THE FUND
FOR WOMEN & GIRLS

A Companion to the 4ᵗʰ Edition Blueprint Report

FOCUS GROUP REPORT

2024-2025

PURPOSE

Throughout 2024 and 2025, The Fund led a series of focus groups to learn from women and girls of color in our community including Black and Hispanic women; first generation and immigrant women and girls; single mothers; and teens.

The focus groups explored barriers to opportunity and access to education, mental health care, childcare, housing, language access, and more.

Their voices shed light on the challenges they face every day, and on the changes needed to create more equitable opportunities and support systems.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Adult Focus Group Report

Demographics

Gender Identity
28 responses

- ● Male
- ● Female
- ● Non-binary

100%
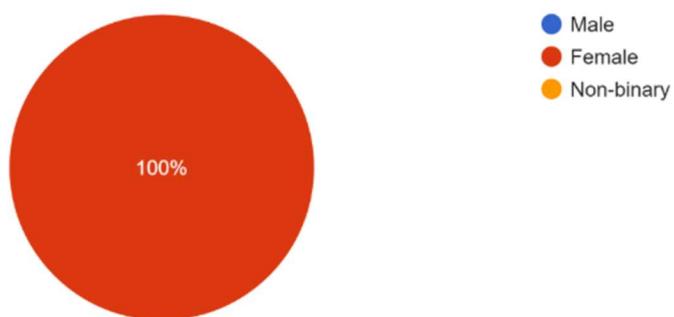
Sexual Orientation
27 responses

- ● Heterosexual
- ● Homosexual
- ● Bisexual
- ● Pansexual
- ● Asexual
- ● Prefer not to say

11.1%

85.2%
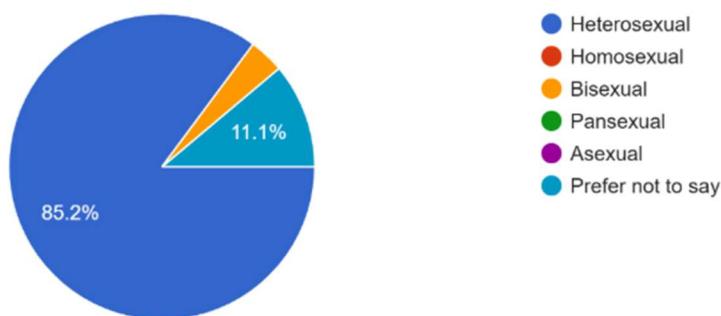
Race (Select all that apply)
26 responses

Category	Count (Percent)
American Indian or Alaska Native	0 (0%)
Asian	0 (0%)
Black or African American	18 (69.2%)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Isla...	1 (3.8%)
White	4 (15.4%)
	1 (3.8%)
mexicano	1 (3.8%)
hispanic	1 (3.8%)
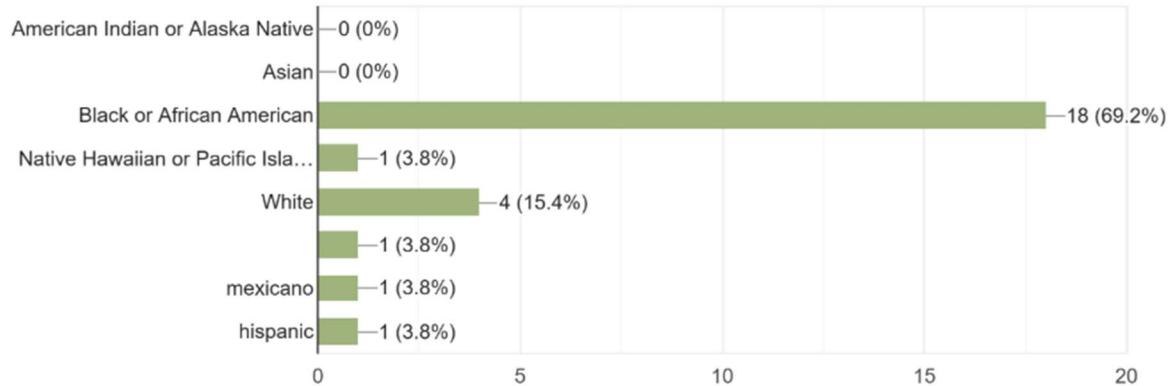
Ethnicity
24 responses

- Hispanic or Latino
- Not Hispanic or Latino
- Prefer not to say

75%
8.3%
16.7%
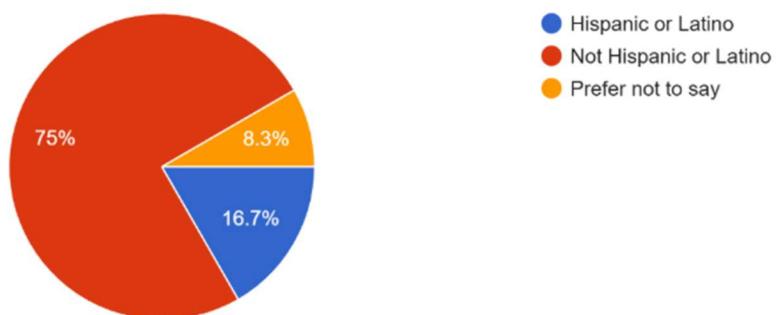
Highest Level of Education
27 responses

- Less than middle school
- Middle school graduate
- High school graduate
- Some college or vocational training
- Bachelor's degree
- Postgraduate degree
- Prefer not to say

11.1%
25.9%
11.1%
7.4%
33.3%
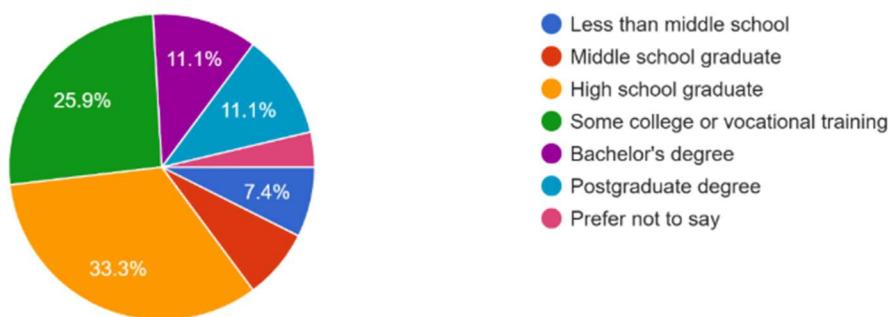
Current Employment Status

28 responses

- ● Employed full-time
- ● Employed part-time
- ● Unemployed
- ● Student
- ● Retired
- ● Prefer not to say
- ● Disable
- ● Homemaker- Special needs daughter

25%   17.9%   14.3%   35.7%
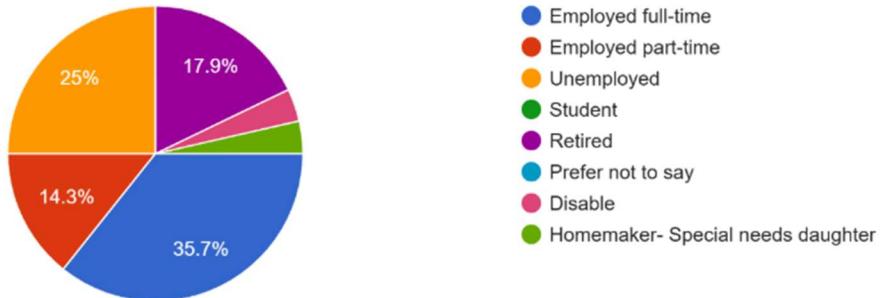
Have you ever experienced discrimination based on your gender or racial background?

25 responses

- ● Yes
- ● No
- ● Prefer not to say
- ● "I am sure there has been"
- ● Hair

40%   8%   44%
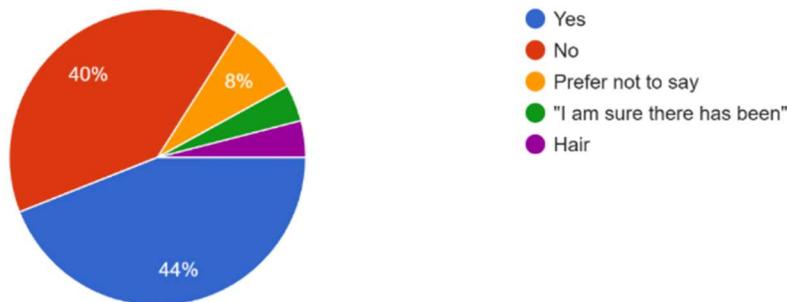
How would you rate the level of inclusivity and diversity in your community or workplace on a scale of 1 to 5? (1 being not inclusive at all, 5 being highly inclusive)

24 responses

- 1: 1 (4.2%)
- 2: 4 (16.7%)
- 3: 8 (33.3%)
- 4: 4 (16.7%)
- 5: 7 (29.2%)
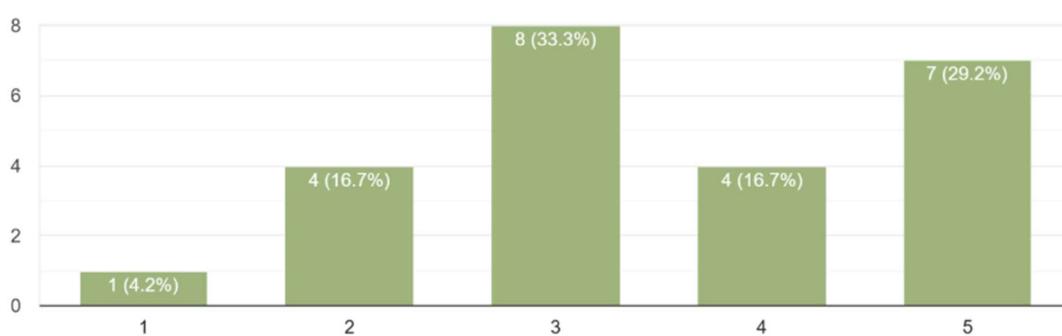
Question #1 In terms of career advancement, do you feel there are equal opportunities for you compared to others? If not, what barriers are there?

Key Themes

- o **Education & Skills**
  Several respondents cited education as a critical barrier to career advancement. A lack of formal education or difficulties in learning created obstacles that limited their opportunities. However, some individuals overcame these challenges through perseverance and self-improvement.

  Key Quotes:

  - "If you're not educated, you live in a closed-off world... you're scared to let others know you maybe can't read."
  - "This helped me to understand how I learn differently from the way I was taught, and that helped me to soar—graduated with honors."
  - "I have been out of work since 2015 as a single mom. I can't just say I have been taking care of my child. They will typically only hire people with current experience."

- o **Race & Gender Discrimination**
  Many respondents highlighted racial and gender-based discrimination as significant barriers in their careers. Instances of unequal pay, lack of representation in leadership, and differential treatment based on race were frequently mentioned.

  Key Quotes:

  - "I went in with this notion that because I'm a black woman, I would have to work that much harder."
  - "My director is an African American woman, and she has a lot on her shoulders. She's underpaid and is being asked to train other people but is not being paid for that."
  - "No, I do not feel there are equal opportunities. I am a woman, head of household, single mom. I often face comparisons to workers who can do overtime, but I can't due to the cost of childcare."
  - "At the moment, no—race plays a big part in the challenges I face. My skin color affects how I am perceived in my workplace."

- ○ **Networking & Support**
  Differences in access to professional networks and mentorship were reported as barriers to advancement. Respondents noted that their white counterparts often had better connections and more support when starting businesses or applying for jobs.
    - **Key Quotes:**
      - ▪ "My white friend had a friend who had a studio on her property she could use, another friend who was an attorney... she was much better connected than me."
      - ▪ "No complete wages—this is often the case for women in administrative roles compared to their male counterparts. It's even harder when you consider disparities based on race."

- ○ **Workplace Hierarchies**
  Respondents reported that leadership roles in many organizations were predominantly occupied by white men, making it difficult for others to advance. Front-line employees who understood the core operations often faced limited career mobility compared to those in higher positions.

    - **Key Quotes:**

      - ▪ "Sadly, the people who are at the front desk are the ones who know how everything works, but the people at the top are only looking at numbers and making tons of money."
      - ▪ "I do feel that I have equal opportunities in my workplace. However, I realize this is not the experience for most individuals from my racial and gender background."

- ○ **Pay Inequity**
  Pay inequity was another prevalent issue. Some respondents described instances where they were offered lower salaries than their white or male counterparts for similar roles and responsibilities.

    - **Key Quotes:**

      - ▪ "They refused to negotiate... eventually [she] got what she asked for, which was close to what I was making."
      - ▪ "I was earning $40k in an administrative position, while the earning potential for someone in the same role but with post-graduate education was $90k. This disparity is a huge obstacle."

o **Positive Experiences**
   Despite the challenges, a few respondents shared positive experiences in their careers. Some credited their success to supportive environments or personal resilience.

   Key Quotes:

   ▪ "Yes, I had a good experience. I have been at (my workplace) for the past 7 years... I have advanced while there."
   ▪ "Where I worked before, my supervisor was someone who looked like me, but everyone above her was male and/or white women, which presented some challenges."
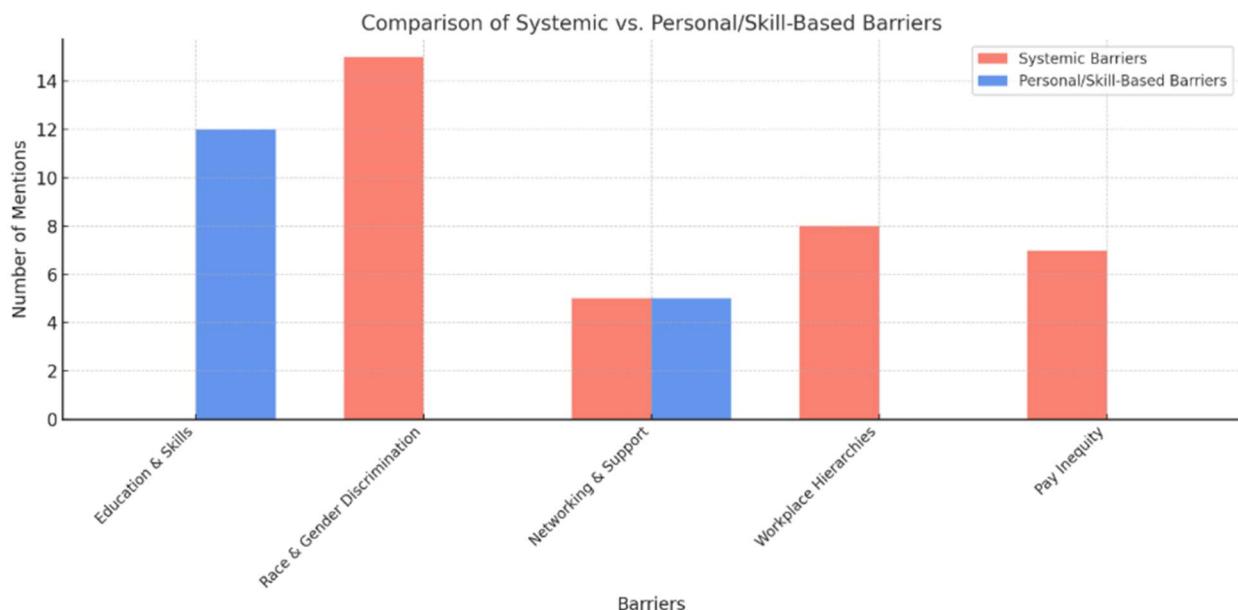
The chart above compares systemic barriers (e.g., race and gender discrimination, workplace hierarchies) with personal/skill-based barriers (e.g., education, networking). This visualization highlights how systemic issues are perceived as more prevalent, while personal barriers are also significant in specific contexts.

Conclusion

The responses provide a clear picture of the inequalities and barriers faced by individuals in their career advancement. Key areas for improvement include addressing pay inequities, fostering inclusive leadership, increasing access to education and professional networks, and reducing racial and gender biases in the workplace.

Efforts to create equitable opportunities should focus on dismantling systemic barriers, providing mentorship, and promoting diverse representation in leadership roles. This will ensure that all individuals, regardless of race, gender, or background, have a fair chance to succeed in their careers.

Question #2: How has your experience been with social support networks in your community? If you have social support networks, can you give us examples? Are there specific areas where you feel additional support is needed?

Key Themes

- o **Lack of Access to Resources for Financial and Housing Guidance**
  Many respondents expressed a need for more community resources related to financial literacy, homeownership, and wealth building. Individuals are unsure where to access help or guidance in these areas, which often feel inaccessible without clear support systems.

    Key Quotes:

    - o "I'm trying to figure out how to set up a trust, how to build intergenerational wealth, how to buy a house, but I don't know who in the community can help with these things."
    - o "You have to know how to keep your own paperwork, like pay stubs, how to pay your bills, and manage your budget, how to see/build your credit."

- **Stigma Around Financial Struggles**
  Several respondents noted feeling embarrassed or hesitant to discuss financial challenges. This creates a barrier to asking for help or sharing difficulties with others in the community.

    Key Quotes:

    - "Why am I embarrassed that I'm making $7/hr. and someone else is making $30/hr., instead of just asking for help on how I can get higher pay?"

- **Community and Family Support**
  Support from family, friends, and faith-based communities remains a key theme, with many respondents identifying their closest support networks as essential to navigating challenges. However, there is also a sense that more community-based assistance would help address financial and mental health needs.

    Key Quotes:

    - "I have a friend who has a daughter with special needs, and she helps me with transportation and provides support."
    - "My friends, fiancé, and faith in God provide a lot of support, but community resources are limited."

- **Culturally Specific Support Networks**
  A number of respondents emphasized the importance of culturally competent community resources, particularly for Hispanic families. Some organizations and local clinics are cited as beneficial in providing support, especially when facing barriers like language or insurance access.

    Key Quotes:

    - "(These organizations) have been great support for people like us, especially when you don't have insurance."
    - "I go to (nonprofit organizations), and my church—it's a network of people who help me and share resources I can use."

- **Single Mother Support**

  There was a significant mention of the need for more support networks geared toward single mothers. Although there are some informal networks and support systems for single mothers in the community, respondents pointed out that formal resources are limited.

  Key Quotes:

  - "It's ok in Chester County—there are networks of single moms, but more support is needed for single mothers."
  - "There's a need for more single mom support. It's tough to balance everything alone."

- **Mental Health and Long Wait Times for Services**

  Mental health support, particularly timely access to evaluations, remains a key concern. Respondents expressed frustration with long wait times for mental health services, which prevent individuals from getting the support they need when facing challenges.

  Key Quotes:

  - "Not waiting 3+ months for mental health evaluations—this is a major issue."
  - "There is a real lack of timely mental health support, which puts a lot of people at risk."

- **Limited Community Support**

  Several respondents noted that while there is some support from friends and family, formal community resources remain limited, particularly for mental health services, housing support, and financial counseling.

  Key Quotes:

  - "Limited community support, especially for people who need mental health help or are dealing with housing issues."
  - "There's not enough support—especially for things like mental health or housing stability."

o **Community Organizations and Gaps in Service**
Respondents shared that certain organizations are seen as helpful but limited in scope. For example, one nonprofit was described as primarily serving mothers, and respondents noted a lack of services specifically for dads and the Hispanic community.

    Key Quotes:

- "(One organization) does stuff for moms, that is it. Dads need support."
- "We need more resources." [reported by nonprofit staff]
- "The Hispanic community is not served at all."

Areas of Need

o **Financial Education and Literacy**
There is a clear demand for financial education programs, particularly for individuals seeking guidance on managing finances, building credit, and understanding how to secure homeownership. Community programs that focus on these areas are largely seen, as necessary.

    Key Quotes:

- "I wish there were more programs where people like me could learn about building wealth, managing credit, and buying a house."

o **Mental Health Services**
Access to mental health services is one of the most urgent areas where respondents feel there is a need for additional support. Long wait times for evaluations, coupled with a lack of immediate care, are significant barriers that prevent people from receiving the help they need.

    Key Quotes:

- "There is a major gap in services for mental health—especially when you're waiting for months for an evaluation."

o **Single Mother and Family Support**
Many respondents emphasized that more comprehensive support is needed for single mothers, particularly related to childcare, financial aid, and resources to navigate the challenges of raising children alone.

Key Quotes:

- "Single moms need more resources to help them navigate life and work, especially when they're doing it alone."

o **Community-Based Resources**
Respondents noted that there is a need for more accessible community-based resources, especially for those with limited access to insurance or who face language barriers. Services that provide guidance on housing, mental health, and career development could help fill a gap in existing support systems.

Key Quotes:

- "There's not enough support in the community to help people who are struggling with basic needs like housing or health care."

Areas Where Additional Support is Needed

Mental Health Services 33.3%

Financial Literacy 25.9%

Housing Support 18.5%

Single Mother Support 22.2%
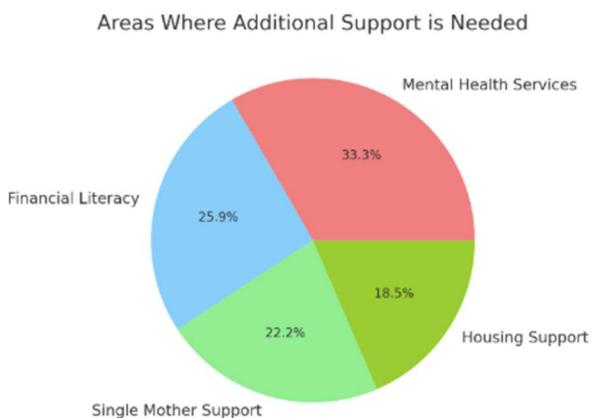
The chart above illustrates the distribution of key support areas based on respondents' feedback. It highlights the relative focus on financial education, mental health services, single mother support, and community-based resources, providing a clear view of priorities.

Conclusion

The responses illustrate several critical gaps in community support, particularly related to financial literacy, mental health, and resources for single mothers. While family, friends, and faith-based communities provide valuable emotional support, the need for formal community resources remains high. Expanding programs that offer financial education, timely mental health services, and support for single parents could greatly enhance the ability of individuals to thrive in the community. Developing culturally competent, accessible services for diverse groups, especially those with limited resources or insurance, will be essential in ensuring more equitable support for all members of the community.

Question #3: In your opinion, what improvements or additional services could be implemented to better assist individuals facing challenges in housing, transportation, or childcare, especially those from marginalized backgrounds?

Key Themes

- o **Navigating Services & Paperwork**
  Many respondents expressed that navigating the complex systems of paperwork and accessing services can be overwhelming. In particular, they mentioned that individuals from marginalized backgrounds, such as single women without children, face difficulties in finding help. There's a lack of clear guidance on how to access resources, which discourages many from even trying.

  #### Key Quotes

  - *"Helping people to navigate where to find the services, paperwork can be overwhelming. Sometimes, having to go to certain places for help, you are looked at as 'less than.'"*
  - *"We need more services for single women without children—these jobs are not paying enough."*
  - *"I've heard of resources but don't know how to access them. A core group to walk people through the paperwork could be helpful."*

- ○ **Access to Transportation**
  Transportation was frequently identified as a significant barrier, particularly in rural or suburban areas where public transportation options are limited. Respondents noted that transportation is especially critical for those trying to get to work, school, or access social services. Many shared stories of struggling to find reliable, affordable transportation, which prevents them from fully participating in the workforce or accessing necessary services.

  Key Quotes:

  - *"We do not have enough public transportation, point blank. I remember trying to find a bus to get my kids to work, and there was none. They had to Uber, which was too expensive."*
  - *"Transportation is one of the biggest issues. A lot of people lost their jobs, homes, cars, etc., during COVID. Public transportation doesn't go everywhere people need to go."*
  - *"I moved from Philadelphia to Coatesville, and the lack of buses, Ubers, or transportation options was a huge shock."*

- ○ **Childcare Accessibility & Affordability**
  Many respondents mentioned that access to affordable childcare was a significant challenge, particularly for parents with limited resources. Issues ranged from the lack of affordable, flexible childcare hours to the high cost of care. Some respondents also noted the scarcity of 24-hour childcare, which is particularly difficult for working parents with nontraditional hours.

  Key Quotes:

  - *"In Philadelphia, a lot of schools offered childcare for low-income families, but nobody does that here."*
  - *"Parents can't always use before and after-school care because they don't have transportation to take or pick up their kids."*
  - *"In Philadelphia, there are a lot of 24-hour childcare, but not enough here."*

o **Housing Barriers**
Housing was a central issue, with respondents describing the difficulty of finding affordable and adequate housing. The process of obtaining housing vouchers was often described as complicated, with restrictive requirements for landlords, and long wait times for public housing. Several people mentioned challenges such as insufficient space for families, difficulty meeting income requirements, and the challenges of renting with poor credit or without sufficient insurance.

    Key Quotes:

- *"Housing is horrible. If the residents of our shelter leave with a voucher, they have to find housing within 60 days, and a lot of landlords won't work with it. The requirements are insurmountable—security deposit, first month's rent, last month's rent, etc."*
- *"When I had Section 8, I had 3 kids but was only given a 2-bedroom voucher. I had to share a bedroom with my daughter."*
- *"I have a 4-year-old, and we are still in a 1-bedroom. There is no room, and we share a bed and closet."*

o **Financial Barriers & Support**
Many respondents highlighted the financial difficulties they face when trying to access resources. Whether it is the cost of transportation, childcare, or the security deposits required for housing, financial constraints play a major role in limiting access to essential services. In some cases, people noted that the financial assistance programs or services they qualified for were not enough to meet their needs.

    Key Quotes:

- *"These jobs are not paying enough, and there is a lack of affordable housing and transportation."*
- *"We need more affordable housing, and quicker housing opportunities. The system is not supportive; it often judges people instead of helping them."*

o **Community Support & Mentorship**
A recurring theme in the responses was the need for increased community support and mentorship, particularly for individuals from marginalized backgrounds. Some respondents shared that they felt isolated and needed more assistance navigating systems. Others suggested that having local mentors or support groups could help individuals better navigate challenges.

Key Quotes:

- *"Chester County has a lot to offer, but people don't know about the available resources. The information isn't getting to the people who need it."*
- *"I had to walk 30 minutes to access resources. It's difficult when housing, childcare, and transportation are all barriers."*
- *"There needs to be more education to empower people, not just sustain a sense of dependency."*

Additional Considerations

- *"Connect points were a useful tool if used correctly, especially for different supports. They were focused on the whole county (which is too big). Don't help enough for the people in (a specific town) support needs to focus on specific areas."*

- *"Vacant areas and buildings could be turned into housing right where we are."*

- *"It is important to have community members assist when they can. Solutions have to come from within. There needs to be a greater awareness of the local needs, the community has significant needs."*

- *"Vacant stores, lack of things, lack of safe spaces for kids, kids are getting bored and think they are 'grown' and acting accordingly."*

- *"(One organization) moved out of town and isn't providing transportation, the 'look at the color of our skin' and then don't want to do anything (referencing elected officials). We need shared community policing—we need to do it ourselves, need to go to council meetings, need to get involved."*

Proportion of Mentions by Theme
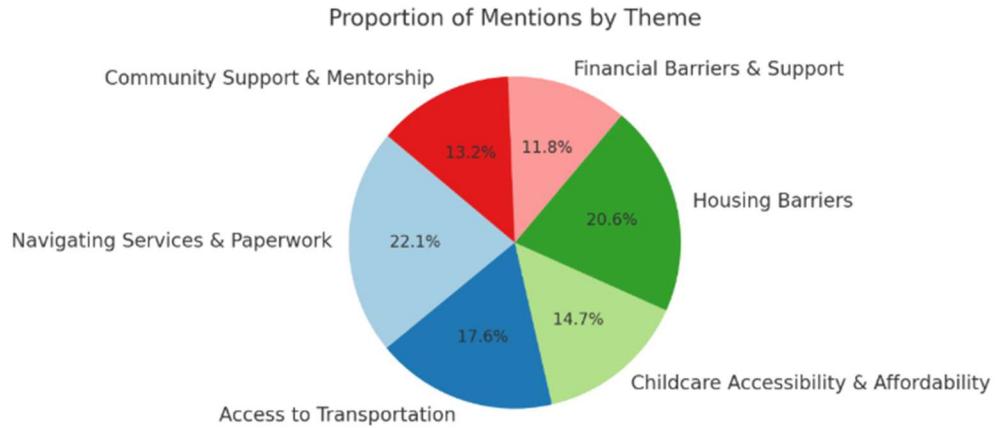
The chart above provides a proportional view of the mentions for each theme. It visually illustrates how attention is distributed across the six key areas, highlighting which themes received the most focus in respondents' feedback.

Conclusion

The responses reveal significant challenges in housing, transportation, and childcare, particularly for individuals from marginalized backgrounds. To address these issues, key improvements include better access to information, streamlined services, and financial assistance programs. Recommendations for improvement include increasing affordable and flexible childcare options, expanding public transportation, and making housing more accessible by removing burdensome requirements for vouchers.

Additionally, community-based mentorship programs and support networks would help individuals navigate these systems more effectively. Empowering people through education and resources—while reducing systemic barriers such as high security deposits and income requirements for housing—could alleviate many of the issues faced by respondents. Addressing these disparities will ensure that all individuals have the support they need to thrive and move towards self-sufficiency.

Question #4: How do you navigate the intersectionality of your identity (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status) in various aspects of your life, and what changes or initiatives would you like to see to address these intersections more effectively?

Key Themes

o   **Navigating Race, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status**
Several respondents expressed how their race, gender, and socioeconomic status to create challenges in their personal and professional lives. For many, their identities influenced how they were perceived in both social and work environments.
   Key Quotes:

- "I've learned that I'm ok with God sending me my people."
- "You can have all the opportunity and all the money in the world, but people are still always going to judge me based on my race and my gender."
- "I'm a trainer, my client base is primarily women; men won't come to my gym because I'm a woman. I know there are people who won't come to my gym because I'm black."

o   **Workplace Challenges & Gendered Expectations**
Gendered expectations, particularly for women, were prevalent. Several individuals felt they had to settle for lower pay or fewer opportunities due to their gender or race. Additionally, some reported the pressure of being judged based on societal stereotypes, with some choosing to "code-switch" or adopt behavior that was more socially acceptable for the workplace.
   Key Quotes:

- "Forced to rob Peter to pay Paul."
- "Had to settle for less pay because I had qualifications but no experience."
- "I was asked to do [something] and I said 'thank you, but I'm a teacher'... and I don't think any of the teachers who don't look like me have been asked that."

o **Social Anxiety & Self-Perception**

Some respondents discussed the impact of social anxiety on their ability to navigate certain spaces or ask for help. This fear, rooted in past experiences of discrimination or judgment, sometimes led them to withdraw from opportunities or avoid certain situations.

Key Quotes:

- "Social anxiety impacting my accessibility to go places and get help."
- "Honestly I just do my best and not think about these things. Sadly."

o **Family Dynamics & Single Motherhood**

A recurring theme among respondents was the complexity of managing family responsibilities, especially as single mothers. Several highlighted the challenges of balancing work, childcare, and maintaining their own well-being. There was also a strong emphasis on wanting better opportunities for their children and the importance of fostering independence in their kids.

Key Quotes:

- "Single mother teaches daughter to fend for herself because she will not be here forever."
- "The church has helped her a lot and is trying to help her kids in Guatemala by sending money but helping them be independent."
- "Being a mother takes priority."

o **Cultural Differences & Parenting**

Some individuals compared their experiences in the U.S. with those of other countries. They noted significant cultural differences in how parents are involved in their children's education and how accessible resources like childcare and school meetings are in different settings.

Key Quotes:

- "In Guatemala, parents can enter schools freely, but here you have to schedule meetings."
- "Taking kids to school is a challenge and finding childcare is challenging because it can be expensive."

- **Resilience & Support Systems**

Despite the struggles, many respondents highlighted their resilience and the support systems that have helped them navigate challenges. Churches, community organizations, and family members were often mentioned as critical in providing both emotional and practical support.

Key Quotes:
- "(A specific organization) has been helpful because we know food is guaranteed."
- "She has been helped a lot by (one nonprofit) and considers it a blessing."

- **Transportation Barriers**

Transportation was another significant barrier, particularly for those without reliable access to vehicles. Several people discussed how public transportation limitations forced children to walk long distances or rely on expensive alternatives like taxis or Uber.

Key Quotes:

- "Transportation not being available to those who live within walking distance."
- "It's hard letting kids go and let them go when you have experienced a hard life. They do not want their kids to go through what they have."

- **Economic Pressures & Housing**

Financial stability, housing, and employment were consistently noted as sources of stress. Many mentioned the need to secure employment to meet basic needs like rent and bills, but expressed frustration that available support often wasn't enough for long-term stability.

Key Quotes:

- "Obligations like rent, bills force us to find employment."
- "Frustrated that it is not enough to sustain long term."

Challenges vs. Support Systems Across Themes
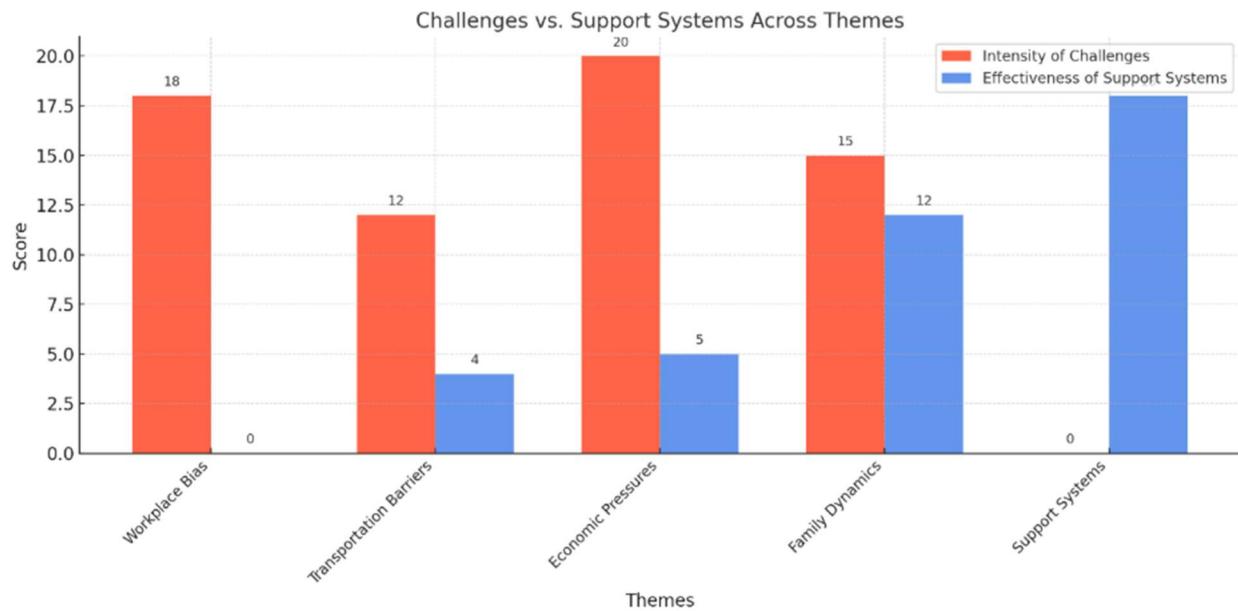
The chart above shows the exact numbers for both the level of challenges and how helpful the support systems are, with labels above each bar for clarity.

Conclusion

The intersectionality of race, gender, and socioeconomic status creates significant challenges in navigating various aspects of life. Many respondents discussed the complexities of balancing family, career, and personal aspirations in environments that often limit opportunities or create systemic barriers. Addressing these intersections more effectively will require a focus on:

- Increasing access to affordable childcare and housing,
- Providing more inclusive and supportive workplace environments,
- Expanding transportation options,
- Reducing social anxiety by fostering more inclusive community resources,
- Creating policies that address the unique needs of single mothers and marginalized groups.

Efforts to improve these areas can empower individuals to overcome the barriers they face, ensuring a more equitable and inclusive society for all.

Question #5: How do you perceive the accessibility and quality of educational opportunities that were available to you (A) in your youth? (B) available to you now for career advancement?

Key Themes

o   **Positive Experiences in Education**

In certain communities, respondents reported positive experiences with education, particularly in Downingtown, where there was a strong educational foundation, ample resources, and a supportive environment. The presence of involved parents, some of whom were teachers or advocates for their children's success, was also a notable factor.

    Key Quotes:

- "Downingtown had a great education system, providing the support needed to succeed."
- "I had parents who were teachers, so they really advocated for me in my education."
- "Sports involvement gave me structure, though academics were secondary."

o   **Challenges in Educational Opportunities**

Challenges were noted in areas like Coatesville, where respondents relocated to areas with limited educational resources, making it difficult to thrive academically. Many felt that they were merely repeating content learned in previous schools. A lack of support for special needs, including speech therapy, was a significant concern, as was financial instability that hindered continued education.

    Key Quotes:

- "In Coatesville, the school system didn't offer much support. It felt like I was repeating what I already knew."
- "There was no real help for students with special needs, like language or behavioral challenges."
- "I couldn't continue my education because I couldn't afford it and had to take care of my family."

- **Socioeconomic Barriers to Education**

Socioeconomic pressures were a major barrier for many individuals, including the need to work while attending school. For some, this led to leaving school early or opting for less demanding educational paths. Additionally, in some communities, sports were prioritized over academics, contributing to a lack of academic focus.

Key Quotes:

- "I had to work and balance school, which meant I had to leave school early."
- "Sports were seen as more important than education in my community."
- "People don't always see education as a priority when they're struggling to make ends meet."

- **Career Advancement Challenges**

While access to online education resources and employer-sponsored tuition assistance offered some career advancement opportunities, several respondents felt stagnant in their careers despite obtaining higher degrees. Discrimination based on race, gender, and appearance often slowed career progression, with many reporting that experience was prioritized over qualifications.

Key Quotes:

- "I have a degree, but I still feel stuck in my career."
- "Even with qualifications, experience is still more important than what you know."
- "I've faced discrimination, especially regarding my hair and race, which has hindered my career."

Work-Life Balance and Family Responsibilities

Work-life balance emerged as a key struggle, especially for parents who had to juggle family responsibilities, including childcare, with work and education. High childcare costs and transportation issues made career advancement difficult for some individuals.

Key Quotes:

- "Balancing work and family is hard when childcare is so expensive."
- "I have to choose between going to work and staying home with my kids because I can't afford childcare."

Recommendations for Improvement

To address these issues, respondents suggested several improvements, including providing greater support for special needs students, ensuring equal access to extracurricular activities, and developing clearer career advancement pathways for individuals from underrepresented backgrounds. They also emphasized the need for workplace inclusivity and mental health support to ensure individuals succeed academically and professionally.

Key Recommendations:

- o Increase support for students with special needs, including language and behavioral assistance.
- o Ensure all students have equal access to extracurricular opportunities that enhance their academic and career prospects.
- o Create clearer, more accessible career advancement tracks, particularly for underrepresented groups.
- o Address discrimination in the workplace, focusing on merit rather than appearance or background.
- o Expand mental health resources for both students and employees to foster success.
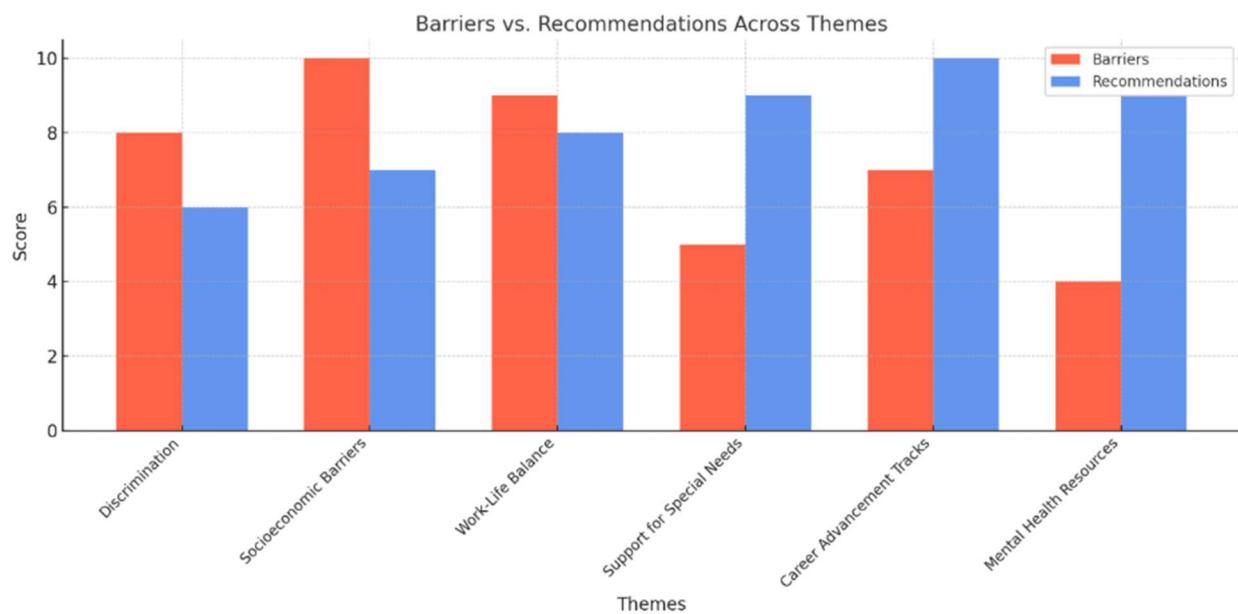
The chart above compares barriers and recommendations across key themes such as discrimination, socioeconomic barriers, and mental health resources. Each theme shows the prominence of barriers versus the intensity of proposed solutions, offering a straightforward visual comparison.

Conclusion

The perception of educational accessibility and quality varies significantly depending on location, socioeconomic status, and personal circumstances. Several challenges, such as limited resources, lack of special needs support, and financial barriers, impede educational success, while workplace discrimination and work-life balance struggles hinder career advancement. To address these barriers, improvements should focus on enhancing educational resources, providing equal opportunities for career development, and fostering inclusive and supportive environments for all individuals. This would contribute to greater equity and success in both education and career advancement.

College Aged Focus Group Report

**Demographics**

Gender Identity
20 responses

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Gender Fluid

100%
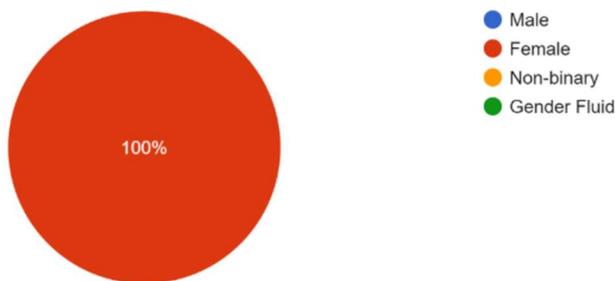
Sexual Orientation
20 responses

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Asexual
- Prefer not to say

85% 10%

Race (Select all that apply)

20 responses

American Indian or Alaska Native	0 (0%)
Asian	0 (0%)
Black or African American	20 (100%)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0 (0%)
White	0 (0%)
Jamican (Tamia)	1 (5%)

Ethnicity

18 responses

- Hispanic or Latino
- Not Hispanic or Latino
- Prefer not to say

100%
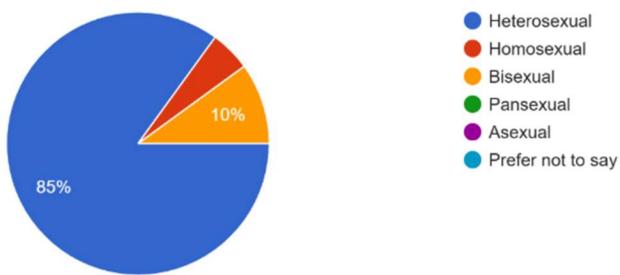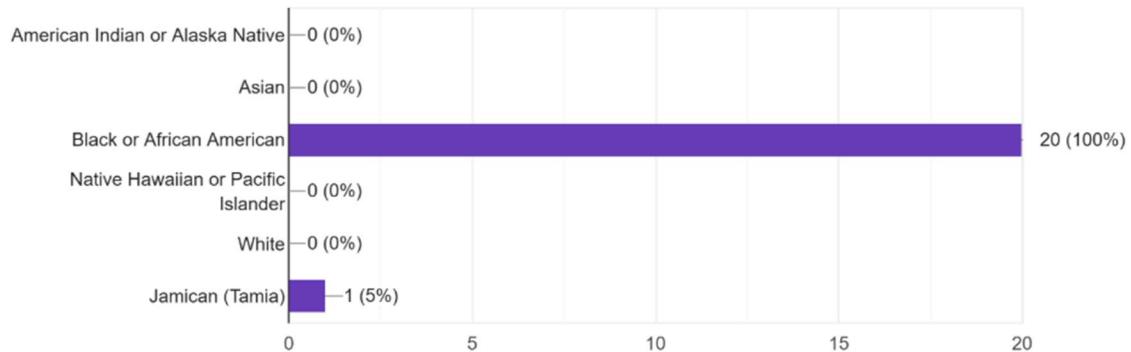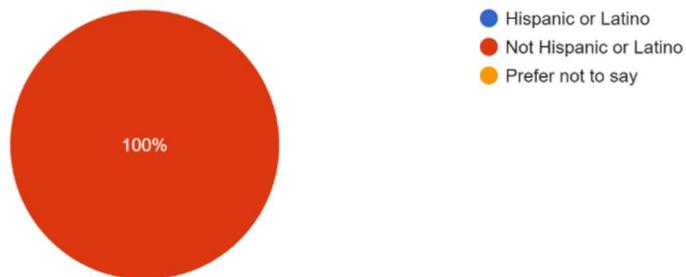
What year are you?

20 responses

- First year (Freshman)
- Second year (Sophomore)
- Third year (Junior)
- Fourth year (Senior)
- Fifth year (Senior)
- Graduate School

50%
10%
30%
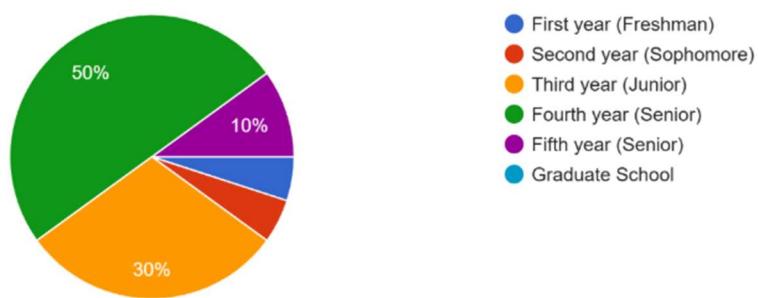
Are you a first-generation college student?
20 responses
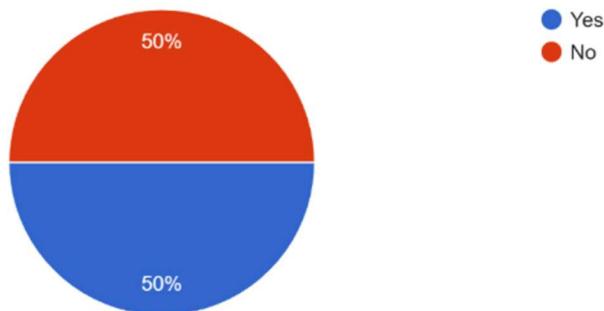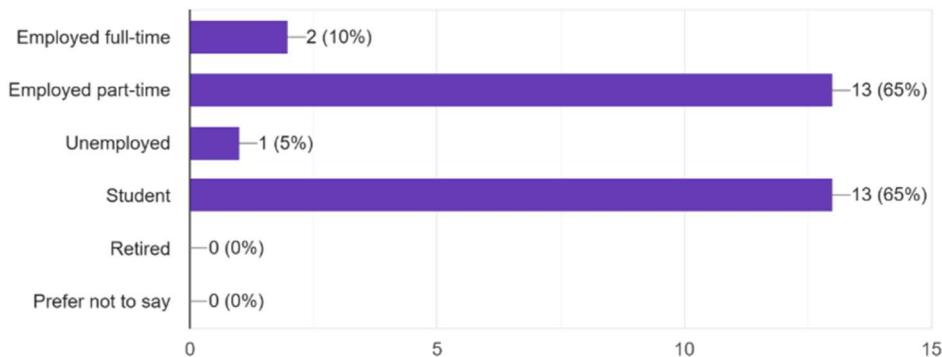
- ● Yes
- ● No

50%

50%

Current Employment Status (Select all that apply)
20 responses

Employed full-time	2 (10%)
Employed part-time	13 (65%)
Unemployed	1 (5%)
Student	13 (65%)
Retired	0 (0%)
Prefer not to say	0 (0%)

Have you ever experienced discrimination based on your gender or racial background during your time on campus?
20 responses

- ● Yes
- ● No
- ● Prefer not to say

50%

45%
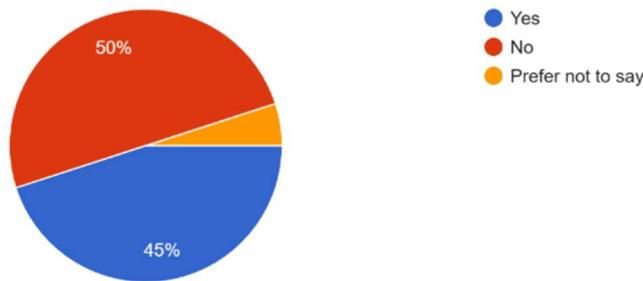
How would you rate the level of inclusivity and diversity on your campus on a scale of 1 to 5? (1 being not inclusive at all, 5 being highly inclusive)

20 responses
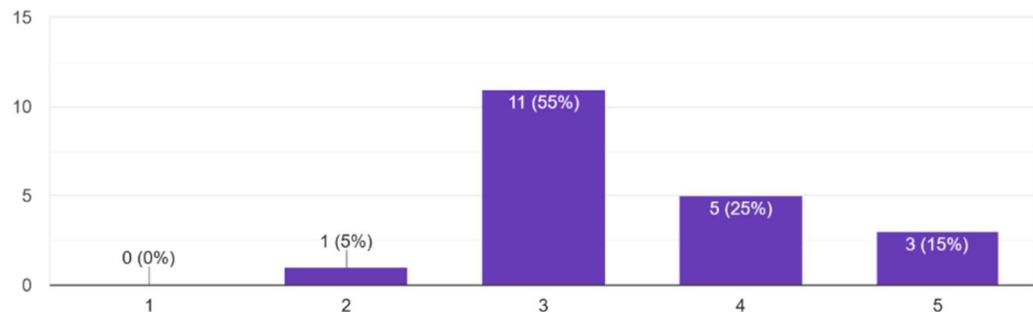
Question #1: Do you feel connected to your cultural or ethnic community on campus? If so, in what ways do you seek connectedness? If not, what are the challenges that prevent being connected?

Key Themes

o **Sense of Connectedness**

Several respondents expressed feeling connected to their ethnic or cultural communities on campus, particularly through clubs, organizations, and cultural events. Participation in these activities allowed students to connect with peers who share similar backgrounds and values. However, some students also faced difficulties in feeling truly integrated into their cultural community due to a lack of representation or support.

Key Quotes:

- "I feel very connected. I tend to seek out peers through my major and special interests."
- "I'm closely connected to people who look like me on campus, best way to meet them was through clubs."
- "I feel connected because on campus there are a lot of clubs and organizations that bring you closer to your ethnicity or identity."

o **Barriers to Connection**

For some students, feeling connected was challenging due to a lack of ethnic representation or cultural spaces. For instance, some students felt isolated because they were the only ones from their ethnic group on campus, while others struggled with the lack of diversity and support in student organizations. Despite this, they sought ways to overcome these challenges by reaching out to other international students or attending events designed to foster inclusivity.

Key Quotes:

- "I am the only Ethiopian-American student on campus, so I don't feel the connection, but it doesn't negatively affect me."
- "There are no minority or ethnicity-based groups like other cultures on campus. The DEI group is not run by us and doesn't meet our needs."
- "I didn't feel connected to the community until I enrolled in classes and started getting involved."
- "There is little to no social space for Black students to gather, and when efforts are made, they are brushed off."

o **Isolation and Imposter Syndrome**

Some students highlighted feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome when navigating a predominantly white campus. These students experienced challenges in finding their place within the broader Black student community or felt excluded by their peers, despite shared ethnic backgrounds.

Key Quotes:

- "I had imposter syndrome and didn't feel like I belonged. I experienced my first racist teacher here."
- "I see a lot of people who look like me, but they are not supportive. It's hard to find people who want to help us succeed."
- "It feels like we should connect, but we don't. I don't feel included in my own community sometimes."

o **Support Systems and Individual Efforts**

Respondents noted that individual efforts, such as seeking guidance from Black faculty or mentors, were essential in finding a sense of belonging and support. These personal connections helped students feel more grounded and supported in their academic and career journeys. However, some expressed frustration that they had to actively seek out these relationships rather than having them readily available.

Key Quotes:

- "I sought out Black faculty and staff, followed them on LinkedIn, and stayed in contact. It's nice to know someone has your back."
- "It would be nice if we didn't have to work so hard to seek out professors who understand and support us."
- "My advisor changed my whole trajectory because I got the guidance and support I needed to succeed."

o **Lack of Representation and Cultural Events**

Some students expressed frustration with the lack of meaningful events or representation for Black students on campus. They described events as "fluff" or lacking substance, feeling that the campus did not prioritize the concerns or needs of Black students. Additionally, students noted that minority-focused events were often not well-received or supported by the broader campus community.

Key Quotes:

- "Minority events are not warmly received or welcomed."
- "The programs for Black students are often seen as superficial with no real substance."
- "There is no one teaching you how to navigate college; most of the clubs are social and don't help you think about life after college."

o **Campus Clubs and Social Spaces**

Students recognized that campus clubs and organizations could provide avenues for connectedness but noted that there was a lack of dedicated spaces for ethnic minorities to come together. The absence of a physical or cultural space for these groups made it harder for students to foster a sense of community.

Key Quotes:

- "We need social spaces for Black students to meet and support one another."
- "When there are no spaces for us to gather, it feels like our needs are being ignored."

Proportional Impact of Support Systems on Connectedness

Dedicated Social Spaces — 26.7%
Cultural Events — 16.7%
Campus Clubs and Organizations — 23.3%
Black Faculty and Mentors — 33.3%
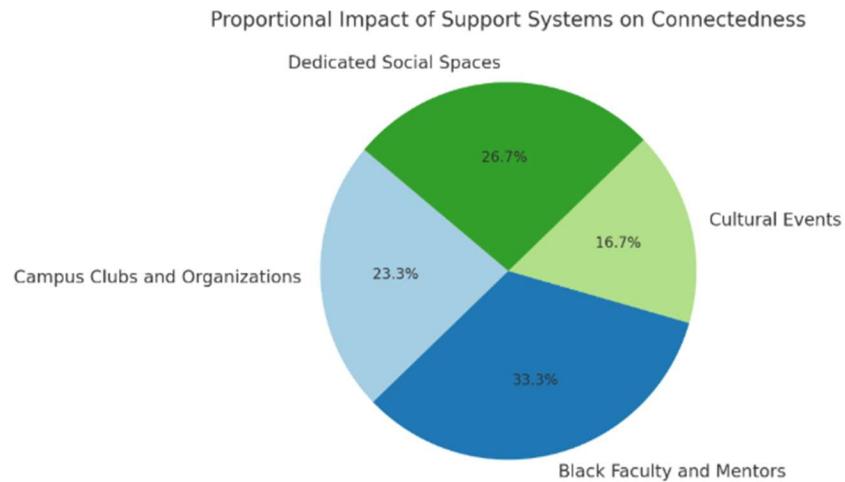
The chart above illustrates the proportional impact of different support systems on students' connectedness to their cultural or ethnic community. It highlights the relative importance of clubs, mentors, cultural events, and dedicated social spaces.

Conclusion

The experience of connectedness to cultural or ethnic communities on campus is shaped by both positive and challenging factors. While many students feel connected through clubs, organizations, and personal efforts to reach out to faculty and mentors, others face significant barriers due to a lack of representation, support systems, and dedicated spaces for cultural expression. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to create inclusive spaces, promote meaningful cultural events, and ensure that all students feel valued and supported in their journey toward academic and personal success.

Question #2: Have you faced any stereotypes or biases based on your gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background within the academic setting?

Key Themes

o **Ethnic and Racial Stereotypes**

Several respondents described experiencing racial or ethnic bias in their academic environments, particularly based on their Black or ethnic identities. These biases were expressed through assumptions about academic ability or behavior, often manifesting in condescending comments or unjustified challenges.

Key Quotes:

- "A white teacher made a comment about stating all students at Lincoln were high-risk students. She only said that because this is an HBCU and because we are black."
- "She asked me about my grade, and when I told her I got an A, she said, 'What do you mean, you got an A? You need to show me your test.'"
- "I'm the only black person in my class, and I had to deal with racial comments from my lab partner."
- "Every time I bring up my points in class, the other students would talk over me, and won't look me in my eyes."

o **Discrimination in Student Housing**

A few respondents shared experiences of discrimination in campus housing. They reported being targeted by peers based on their race, with incidents of racial slurs and exclusion occurring within dorms.

Key Quotes:

- "On my floor, there are only four black students. We had issues with loud noises and door banging, which seemed targeted at black students. My roommate transferred because of the discrimination."
- "We were subjected to monkey noises and had our clothes stolen, while white students smoked and were left unchecked by RAs."

- **Gender and Race Bias in Academia**

Biases were also reported in relation to gender, particularly for Black women, who felt pressured to assert themselves more strongly due to stereotypes about aggressiveness.

Key Quotes:

- "I'm almost invisible in my classes. I have to assert my dominance, but I hate that I have to do that because of the stereotypes of black women being aggressive."
- "I'm the only black person in the discussion group, and every time I try to speak, students talk over me and don't make eye contact."

- **Stereotyping in Career Aspirations**

Some respondents expressed frustration with being stereotyped based on their career interests. Specifically, those wanting to work with at-risk youth or marginalized communities were questioned about their motivations, often being met with disbelief or intrusive questioning.

Key Quotes:

- "When I tell people I want to work with kids who have parents in prison, they ask, 'Why that sector of kids?' as if they can't understand why I would choose that path."
- "It's almost like they're judging me, trying to figure out something personal about me, rather than recognizing my desire to help."

- **Economic and Socioeconomic Stereotypes**

Respondents noted how assumptions about their socioeconomic status affected their academic experiences. Some mentioned being perceived as less capable or resourceful than their white counterparts, possibly due to their background as first-generation college students or coming from less affluent areas.

Key Quotes:

- "White students seem like they have a lot of resources to fall back on, whereas we don't have that choice. We have to succeed and make the best out of our college opportunity."
- "I was used as a stereotype to make a point. They asked me to come to events to show diversity, but once there, I was ignored until they needed me for a photo op."

o **Tension Between Peer Groups and Cultural Differences**

The tension between Black students and other student groups, particularly white students, was mentioned as a barrier to connection. The experiences of Black students were often dismissed or minimized, leading to feelings of exclusion and isolation.

Key Quotes:

- "I feel like I'm used as the 'good cop' to balance out the 'bad cop' mentality of white students, especially when teaching. They get more chances than we do."
- "In some spaces, it feels like we're just tokens for diversity without real connection or support beyond that moment."

o **Imposter Syndrome**

A few respondents shared experiences of imposter syndrome, feeling like they didn't belong or weren't given the same opportunities to succeed as their peers.

Key Quotes:

- "I had imposter syndrome and didn't feel like I belonged until I took the initiative to connect with people and build relationships."

o **Lack of Representation in Faculty and Mentorship**

Lack of representation among faculty and staff, especially those who share similar backgrounds, was mentioned as a challenge for navigating the academic environment. Some students sought mentors of color but felt that they had to actively seek them out rather than having mentorship available organically.

Key Quotes:

- "I didn't have any Black professors until my junior year. It was really important to find people who looked like me who could support me."
- "We can't always count on student organizations to provide mentorship; we need that individual guidance from professors, but it's hard to find."

Intensity of Challenges in Academic Settings
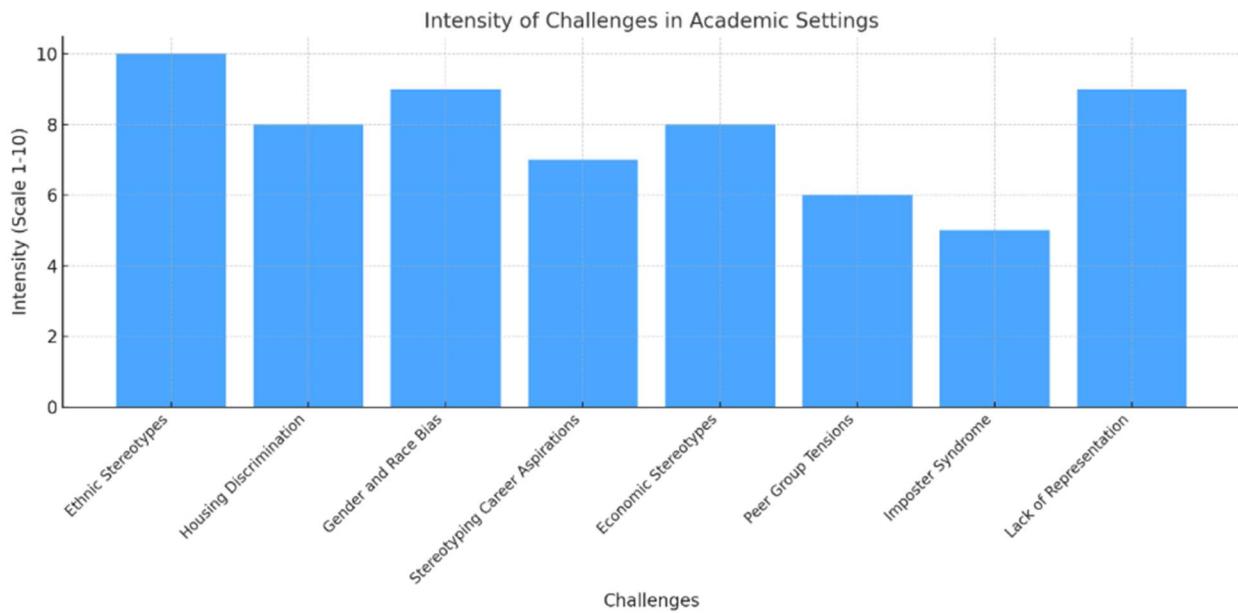
The chart above displays the intensity of challenges faced by respondents in academic settings, such as ethnic stereotypes, housing discrimination, and lack of representation. Each challenge is rated on a scale of 1 to 10, highlighting which issues have the greatest impact.

Conclusion

Biases and stereotypes based on race, gender, and socioeconomic background significantly impact the academic experiences of Black students. These biases manifest in various forms, from racial profiling and exclusion in housing to being stereotyped in the classroom and questioned about career goals. Addressing these issues will require:

- **Better representation** among faculty and mentors who can relate to diverse students.
- **Raising awareness** among faculty and peers about the subtle ways bias can affect students' academic experiences.
- **Encouraging diversity and inclusion** in student housing and activities to create more supportive environments for all.
- **Combating the imposter syndrome** that arises from a lack of support or representation. Efforts to confront these biases can lead to a more equitable academic environment where all students feel seen, heard, and valued.

Question 3: Do you feel that there are opportunities for mentorship or guidance tailored to your specific needs and experiences?

Key Themes

o **Availability of Mentorship Opportunities**

Several respondents indicated that there are opportunities for mentorship, particularly through joining student organizations. These organizations offer mentorship that can address various specific needs and experiences.

Key Quotes:

- "There are several opportunities simply by joining one of the many organizations on Lincoln's campus."
- "I feel like there will always be opportunities for mentorship tailored towards your specific needs because every aspect of life changes rapidly."

o **Challenges with Representation**

A recurring challenge mentioned by respondents was the lack of mentors who resemble them, particularly for Black students. Some expressed frustration that mentorship, if available, often comes from individuals who do not share their background or lived experiences.

Key Quotes:

- "There are not many mentors, especially ones who look like me."
- "I had to seek them out, do my due diligence and work to find them."
- "Most of the opportunities are all white people."

o **Barriers to Accessing Mentorship**

Some respondents felt that mentorship opportunities were not easily accessible, particularly for Black students. They described a system where white students had easier access to mentorship (e.g., from the career center), while Black students faced more obstacles to finding the support they needed.

Key Quotes:

- "Black students don't have that option [for mentorship] when they need it."
- "No mentorship set up. They have ways for us to connect, but it's not on our time, when we need it."

o **Positive Experiences with Mentorship**

Despite the challenges, a few respondents shared positive experiences with mentorship, especially when faculty or staff members proactively offered guidance. One student highlighted a moment when they felt supported in a lecture with faculty and staff who looked like them.

Key Quotes:

- "I do have a mentor here at (the university.)"
- " (A particular class was the) first time I was in a room full of faculty and staff that look like me."

Suggestions for Improvement in Mentorship Programs

Several respondents suggested that incoming students should be introduced to mentors and faculty who share similar backgrounds. This would help ensure that students don't have to go out of their way to find mentorship, reducing the burden on students already facing other challenges.

Key Quotes:

- "They should start giving incoming students a place to meet staff and faculty who look like them."
- "If a teacher or administrator goes out of their way, there's opportunity for mentorship."

o **Mentorship Limited to Peer Support**

A few respondents felt that most mentorship opportunities were limited to peer support or were not sufficiently comprehensive to address their specific academic, social, or career needs. They expressed a desire for mentorship that extends beyond just peer-based connections.

Key Quotes:

- "The (center) is more like a peer mentorship, not what we actually need."

Themes in Responses to Mentorship Opportunities
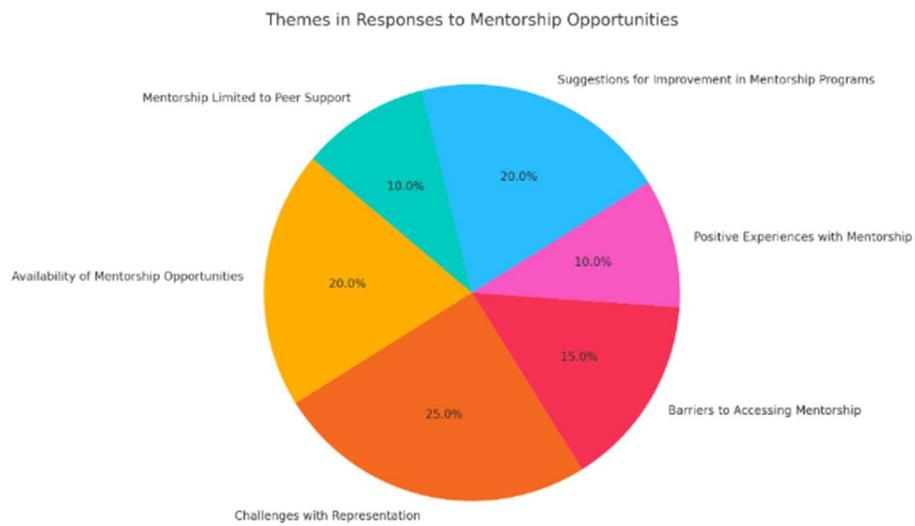
The chart above represents the key themes from responses to the mentorship question. Each slice shows the relative distribution of the themes based on the responses. This visual emphasizes the areas where mentorship is seen as strong, as well as where improvements are needed.

Conclusion

While there are mentorship opportunities available on campus, particularly through student organizations, many Black students experience barriers to accessing these resources, primarily due to a lack of mentors who share their ethnic, racial, or socioeconomic background. There is a clear need for more culturally relevant mentorship programs, especially for Black students, who may have to actively seek out support. To improve the mentorship experience for students

- **Ensure that mentorship is accessible** and available when students need it.
- **Increase representation among faculty and staff**, so students can more easily find mentors who resemble them.

- **Provide structured mentorship programs** that cater to the specific needs of marginalized groups, helping to bridge the gap between students and the resources they need.
- **Encourage proactive mentorship** from faculty and administrators who are willing to go beyond traditional channels to support diverse students.

By addressing these gaps, institutions can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students, particularly those from underrepresented groups.

Question 4: How does representation in leadership positions within the college impact your sense of belonging and empowerment?

Key Themes

o   **Positive Impact of Representation**

Respondents shared how seeing individuals who look like them in leadership positions significantly boosts their sense of belonging and empowerment. It validates their place within the college community and motivates them to strive for similar success.

Key Quotes:

- "Representation in leadership positions has greatly impacted my individual experience. When people see people who look like them and come from similar backgrounds in positions of power, it can provide a sense of validation and belonging."
- "It helps me build a platform within myself and the courage to face things I didn't think I could do."
- "When I see successful people who look like me, it makes me feel more confident in my field of study."
- "Seeing people like me in those positions gives me that push – a reality check."

o **Lack of Representation in Specific Majors**

A few respondents highlighted the absence of representation in their specific fields of study, particularly in psychology. They noted that this lack of representation in both faculty and mentors leads to feelings of isolation, especially for students of color.

Key Quotes:

- "There is no representation within my major (Psychology). No instructors, mentors, or staff, which leaves a feeling of isolation especially for students of color."
- "If I had more representation that resembled me, I wouldn't have to continuously explain my perspective and point of view... At times I feel like I have to preface or consider how I can make them understand the simplest of concepts."

o **Empowerment through Leadership**

The presence of leaders who embody integrity, involvement, and a sense of community is seen as essential to both individual and collective empowerment. Students expressed that leadership should reflect positive characteristics that they can look up to, which helps them advocate for themselves and others.

Key Quotes:

- "Representation in leadership impacts my sense of belonging because you wouldn't want someone who represents themselves negatively or isn't involved in the community."
- "It helps me be an advocate in ways I didn't know how to be one."
- "When we go to leaders who don't look like us, they often don't understand or address our problems, whereas we get a different response when we go to someone in a leadership position who looks like us."

o **Mentorship and Guidance**

Some students expressed how the lack of mentorship or guidance from leaders who share their background and experiences creates barriers. They emphasized the need for more mentors of color to provide support, especially when navigating difficult academic or social situations.

Key Quotes:

- "I need support but can't find any among African American professors."

- "When I saw her face (someone she connected to) in an email, I found myself light up – seeing a Black woman doing what I know I can do but I haven't seen anyone like me do."

o **Inspiration and Motivation**

Seeing individuals who resemble their background in leadership roles serves as a source of inspiration, encouraging students to believe in their own potential and aspire to similar positions. It fosters a culture where students feel empowered to pursue leadership roles and affect change within their community.

Key Quotes:

- "It pushes you in a way that you didn't even realize you could be pushed."
- "I'm going to talk to young girls and mentor them."
- "When I see my people at these tables with me, I'm reminded that this is where we deserve to be – I deserve to be with the big dogs and I'm going to bring all my friends with me."

o **Challenges of Being a First-Generation Immigrant and College Student**

Some respondents shared their experiences of being first-generation immigrants and the challenges they face in finding a sense of belonging within the college community. The lack of support and guidance for these students is often exacerbated by the absence of faculty who understand their specific needs and backgrounds.

Key Quotes:

- "It's a whole other ballgame to not only be a first-gen immigrant and then to be at a college."
- "My dad found it so difficult to find community or staff support."
- "There are a lot of Haitian workers here, and I wonder if they know there are places they can meet other immigrants?"

o **The Importance of Multiculturalism and Diverse Representation**

A few students emphasized the importance of creating a more inclusive and multicultural environment where students can connect with leaders who share their experiences and cultural

backgrounds. They suggested initiatives such as multicultural days or spaces that foster connection and understanding.

Key Quotes:

- "I think a multicultural day could be a really good thing."
- "Let's be the change we want to see – I'm going to talk to young girls and mentor them."
- "If we create that environment where people can truly represent who they are – this professor is from Jamaica, etc. – so we can know who they are and build community with them."
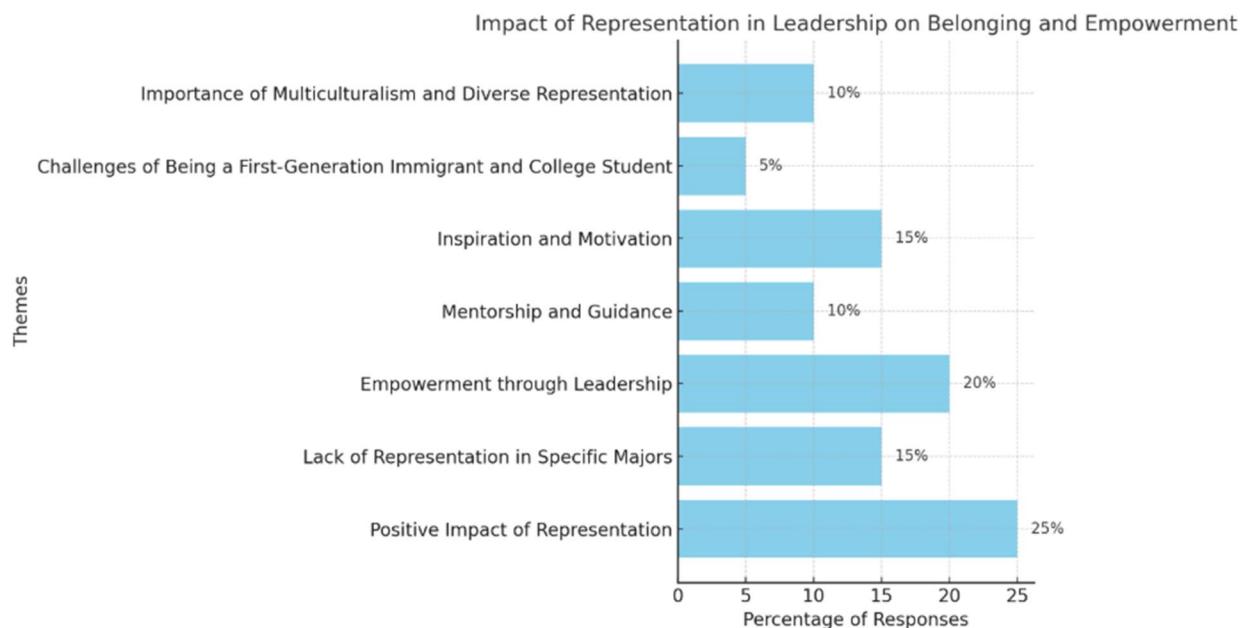
The chart above visualizes the key themes from responses to the question about representation in leadership. Each bar represents a theme, with its length indicating the percentage of responses mentioned in that theme.

Conclusion

Representation in leadership positions within the college has a profound impact on students' sense of belonging and empowerment. When students see leaders who share similar backgrounds, it validates their place in the community, boosts their confidence, and encourages

them to pursue similar leadership roles. However, the lack of representation in specific academic fields and leadership positions can lead to feelings of isolation, especially for students of color. Ensuring that leadership reflects the diversity of the student body and providing mentorship and guidance from leaders who understand students' experiences can foster a more inclusive and empowering environment. Additionally, initiatives such as multicultural events and connecting students with leaders who share their backgrounds can create stronger, more supportive communities.

Question #5: Do you feel that your voice is heard and valued in the academic and social aspects of college life?

Key Themes

o   **Perceived Lack of Engagement from Faculty and Staff**

Several students expressed the feeling that their voices are not heard or valued, particularly when it comes to matters like food, housing, safety, and the way courses are conducted. They noted a general disconnect between students' concerns and the response from faculty and campus administration.

Key Quotes:

- "The people who run the campus and classes do not listen to the students' needs and concerns."
- "I had to go to my professor for help, but I had to email her every day with all the proof of my work and it still wasn't enough."

o   **Introversion and Class Dynamics**

Some students mentioned feeling hesitant to voice their opinions in class, either due to introversion or a perception that their perspectives would not be valued. This situation was

particularly noticeable in classes with predominantly white students, where minority voices often felt marginalized.

Key Quotes:

- "I'm making myself be heard, more so than my voice being heard."
- "In some conversations, they clearly do not get it. We tend to feel dismissive around subjective conversations."

o **Cultural Disconnect and Dismissal of Black Experiences**

A recurring theme involved students feeling dismissed or misunderstood by faculty when discussing culturally specific topics, such as slang or aspects of their personal identities. In particular, students in fields like psychology reported feeling isolated due to the lack of faculty representation from similar racial or cultural backgrounds.

Key Quotes:

- "Professors disregard our language or perspectives as unimportant, like when using slang terms such as 'Jawn.'"
- "There are not many people that look like me in psychology. Very seldom do I see a Black Psychology instructor."

o **Disparities in Faculty Treatment of Students**

Many students noted a perceived difference in the way their contributions were treated compared to their white peers. Black students felt that their input was not as valued or affirmed, which led to feelings of being "dismissed" or "ignored."

Key Quotes:

- "Professors react differently to Black students versus white students – more affirming to white students, but they don't value what I have to say."
- "They'll say 'ok, anybody else?' after I speak, but if someone else says the same thing, they'll get a positive response."

o **Lack of Support for Personal and Cultural Challenges**

Students expressed frustration that their personal and cultural challenges were not being acknowledged. This included the emotional toll of balancing academics with personal responsibilities like taking care of family members or managing multiple jobs.

Key Quotes:

- "Professors equate behaviors like putting your head on your desk as laziness, but sometimes you're just exhausted."
- "What if our white counterparts aren't working two jobs to afford tuition or taking care of siblings? Professors should recognize the extra challenges we face."

o **Self-Advocacy and Advocacy from Faculty**

Some students felt that they had to be their own advocates, as their voices were not prioritized or adequately supported by faculty. They spoke about the challenge of navigating academic environments without clear support and the emotional exhaustion that can result from advocating for themselves.

Key Quotes:

- "Sometimes you have to be your own advocate."
- "I had to miss a lot of class due to personal reasons, and professors would get nasty. You just have to make your voice heard."

Student Perceptions of Their Voices Being Heard and Valued
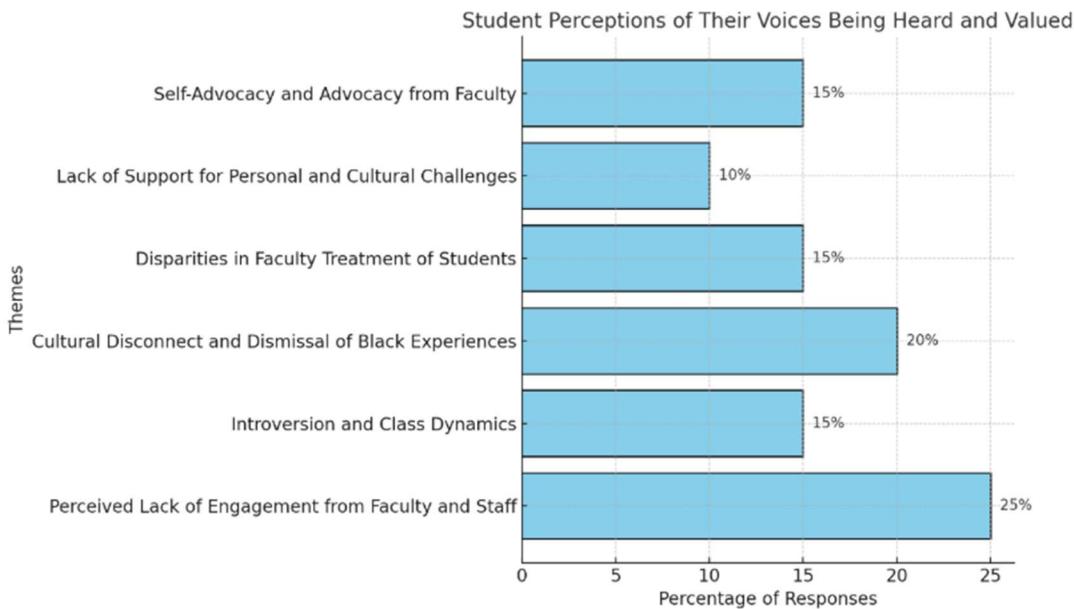
The chart above represents the themes related to students' perceptions of their voices being heard and valued in college life. Each bar shows the proportion of responses mentioning a particular theme, offering a clear visual comparison of the key concerns.

Conclusion

The responses reveal a strong sense that students—particularly students of color—do not always feel that their voices are heard or valued in academic and social settings at the college. Students face significant challenges when trying to be heard, such as cultural misunderstandings, racial biases, and a lack of faculty support. Addressing these issues will require:

- **Improved Faculty Awareness:** Faculty should be better educated about cultural differences and the unique challenges faced by students of color, particularly in areas like language, personal struggles, and the demands of being a first-generation student.
- **Active Listening and Engagement:** Professors and staff should engage more actively with students' perspectives, validating their voices and fostering an inclusive environment that encourages open dialogue.
- **Increased Support Systems:** There is a need for more accessible and responsive support structures to assist students in navigating the challenges they face, both academically and personally.

Middle High School Focus Group Report

**Demographics**

Gender Identity
48 responses

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Gender Fluid

97.9%
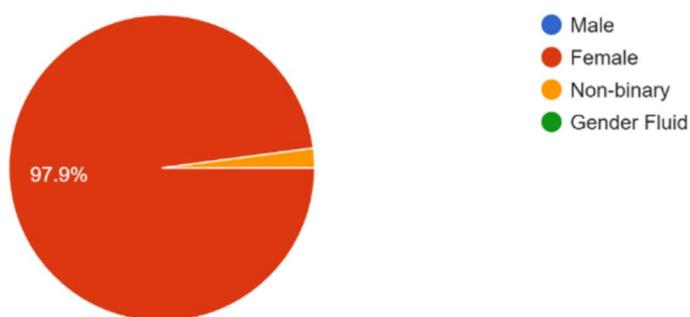
Sexual Orientation
40 responses

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Asexual
- Prefer not to say
- Other:

85%

Race (Select all that apply)

48 responses

Category	Value
American Indian or Alaska Native	4 (8.3%)
Asian	1 (2.1%)
Black or African American	22 (45.8%)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Isla…	0 (0%)
White	5 (10.4%)
	14 (29.2%)
Mexican	3 (6.3%)
puerto rican	2 (4.2%)
Brazilian	1 (2.1%)
Hispanic	1 (2.1%)

Ethnicity

45 responses

- Hispanic or Latino
- Not Hispanic or Latino
- Prefer not to say

42.2%

55.6%
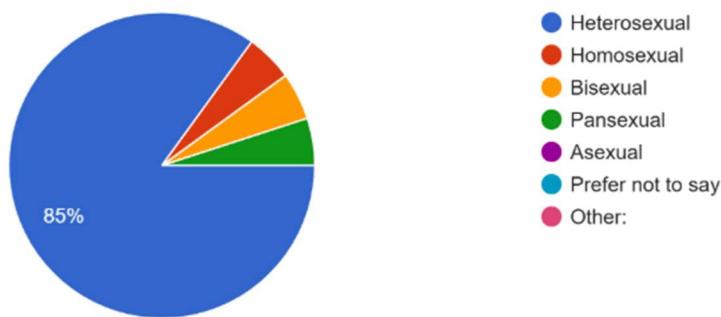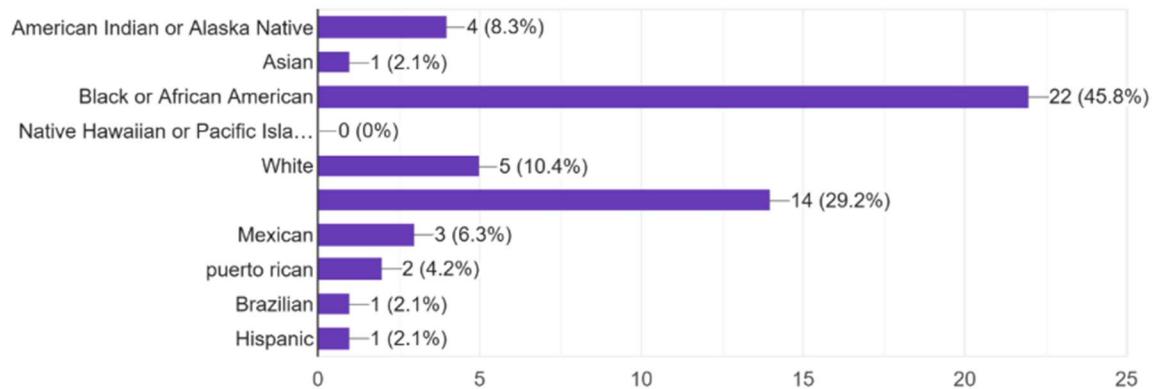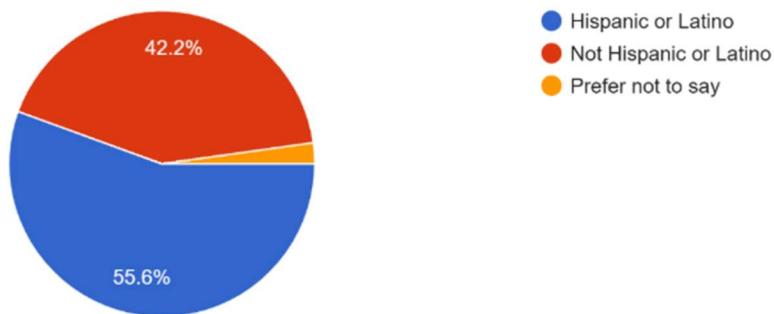
What year are you?
47 responses

- ● 6th grade
- ● 7th grade
- ● 8th grade
- ● 9th grade
- ● 10th grade
- ● 11th grade
- ● 12th grade

8.5%
10.6%
10.6%
23.4%
25.5%
21.3%
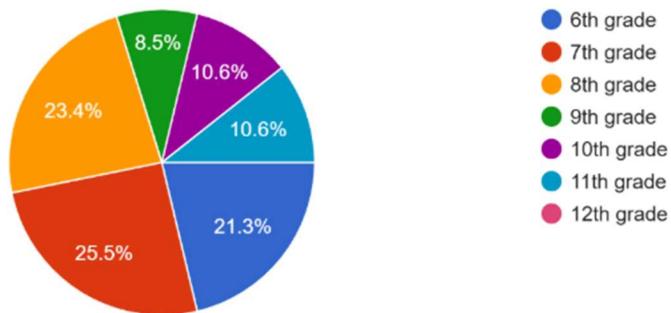
Are you a first-generation middle school/high school student?
48 responses
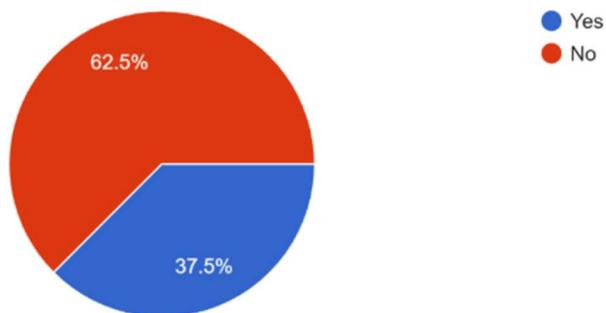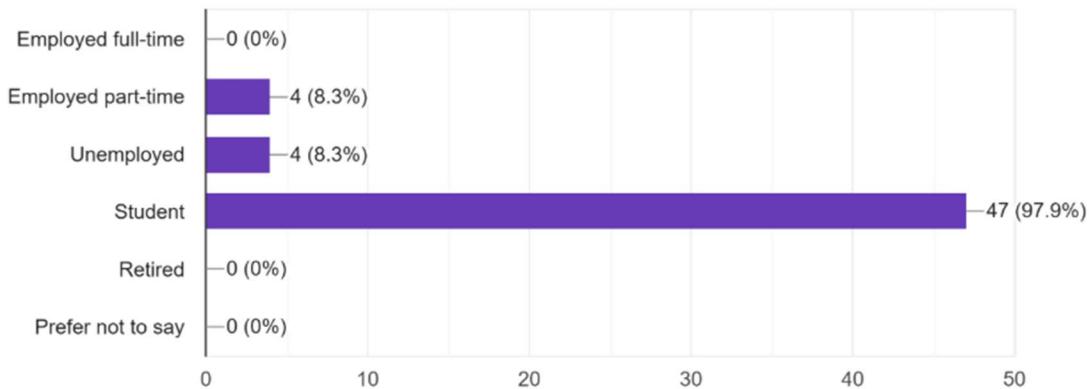
- ● Yes
- ● No

62.5%
37.5%

Current Employment Status (Select all that apply)
48 responses

Employed full-time	0 (0%)
Employed part-time	4 (8.3%)
Unemployed	4 (8.3%)
Student	47 (97.9%)
Retired	0 (0%)
Prefer not to say	0 (0%)

Have you ever experienced discrimination based on your gender or racial background during your time in school?
47 responses

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

48.9% 17% 34%
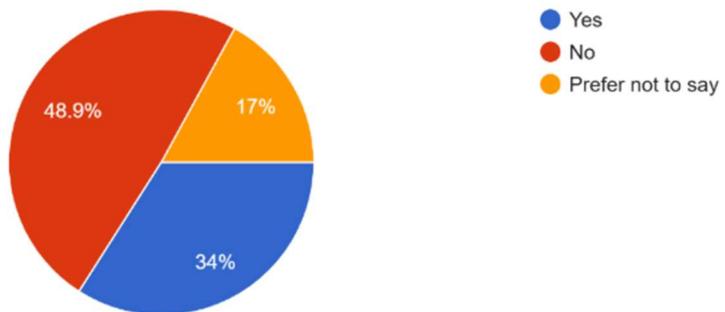
How would you rate the level of inclusivity and diversity in your school on a scale of 1 to 5? (1 being not inclusive at all, 5 being highly inclusive)

47 responses
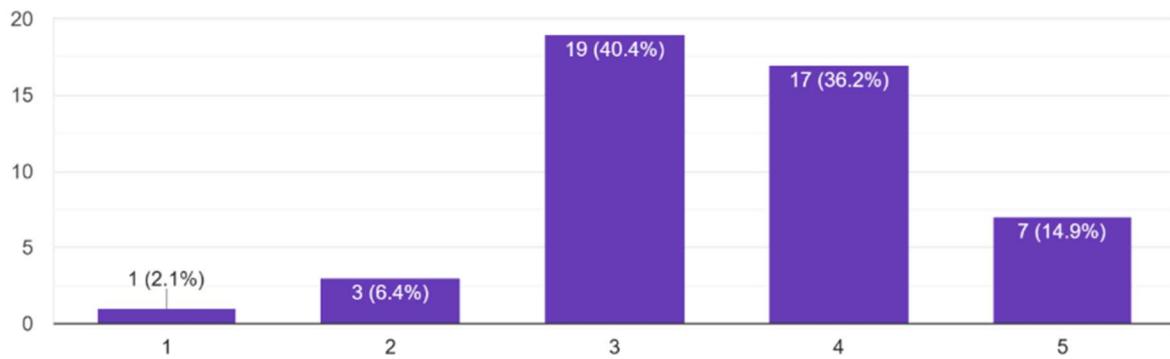
Middle School/High School Community Support and Experiences

**1. Sense of Belonging and Connectedness in the School Community**

Key Themes

- **Lack of Representation and Cultural Clubs:**
  - ο Several students noted the absence of a Black Student Union, which could help foster a stronger sense of community.
  - ο The presence of supportive staff members and teachers plays a key role in creating a connected environment.
  - ο *Quote:* "A Black Student Union would help. There is not one at my school."

- **Discrimination and Assumptions:**
  - ο Hispanic students reported discrimination, including assumptions about language proficiency.
  - ο Students expressed discomfort or pressure during presentations, with some citing a lack of compassion from teachers.

ο *Quote:* "There's discrimination against Hispanic students, people think we don't speak English well."

- **Gender and Racial Discrimination:**
  - ο 43.8% of respondents experienced gender or racial discrimination, while the same percentage reported no discrimination, showing mixed experiences.
  - ο *Quote:* "I feel like sometimes the teachers treat some students differently based on their background."

- **Inclusivity:**
  - ο Many students rated inclusivity at a moderate level. They suggested that establishing clubs for marginalized female students of color could improve the experience.
  - ο *Quote:* "Having more POC clubs focused on girls would really help us feel more included."

- **Clubs and Sports as a Source of Belonging:**
  - ο Clubs, organizations, and sports provided the strongest sense of belonging.
  - ο *Quote:* "I feel connected to school through sports and clubs."

- **Role Models and Teacher Representation:**
  - ο Students noted a lack of teachers who share their background, which was seen as a challenge in building connections.
  - ο *Quote:* "None of my teachers look like me, it would be nice to have that."

Themes in Sense of Belonging and Connectedness in the School Community
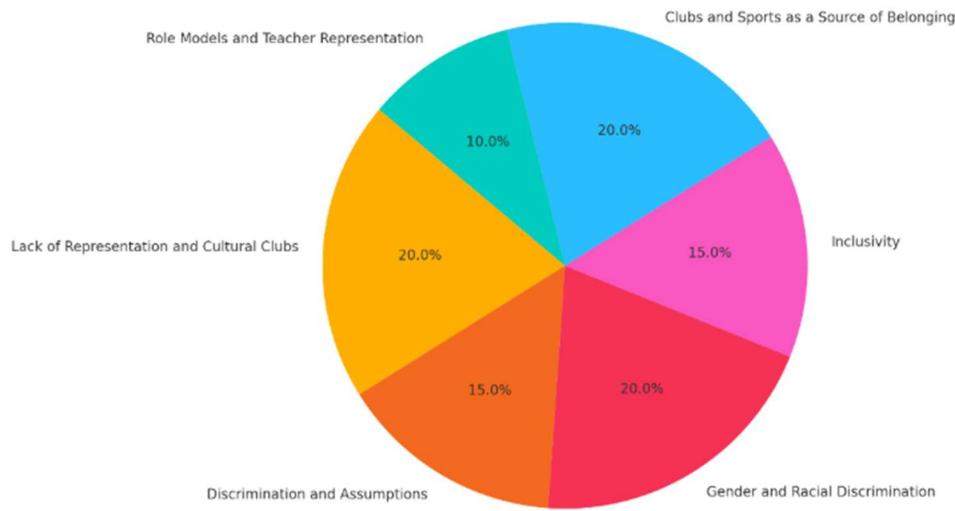
The chart above provides a clear and proportional view of the key themes related to students' sense of belonging and connectedness in the school community. Each slice represents a theme's relative importance.

2. Teacher Representation and Impact

Key Themes

- **Lack of Representation:**
  - ο Most students did not have teachers who shared their background, which they felt hindered understanding and support.
  - ο *Quote:* "None of my teachers look like me, it would be nice to have that."

- **Positive Impact of a Role Model in Leadership:**
  - ο Some students appreciated having leaders who understood their experiences.
  - ο *Quote:* "The head of my school understands me because he shares similar experiences."

Teacher Representation and Its Impact
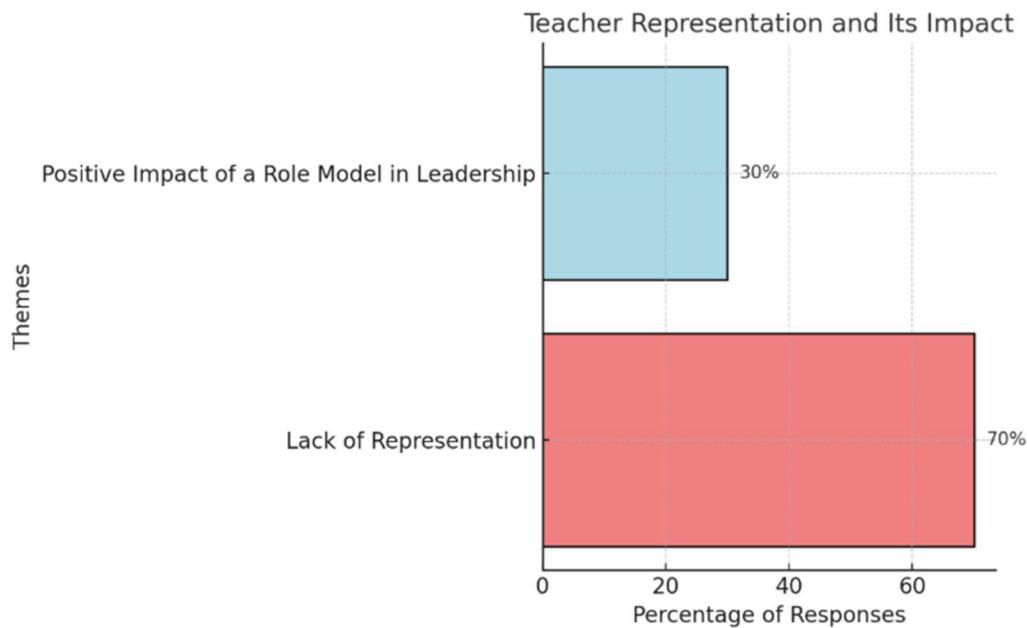
This horizontal bar chart effectively highlights the distribution of responses regarding teacher representation and its impact. The chart contrasts the lack of representation with the positive impact of role models in leadership.

3. Fairness of Disciplinary Actions

Key Themes

- **Mixed Experiences with Disciplinary Actions:**
    - Students felt discipline was inconsistently applied, often harsher for Black or Hispanic students.
    - *Quote:* "A boy physically attacked a student, but nothing happened to him. She got two detentions."

- **Teacher and Staff Discretion:**
    - Students mentioned that disciplinary outcomes often depend on the teacher, creating inconsistency.
    - *Quote:* "Depends on the teacher, some are stricter with certain students."

Fairness of Disciplinary Actions

Teacher and Staff Discretion

40.0%

60.0%

Mixed Experiences with Disciplinary Actions
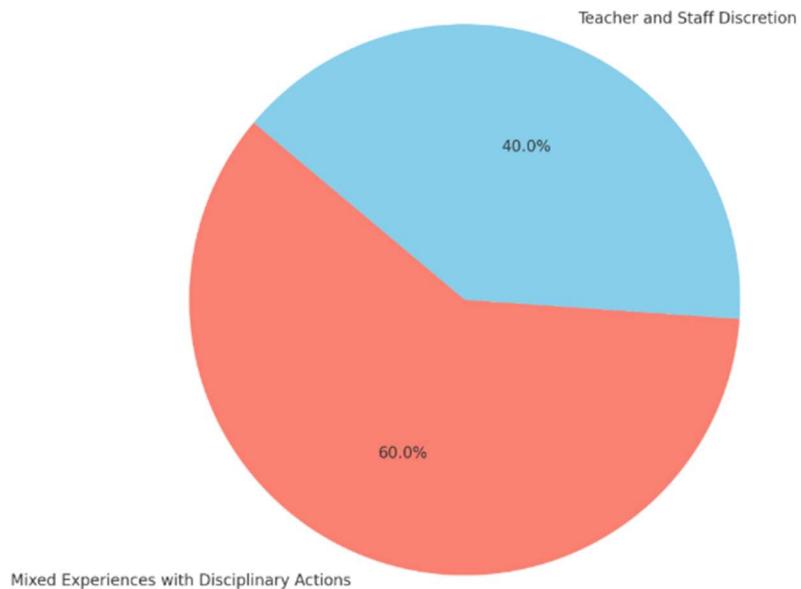
The chart above visually represents the key themes regarding the fairness of disciplinary actions. It shows the proportion of responses that highlight mixed experiences with disciplinary actions and the influence of teacher and staff discretion.

4. Challenges and Dislikes About School

<u>**Key Themes**</u>

- **Difficulties in Connecting with Peers:**
    - Students struggled to connect, particularly when few people looked like them.
    - *Quote:* "It's harder to connect when people don't look like you, but once you find friends, it's all good."

- **Overwhelming Workload:**
    - Students found the combination of schoolwork and extracurriculars overwhelming.
    - *Quote:* "Too much homework and too many subjects to study for."

- **School Lunch and Quality:**
  - o Several students mentioned dissatisfaction with the quality of school lunches.
  - o *Quote:* "Sometimes the lunch is really bad."
- **Colorism and Other Issues:**
  - o Students pointed out issues like colorism and lack of diversity as areas needing attention.
  - o *Quote:* "Colorism is an issue we need to address."

Challenges and Dislikes About School
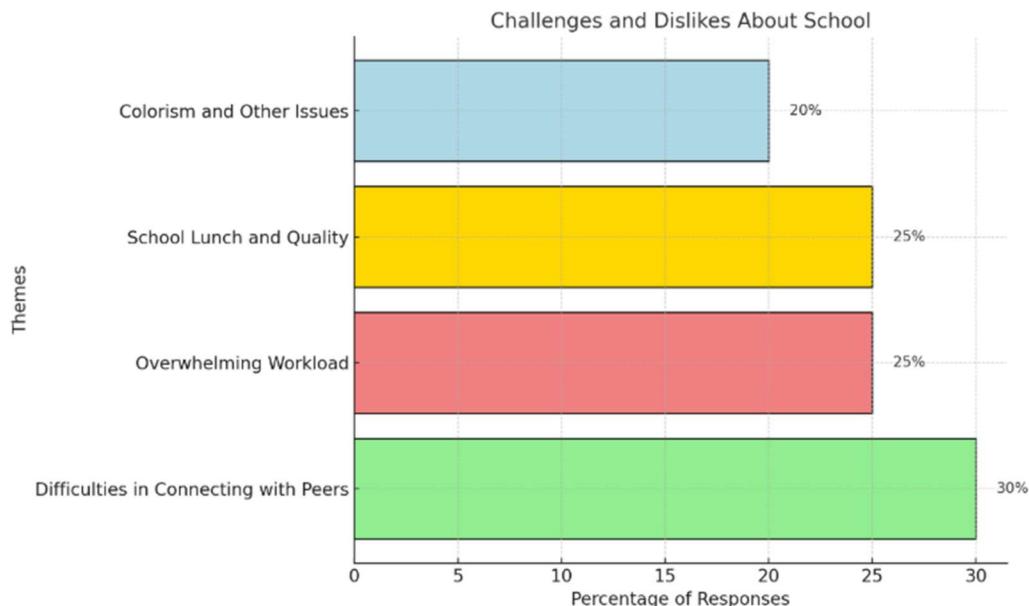
The chart above represents the key themes regarding challenges and dislikes about school.

Role Models and Influences

Key Themes

1. **Influence of Family as Role Models:**
   - o Many students highlighted their family, particularly their mothers, as role models for their strength, resilience, and guidance. These familial role models provide motivation for students to work hard and persevere in their endeavors.

Quote: "My mom is my role model because she's strong and hardworking."

2. **Positive Role Models in STEM and Life Lessons:**
   o Students emphasized the importance of seeing role models who have achieved success in fields where representation is limited. For instance, one student shared how her mother's accomplishments in STEM inspired her to pursue a similar path.
   Quote: "My mom is my role model because she's successful in STEM, where there are few Black women."

3. **Lack of Representation Among Role Models Outside the Family:**
   o Many students expressed difficulty finding role models who shared their racial or cultural backgrounds, especially in professional and academic settings. This lack of representation contributes to feelings of uncertainty about their ability to succeed in life and future careers.
   Quotes:
   - "I don't see people who look like me in leadership or in jobs I want to do. It makes me wonder if I'll ever make it."
   - "It's hard to imagine myself succeeding in certain careers when I've never seen anyone who looks like me doing it."
   o Students suggested that increasing diversity in leadership, faculty, and professional spaces could help bridge this gap and provide tangible examples of success.

Role Models and Influences

Lack of Representation Among Role Models Outside the Family
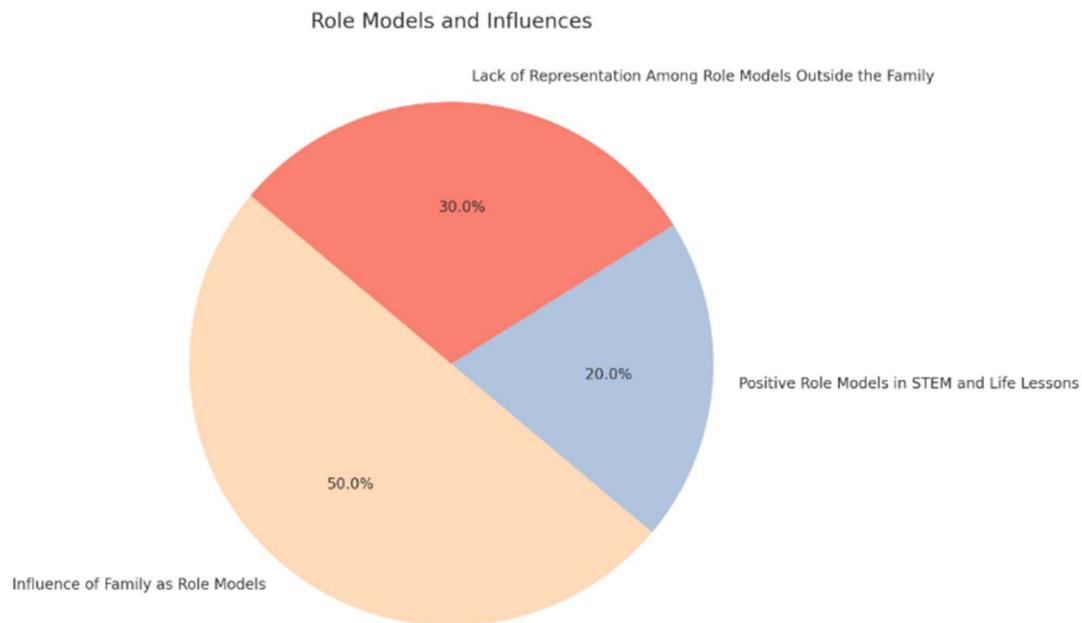
The chart above provides a clear comparison of the three key themes related to role models and influences. It highlights the significant impact of family, the inspiration from positive role models in STEM and life lessons, and the challenges posed by a lack of representation outside the family.

Conclusion

While students value the support they receive from family, extracurricular activities, and certain teachers, there are still significant areas where schools can do better to create a sense of belonging and fairness for everyone.

One major challenge students mentioned is the lack of representation. Many shared how important it is to see teachers and leaders who share their racial, cultural, or lived experiences. Without this representation, it can feel harder to connect or imagine themselves succeeding in certain careers. Students suggested creating spaces like a Black Student Union or clubs for marginalized groups to help foster community and make schools feel more inclusive.

Another concern was the inconsistencies in disciplinary actions. Some students felt that discipline was not always fair, with Black and Hispanic students often facing harsher consequences. These experiences left students feeling unheard and unsupported. Addressing this issue by ensuring fairness and providing cultural sensitivity training for staff could help create a more equitable environment.

Students also spoke about the overwhelming pressure of balancing schoolwork and extracurricular activities, which often feels too much to handle. Combined with challenges like dissatisfaction with school lunches and the presence of colorism, these struggles highlight the need for schools to provide better support for students' well-being.

On a positive note, family members, especially mothers, were often cited as strong role models. However, students also expressed how the lack of diverse role models outside the family affects their confidence and dreams. When they don't see people who look like them in leadership or professional roles, it's harder to imagine achieving those goals themselves. Schools could help by displaying more diverse success stories and providing opportunities for students to connect with mentors who share similar backgrounds.

Overall, the feedback highlights the importance of creating a school environment where all students feel seen, valued, and supported. By focusing on representation, fairness, and balance, schools can help every student thrive academically, socially, and emotionally—and ensure they feel empowered to reach their full potential.

Recommendations

1. **Increase Representation**
   - Recruit diverse faculty and staff to serve as relatable role models.
   - Provide cultural competence training for teachers.

2. **Foster Inclusivity**
   - Establish clubs like a Black Student Union to support marginalized students.
   - Organize multicultural events and mentorship programs.

3. **Ensure Fair Discipline**
   - Create clear, equitable disciplinary guidelines.
   - Train staff to address biases and ensure fairness.

4. **Balance Workloads**
   o   Review academic demands to reduce student stress.
   o   Offer resources like time management workshops.

5. **Showcase Role Models**
   o   Invite diverse speakers and create mentorship opportunities.
   o   Highlight successful alumni from underrepresented backgrounds.

6. **Improve Support Systems**
   o   Enhance communication channels for student concerns.
   o   Improve resources like school lunches and mental health support.

These actions can help build a more inclusive and supportive school community.