critical Race Praxis with our campus partners. Employing a Critical Race Praxis approach allowed us and the campus partners to engage in reflective dialogue about our work in engaging young men of color, identifying areas of potential growth and translating theory into practice. This approach allows for the changing needs of men of color to be central to the work and allows partners to approach the work from an asset-based perspective. Critical Race Praxis also allows us to push back and challenge dominant theories and practices within student affairs to ensure that race and gender are central to the practices of male success initiatives within the Consortium. In writing this collaborative article, we focus on the research to practice frame which allows us to collaborate with our colleagues who engage in the day-to-day work in order to inform research.

### 2.2. The California State University System

The California State University (CSU) System is the largest public higher education system in the United States consisting of 23 campuses spread throughout the state of California. With an enrollment of 432,264 undergraduate students, the system serves primarily students of color with 46% of its student body identifying as Latina/o/x, 16% identifying as Asian American, 4% identifying as African American, less than 1% identifying as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and less than 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native. In the fall of 2020, enrollment for first time college students dropped slightly from 65,979 to 61,830 from the previous year [32].

Looking exclusively at men of color, the CSU system enrolled 137,125 self-identified men of color in the fall of 2020. More specifically, Latino men's enrollment slightly dropped across the system, decreasing from 12,638 in the Fall of 2019 to 12,051 in Fall 2020 while African American men decreased from 1045 to 1008 during the same time. Asian American men decreased from 5028 first year students in the previous fall term to 4786 in Fall 2020. Pacific Islander men dropped from 118 to 95, while American Indian and Alaska Native men increased from 23 to 34 [32].

A number of similar representations of enrollment and demographics exist across each of the individual CSU institutions with a majority of campuses experiencing decreased enrollment overall. System-wide retention and graduation data also revealed the need to improve graduation rates for all students. As a result, the Graduation Initiative 2025 (GI 2025) was developed with a specific goal to improve students' retention and graduation. Through both research and practice, the CSU identified six operational priorities to implement the Graduation Initiative efforts across the system. These priorities were evaluated as having significant impact on degree completion and student success; they include broadening academic preparation; enhancing enrollment management; supporting student engagement and well-being; investing in financial support; using data-informed decision making; and improving administrative processes [33].

The Graduation Initiative 2025 was also instrumental in grounding the work of the CSU Young Men of Color Consortium. CSU data revealed that retention and persistence relating to graduation for men of color were critical to helping to achieve the GI 2025 goals. While the data regarding enrollment, demographics and graduation vary from campus to campus, we present system-wide data above to provide a context for the collaborative work and efforts of the Consortium and the work discussed in this manuscript. Additionally, these student demographics and enrollment data, along with some of the trends experienced within the system related to retention and graduation, were used to make clear the need for system-wide efforts aimed specifically at improving access, matriculation, and success for young men of color within the CSU System.

### 2.3. Background of the Consortium

Efforts to eliminate the pernicious equity, opportunity, and earnings gap in populations of color must be informed by a commitment to postsecondary education. However, postsecondary degree attainment for underrepresented minority men continues to lag behind national averages. The California State University (CSU) is the largest, most diverse 4-year public university system in the nation. Established in 2017, the CSU Young Males of Color (YMOC) Consortium, housed at California State University Dominguez Hills, leveraged the CSU's expansive geography and impact to create a 23-campus Consortium. The Consortium was created to explore the unique challenges young men of color face during their postsecondary experiences, as well as advance effective approaches to better support them by (1) constructing a common agenda, (2) advancing mutually reinforcing activities, and (3) championing a shared measurement system. The Consortium is made up of two subsets across each campus, one of which includes staff, faculty, and administrators and the other which includes students. The Consortium leadership helps establish the agenda and programming in collaboration with partners across each of the CSU institutions (staff, faculty, and administrators). Students are involved in multiple facets of the Consortium, including in various facets at the institutional level and which vary by institution. Some of these aspects include running parallel student organizations, mentoring peers and participating in service programs. Across the Consortium, students are identified from each of the campuses to participate in annual Forums, serve as speakers and facilitators, and contribute to conversations, discussions, planning, and organizing selected events. Our goal is to affect systemic change leading to substantially increased retention and graduation rates for underrepresented minority men.

As a Consortium and statewide learning community, we meet periodically to review the CSU's and each campus' access, persistence, and graduation rates. This type of disaggregated data analysis allows us to underscore the unique needs, lived experiences, and longitudinal outcomes for young men of color. Reviewing the data together, as regional partners, helps us build a network of committed leaders and fosters shared knowledge and understanding in support of young men of color. During the 2020–2021 academic year, we also engaged in focused and intentional sessions called Critical Conversations, which provide opportunities to share experiences and to build a support network. Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we plan to continue to engage in the Critical Conversations during this current academic year. In addition to Critical Conversations, we also offer professional development opportunities for staff on the frontline doing this work. In the summer of 2021, we offered a month-long series called Designing and Evaluating a Successful Male of Color Initiative. Annually, during our statewide Young Males of Color Forum, we partner with national experts who understand the importance of sound research, inclusive excellence, and data-informed praxis. The annual Forum is not designed to be a "typical" gathering with extended keynotes, structured panels, and workshops on "best" practices that may or may not work in every campus context. We are not trying to be critical of those types of settings, but we ask national thought leaders on males of color to be "co-laborers". They work with teams from all campuses, with staff from the Chancellor's Office, with program officers from regional foundations, K-12, and community college partners and most importantly with a large cadre of students from all 23 CSUs. Together, we endeavor to build a culture of evidence and to define and align success.

### 2.4. Critical Conversations

We (Martinez and Brooms) established and facilitated three sets of Critical Conversations during the 2020–2021 academic year. Based on our Consortium work in previous academic years, we identified developing Critical Conversations as an important venue to engage with colleagues as we all worked to navigate the shifts and changes demanded by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Critical Conversations (CCs) provided us with opportunities to check in and continue to bridge and support the community for our CSU YMOC colleagues within and across the Consortium. The main participants for the CCs included

program directors, coordinators, and staff; our goal was to connect with staff members who were closest to and responsible for programming, planning, and facilitating male success initiatives. The primary aims of these Critical Conversations were threefold. First, we wanted to connect and strengthen the Consortium efforts by coordinating semester-based conversations (fall, spring, and summer) that helped bridge the “everyday” work with our statewide YMOC Forum as well as all-campus conversations. Second, we identified the Critical Conversations as a unique opportunity and intentional effort to develop and enhance the sense of community and collegiality in the Consortium. In this realm, we believed that the CCs could be important for increasing knowledge and awareness of institutional and collective efforts (e.g., programming and praxis). Additionally, a main thread of this approach also was to provide support for colleagues who may be at different stages of their professional work, are at various stages of program development, and work in different institutional contexts (e.g., a few programs had one dedicated staff member while several programs had five or more dedicated staff members). Third, we desired to keep our YMOC Consortium aims and goals centered in our collective work. For instance, as discussed above, one charge that informs the Consortium’s work is CSU Graduation Initiative 2025, which is an initiative aimed at increasing graduation rates for all CSU students while eliminating opportunity and achievement gaps [33].

For us, these Critical Conversations (CCs) were foundational to helping build rapport with and among colleagues, which also allowed us to share knowledge and resources and assisted us in being strategic in our planning. By approaching our work from a Critical Race Praxis, we were intentional about allowing the needs of our campus partners to guide our discussions. Rather than dictating the topics for each session based on research and our professional experiences, we provided a space for campus partners to identify areas they needed support in. For instance, during our Fall 2020 meetings, several colleagues expressed interest in scaling down the conversations even further to efforts on their own campus. In response, we divided the campuses into two different sections based on their program development and we facilitated the Spring and Summer CCs along these two lines. This approach provided us with an opportunity to provide targeted feedback, information, and details for strengthening efforts for supporting Young Men of Color and strategizing campus-based programming and activities. On the one hand, we assessed ongoing efforts in these conversations to better understand how to meet the needs of YMOC during the pandemic, especially since each of the campuses conducted their programming through a virtual format. On the other hand, we wanted to strengthen our community among the programs so that they could share ideas, resources, and experiences with each other. When needed, we were able to provide additional grounding in the literature and engage in discussions about theoretical grounding. Additionally, during our Spring 2021 CCs we identified areas of growth, planning, implementation, and assessment for and with our campus colleagues.

In the following subsections, several of our campus partners share reflections about the focus of their work and efforts in supporting Young Men of Color during the 2020–2021 academic year, with particular attention on supporting them during the COVID-19 pandemic. These reflections are rooted in the Critical Conversations and provide insight into efforts made at these campuses and how staff shifted programming during the previous academic year. We invited reflections from these campuses based on two criteria: regional representation and engagement in Critical Conversations. These campus partners include CSU Bakersfield, Sonoma State University, and CSU Dominguez Hills. Table 1 details campus demographic information for each of the three campuses based on gender, race and enrollment for men of color.

**Table 1.** Campus Enrollment by Gender, Race and Enrollment for Men of Color.

Campus	Gender	Enrollment by Race	Men of Color Enrollment
CSU Bakersfield	Women: 6304 Men: 3484	Am. Indian/Alaska Native: 27	Am. Indian/Alaska Native: 0
		Asian: 624	Asian: 288
		Black: 430	Black: 160
		Latino: 6129	Latino: 1994
		Native Hawaiian/Pac. Islander: 21	Native Hawaiian/Pac. Islander: 0
		White: 1329	
CSU Dominguez Hills	Women: 10,040 Men: 5833	Am. Indian/Alaska Native: 20	Am. Indian/Alaska Native: 0
		Asian: 1070	Asian: 551
		Black: 1696	Black: 536
		Latino: 10,701	Latino: 3790
		Native Hawaiian/Pac. Islander: 49	Native Hawaiian/Pac. Islander: 18
		White: 815	
CSU Sonoma	Women: 4471 Men: 2683	Am. Indian/Alaska Native: 27	Am. Indian/Alaska Native: 0
		Asian: 356	Asian: 144
		Black: 169	Black: 70
		Latino: 2636	Latino: 867
		Native Hawaiian/Pac. Islander: 22	Native Hawaiian/Pac. Islander: 12
		White: 2983	

Source: The California State University. Enrollment Dashboards. 2021.

### 3. Campus Programs and Efforts during COVID-19

The three campus programs and efforts discussed below were chosen for two inter-connecting reasons. First, CSU Bakersfield, Sonoma State University, and CSU Dominguez Hills campuses are located in different geographic regions in the state and, as a result, engage with diverse sets of young men of color. Two of the important points that we continue to center in our work, both institutionally and collectively, are that geographic location matters to campus culture and climate as well as how students engage with campus; additionally, we also center our collective understanding that men of color are not a monolith or homogenous group. Second, the programs at each of the campuses vary in scope, background, institutional support, and programming. As mentioned in our discussion of the Critical Conversations, we want to create a collaborative environment in the Consortium where we share information, research, resources, and student-centered practices that prove effective. Given the variety in program history, positioning, and functionality, highlighting these three campuses provides a glimpse of how programs with a different focus or history approach and carry out their work to improve the plight, education, and outcomes for men of color within the CSU System in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

#### 3.1. CSU Bakersfield—Markel Quarles, Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs and Student Services

CSU Bakersfield is a regional mid-size comprehensive university in Kern County that enrolls about 11,400 students [32]. Designated a Hispanic Serving Institution, CSU Bakersfield is in its 50th year of operation and is situated approximately 100 miles from the nearest university. Kern County is known for the following industries: agriculture, oil, wind energy, and supply chain. Historically, Kern County is known for its low cost of living and low educational achievement rates. To date, about 26% of Kern County residents have completed at least a bachelor's degree. Demographically, CSU Bakersfield student enrollment is comprised of students largely from the San Joaquin Valley who come from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds (over 70% Pell-eligible, 67% first-generation, 85% students of color [62% Hispanic/Latino]). Over 80% of graduates remain in the San Joaquin Valley after graduation.

After hosting the inaugural CSU Young Males of Color Forum in 2018, CSU Bakersfield launched Excel Scholars in 2019. Excel Scholars' mission is to increase the access, retention,

and graduation rates of underrepresented minority (URM) males. The program has three overarching goals focused on access, retention, and graduation: (1) Be a school of choice for Kern County URM males; (2) Be a model CSU campus for retaining URM males; and, (3) Eliminate the URM male equity gap. There are four programmatic areas that make up Excel Scholars: Freshman Mentoring Program (program designed to provide wraparound mentoring for first-year students), First Fridays (all-cohort convenings that focus on sense of belonging, brotherhood, identity development, campus support services, and academic success), Conference for Budding Leaders (a partnership with the Kern High School District that focuses on creating a college-going culture for URM males enrolled in the Kern High School District), and the CSU Young Males of Color Consortium (as discussed above). The Freshman Mentoring Program pairs up first-time freshmen males of color with a faculty or staff mentor. Having completed its second cohort, the number of Freshman Mentoring Program student participants has grown by one-third.

### CSU Bakersfield—Excel Scholars' Shifts during COVID-19

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted higher education in March 2020, events and convenings had to take place exclusively virtually. Case management, academic support, mental health, basic needs, and motivation became a larger focus as our URM male students were significantly and negatively impacted by the pandemic. Many students shouldered larger family responsibilities while trying to maintain their studies (i.e., taking on income-bearing responsibilities, helping younger relatives manage virtual learning, babysitting while parents worked, and supporting relatives with healthcare needs). Instead of simply helping students adjust to the rigors of college, we focused on getting them connected to resources to support their basic needs. In addition, considerable effort was made to address the widening technology gap and navigate faculty communication exasperated by the sudden pivot to virtual instruction. Many of our students did not have stable internet connection or a quiet place to study, complicating their ability to be successful academically. Lastly, we spent considerable effort helping our students stay motivated academically to continue their educational pursuits.

The student response was very diminished. Hampered by not being able to 'bump into' students on campus and have meaningful impromptu conversations, we had to rely on the students' willingness to engage virtually. While it worked for some, it did not for others. Consequently, some mentors no longer wanted to serve as mentors as some students were unresponsive to their engagement efforts and outreach. Of those who maintained student interactions, they became briefer in scope and depth.

Despite those difficulties, our student retention rate has remained consistent (83%) and over 40% of our students are still maintaining at least 3.0 grade point average (GPAs). Students are also beginning to engage in internships, research assistantships, and on-campus employment opportunities. For the upcoming year, we remain mindful that we have two cohorts of students who have not stepped foot on campus and experienced a robust college experience. We will need to be intentional and savvy about facilitating meaningful connections for both our students and colleagues. We will also need to prioritize students' academic support, mental health, and basic needs. In addition, we will need to remain cognizant of needing to support our students as they engage in discussions stemming from relatively recent social unrest, presidential election, and pandemic.

### 3.2. Sonoma State University—Andre Bailey, Student Affairs Advisor

Sonoma State University (SSU) is a mid-size liberal arts campus located in Rohnert Park, CA. Just 60 miles North of San Francisco in the Sonoma/Napa wine country. The campus enrolls 9210 students, including an estimate of about 8500 undergraduates [32]. Of our freshman class, 90% live on-campus, allowing for a very vibrant residential community. Of our students, 79% come from outside the area. Sonoma is the first institute of higher education to offer undergraduate and professional MBA degrees focused on the business of wine.



### SSU Male Success Initiative Shifts during COVID-19

During this past year during the pandemic, we implemented the SSU Male Success Initiative (MSI) program, which served 24 students ranging from freshman to seniors. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we met virtually each week on Friday evenings to share and discuss current issues, leadership models, strategies for academic achievement, civic engagement and social activism. All of these efforts aligned and were in accordance with the CSU "Graduation Initiative 2025," which is to close the achievement gap for young males of color. We operated very closely under the cohort support models of YMOC. There was also an active virtual presence of the 100 Black Men of Sonoma County. We had a total of 13 guest speakers, including five tenured-track professors, four executive administrators including an on-line zoom session with SSU President Sakaki, and four working professionals, including the Rohnert Park Vice-Mayor and the Director of Sonoma County Sheriff Oversight Committee.

We also established a mentoring program where students were partnered with faculty, staff and administrators. Four students completed their undergraduate degree, of which three have been accepted to graduate programs. One MSI member, Amish Patel, was awarded the Sally Casanova Research Scholarship. In the first semester, these young men started the program with a cumulative group GPA of 2.37. We have improved our overall cumulative GPA to 3.39. There were three students who were on academic probation who had earned good academic status. We maintained 94% retention in the first year.

Our MSI mentoring program has three guiding principles: Leadership, Scholarship, and Service. Additionally, we grounded our MSI program in student development models. By using these, such as "Tuckman's Group Development" model, we were able to establish an executive leadership committee by allowing students to present their rationale to the group as to why they should be elected [34]. These young men are ready to represent SSU and the CSU system as ambassadors for new and continuing students. Based on experiences from last year, the MSI will implement study hall sessions that will allow young men to gather in a shared space each week prior to MSI meetings in addition to planning two co-curricular events off-campus, which will provide students with an opportunity to engage in cultural activities that also can contribute to their sense of cohesion and help strengthen our MSI community.

### *3.3. CSU Dominguez Hills—Matthew Smith, Associate Vice President of Student Life & Dean of Students*

California State University, Dominguez Hills is a public four-year institution centrally located in the South Bay and the heart of Los Angeles. The campus is home to one of the nation's most diverse and ethnically balanced campuses. The student body is 60% Latino, 14.5% African American, 10.8% Asian, and 10.9% White [32]. In 2009, the campus launched the Male Success Alliance (MSA). The mission of MSA is to improve access, retention, and graduation for undergraduate men of color at CSU Dominguez Hills. The program aims to support the college and career success of boys and men of color by utilizing a holistic approach to promote brotherhood and community through cultural awareness and identity development.

### CSUDH—Male Success Alliance Shifts during COVID-19

In response to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, MSA swiftly changed its outreach and engagement strategies from in-person formats to strategic virtual interactions. For example, a critical component of MSA was the offering of one-on-one in-person check-ins between student members and the MSA professional staff. However, during the pandemic, the MSA staff were forced to identify ways to structure virtual check-ins so that students still felt they were in a caring environment. The staff did this by speaking with students about their personal and educational successes and challenges. Staff were committed to understanding how their student members were faring mentally, physically, and socially during the pandemic. The staff asked about their families and provided

students with feedback on how they could remain connected to the program, their peers, and other support networks on campus.

For institutions that primarily relied on in-person interactions, the pandemic presented many challenges. For instance, because of taking online classes, having online meetings, and in many cases, working online, students experienced Zoom fatigue. This resulted in support programs struggling to maintain engagement with their students. The same was true for MSA. The longer the pandemic lasted, the program experienced sharp declines in student engagement. However, when the MSA staff connected with students, both students and staff reported appreciation for the opportunity to bond and reconnect. In fact, many students described these interactions as therapeutic. Despite the challenges the pandemic presented, the MSA program was able to successfully engage students in several ways. For example, on Friday, April 9th and Saturday, April 10th the MSA 2021 Annual Spring Summit was held. The virtual format allowed middle school, high school, and undergraduate students enrolled in a two-year or four-year colleges to attend. The event hosted over 300 participants and created a virtual space that spoke to culturally relevant concerns that male students of color continue to face.

Lastly, the pandemic provided an opportunity for staff to reflect on their practices and gauge the overall effectiveness of the MSA program. As a result, MSA has improved its theory of change and overhauled its data collection, storage, and analysis processes. Additionally, program staff learned that providing online support for students can offer more equitable access to resources for students who commute to campus and juggle several competing priorities.

#### 4. Discussion

As we discussed above, there continues to be a range of challenges that men of color face in college, ranging from accessing higher education and making sense of the campus social milieu to navigating various domains (academic, social, cultural) and pursuing their educational goals [5,6,20]. One prominent effort in supporting their college endeavors is the development of MSI programs where institutions pool specific and targeted resources to meet some of their personal and educational needs [10,16,19,21]. Scholars have noted that engaging men of color on campus through programming efforts, mentoring initiatives, positive interactions with faculty and staff, strong peer relationships, and creating an environment where they can thrive personally and academically can contribute to their educational performances, matriculation, and outcomes [8,17–21].

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted higher education in unprecedented ways, putting many students in vulnerable positions. Men of color were no exception as they experienced different familial expectations, financial constraints, and academic concerns. Within the CSU System, Consortium partners shifted their programs in an effort to be responsive to the needs of men of color on their campus. Despite the differences in program history, the campuses highlighted above responded in similar fashion during the pandemic. In relation to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, each of the three programs responded by making several important shifts. First, as was the case for so many in higher education, the campus partners shifted their programming (both activities and events) to online platforms and delivery. Second, given that students' lives shifted during the pandemic (e.g., increased responsibilities, taking college courses online, etc.), campuses reprioritized students' needs and focused primarily on their basic needs and relayed being more intentional in getting resources to students (e.g., technology support). Third, and relatedly, due to the shifts to both online courses and online programming, students' engagement with these programs dipped slightly during the 2020–2021 academic year. In response, program staff placed a premium on quality relationships with students, as they identified that staying connected with students could serve as a critical bridge to supporting their educational endeavors, helping students stay connected to peers and staff in meaningful ways, and providing important forms of care.

Given our focus on a Critical Race Praxis approach, the lead authors synthesize our learning from our Critical Conversations and the shifts in programming across our campus partners to offer valuable lessons and important takeaways. What follows is a discussion of what we identify as promising practices based on lessons learned from institutional responses and shifts for supporting men of color during the pandemic.

#### *4.1. Developing Promising Practices in Times of Challenge and Crisis*

Based on our work in the Consortium and as highlighted by campus partners who contributed to this work, we identify four practices that we see as promising for meeting the needs for men of color in higher education.

##### *4.1.1. Establish and Work to Sustain a Collective, Focused Effort*

First, we identify establishing and sustaining a collective, focused effort as an important promising practice that has the potential to improve practice and student outcomes. While we acknowledge variation in campuses (in terms of local context, resources, and programs), we identify such collective, focused efforts as a critical intervention that has and can continue to improve practices. For instance, establishing mentoring programs with institutional partners across secondary and postsecondary levels can reveal a breadth and depth of influence across different educational levels [15,17,35]. Establishing and sustaining a collective effort can assist in limiting some of the silos that may exist at individual campuses, which often restricts the potential scope and impact of institutional or programmatic endeavors. This also allows for continuous support for young men of color across different sectors.

##### *4.1.2. Create Conditions and Opportunities for Collaborative Sharing and Learning*

A second promising practice that can improve practice is creating conditions and opportunities for colleagues across institutions to share knowledge, learning, and resources. We used our quarterly Critical Conversations convenings to create conditions for collaborative sharing and learning. Collaboration is based on mutual cooperation and can contribute to investment. As opposed to operating from a scarcity model, where institutional or system-level colleagues feel pressure to compete for resources and information, there is great opportunity for members to contribute to and benefit from the collective effort to improve and enhance students' experiences more broadly. Relatedly, as opposed to enduring potential difficulties in the beginning or early stages of program development, perhaps due to a lack of knowledge or familiarity with the components, resources, and structures needed to develop and advance such an effort, a collective approach can prove vital in helping build knowledge and resource bases which has the potential to enhance the establishment of growing initiatives and programs. Engaging colleagues collaboratively, where sharing is the expectation and norm, can allow for generative spaces and opportunities to develop and flourish. Further, this sharing in the spirit of collaboration can allow for critical reflections, growth, and learning among professionals, which has the potential to strengthen and inform their practices in meaningful ways.

##### *4.1.3. Be Responsive to Students' Developing and Temporal Needs*

A third promising practice is drawn from campus partners' recognition of the need to respond to student needs as student priorities shifted as a result of the pandemic. Rather than simply shifting programming online, campus partners assessed what the needs of students were and identified areas where they could support students authentically given those specific needs. Given that a majority of the students were away from their respective campuses, providing services for students became a challenge due to the distance some students were from the campus, in particular at Sonoma State. As a result, campus partners found additional resources for students who may have lost employment, may have experienced unreliable internet connection at home (or their residence), or needed access to campus resources.

MSI programs recognized the need to program with students' needs and interests in mind. Rather than sticking to traditional discussions about academics and leadership, programs provided a forum for men of color to engage in discussions about personal challenges that students faced in their home communities—both current and ongoing. Perhaps the most critical aspect for campus partners was providing a forum for students to engage in discussions about the social uprisings that occurred in the wake of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor (as well as several other individuals). As such, programs not only supported students academically, but served as an outlet and a healing space for students seeking to engage with their peers about current events and pressing social justice issues across the country.

Additionally, a critical component of these conversations was that they also connected with students' socioemotional health and well-being. Campus partners reported that having conversations about racial equity and racial justice was something a number of students identified as a desire. These conversations allowed some of the men of color to share their own lived experiences, and sometimes challenges, in navigating social institutions, such as college, media, and the criminal justice system.

Despite the challenges presented and decreased participation during the pandemic, it was essential for campus partners to continue to provide a space for men of color to gather. In addition to the three campuses highlighted, other campuses discussed how MSI meetings, whether formal or informal, provided an escape for students from the realities of their home or community environment. This allowed students to remain hopeful and maintain a connection to their campus—and important institutional agents. For some students, engaging in MSI activities prevented them from withdrawing from their university completely.

#### 4.1.4. Program and Engage with Intentionality

Finally, campus partners reflected on the lessons learned from their efforts during the first academic year of the pandemic and recognized the need to continue to remain intentional about their work. This is centered directly in critical race praxis. Rather than simply returning to the way things were (e.g., "getting back to normal"), campus partners will continue to provide a space for the voices of young men to be heard and valued. While programs will still provide opportunities for professional growth and development, campus partners also continue to provide comprehensive services for program participants, which include more deliberate discussions about mental health among men of color, addressing basic needs, and supporting both students who live on-campus and commuter students. This reflection is also embedded throughout the Critical Conversations as the themes of each gathering shifted to ensure that campus partners were thinking critically about how to continue to meet students where they are, including shifting and increased needs, while also staying focused on how to move forward during the year, and the changes they would implement during campus re-openings.

While we identify these promising practices and acknowledge that they can be and are connected in several ways, our goal here was not an attempt to be exhaustive, as to do so would muddy the waters and not encompass all that might need to be considered. We contend that the Consortium offers a unique structure that allows for developing and employing promising practices that can enhance both institutional and collective efforts. These practices can help embolden targeted efforts to meet students "where they are"—from struggles and challenges to thriving and accomplishments. Additionally, given the Consortium's focused attention on men of color, and other similar collective efforts, these types of endeavors may be able to respond to emerging challenges (or crises) in timely, nuanced, and culturally affirming ways.

Given the need to improve the college experiences and outcomes for men of color, the Consortium exists as an important axis that can help move theory to practice, both at the institutional level of individual campuses and at the collective, systemwide level. As noted in our discussion of literature above and in research elsewhere [2,6,12], the need to

improve their educational pathways and outcomes is heightened when considered in the larger context of how men of color are positioned in society writ large.

## 5. Conclusions

As mentioned, the California State University system is the largest most diverse state university system within U.S. higher education. The CSU YMOC Consortium is a collaborative effort engineered to address some of the pressing needs of men of color and focused on supporting them effectively and holistically. The intentionality needed to effectively support men of color, as well as other students from minoritized populations, begins from the state level and continues all the way down to the individual campus level. By working collaboratively with campus partners, the Consortium was able to share ideas and support one another during the COVID-19 pandemic in an effort to provide a collective, systemwide response to supporting men of color. Programs that were more established were able to share information with newer programs, including discussing different program structures, funding sources and co-sponsoring events.

Part of our role as senior research associates (Brooms and Martinez) was to push the thinking of all the Consortium members during the pandemic and beyond to think robustly, creatively, and thoroughly about how to shift programming and efforts to support men of color during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through Critical Race Praxis, we were able to put research and theory into practice with campus partners and identify promising practices for meeting the needs of men of color within the CSU system. Additionally, we also provided the language that campus partners needed to help justify their work and their decision making processes. As campuses re-open, we continue to remind campus partners to remain intentional about their work and push them to ensure that their efforts (e.g., programming, activities) remains centered in the lives, realities, and needs of the students that they are trying to serve. Our Critical Race Praxis approach will be essential to ensure that the work and progress that was made in supporting men of color during the COVID-19 pandemic continues as students return to campus, with some men of color setting foot on college campuses for the first time.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, E.M.J. and D.R.B.; formal analysis, E.M.J. and D.R.B.; writing—original draft, E.M.J., D.R.B., W.F., M.S., A.B. and M.Q.; validation, E.M.J., D.R.B., W.F., M.S., A.B. and M.Q.; writing—review and editing, E.M.J. and D.R.B. This article was jointly conceptualized by the lead authors with contributions from the other authors. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are openly available in The California State University, Enrollment Dashboards, which can be accessed at: <https://www2calstate.edu/data-center/institutional-research-analyses/Pages/enrollment.aspx> (accessed on 1 September 2021).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Ballysingh, T.A. The varied college pathways of Latino young adults: A narrative study of empowerment theory. *Prof. Sch. Couns.* **2019**, *23*, 1–12. [[CrossRef](#)]
2. Carey, R.L. “Keep that in mind . . . You’re gonna go to college”: Family influence on the college going processes of Black and Latino high school boys. *Urban Rev.* **2016**, *48*, 718–742. [[CrossRef](#)]
3. Chapman, T.K.; Contreras, F.; Comeaux, E.; Martinez, E.; Rodriguez, G.M. *High Achieving African American Students and the College Choice Process: Applying Critical Race Theory*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2020.
4. Harris, F., III; Felix, E.R.; Bensimon, E.M.; Wood, J.L.; Mercado, A.; Monge, O.; Falcon, V. *Supporting Men of Color in Community Colleges: An Examination of Promising Practices and California Student Equity Plans*; College Futures Foundation: Oakland, CA, USA, 2017.
5. Abrica, E.J.; Dorsten, A. Latino male community college students’ perceptions of course-related interactions: A critical race analysis. *J. Lat. Educ.* **2021**, 1–13. [[CrossRef](#)]
6. Harper, S.R. Black male college achievers and resistant responses to racist stereotypes at predominantly White colleges and universities. *Harv. Educ. Rev.* **2015**, *85*, 646–674. [[CrossRef](#)]

7. Jenkins, D.A.; Tichavakunda, A.A.; Coles, J.A. The second ID: Critical race counterstories of campus police interactions with Black men at historically white institutions. *Race Ethn. Educ.* **2021**, *24*, 149–166. [CrossRef]
8. Rodriguez, S.L.; Massey, K.; Sáenz, V.B. Engaging Latino men in community colleges: The role of student-faculty interactions. *J. Appl. Res. Community Coll.* **2016**, *23*, 21–40.
9. Rodriguez, S.L.; Lu, C.; Bukoski, B.E. “I just feel like I have to duke it out by myself”: How Latino men cope with academic and personal obstacles during college. *J. Committed Soc. Chang. Race Ethn.* **2016**, *2*, 63–101. [CrossRef]
10. Huerta, A.H.; Romero-Morales, M.; Dizon, J.M.P.; Salazar, M.E.; Nguyen, J.V. *Empowering Men of Color in Higher Education: A Focus on Psychological, Social, and Cultural Factors*; Pullias Center for Higher Education: Los Angeles, CA, USA, 2021.
11. Brooms, D.R.; Clark, J.; Smith, M. Being and becoming men of character: Exploring Latino and Black males’ brotherhood and masculinity through leadership in college. *J. Hisp. High. Educ.* **2018**, *17*, 317–331. [CrossRef]
12. Pérez, D., II. In pursuit of success: Latino male college students exercising academic determination and community cultural wealth. *J. Coll. Stud. Dev.* **2017**, *58*, 123–140. [CrossRef]
13. Huerta, A.H.; Dizon, J.P. Redistributing resources for men of color in higher education. *About Campus* **2021**, *26*, 19–25. [CrossRef]
14. Harper, S.R. *Five Things Student Affairs Administrators Can Do to Improve Success among College Men of Color*; NASPA: Washington, DC, USA, 2013. Available online: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED605763> (accessed on 23 August 2021).
15. Briscoe, K.L.; Jones, V.A.; Hatch-Tocaimaza, D.K.; Martinez, E., Jr. Positionality and power: The individual’s role in directing community college men of color initiatives. *J. Stud. Aff. Res. Pract.* **2020**, *57*, 473–486. [CrossRef]
16. City University of New York. Black Male Initiative. 2021. Available online: <https://www1.cuny.edu/sites/bmi/> (accessed on 28 August 2021).
17. Sáenz, V.B.; Ponjuan, L.; Segovia, J., Jr.; Del Real Viramontes, J. Developing a Latino mentoring program: Project MALES (mentoring to achieve Latino educational success). *New Dir. High. Educ.* **2015**, *2015*, 75–85. [CrossRef]
18. Torrens, O.D.; Salinas, C., Jr.; Floyd, D.L. Examining the value of mentoring and men of color staff members of a community college. *Mentor. Tutoring Partnersh. Learn.* **2017**, *25*, 509–527. [CrossRef]
19. Beatty, C.C.; McEdlerry, J.A.; Dorsette, J.J. Comprehensive initiatives and programs for college men. In *Men & Masculinities: Theoretical Foundations and Promising Practices for Supporting College Men’s Development*; Tillapaugh, D., McGowan, B.L., Eds.; Stylus: Sterling, VA, USA, 2019; pp. 185–194.
20. Brooms, D.R. Not in this alone: Black men’s bonding, learning, and sense of belonging through engagement in college. *Urban Rev.* **2019**, *51*, 748–767. [CrossRef]
21. Brooms, D.R.; Clark, J.S.; Smith, M. *Empowering Men of Color on Campus: Building Student Community in Higher Education*; Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, NJ, USA, 2018.
22. Garcia, G.A.; Huerta, A.H.; Ramirez, J.J.; Patrón, O.E. Context that matter to the leadership development of Latino male college students: A mixed methods perspective. *J. Coll. Stud. Dev.* **2017**, *58*, 1–18. [CrossRef]
23. Marcus, J. The Pandemic Is Speeding up the Mass Disappearance of Men from College. The Hechinger Report. Available online: <https://hechingerreport.org/the-pandemic-is-speeding-up-the-mass-disappearance-of-men-from-college/> (accessed on 19 January 2021).
24. Lewy, E.B. Supporting the Success of Male Students of Color during COVID-19. Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. Available online: <https://www.mdr.org/publication/supporting-success-male-students-color-during-covid-19> (accessed on 29 May 2021).
25. Vasquez, M.C.; Vang, M.; Garcia, F.; Harris, F., III. What do I eat? Where do I sleep? A concern for men of color in community college. *Community Coll. J. Res. Pract.* **2019**, *43*, 295–306. [CrossRef]
26. Bell, D.A. Who’s afraid of critical race theory. *Univ. Ill. Law Rev.* **1995**, *4*, 893–910.
27. Delgado, R.; Stefancic, J. *Critical Race Theory*; New York University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2017.
28. Ladson-Billings, G.; Tate, W., IV. Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education. *Teach. Coll. Rec.* **1995**, *97*, 47–68.
29. Yamamoto, E.K. Critical race praxis: Race theory and political lawyering practice in post-civil rights America. *Mich. Law Rev.* **1997**, *95*, 821–900. [CrossRef]
30. Stovall, D. Critical race theory as educational protest: Power and praxis. In *Black Protest thought and Education*; Watkins, W.H., Ed.; Peter Lang: New York, NY, USA, 2005; pp. 197–211.
31. Stovall, D. School leader as negotiator: Critical race theory, praxis, and the creation of productive space. *Multicult. Educ.* **2004**, *12*, 8–12.
32. The California State University. Enrollment Dashboards. 2021. Available online: <https://www2.calstate.edu/data-center/institutional-research-analyses/Pages/enrollment.aspx> (accessed on 30 August 2021).
33. The California State University. Why the CSUs Matter: Graduation Initiative 2025. n.d. Available online: <https://www2.calstate.edu/csu-system/why-the-csu-matters/graduation-initiative-2025> (accessed on 25 August 2021).
34. Tuckman, B.W.; Jensen, M.A.C. Stages of small-group development revisited. *Group Organ. Stud.* **1977**, *2*, 419–427. [CrossRef]
35. Brooms, D.R.; Franklin, W.; Clark, J.S.; Smith, M. “It’s more than just mentoring”: Critical mentoring Black and Latino males from college to the community. *Race Ethn. Educ.* **2021**, *24*, 210–228. [CrossRef]