The Illusion of Belonging: EOP’s Impact on Sociocultural Issues in Education

Lillian Stone
State University of New York at New Paltz

Dr. Asilia Franklin-Phipps

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Abstract

Economically disadvantaged and underrepresented students are taught to fend for themselves from their first day in the education system. Through dilapidated schools, unforgiving policies, and a lack of funding, they’re made to believe that they’re not as important as others, and their success isn’t cared for, contributing to the endless cycle of poverty. As these students enter into higher education, if they even can afford or decide to go, they’re often unprepared and overlooked. Comfortability and seamless transitions come through a sense of belonging to have a secure identity and a feeling of relatability. As much as universities may think they contribute positively to underrepresented and disadvantaged students’ sense of belonging, their efforts are usually ignorant and ill-informed, and the issue is systemic. New York’s Educational Opportunity Program aims to increase graduation rates, college readiness, and educational attainment among students who are admitted. Their impact has improved the lives of these students and helped them feel like they belong in the college or university setting, but it has its faults, as seen through survey research at SUNY New Paltz. There’s still a lot of work that needs to be done regarding policies, systemic sociocultural issues, and opportunity programs, but the program’s success has showed us what truly works for students and how we can help them to continue to strive to achieve their goals in the future.

Keywords: Social justice, higher education, racism, poverty, belonging, academic success, Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)
Introduction

What do you remember about school? Waking up at six in the morning is always a daunting task, no matter how old you are or how many times you’ve done it. Trekking ourselves out of bed with our eyes half closed, struggling to put on our pants only to find out that they’re backwards, and finally running out of the front door, it seems like an almost universal experience. You get to your first period class in the local suburban high school, and it’s Advanced Placement Spanish. You open your textbook, yawning between sentences, and begin to get to work. As you walk the halls, you stare at those same walls you see every day, listening to the familiar sounds of students typing on keyboards, running in gym, and laughing with their teachers. Maybe these are the memories you have; perhaps, you remember your favorite teacher, the games you played during recess, singing in the school chorus, or drawing in art. Except, what if our memories consisted of the seeing buckets lining the hallways when it rained, hearing as the water hits the metal, tasting cold food, or grabbing your coats, gloves, scarves and hats to walk outside in the middle of winter to use the outhouse bathroom? Childhood is not a universally memorable experience, especially when it comes to education. Having come from an upper-middle class area, my district was able to make my experience cherished with my favorite teachers, class activities, and field trips as we had access to a wide range of resources and funding. It wasn’t until my sophomore year of college, however, when I had finally left my Long Island bubble, that I began to see different realities, like those for many students living in low-income areas. It piqued my curiosity: Why was I so fortunate? Why are our educations not consistent and equal? How does this affect everyone? Is anything being done to help?

In this first part of this paper, I will discuss the effects of racism and poverty on schools and students. This section will provide needed context about funding for school districts, the
physical state of schools, and student achievement gaps in lower grades including elementary, middle school, and high school. The second part will link this to high school dropout rates/graduation rates and its contribution to the cycle of poverty. The next part of this paper will use this information to describe poverty and racism’s influence on students’ sense of belonging in higher education in the context given previously. I will discuss statistics, research studies, and use my own findings through interviews to justify my ideas and explanations. Finally, I will examine and analyze the Equal Opportunity Program, and other opportunity programs, to illustrate their benefits and ways of alleviating the long-lasting and continuous weight of poverty and racism. I will do a case study of the State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz’s EOP and use their testimonies and statements to provide a comparison of intended and actual benefits of the program in the eyes of EOP employees and student recipients.

American Education, Or A Lack Thereof, Is Failing Our Children

School districts are primarily funded by property taxes in their designated districts. However, it’s important to discuss zoning, or regulations that specified what kind of housing can be built where, which sustain racial and economic segregation. Back in the 1930s with President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, neighborhoods that housed Black and other homeowners of color were deemed “risky” for government-insured mortgages using redlining, which is “shorthand for many types of historic race-based exclusionary tactics in real estate” (Jackson, 2021). Thus, in these “risky” areas, since the residents couldn’t obtain mortgages, property values went down, and it led to the belief that the presence of Black residents was a sign of impending property value decline (Jackson, 2021). Naturally, this resulted in a lack of school funding from property taxes, which directly contributes to quality of education at these schools.
Regarding quality of education, it’s important to discuss the gaps in student achievement between these high-poverty and low-poverty school districts. Sean Reardon, now a professor at Stanford University, has used the data of two hundred fifty million test scores from over twelve thousand school districts in the US to investigate the correlation between family income and achievement; in doing so, he noticed a pattern: “school districts with low levels of socioeconomic status have relatively low levels of economic achievement, and school systems with high levels of socioeconomic status have high levels of academic achievement” (Reardon, 2016). When lowering the number of school districts to one hundred, he still observed a similar pattern. Through his research, he asserts that “while racial segregation within a district is a very strong predictor of achievement gaps, school poverty – not the racial composition of schools – accounts for this effect” (Spector, 2019). This is shown when he compares every Massachusetts school district with every California school district. Reardon states that, “California schools districts are underperforming relative to other school districts around the country like them, and Massachusetts school districts are generally over performing relative to school districts throughout the country” (2016). This further suggests that it’s not just something that administrators in school districts are doing in Massachusetts, but it’s something about the state policy and funding for schools that makes opportunities easier for students. This issue exists for school districts all over the country as each state has individual policies that affect their districts.

Furthermore, this contributes to the growing evidence that clarify that policy makers do not understand poverty or economic insecurity. In both “The Tragedy of America’s Rural Schools” (2021) by Casey Parks and “Held Back: Inside a Lost School Year” by Annie Waldman (2021), both authors describe two versions of the same story. In Waldman’s article, she describes the unfair and ill-informed new literacy law enforced by the Michigan legislature. It required that
any third grader who does not read proficiently by May to be held back. This was an effort to promote academic progress in children by giving consequences to the parents who don’t pay attention to their kids. However, like Waldman states, “Proficiency is not contagious... but comes from years of effective educational support, practice and preparation, which the lack thereof is why our students our failing” (2021). Though the Benton Harbor School District was thriving due to a 1977 desegregation court order, which gave the district payment for each child within its boundaries, it ended in 2002. The then governor of Michigan had essentially said that there should be no problem continuing success, and if there was, it had nothing to do with intentional segregation. Without adequate funding from the state, their buildings were dilapidated; they were filled with mold, mice that were trapped in classrooms, buckets to catch rainwater, corroded playground equipment, etc. Expectedly, students’ test scores were declining too. In Parks’ article, she describes a school district in Mississippi, the Holmes County Consolidated School District, that has been crumbling for generations. Like the Michigan school district, this school district also lacked funding from the state. The classrooms lacked textbooks, certified teachers, buses, computers, etc. According to the article, “Twelve states offer no support for construction [of new facilities]” (Parks, 2021). In 2016, Michigan started a new program that would take over districts that repeatedly failed to meet academic standards; they dissolve the local board, fire the superintendent., and absorb the district into the Achievement School District. Predictably, most of the districts that are absorbed tend to be largely poor and Black. Instead of addressing the root causes of poverty and racism, the state relies on the belief that governance is the problem. Unsurprisingly, this program doesn’t seem to be having the best results. As seen in both articles, it is evident that policy makers do not understand poverty and its effects and refuse to believe or act on the fact that racism has an effect. These districts’ that are failing are not caused by
preoccupied parents or lack of governance, but rather lack of funding and refusal to address root causes.

The Benton Harbor School District and the Holmes County Holmes County Consolidated School District are not the only neglected and poorly funded districts. In the film, “Children in America’s Schools, Part I” (Hayden, 1996), the most important issue to me was the severe disparity in the physical state of these schools. The schools in lower-income neighborhoods were dilapidated and collapsing. There were holes in the walls and ceilings, it rained in the hallways, the schools ran on coal, there were no stoves or ovens to heat up food, and it is all connecting to school funding. In one of the schools, the gymnasium, band room, and study hall were all in the same room. One of the schools also had their bathrooms outside; kids in grades K-6 had to walk outside, even in the winter, to use the restroom. Even though I’ve worked in childcare for a relatively long time, I don’t think it’s necessary to have worked in that environment to know that young children will rarely use the restroom in advance of having to go; needless to say, I can’t imagine how they train the kids to either all go at the same time or run them outside every twenty minutes. However, the schools in higher-income neighborhoods have a variety of new computers, libraries, fitness opportunities, gymnasiums, art and music rooms, etc. Struggling schools do not have the resources to invest in these same luxuries. The state of these schools says a lot about how the children will view themselves and their schooling. Why should they care about their education and school when the government doesn’t? When discussing the pledge of allegiance, one person said, “In a sense, we make it clear that we are sending them to school to learn to be Americans, but we are educating them not as Americans, but as residents of rich or poor school districts” (Hayden, 1996). It’s clear that the inequality amongst American school
districts is widespread and the gap will only continue to grow with policy makers who refuse to acknowledge the true cause of it.

Seeing these dilapidated and underfunded schools really put the goal of these policy makers into perspective. As someone who grew up in a more affluent neighborhood, seeing the clear difference between my school and these students’ is baffling and heartbreaking. I was afforded opportunities that all students should be offered, regardless of economic status. My school district offered a variety of Advanced Placement courses, a culinary program, multiple different clubs, and organized class field trips and celebratory events. With those I have talked about schooling with, all of our experiences were different. Some of my friends had even bigger schools than mine, with a multitude of additional art courses, advanced or honors courses, larger auditoriums, and gymnasiums, etc. While, with my other friends, some had never gone on a field trip or given an opportunity to take Advanced Placement courses. Students’ schooling experience should not depend upon their income, but rather, schools should be catering to the students.

There needs to be equality within education to ensure equality outside of education. If students aren’t afforded equal opportunities in education, how can we expect them to have equal resources or opportunities after their schooling ends? All students should have equal access to opportunities and resources necessary to thrive inside and out of the education system.

Racism and poverty play a key role in the gap of inequality present amongst these school districts, yet states and their policy makers refuse to acknowledge it; instead, they tend to blame the schools and their districts themselves and state that they need to fix their own issues. However, as shown by Reardon, this clearly isn’t the fault of the districts, and poverty and racism are issues that are too widespread and powerful for schools alone to address. The poor quality of these districts’ education contributes to the low levels of academic achievement, thus
causing students to not get into college and get a low-income job, showing the cyclical nature of poverty and our governments’ involvement. Not only do states need to address these issues, but our federal government does as well. Until our government recognizes its contribution to the poor quality of education in school districts, as well as the effects racism and poverty on districts and their students, this problem will not only linger to last but will spread even further as the cycle of poverty continues.

An Endless Cycle: The Impacts of Poverty and Racism on High School Graduation Rates and How They Can Be Improved

As stated in the previous section, the effects of poverty and racism in education continue to reach depths that have yet to be uncovered fully, or better yet, are continuously ignored. I examined the impact of redlining, lack of school funding, and failed attempts of understanding from policy makers on the continuing poor quality of education and disparity in student achievement in the United States. However, what was not discussed was their contribution to the unwavering problem of high school dropout rates. Specifically, what needs to be examined and challenged are the reasons why these dropout rates are so prominent, their effects on students’ ability to have successful lives and careers, and how we can aim to improve them.

While graduation rates have been steadily improving in the United States over the last decade, this greatly differs for students of color as well as those with low socioeconomic status (SES). When reviewing statistics, it’s important to mention the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR), which is the “the percentage of students in a ‘cohort’ of first-time 9th-graders who graduate with a regular high school diploma within 4 years” (Irwin et al., 2022). According to the National Center for Education Statistics and U.S. Department of Education’s Report on the
Condition of Education 2022 (Irwin et al., 2022), the U.S. average ACGR for public high school students had increased from 79 percent to 86 percent from 2010-11 to 2018-19, respectively. However, Black (80 percent), Hispanic (82 percent), and Indian/Alaska Native (74 percent) students were all below the national average of 86 percent, while White (89 percent) were above the average (Irwin et al., 2015). Additionally, Wodtke et al. (2011) investigated the impact of duration of exposure to disadvantaged neighborhoods on Black and non-Black high school students and, subsequently, their high school graduation rates. When comparing Black and non-Black students, the study revealed significant racial differences. Specifically, the study found that “Black children were more likely than nonblack children to be part of a family unit in which the head was unmarried, unemployed, and worked fewer than 40 hours per week. The average black child also lived in a family with lower income and a greater number of family members” (Wodtke et al., 2011, pp. 725). They also differ in their rates of exposure to disadvantaged neighborhoods (i.e. characterized by high poverty, unemployment, and welfare receipt), finding that Black children were “seven times more likely than nonblack children to experience long-term residence in the most disadvantaged 20 percent of American neighborhoods” (Wodtke et al., 2011, pp. 726). The study concluded that “sustained exposure to the most disadvantaged neighborhoods reduces the odds of high school graduation by nearly 90 percent for blacks...and by about 70 percent for nonblacks” (Wodtke et al., 2011, pp. 729-731). With this clear evidence that both poverty and racism directly correlate to a decline in academic achievement and graduation rates, and thus, the cycle of poverty. Such a direct correlation gives credence to these two factors’ impact on underrepresented students’ futures.

Consequently, the effects of high school dropout rates reach far and wide as they produce and reinforce an endless cycle of poverty. According to Irwin et al. (2022), the overall immediate
college enrollment rate (i.e. the percentage of high school graduators who enroll in 2- or 4-year institutions within a certain time frame) for 2020 (63 percent) was lower than the rate in 2010 (68 percent). However, for Black students, the rate decreased from 66 percent in 2010 to 54 percent in 2020 (pp. 24). Similarly, Irwin et al. (2022) found that total undergraduate enrollment decreased by 9 percent between fall 2009 and fall 2020, with an 11 percent decrease in full-time enrollment and a 6 percent decrease in part-time enrollment (pp. 25). As seen by these statistics, undergraduate and immediate college enrollment has not only consistently decreased, but unnecessarily remains even lower for Black students, showing the obvious racial disparities in the education system and overall decline in enrollment in postsecondary institutions. Especially among people of color, this decline in enrollment correlates with the reduced odds of graduation rates for those in disadvantaged neighborhoods. We see this contribution to the endless cycle of poverty, as those without higher-level educations often miss out on job opportunities and standard, or more often than not, livable, wages. According to Irwin et al. (2022), in March 2021, “the employment rate of 25- to 34-year-olds was higher for those with higher levels of educational attainment” (pp.31). Those who had not completed high school had an employment rate of 53 percent, while those with a bachelor’s or higher degree had a rate of 86 percent. Moreover, those with bachelor’s degrees had a median earning ($59,600) that was 63 percent higher than “the earnings of those who completed high school as their highest degree ($36,600)” (Irwin et al, 2022, pp. 31). Thus, high school dropout rates are not only affecting students currently, but will continue to affect them in the future (including their own children), which, again, keeps them in this continuous, complex, and treacherous cycle.

This data then begs the question: why are high school dropout rates so high? Unfortunately, there is no one single answer to this, and thus, no one solution. As discussed in
the previous section, the lack of school funding is synonymous with the failure of policymakers to understand, or better yet, recognize, poverty, its cyclical and systemic nature, root causes, and its impact on education. While I discussed local/district funding for schools by property taxes, schools are also funded on two other levels: federal and state. Most school funding comes from the state directly, while federal funding most typically comes through Title I, authorized in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and used to provide extra funding for high-poverty schools. However, at the state level, there are often disparities amongst states because the distribution of funding can differ state by state, with some states funding education more generously than others. According to Education Law Center’s report (2020), drawing upon 2018 data:

A fair school funding system is the basic foundational building block for high-performing, effective K-12 public school systems. Fair funding has two basic components: a sufficient level of funding for all students and increased funding for high-poverty districts to address the additional cost of educating students in those districts. These two components are dependent on a third: the effort made by state legislatures to provide sufficient revenue to support the public school system. (pp. 2)

One measure that determines fair funding is funding distribution, “the extent to which additional funds are distributed to school districts with high levels of student poverty” (Farrie & Sciara, 2020, pp. 2). Unfortunately, this varies greatly between states. For example, in Nevada, with the lowest position in funding distribution in the US, high-poverty districts receive 33 percent less per pupil than low-poverty districts, meaning they are the most regressive (high-poverty districts receive less funding) state and are shortchanging students who need the funds the most and are most at-risk of academic failure. While, in Vermont, at the highest position, high-poverty districts
receive 73 percent more per pupil than low-poverty districts, meaning they are the most progressive (high-poverty districts receive more funding) state. As stated by Farrie & Sciara (2020):

Only 16 states have even modestly progressive school funding systems with at least 5% more funding, on average, in high-poverty districts. School funding is flat (+/-5%) in 17 states, meaning there is no appreciable increase in funding to address the need for additional resources in high-poverty districts. The remaining 15 states have regressive funding systems. (pp. 7)

More than half of the states in America aren’t accounting for the disparities in not only school funding but, consequently, quality of education, resources, academic standards, achievement gaps, and graduation rate gaps. How can students in high-poverty schools be expected to enjoy and thrive in classrooms, engage in academia, or simply care about school, when policymakers and state legislators clearly don’t? Similarly, in The Complexity of Non-Completion: Being Pushed or Pulled to Drop Out of High School (2011), Bradley et al. determines how SES is “the primary explanatory factor in dropout” (pp. 537). They discuss how low SES can be a significant factor in dropout rates through causing students to either be “pushed out” or “pulled out.” Students who are “pushed out” are discouraged from continuing their educations, usually because they have “failed to create appropriate identifications or connections with school,” resulting in “delinquent behavior, academic disinterest and eventually complete withdrawal from the academic process.” (Bradley et al., 2011, pp.523). On the other hand, students who are “pulled out” have a variety of responsibilities and loyalties which “compete with or preclude students’ commitment to their educations,” like needing to work and/or support their families either physically or financially (Bradley et al., 2011, pp.523). Bradley et al. suggests that “greater
financial resources may offer students alternatives to dropout that are not available to their lower SES classmates.” Moreover, this study analyses and compares these factors amongst Black, Latinx, and white students. In particular, with Black students, they consider that it is possible that there are perceived racial barriers to success, and with Latinx students, they realize the institutional barriers to success in education, and feel that jobs or caring for families may have greater value. These may assist in the prominence dropout rates, especially amongst students of color. In addition to SES being a significant factor in overall dropout rates, researchers found that “SES does account for the difference in the likelihood that black students will be pulled out of school as opposed to white students.” So, students are being institutionally discriminated not only on the basis of race, but socioeconomic status as well. As discussed with redlining in the previous part, even if Black families have a high SES, they are more likely to be living in a high-poverty district, which also increases the likelihood that these students will dropout because they feel like outsiders and academic isolates (Bradley et al., 2011, pp.537-538). These racial and SES based disparities contribute greatly to high school dropout rates and continue to show how poverty and racism are interwoven in the foundations of education.

The disparities in school funding, and the lack of initiative and acknowledgement on the part of policy makers, have all contributed to the dropout rates and, thus, their effects. Messacar & Oreopoulos (2013) propose multiple methods that aim to improve high school graduation rates as well as close the achievement gaps. In terms of funding, Messacar & Oreopoulos (2013) suggest that the states need to be encouraged to develop “new programs to reengage at-risk youth” (pp. 58). Schools should be fostering engaging environments for their students, and assisting in the competition of high school. This can be achieved by including parents in setting rules and helping with homework, actively communicating with them about their children’s
performances. Teachers also need to be engaging students by motivating, guiding, and supporting them so that students develop more of a positive relationship with them and feel cared for. However, these are not foreseeable in classrooms with large class sizes within dilapidated buildings lacking funding and resources. While there are compulsory education laws enforcing a minimum school-leaving age, as Messacar & Oreopoulos state, “...compulsion should be a last resort alongside other policies to promote engagement and foster an environment in which struggling students are encouraged and assisted to complete high school” (pp. 58). Thus, this is where school funding comes into play. Schools, especially those in high-poverty districts, need to be fairly funded in order to foster these engaging environments. As a student who went to a low-poverty district, it’s easy for me to say what fostered an engaging environment: positive relationships with caring teachers, a support system of friends, family, and guidance counselors, afterschool programs, school-hosted events, community-building activities, rewards for accomplishments, a sense of acknowledgment for hard work, etc. This can’t even begin to happen to schools that are consistently struggling resource-wise, structurally, and fiscally. Without help from those who have the ability to redistribute funds, who’s there to help them? Additionally, promoting college attendance and educating states on the benefits of high-school graduation are great ways to improve these gaps and dropout rates. In high school, I was continuously made aware of the resources available to me to access a postsecondary education. In fact, it was even explained to me as if it was expected that I go to college or receive some form of postsecondary education. My teachers, guidance counselors, parents, and friends spoke to me constantly about my aspirations, goals, hobbies, likes, dislikes, etc. In my mind, there was no other choice. While I don’t necessarily think college should be served as a necessity, especially for those thinking of trade school, the military, apprenticeships, etc., it is an
increasingly crucial requirement for most jobs and careers. Students should be given all of the resources they need to make a decision for themselves, while being strongly encouraged to go to college based on their desires. Knowing that they can receive assistance in finding work or a postsecondary education might be exactly what students need to push them towards graduating on time, especially in showing that it benefits them more financially to stay in school than to dropout. In order to do this, state policymakers and legislators need to clearly understand the benefits of completing high school. For example, according to Messacar & Oreopoulos (2013), “...each year of additional schooling that students receive lowers the probability by 3.6 percentage points that they will end up unemployed, lowers the likelihood by 5.5 percentage points of their being on welfare, and lowers by 8.1 percentage points the likelihood of their living below the poverty line” (pp. 57). Encouraging the completion of high school, and especially college, can potentially end or minimize the cycle of poverty and its intergenerational effects. Once policymakers are educated on not only the benefits of completing high school, but also knowledge of poverty, racism, and their structural effects, they might finally be able to effectively redistribute funds and create policies to improve these issues and barriers to a valuable and fair education.

There are a multitude of reasons why the rates of high school dropouts/graduation rates are so prominent, especially when comparing people of color and white people. While these reasons stem from the bigger picture of poverty and racism in America, and how people of color and of low SES are treated, they all lend themselves to the effects of low high school graduation rates. With increasingly declining college enrollment rates and employment rates for those who are in poverty and/or people of color and/or have dropped out of high school, the main answer to these issues is school funding. Without policymakers and state legislators having a clear
understanding of poverty and racism, schools have been negatively affected nationwide with the failure of most state governments to effectively distribute funds with more allocated to high-poverty districts. By making clear the effects of poverty and racism to policymakers, states can aim to improve school funding, and thus, improve student engagement in academia, entice them to graduate, and assist them in postsecondary education or work. Through this, we might have the power to end this endless cycle.

**Analyzing Continued Disparities and Barriers in Higher Education**

This next section brings to light the continued effects of racial and economic disparities from lower grades and high school into higher education. As discussed previously, it’s becoming harder to achieve employment without a college degree as the result of a growing, competitive, globalized market. With this knowledge comes the research that shares the fact that “students with low socioeconomic status (SES) have fewer opportunities to succeed in university contexts compared to students with high SES” (Jury et al., 2017, pp. 16). The economic barriers, such as lack of resources and support, that students faced in their early education continue into their college life. According to Jury et. al (2017), after students enter higher education, their socioeconomic status continues to influence their college experiences, academic achievement, and ultimately rates of graduation (pp. 17). There have been reported disparities in students’ college preparation, employment status, and academic performance while in college. For example, “first-generation students (i.e., students whose parents do not have a bachelor’s degree or higher) tend to have a lower grade point average… and are more likely to leave college without a degree than are continuing-generation students” (Jury et al., 2017, pp. 17-18). As with early and secondary education, this could be due to the “push” and “pull” scenarios described
earlier. Perhaps, students have other responsibilities to attend to like work, families, other priorities, etc. It could also be because of a lack of a support system. First-generation students may be the first ones in their families going to college, so their parents may not be able to assist them. Also, if they went to a poorly funded school district, counselors may not have had the resources to make up for this lack of support or experience, and their friends may be in the same boat. Similarly, when discussing Latinx students in predominantly white institutions (PWI), Mendoza et al. (2021) recognizes that “Latinx people (generally referred to as Hispanic in official U.S. discourses of race and ethnicity) constitute the largest ethnic minority in the United States. According to the U.S. census, Latinx peoples are predicted to reach more than 24% of the total population by 2050. Yet currently, only about 11% of those under the age of twenty-four have completed a bachelor’s degree…” (pp. 1141). This shows clear evidence that students of color are experiencing a disadvantage in education, whether that be due to perceived barriers or a lack of social and economic support. Even when students do graduate from high school from lower-income districts, they are starting at a disadvantage compared to their wealthier White peers. There is no “clean slate,” they will always be barriers due to their race and/or economic status.

In addition to economic barriers, there’s also psychological barriers, meaning “students’ emotional experiences (e.g., emotional distress, well-being), identity management (e.g., sense of belonging), self-perception (e.g., self-efficacy, perceived threat), and motivation (e.g., achievement goals, fear of failure)” (Jury et al., 2017, pp. 18). According to Jury et al. (2017), low-SES students are “more likely to feel and express greater emotional distress than high-SES students” in higher education since it is a “new and often unfamiliar environment” for them, and they have a “difficult time embracing their new identity as college students.” Transitioning to
college life is hard on everyone. I had to learn a completely new way of life, which felt like a culture shock. I was on my own for the first time and didn’t know where or with whom I fit in. I struggled to find my crowd and gain confidence in my social standing as a student. For low-SES students, this experience is multiplied because of the culture of colleges and universities. They are often noticeably underrepresented in higher education, making them the minority and reminding them of their differences (Jury et al., 2017, pp.19). “Consequently,” says Jury et al., “low-SES students regularly report feeling like they ‘do not belong’ in the college context” (pp. 19-20). These psychological barriers of feeling underrepresented can create an “imposter syndrome.” Even when economic barriers are pushed passed or overcome, psychological barriers take a toll on the identities and sense of belonging of low-SES or minority college students. Low-SES students also face negative stereotypes regarding their competence, and because of this, often have “lower perceptions of their competencies, report lower self-efficacy, and have lower self-reported perceptions of their own intelligence” (Jury et al. 2017, pp. 20). This concept of people of color and low-SES students being less intelligent stems from systemic racism and the idea of stereotypes like the “welfare queen.” The “welfare queen” is typically depicted as a single Black mother who intentionally has multiple children to profit off of welfare benefits. This conjures racist stereotypes as it lies in the intersection of race, class, and gender. These types of stereotypes greatly contribute to “stereotype threat,” or the fear of conforming to the negative stereotypes, which greatly impacts their psychological and emotional stress. Furthermore, as discussed, many times in this paper, issues involving race and SES, more often than not, intersect and overlap. Mendoza et al. (2021) interviewed Latinx college students to gain a first-hand perspective on their perceptions of experiences at their university, particularly in relation to their racial subtexts. The interviewer asked Jimena, “Have you found it challenging to adjust to
college life? If so, in what ways specifically?” Jimena responded, “…when you are in a college like this where the majority is Caucasian, you wanna look Caucasian, and it’s really hard, because I don’t have that lighter skin tone, I don’t have that lighter hair, I don’t have those lighter eyes, and I don’t speak the same way they do, I don’t have the same lifestyle, like the majority of them…” (Mendoza et al., 2021, pp. 1144-1145). Another student, Susana, claimed that she felt embarrassed while speaking Spanish, and Lucía felt disliked because of her decision to openly express her passion for her Mexican culture. Mendoza et al. (2021) states that this process of racialization “equates Spanish with illegality, poverty, and backwardness, projected onto immigrants from Latin America and especially from Mexico” (pp. 1145-1147). As a student of color and/or low-SES, the construction of their identities are fed by presuppositions and implicit biases. This greatly affects how student perform in schools, make friends, and feel a sense of belonging in schools.

The Necessity of a Sense of Belonging in Schools

In the previous section, I discussed the factors contributing to the identities of low-SES students and students of color, as well as how that impacts their performance in higher education and sense of belonging. But what is a sense of belonging, and why does it matter? According to most researchers, belonging is defined by a combination of factors. In Lähdesmäki et al. (2016), belonging is described as the “fluid, unfixed, and processual nature of diverse social and spatial attachments” (pp. 234). Essentially, belonging is “‘a constant process rather than a fixed property that becomes firm once it has been attained.’ Because of its intersecting and manifold character, belonging is even perceived as “a messy and uncertain process, fractured along a range of axes and social fields” (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016, pp. 237). Similarly, according to Antonsich (2019),
“belonging should be analyzed both as a personal, intimate, feeling of being ‘at home’ in a place (place-belongingness) and as a discursive resource which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging)” (pp. 1). In the first, to be ‘at home’ is symbolic of a space or feeling of “familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment” (Antonsich, 2019, pp. 6). He states that, in this case, economic factors contribute to a sense of safety and stability for individuals and families, which shows that low-SES matters when discussing a sense of belonging. Students, simply because they are of low-SES, may not feel safe or stabilized in their lives. Antonsich continues to say that “this sort of economic embeddedness matters not only from a material perspective, but also in relation to make a person feel that s/he has a stake in the future of the place where s/he live” (2019, pp. 10). “…The absence of place-belongingness” Antonsich states, “is a sense of loneliness, isolation, alienation, and displacement…[which] might lead to motivational and also mental health problems” (pp. 11-12). In the second, to feel at home in a place, Antonsich states that “if one feels rejected or not welcomed by the people who live in that place, her/his sense of belonging would inevitably be spoiled” (2019, pp. 12). According to this second factor of belonging, one must feel like a member to a group and feel that they have some ownership in a place. Moreover, Antonsich recognizes that “empirical studies on multiculturalism confirm that in order to belong, people should feel that they can express their own identity… and be recognised as an integral part of the community where they live, as well as being valued and listened to” (2019, pp. 13-14). However, this can be difficult for underrepresented students of color or low-SES since they often notice their status as a minority. Thus, these students often feel that they have to assimilate to the dominant ethnic groups’ language, culture, values, behavior, and religion. Still, this doesn’t include other dimensions of people that remain different, like place of birth or skin color
(Antonsich, 2019, pp. 15). Clearly, no one factor contributes to belonging, and a sense of belonging constantly changes with our environments depending on how accepted, comfortable, and valued we feel individually as a part of the community. If college students don’t feel like they belong in their community, particularly due to their race or SES, it can greatly impact their psychological wellbeing and academic success as their self-esteem, social support, and participation is being impacted. This can also impact college persistence and the degree of academic and social integration into the culture of college (Somchanhmavong, 2009, pp. 49). Thus, as discussed before, could lead to drastic effects like mental health issues, heightened dropout rates/ lower graduation rates, which all impacts and contributes to the cycle of poverty.

Colleges’ Systemic Impact on a Sense of Belonging

In addition to SES, it’s important to hone in on systemic racism in particular as a factor contributing to a sense of belonging. More importantly, I’ll explain how the system in colleges and universities sustain and perpetuate racial microaggressions and ideologies that favor White, high-SES students. According to Mendoza et al. (2021), “Although Critical Race Theory (CRT) originates in critical legal studies, scholars across disciplines and especially in critical education studies have used it to examine how racial oppression is perpetuated or resisted under different pedagogical circumstances and imperatives” (pp. 1140). CRT is used as a means to “examine the discourses and practices that frame systemic racism in U.S. education and walk us through the anti-racist pedagogies that help us to undo them” (Mendoza et al., 2021, pp. 1140). This is extremely important in both recognizing and taking action against a system that is discrete, forcibly hidden, unrelenting, yet still known to and ignored by many people. According to a study that researched a sense of belonging at a historically white university (HWU or HWCU),
“Using a CRT perspective requires a focus on counterstories, lived experiences, and the complex and intersecting ways that racial microaggressions manifest in the lives of students of color at HWCUs based on their racial and ethnic backgrounds” (Lewis et al., 2019, pp. 4). Lewis et al. (2019) describes racial microaggressions as interpersonal manifestations of overt and structural racism in society…” (pp. 4) It’s necessary to ask students about their lived experiences, like Mendoza et al. (2021) does in their research with Latinx students, in order to bring to the forefront these racist ideologies and opinions that White people tend to overlook. Unlike many people choose to recognize, race is a social construct developed by the oppressive to control the oppressed, rooted in colonialism, power structures, tyrannical violence, and ultimately, fear; there is a fear of losing power and privilege, and the belief that if they improve the lives of the historically oppressed, they’ll lose their control and supremacy. This is the same reason why some schools are more funded and resourced than others. They want to deny these students and their families the opportunity of success and a better life in order to benefit themselves and maintain their privilege. Moreover, racism is not in a bubble, meaning it does not apply to only typically overt situations; it is systemic, structural, and imbedded within our culture, rooted in colonialism. It’s the foundation of this country and underlies societal beliefs and expectations. Universities and colleges are a product of this system, and thus, naturally contribute to negative experiences of students of color.

Additionally, “according to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his colleagues, the university system sustains the reproduction of social inequalities by promoting attitudes, speech, behaviors, and knowledge that are more congruent with the practices of high-SES families than of low-SES families” (Jury et al., 2017, pp. 22). Namely, universities have a tendency to promote independent values, for example, learning by yourself and expressing yourself, which is
congruent with how high-SES students view themselves. This is in opposition to supporting interdependent values, like learning to work with others or adjusting to other’s expectations, which is common among low-SES students (Jury et al., 2017, pp. 23). These are taken-for-granted middle- and upper-class cultural norms and unwritten codes that the system is built on. They act as psychological barriers for low-SES students and fuel a sense of isolation and the achievement gap between students of color/ students of low- and high-SES (Jury et al., 2017, pp. 18-23). Mendoza et al. (2021) notes that White Americans “are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with structured advantages,” and that whiteness has a “cash value” (pp. 1138-1139). Essentially, this means that White people are profiting from the privilege that they have due to a discriminatory system that result in issues like unequal educational or employment opportunities. Keeping this in mind, it’s important to recognize that many White people in power, like those in PWIs or HWCUs, will do anything to protect the system at the expense “of the lives, livelihoods, and wellbeing of people of color.” This leads to “superficial and incomplete responses to racial inequities and exclusions” (Mendoza at al., 2021, pp. 1140). As I’ll discuss in the next section, although universities describe or layout how they aim to fight discrimination, racial microaggressions, and inequalities grounded in systemic racism and White, high-SES cultural norms, many don’t approach the situation correctly in a way that best improves the lives of students.

Responses to Sociocultural Issues in Higher Education

Now that I’ve covered the various definitions of belonging and how colleges contribute to that feeling of comfortability, it’s important to discuss what’s being done to address these sociocultural issues within education. The Federal Higher Education Act, passed in 1965, was
designed to institute the U.S. Department of Education’s first federally supported education
opportunity programs referred to as TRIO. The first of these now eight programs were
Educational Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services. These aimed to
increase the postsecondary persistence, educational attainment, and graduation rates of students
from low-income, first-generation college, and underrepresented ethnic minority backgrounds.
TRIO programs are regarded as “college transition programs” and are designed to “bridge the
gap between high school and college” by helping students with college readiness and
development of higher educational aspirations (Pitre & Pitre, 2009, pp. 96-99;
Somchanhmavong, 2009, pp. 15). For example, Educational Talent Search programs provide
workshops that promote “self-esteem building, goal setting, and decision making. These
programs are an example of cost-free resources available to “support school leaders and
educators in preparing all students for postsecondary education” (Pitre & Pitre, 2009, pp. 99-
102).

Concurrent with the Federal Higher Education Act, New York instituted Opportunity
Programs. While there are other programs are available at City University of New York
campuses and private and independent colleges, the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) is
offered at SUNY schools. They offer both financial and academic assistance. However, being
admitted into EOP isn’t always the most accessible. Students, who must be a New York State
resident at least 12 months prior, need to meet bot

There are certain economic and academic criteria needed in order to be accepted. In terms
of economic criteria, on the SUNY website, they list the maximum total annual income needed,
based on household size, in order to be financially eligible for EOP (see Table 1 below). As for
academic criteria, students must be inadmissible under regular admissions, and the range for high
school GPA and SAT/ACT scores is different at each school. For example, as of 2022 at SUNY New Paltz, students’ high school GPA must fall between 81-88, and their SAT score must fall between 910-1040 (SUNY, 2022). EOP directors must use these guidelines as a means to see which students are the most in need of a slot within the program, which are students that are both economically and academically disadvantaged and underrepresented.

**Table 1**

*EOP Eligibility Guidelines 2024-2025*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Size (including head of household)</th>
<th>Total Annual Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$26,973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$45,991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$55,500</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>$65,009</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>$74,518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>$84,027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>$93,536*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*For families/households with more than 8 persons, add $9,509 for each additional person.

Source: SUNY 2023 [https://www.suny.edu/attend/academics/eop/]
**EOP at SUNY New Paltz**

Antonio Bonilla is the current director of EOP at SUNY New Paltz. He himself was a first-generation college student at New Paltz back in 1982 and is a product of EOP. He oversees the whole operation from organizing academic advisors and professional employees the day-to-day operation of the program to enrollment academic support. In the interview I conducted with him, he says that his goal is to give back to students, as many alumni do. In fact, Bonilla says that alumni of the program voluntarily engage in a mentorship capacity to current students in the program. He prides himself on his committed staff that understands the needs of the students from a personal and intellectual stance. They do this job for the love and passion as many of them are products of EOP themselves or other opportunity programs like HEOP and SEEK. The rest, he says, are first-generation college students. In a field like this, it is great to see the personal connection Bonilla has with his staff, students, and the program as a whole. In this interview, we discuss the current impact of EOP in relation to their goals, aims, and missions. 

When asked how EOP aims to help students, he replied that many “students come in unprepared personally and academically.” Their schools and education have lacked financial support, especially at inner-city schools, in addition to their pressures outside of the classroom, which Bonilla says is overlooked. Bonilla states, “Our job is to try and help them reacclimate themselves to this new environment and understand that they are valuable, and they can add value to New Paltz.” This aligns with Somchandmavong statement that “since the majority of Opportunity program participants are students of color, knowing their experience prior to and during college may shed light on eventual college outcome.” It’s important to acknowledge that college does not exist in a bubble and cannot take away the injustices of students’ past experiences. Somchandmavong recognizes that these students come in with a lot more
“baggage” than most of their peers, and that they are admitted “in part because they’re poor and as a consequence of their economic position, their academic works are weaker than most students in their entering cohort” (2009, pp. 42-48). In order to help complete EOP’s mission, while it is hoped that more high school guidance counselors were aware of resources available to students, EOP helps greatly with the transition from high school to college nonetheless. The summer before their freshman year, they are required to take the summer bridge program, and throughout their college experience they required to receive “personal and academic counseling and advising, financial aid counseling, tutorial support, and [take] supplemental courses such as College Study Skills and Time Management” (Somchandmavong, 2009, pp. 18). These requirements are necessary to shaping an institutional culture that promotes student success. Students gain non-cognitive measures of success and important personal qualities such as “leadership skills, work and volunteer experience as well as involvement in extracurricular activities” Somchandmavong, 2009, pp. 48). Goals are reframed in a positive and reinforcing light, students become more confident and learn self-affirmation, and they become involved with people of similar backgrounds and experiences, promoting growth and academic and career success.

Bonilla also states that EOP’s purpose is to break the cycle of poverty and to right a wrong. He states, “EOP creates a productive citizen… [that] can contribute to society…socially, intellectually, financially.” Capitalism plays an extremely important role in the cycle of poverty in that it inherently creates citizens who are less advantaged and financially stable, especially due to sociocultural issues like racism, sexism, classism, etc. When it comes to politicians, they need to be convinced as to why they should financially support these systemically disadvantaged students, and Bonilla says that helping these students benefits the system as a whole. Politicians,
who we’ve discussed can be selfish, stubborn, and ignorant to societal problems, need to see that this is an investment for the future. As students become more highly educated, they give back to the state and community by getting higher-income jobs that will eventually, through state taxes, pay back (if not give back more than) what they received as financial aid from the state during college. By helping these students succeed, both parties stand to win something; the cycle of poverty is successfully breaking one family at a time, especially for first-generation college students, and politicians successfully add more highly-educated workers into the economy and boost productivity for our capitalist society.

In our interview, we discussed how EOP has a “family feel,” which Bonilla says is extremely important in the age of COVID-19. During the pandemic, instead of a four-week summer program before the start of the semester, students did their classes and met their advisors online over the course of three weeks. In this time, Bonilla states, students began to act like “hermits” instead of seeking out the help the EOP program has to offer. It’s clear that COVID-19 was and still is a barrier to students. Bonilla says that everyone hibernated and, in secondary school, “forgot about teaching and preparing students for college, and what college expectations are.” Students were passing through the system by doing minimal work. EOP’s responsibility is to make sure that students understand that they have a responsibility. Additionally, when asked what students’ perceived barriers EOP aims to improve, Bonilla says that “a lot of them don’t want to do the work…they perceive that we are asking too much of them.” He says to the students that success is determined by the amount of effort you put out. Students have to understand that they need to put in the work in order to achieve. However, it’s important to recognize that these students are putting in this work just to be acknowledged at the same level as advantaged students. In order to right a wrong, as Bonilla said, students and their habits
become viewed as the problem that need to be fixed. These poor habits need to be rewired and retaught in order to create a productive citizen. Without the incentive or promise of capitalist workers for politicians, these students wouldn’t be receiving support in the first place. To students, it’s clear that they remain unimportant in the eyes of society unless they can become products of capitalism, and many in EOP feel this pressure.

**A Student’s Perspective**

An anonymous survey was sent out to students in EOP at SUNY New Paltz in order to determine their sense of belonging at school with and without relation to the program. Some students stated that they did feel like they belong. Others stated that they only felt like they belong because of the EOP program. One student said,

“EOP does help me feel like I belong because I most likely would not have the friends I have now. It led me to connect with people in my similar situation of being under represented and a first gen student. I never have to question if someone understands when I can’t pay a remaining balance or when I can’t buy an expensive textbook.”

Another student stated, “Yes, I feel like EOP definitely does help me feel like I belong because they are able to accommodate me with a lot of support and allow me to meet other students who may have faced the same instances and circumstances as myself.” Both of these students recognized that EOP helped them feel better represented and meet people with similar circumstances to them. According to Antonsich’s idea of place-belongingness, this successfully allows for students to not feel as isolated or alienated, though it may not necessarily provide that sentiment of being valued or integral in their community. Though, one student said, “EOP brings diversity and makes you feel like you’re a part of a family.” This confirms Bonilla’s statement
about how EOP feels like a family. Another student said, “Yes of course. it’s my community, everyone helps each other.” According to these students, some students may feel valued by this community and clearly see the vital role they play. Some students expressed their appreciation for EOP’s diverse nature and their advisors. One student said, “EOP has literally changed the way I view college and made the experience so much easier. I have never had a better and more trusted advisor that is really hands on and knowledgeable on my personal situations.” Another said,

“It’s a great program and allows you to meet many different people that you might have never thought you’d be able to build a connection with. Even just seeing all of the different ethnic backgrounds and being able to learn about different cultures and traditions.”

This further affirms that students do recognize how race and class effect their lives here and play an important role in their sense of belonging. They need to be able to feel comfortability, part of a community, and represented within their college campus. EOP offers a chance for students to feel more racially and economically represented as opposed to isolated and alienated. Students also recognized that EOP wants to see them succeed and that they “help you have one foot in the door for a bright future.” In addition to allowing more underrepresented students to have an opportunity to go to a college who may not have accepted them or that they could afford, EOP fosters an environment that aims for success and gives students access to more resources and opportunities.

However, many students in EOP stated that they felt like they didn’t belong here. One student said,
“I don't really know if I belong at New Paltz and I think it has to do with the fact that I'm in a new place and everything is so different then in high school. It's hard to keep up with everything if you don't have good organization skills, time management, a daily routine, and such.”

EOP strives to make the college transition as seamless as possible, regardless of the background students may have had. Though, even with advisors who themselves have been through the program, students still feel unprepared and unfamiliar with their new environment. Entering college can be hard for anyone, and it was for me too. Like I said previously, it’s a complete culture shock. While it’s expected that students may feel some disassociation at first, advisors should be working with students, especially before their first year, to prepare them with necessary and practical skills for class, and life in general, like time management, organizational skills, and routine. Another student stated that they feel like they don’t belong at SUNY New Paltz because “it’s a pwi. I feel as though I am always in competition with white peoples.”

Another student shared a similar opinion by stating, “I feel like I don't belong here because it's hard being an EOP student and an afro-latina in a PWI. I find it hard trying to make friends and fit in.” As of 2022, SUNY New Paltz’s campus is made up of 59% White undergraduate students, which is a clear majority. Students can visibly see that they don’t look like most others, and it affects their sense of belonging. In fact, in the last twelve years from 2010 to 2022, White undergraduates have been the majority, ranging from 67% to 59% (see Figure 1). While SUNY New Paltz has many programs to assist disadvantaged and underrepresented students, like the Student Mentorship Program, AC², etc., it doesn’t take away the fact that the campus is primarily White and caters to this crowd in its teaching methods, culture, and environment. Racially underrepresented students, according to Antonsich’s idea of place-belongingness and the politics
of belonging, feel a lack of ownership on campus as they can’t express their identity without the fear of being out of place or unwelcomed. One student opened up about their negative experience in EOP, stating, “As an EOP student, people look at us differently. Over the summer, people would look at us weirdly or point and stare or just laugh at us. It just made me feel really out of place. Being in the program, further made me feel like I didn't belong.” The program had made them feel even more alienated as are actively being “othered” and recognized as different and less-than. It’s clear that more can be done at SUNY New Paltz, and many more university/college campuses, to promote the success and comfortability of underrepresented and minority students through a sense of belonging.

Figure 1

SUNY New Paltz Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity 2010 - 2022

Source: Institutional Research (SUNY BI SIRIS data)

SUNY 2023 https://www.newpaltz.edu/oir/facts.html
There are also students who have mixed feelings about the program. One student described, “Sometimes I do, oftentimes I don't. Usually, with academics I feel like I belong but when it comes to culture or events definitely do not.” Another student expressed, “I feel like on one hand I am glad that EOP has taken a chance on me and has helped me get into a good school with a great advisor, along with a community with other EOP students who have similar backgrounds like me, however I find it hard to be at the same academic wave length with EOP students who I came with because we don't share similar values.”

It's evident that there’s no one solution to sociocultural issues faced by students in education. As seen by these two students, they both have different needs with one being academic and the other being cultural or social. This could also be due to the environment and culture created by PWIs, as I discussed the different learning techniques employed that foster a conducive learning environment for typically only White, wealthy students. Other students confirmed Bonilla’s belief that many students think that they are asking too much of them. One student wrote that EOP is “definitely is a beneficial program to engage in although they are a bit strict on us, it is worth it.” Another student said that “…sometimes, with everything they make things mandatory, you might not have a lot of time on your hands.” Students recognize that the program is asking a lot of them in terms of time and even patience, but they also know that it’s for the own benefit and it’s worth it in the end. I think it’s helpful for them to know that they’re not the only ones going through this stress, that other students are too, and even the alumni who are their advisors and mentors have been in their position. It further strengthens that feeling of community, solidarity, and that sense of belonging that improves their chances of success.
There’s been effective research done on the real, tangible benefits of EOP and TRIO that can be seen through data and statistics. According to Pitre & Pitre (2009), “Researchers found over 30% of TRIO students attained their baccalaureate degree within 10 years after high school graduation compared to 13% of the non-TRIO population” (pp. 105). They state that this is largely due to the program’s focus on early intervention as a college transition program. Researchers also found that early intervention increases the program’s ability to “identify and address the barriers to academic achievement” (Pitre & Pitre, 2009, pp. 105). By reducing students’ academic and economic barriers, “more talented students will have an opportunity to not only gain access to higher education, but will be almost ensured to graduate” (Somchandmavong, 2009, pp. 47). As seen with certain EOP students at SUNY New Paltz, they too recognize these barriers, whether perceived or not, and they make a big impact on their sense of belonging, and thus, their success in college. EOP and other TRIO programs offer a network of resources like tutoring, academic, personal, and career advising, etc. Counseling is one of the many resources, and, according to Somchandmavong,

“Counseling helped foster the development of self-esteem in addition to mediating understanding of the expectation of the university…furthermore, counseling proved to be an important factor in college student retention. As did tutoring, especially one-on-one as well as in group, when used in conjunction with a reduced course load had an effect on improving GPA” (2009, pp. 19).

These resources greatly help students to feel more prepared for college life, reducing the stress of a possible culture shock, and help them to feel less isolated and more valuable in their campus culture and community. Most of the students who had completed the survey discussed the necessity of their advisor’s assistance, and warmth and kindness to their situation. They rely on
them for empathy, respect and preparation for classes and life on campus. It’s because of this that:

“Although low-income status alone has been related to lower rates of postsecondary attendance…the study produced evidence that low-income Southwest TRIO students attended postsecondary education — continued to college upon high school graduation or enrolled at a later time — at rates higher than low-income U.S. students nationally” (Pitre & Pitre, 2009, pp. 1060).

EOP and programs like it aim to address economic barriers through their resources, which has shown to improve low-SES students’ rates of attendance and graduation rates. According to the EOP Data Facts, a SUNY report that describes the 2019-20 Collected Data for SUNY EOP Students, the national graduation rate for students who graduated in six-years from a public institution compared favorably to EOP’s graduation outcomes, with them being 62% and 63.85% respectively. They state:

“EOP’s remarkable performance is due to its full-service holistic model that includes a specialized admissions process; participation in an extensive pre-freshman summer academy that aims to strengthen academic competencies; individualized academic advising/counseling; a robust academic support environment that provides tutoring, skill development programming, and a dedicated team comprised of an EOP director, counselors, instructors and tutors who are devoted to student success” (SUNY, 2020, pp. 4).

This compares well with Bonilla’s belief of EOP’s mission and how they’ve aimed to address these issues. One of my goals with this interview was to assess how well EOP’s mission is relayed in the real world. Essentially, I was wondering if their day-to-day activities represented
what was stated on EOP’s website and in their data reports, spoken from someone with first-hand knowledge of the program. Antonio Bonilla, being the director of EOP at SUNY New Paltz, offered refreshing insights into the program and reaffirmed the goals of EOP. It was also important to gain insight into the students’ experiences within the program because they don’t necessarily always correlate with the intended mission or message. Unsurprisingly, there were mixed feelings regarding EOP’s effectiveness in schools. EOP and other opportunity programs, while they do acknowledge the need for academic and financial assistance, should focus on how to further create that sense of community, possibly by analyzing a sense of belonging which greatly assesses the program’s benefits as it improves students’ interpretation of campus culture and their success in school. Ultimately, Somchandmavong states a quote from a researcher who proclaims that “the success of EOP lies not in the hands of White patriarch but in the design of the program, directed by Black people who recognize and build upon the strengths and weakness of the Black students” (2009, pp. 21). In order for the program to completely understand the lives and beliefs of underrepresented and disadvantaged students, they must have experienced and been in their position themselves. The effectiveness of the program relies on the empathy, ambition, passion, sensitivity and kindness of its advisors, counselors, mentors, directors, and facilitators. Aside from this, Bonilla says, “I want the rest of the student body [and] the faculty to see the value of this program and the value our student body can contribute to the whole New Paltz experience. That way, our students feel comfortable and confident to be able to reach out and socialize.” It’s essential that students know that they hold value in their community in order to feel safe and comfortable enough to achieve that sense of belonging. This is a huge predictor in students’ academic and career success, and, ultimately, breaking the cycle of poverty.
Discussion and Conclusion

My research aimed to identify the role that belonging plays in education, especially higher education, in terms of educational attainment, retention and graduation rates, and academic success. Based on a review of the literature and my own interview and survey research, it can be concluded that having a sense of belonging in schools is imperative to the success of students, and EOP and other opportunity programs aim to improve this. EOP is not perfect, as seen by the student responses to the survey. There’s a lot of work to be done in terms of curriculum, campus culture (particularly in PWIs and HWCUs), academic, economic and psychological barriers. Currently, conversations about race are limited in higher education institutions, and when they do take place, they are ill-informed, “doomed and ineffective because they often occur as isolated events, with few if any long-term efforts toward authentic engagement.” They often lack “awareness of the complexity of race and fail to demonstrate changes in consciousness or behavior” (Mendoza et al., 2023, pp. 1141). Often, our contributions to racism are unconscious, as is our possessive investment in whiteness (Mendoza et al., 2023, pp. 1138). In order to improve these, an understanding of the unique challenges, aspirations and achievements that disadvantaged students face is crucial. As Mendoza states, “…white people’s role in remedying racial oppression is limited to passive condemnation at best and saviorhood at worst” (2023, pp. 1143). People of color who themselves have been through this oppressive system should not only be consulted in the remedying process, but should be the heads of the operations. These narratives need to be unmasked and unnormalized by those that personally reap the consequences. Only they will truly be able to determine where and how to begin to remedy these forms of oppression. By incessantly continuing to allow White people to determine
the solutions and needs of people of color, we’re still promoting ideas of colonialism and White supremacy as we deny them the ability to determine their own wants and needs.

One aspect of my interview with Antonio Bonilla that surprised me was the mention of the role of alumni in current students’ lives. Students who had graduated at SUNY New Paltz with EOP have continuously wanted to give back to their “family” or community. They enjoy being there both financially and personally for their mentees. Having been through the program themselves and a similar background to students in it, they voluntarily commit their time and energy to helping their mentees see the program through.

In this line of research, I felt a survey was imperative because first-hand accounts of experiences faced by disadvantaged and underrepresented students are the best, if not only, way of attempting to, as Bonilla says, right our wrongs as a country. Instead of assuming how students feel, we should be asking them to tell us what they need in order to succeed. Otherwise, we might as well be directly denying them access to a successful academic career and future. Students need to have an active role in their education and success. If everything is determined for them by privileged, White, ill-informed politicians, disadvantaged students will feel no sense of control or value in their education. It’s as if they’re sitting behind the wheel of a car being driven by someone with a remote control in the back seat with a blindfold on. Students know what is best for themselves and their education, and politicians who have never experienced this type of oppression have little to no idea of what each individual student may need in order to succeed. A survey will allow me, as well as future researchers, to determine what students think about their education, what they are getting from EOP, and what they need to be getting in addition, in order to thrive.
Before receiving responses to the survey, I had expected mixed results. I thought some people had experienced great success within EOP and it greatly improved their sense of belonging, while others may have faced challenges, with the program possibly hindering their sense of belonging by alienating them from the general population of their classmates. I also expected many students to talk about EOP as a community or family. The results seem to compare well to my expectations, and I enjoyed how descriptive and analytic the responses were. Students really seemed to hone into their sense of belonging on campus and how EOP affects their experiences, whether positively or negatively. Many students, as opposed to using the word community, discussed how they feel part of a family at EOP and they recognize that they’re trying to help them succeed, even if they feel overworked or restricted. Though, I was intrigued to see that some students recognized SUNY New Paltz as a PWI, even if not stated directly, and noted the differences between themselves, their culture and their classmates and campus culture.

Clearly, EOP does improve the graduation rates and academic performance of the college students they admit, however, I aimed to search if this was through a sense of belonging, and how belonging played into students’ success in school, with success being defined by students themselves and, more broadly, GPA and retention/graduation rates. This research illustrates that some students within EOP feel like they belong on their campus at SUNY New Paltz, while others only feel this way because of EOP, or even not feeling like they belong at all. Nuances are to be expected in research like this because these terms like “belonging” and “success” are all up to personal interpretation, leading to mixed results and personal differences – a clear limitation of my research. Nonetheless, it’s still important to talk to students to learn their definitions of these terms and, based on that, how it affects their lives at school. Perhaps, personal differences should be harped on more. Instead of grouping disadvantaged students together hoping to come up with
group solutions, we should be focusing on solutions that are able to be more personable and flexible. My research merely scratched the surface of the educational challenges underrepresented students face, and more research is needed to further conclude and refine my results and recommendations.

There are many clubs and organizations at SUNY New Paltz that encourage the expression and celebration of different cultures and heritages like Caribbean Latin Coalition, Chinese Students and Scholars Association, Golden Roots Dance Team, Impacto Sensual, South Asian Cultural Association x Nachle, The Curl Craft, etc. While EOP certainly can’t address or solve many issues face by underrepresented students, especially at PWIs or HWCUs, many clubs and organizations, in addition to EOP, may help students to find their sense of belonging on campus. Future research can aim to analyze how these culturally significant clubs impact students’ sense of belonging on campus, as well as in addition to EOP or other opportunity programs. This research should be done through surveys or interviews in order to attain first-hand accounts of students’ feelings and emotions regarding the subject.

Future research can also include longitudinal studies on how a sense of belonging effects students throughout their college years and/or future careers. Through this, we’ll understand the direct impacts a sense of belonging has on students and their success, and possibly how opportunity programs could change or help the course of their careers. Possibly, in relation to this, a study could focus on the definition of “belonging” and “success” in the eyes of different college students, and how it plays into their lives on campus. What do individual students need in order to feel like they belong? What does success look like for them? What do they want to get out of college/university?
Future studies should also continue to address the personal factors that must be considered by programs that aim to help disadvantaged students. How are they catering to individual students? What methods, values and advising/teaching styles are being employed to provide more flexible assistance to students? Perhaps, students don’t have to meet all such specific eligibility criteria, but they can be assessed on more personalized or individualized needs. More opportunity programs should be tried or refined in order to fit the needs of more students. While I understand the need to help the students in dire need of financial and academic assistance, it shouldn’t mean that other students of slightly less need should be overlooked. All students should be treated as a priority.

As a privileged student from an extremely White town on Long Island, New York, hearing about this line of research for the first time was a little shocking. Not because it was surprising to hear, but simply because I couldn’t believe I hadn’t been told this before, or at least come to the conclusions myself based on what I know about race and SES. I was eager to share my knowledge with others, asking my parents, brothers, and friends, “Did you know about all of this? About the history and persistence of systemic racism in schools? Students’ lack of funding and support? Redlining? The cycle of poverty?” Unsurprisingly, many people said that they had heard about these, but that’s as far as it went in their minds. It was just reality to them. I was confused as to why no one had thought about it further or wanted to learn more. Even my friends who are underrepresented themselves had settled for this idea of reality. Almost immediately, maybe it’s my altruistic nature, I asked myself how I could make a difference, or how I could use my privilege to help others. I’ve always been one to challenge my perspective. As an art education major, I enter conversations with an open-mind and patience, and my brain racing with ideas and advice. I enjoy educating myself on others’ perspectives and using it to challenge my
I began researching the effects of racism and poverty on public school education, which eventually led into topics on higher education. Then, I started to think about what about racism and poverty impacted students’ success, which is when I discovered the necessity of a sense of belonging in schools. I thought about my experience as a college student and how I struggled to fit in, especially during the pandemic. I was stuck on a campus that felt barren, where everyone had to wear a mask, and no one could enter into another hall, or even eat together inside of the dining areas. For the first two years of my college experience, I struggled to find my “crowd” or friends in general. I’d eat every meal by myself, focusing on my studies as a way to distract myself. I understand what it's like to not feel a sense of belonging. It’s an alienating, almost dehumanizing experience. As humans, we naturally want to be social, but it can be hard when you’re isolated and don’t have that like-minded group of friends like everyone else does. I felt left out, like I would never find my people. Eventually, in the last semester of my sophomore year, I began to finally make friends who I truly bonded with. I finally achieved that sense of belonging I was looking for and I felt happier, fuller, and more energized with the simple idea of having someone to eat dinner with. I want everyone to have that feeling, which is even harder to achieve when you don’t see people that look like you, act like you, or have the same challenges that you do. In addition to the systemic problems faced by disadvantaged students, they face social and cultural issues that directly impact their sense of belonging and success in school. I hope to see a change one day in both the systemic sociocultural issues of the education system, but also in the current solutions being executed. Everyone deserves to feel like they belong. Everyone deserves to be happy.
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