



# PUSHING TOWARD PROGRESS

## Early Implementation Findings from a Study of the Male Student Success Initiative

Michelle Manno, Dominique Dukes, Oscar Cerna, and Colin Hill

NOVEMBER 2020

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# Overview

National college completion rates for men of color at open- and broad-access postsecondary institutions (including community colleges) lag behind completion rates for White students and for female students of any race or ethnicity. Research points to several broad factors to explain these unequal outcomes, including precollege environments that do not sufficiently prepare men of color for college, nonacademic barriers that compete for students' time and attention, and inadequate college campus support. Other scholarship challenges postsecondary education professionals to think critically about how discriminatory policies and practices and structural racism perpetuate this inequality nationwide.

Since the early 2000s, many colleges have tailored campus programs to provide academic and social support specific to the interests and needs of male students of color to overcome gaps in success rates. The Male Student Success Initiative (MSSI) at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) in Maryland is one such program, and MDRC is evaluating it through the Men of Color College Achievement (MoCCA) Project. MSSI's program model includes an ambitious set of services to support male students of color, including a culturally contextualized first-year student success course, assigned mentors (who are also men of color), connections with student support services on campus, leadership and professional development opportunities, and a focus on community building through activities that reflect racial and ethnic identities. While the student success course is one semester, the MSSI program is intended to keep students engaged beyond their first semester at CCBC.

This report presents findings on how the MSSI program was implemented in 2019 — the first year of the MoCCA study. Important insights from this early period of program implementation are:

- The resources supporting the program in 2019 were limited and its leadership had little available time and capacity for effective oversight.
- The MSSI program was not yet implemented fully, a common characteristic of newly formed or redesigned programs. Program components were implemented inconsistently and student attendance in program activities was lower than expected.
- There were promising indications of program improvements in 2019. For example, the college increased support for MSSI over time, and program staff members made notable efforts to strengthen the delivery of its components.

The time frame covered by this report predates the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the latest high-profile examples of racial injustice in this country, so their specific effects on the college and the MSSI program are not described here. However, CCBC was deeply affected by the pandemic, like most other colleges nationwide. The pandemic will likely exacerbate equity gaps for male students of color given its disproportionate effect on communities of color nationwide. At the same time, CCBC has reoriented its framework for equity and inclusion considering the struggle to address the ongoing marginalization of communities of color on a national scale. Those events and their impact on MSSI and the students participating in the study will be addressed in future reports.



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*The Authors*



## INTRODUCTION

**“IF THERE IS NO STRUGGLE, THERE IS NO PROGRESS.”  
– FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AUGUST 4, 1857**

**A**ccess to college has increased over recent decades, but student success — defined as the combination of persistence, achievement, engagement, and degree or certificate completion — remains largely unchanged.<sup>1</sup> College completion rates for men of color at open- and broad-access postsecondary institutions (including community colleges) lag behind completion rates for White students of any gender and female students of any race or ethnicity, indicating that these institutions still struggle with providing the necessary support for men of color to be successful.<sup>2</sup>

Research literature is rich with theories about men of color striving to achieve college success and completion. Three broad factors seem to get the most support for explaining unequal outcomes for these students:

1. precollege institutions or environments that do not sufficiently prepare men of color for college<sup>3</sup>
2. nonacademic barriers that compete with students’ time and attention for college, such as work and home life responsibilities, lack of financial support and resources, and uncertainty of social belonging (or a sense of having a positive relationship with others)<sup>4</sup>
3. inadequate social, emotional, and college campus support<sup>5</sup>

Recent scholarship challenges the postsecondary education field to think more critically about how inequality in educational attainment for students of color results from historical local, state, and national policies, discriminatory practices, and structural decisions that perpetuate this inequality across the country.<sup>6</sup> Though there are many sources of inequality of academic outcomes, community colleges typically lack the resources to provide the level of support to overcome the inequalities and consistently face difficult choices about allocating their finite resources within their schools.<sup>7</sup>

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1. Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner (2010); Pretlow, Jackson, and Bryan (2020).
2. Shapiro et al. (2017).
3. Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006); Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2010); Adelman (2004); Perry, Bahr, Rosin, and Woodward (2010); Harris III and Wood (2013).
4. Palmer, Davis, Moore, and Hilton (2010); Harris III and Wood (2013); Walton and Cohen (2007, 2011).
5. See Lee and Ransom (2011) for a summary and Harper (2012) for an extensive bibliography.
6. Ladson-Billings (2006); Bensimon (2005); Bensimon (2020); Steele and Aronson (1995).
7. Carnevale and Strohl (2013); Jenkins and Rodríguez (2013).

Since the early 2000s, to overcome gaps in success rates, many colleges have tailored campus programs to provide academic and cultural support specific to the interests and needs of male students of color.<sup>8</sup> The most common program components for strengthening college support to men of color include academic advising and counseling, academic and study skills training, leadership training, mentoring, and special events or workshops. However, these are not always all implemented within the same program.

An MDRC study that includes Male Student Success Initiative (MSSI) at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) in Maryland examines one program tailored to the needs of male students of color.<sup>9</sup> Like most community colleges, CCBC’s enrollment has declined over the past decade. Its four-year graduation and transfer rates for all students, and specifically for Black students, lag behind statewide rates and those of their White peers at CCBC.<sup>10</sup> See Box 1 for information about the context of racial inequality in Baltimore County within which CCBC operates.

## Box 1

### Baltimore County Region

Baltimore County, Maryland, surrounds but does not include the city of Baltimore. The region has had a history of racial segregation and marginalization of disenfranchised communities of color for decades, especially African Americans. Remnants of segregation-era policies can still be found in Baltimore County today. For example, although racial covenants were struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1948 and deemed unenforceable by the 1968 Fair Housing Act, many communities in Baltimore County continue to have discriminatory language in their home deeds initially established in the early 1940s when African Americans were prevented from living there.\* In the years since, as with other parts of the country, the 1960s saw a migration of predominately White residents out of the city of Baltimore into the surrounding Baltimore County, leaving the city with predominately Black residents (62 percent in 2018).<sup>†</sup> In more recent decades, the number of Black residents in the county grew; in 1990, 12 percent of residents were Black, and in 2018 that percentage was 29 percent.<sup>‡</sup>

\*Miller (2020); Solomon (2019).

<sup>†</sup>[U.S. Census Bureau \(2018\)](#).

<sup>‡</sup>[U.S. Census Bureau \(2018\)](#); [Maryland State Data Center \(2011\)](#). The city and county have nearly equal percentages — around 6 percent — of Hispanic or Latino residents in 2018.

- .....
8. Gardenhire-Crooks and Cerna (2016). The number and types of programs profiled in Gardenhire-Crooks and Cerna’s 2016 scan has changed, as programs have been added, changed, or ceased operations, indicating the difficulty of sustaining these kinds of programs over long periods of time.
  9. References to “male” students include any student who self-identifies as being male. See Johnson, Williams, and Wood (2015).
  10. CCBC Office of Planning (May 2020); Maryland Higher Education Commission (2020).

Now active at multiple locations across the CCBC system, MSSSI includes the common program components noted above. It strives to address issues of weak college preparation and academic achievement as well as nonacademic barriers that compete with students' time, and to support male students of color to improve their academic success and degree completion. CCBC's equity agenda includes a voluntary culturally responsive teaching and training program for staff members and students, support for events through the Office of Intercultural Engagement, and some classes targeted to specific student demographics or on topics that emphasize specific populations. See Box 2 for facts about CCBC.

MDRC's evaluation of the MSSSI program is taking place through its Men of Color College Achievement (MoCCA) Project. The study uses a mixed-methods approach to measure the effects of MSSSI on the persistence and degree completion of male students of color. This project includes an impact study to test these effects; an implementation study to understand how MSSSI operates and how its program components are executed; a cost study to analyze the costs associated with operating MSSSI; and a student voices qualitative study to understand how the backgrounds and experiences of male students of color impact their college careers.

This report presents findings on how the MSSSI program was implemented during the first year of the MoCCA study, using an early sample of students enrolled in the program. Students were enrolled in the study in two cohorts: the first in spring 2019 and the second in fall 2019. Important insights from this early period of program implementation are:

- The college designed a multifaceted program to engage male students of color and enhance their experiences while addressing their unique needs.
- There was a limited set of resources to support the program in 2019 and program leadership had little available time to oversee the program.
- The college struggled to implement MSSSI consistently. For example, MSSSI staff members reported inconsistent approaches to communicating and working with students, which may have resulted in lower-than-expected student attendance in various program components.
- Despite these shortcomings, there are recent indications of stronger implementation. The college increased support for MSSSI over time, and program staff members made notable efforts to strengthen its components.

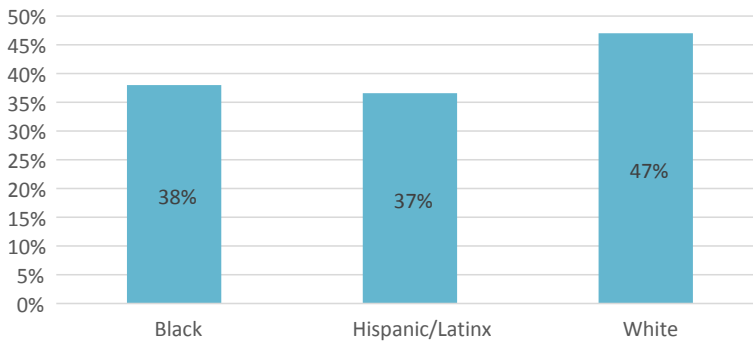
Although early indications suggest implementation improved over time as MDRC worked with the college to strengthen the program model and operational processes, the college and MSSSI were deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in March 2020. The pandemic will likely exacerbate equity gaps for the male students of color, as communities of color are hit disproportionately harder by COVID-19. At the same time, the United States continues to struggle to address the latest examples of racial injustice and marginaliza-

## Box 2

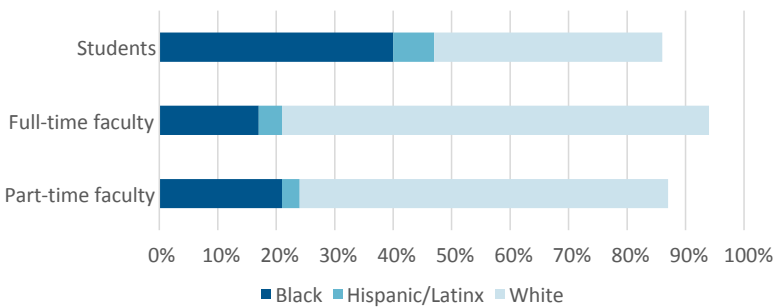
### Facts About CCBC

- Location: Baltimore County, Maryland
- Campuses: 3 main campuses and 3 extension centers
- Credit student enrollment (2018): 27,800
- Full-time student enrollment (2018): 11,600
- Students who are Baltimore City residents: 11.1%
- Students who are Baltimore County residents: 66.4%

Four-Year Graduation/Transfer Rates for  
CCBC Students, 2018



Race/Ethnicity of CCBC Students and  
Faculty (Fall 2018)



SOURCE: [CCBC Office of Planning \(May 2020\)](#); [CCBC Office of Planning \(2019\)](#).

tion affecting Black communities on a national scale.<sup>11</sup> However, since the time frame covered by this report predates the pandemic and the racial tensions of 2020, it does not describe the specific effects on the college or MSSSI program. Those effects will be addressed in future reports.

## THE MSSSI PROGRAM MODEL

MSSSI is housed within CCBC’s Office of Instruction and receives funding through CCBC’s student success centers. It operates on three CCBC campuses: Catonsville, Essex, and Owings Mills.<sup>12</sup> The program’s stated primary goal is improving academic outcomes for men of color through five key program components, rooted in empirical research of factors that support such success.<sup>13</sup> MSSSI’s program model is more robust than other programs for men of color, offering an ambitious set of services to support students.<sup>14</sup>

- **Culturally contextualized approach.** In 2019, MSSSI was linked with Academic Development 101 (ACDV 101), CCBC’s one-semester course supporting first-year student success. MSSSI’s sections of ACDV 101 are taught

11. COVID Tracking Project and Boston University Center for Antiracist Research (2020).

12. MSSSI operated on the Catonsville and Essex campuses in both the spring and fall semesters of 2019; the Owings Mills campus was added in fall 2019.

13. Museus (2014); Truscello, Coleman, and Stone (2014); Gardenhire-Crooks and Cerna (2016); Ladson-Billings (1995).

14. Gardenhire-Crooks and Cerna (2016).

by adjunct faculty who have received training in culturally responsive teaching and work to engage students by making learning relevant and affirming students' cultural identities in the classroom.

- **Success Mentors.** Each student is paired with a Success Mentor, an adult male of color employed by CCBC who provides academic coaching and mentorship. Students are expected to meet with Success Mentors at a minimum of three times per semester.
- **Student support services.** Mentors connect MSSSI students to on-campus opportunities and resources, such as counseling, financial aid, and tutoring, to set them up for personal and academic success.
- **Leadership and professional development.** MSSSI provides students with opportunities for leadership and professional development, including activities like monthly cohort meetings, four-year college visits, cultural field trips, and a statewide conference for men of color.
- **Community and brotherhood.** Both inside and outside the classroom, MSSSI seeks to foster community through culture and identity-focused activities and group meetings.<sup>15</sup>

Although ACDV 101 is a one-semester course, the MSSSI program is intended to keep students engaged beyond their first semester at CCBC. Success Mentors are expected to contact students in their second semester of college and beyond, while students are expected to participate in MSSSI activities and take on leadership or peer mentorship roles within the program. Box 3 provides a brief history of the program.

## THE MoCCA EVALUATION

The MoCCA evaluation uses a multifaceted approach to assess how CCBC is implementing MSSSI, the program's operating costs, its effect on the persistence and degree completion rates of participants, and how the experiences of male students of color affect their college careers. Eligible students were randomly assigned to either the program group, which can access MSSSI services in addition to all other student support services on campus, or the control group, which only has access to the support services available to all students at CCBC.<sup>16</sup> This report describes how the program was implemented, with data collected from the first year (2019) of the research study. The data are from a baseline survey (completed by students immediately prior to random assignment), the program's management information system developed by the MDRC research team, interviews with CCBC faculty and

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15. Welbeck and Torres (2019).

16. See <https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/MoCCAIssueFocus2019.pdf> for more information about key outcomes of interest for this study. The final report will compare self-reports of support services (such as advising, mentoring, and tutoring) received by students in the program and control groups.



### Box 3

#### History of CCBC's Male Student Success Initiative

Since 2004, the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) has offered a culturally contextualized section of its student success course for men of color called Academic Development 101, known as “Men’s ACDV.” With the help of external grant funding, Men’s ACDV evolved into the Male Student Success Initiative (MSSI) in 2014, which operated out of CCBC’s career services office. MSSI offered mentorship and enhanced support and activities to students in the ACDV class, including retreats for MSSI peer mentors, robust community outreach, and student stipends. When the grant funding supporting the joint initiative ended, leadership changes and reorganization resulted in the separation of MSSI from Men’s ACDV, around 2017. CCBC’s Office of Instruction took on oversight of Men’s ACDV, while the college’s student success centers funded and operated MSSI. MSSI’s capacity shrank, partly because of reduced funding and staff turnover. The program lost staff and could no longer provide as much support or activities beyond mentoring. Men’s ACDV and MSSI remained largely distinct from one another until the Men of Color College Achievement (MoCCA) Project reintegrated them in 2018. MSSI was revitalized in part because of its relationship with the MoCCA Project and the study’s added funding. Still, it was not until early 2020 that the college committed to providing substantially more funds for the program and hired a full-time MSSI program coordinator.

MSSI staff members, observations of ACDV 101 classes, and focus groups and interviews with students during their first or second semester in the program.<sup>17</sup>

Along with these evaluation activities, MDRC technical assistance team members work with the MSSI team to strengthen and refine its program and align it with existing evidence on effective student success measures supported by current research. Program development activities include providing MSSI with formative feedback and recommendations based on MoCCA’s qualitative research, working closely with its leadership to develop tools and strategies to support team members, engaging other members of the college community to integrate the program with other student support services, and developing the management information system to record MSSI student participation in program activities.

#### Students Enrolled in the Study

To enroll students in the study, MSSI program staff members contacted eligible students through email, letters, text messages, and in-person outreach. Students eligible for MSSI and the study:

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17. The management information system captures limited information about program staff members’ contact with students. Especially in early 2019, staff members were still learning the nuances of the system and what information should be recorded, which resulted in limited data for this analysis. Staff usage of the system has improved over time.

- self-identify as a male of color (including Hispanic students and other ethnicities)
- are required to take ACDV 101 — typically students who are new to postsecondary education and new to CCBC
- are available for at least one ACDV 101 section affiliated with MSSSI

Interested students met with an MSSSI staff member to learn more about the program and the MoCCA evaluation. If they agreed to participate in the study, students completed a baseline survey and were randomly assigned to the program or control group. Once students were assigned to a research group, an MSSSI team member helped them register for the appropriate ACDV 101 courses. Over the course of the spring and fall 2019 semesters, 204 students enrolled in the study, with 92 in the program group and 112 in the control group.

Aside from their identity as men of color, the MSSSI students’ circumstances and goals vary widely, as shown in Table 1. Most MSSSI students are U.S.-born Black males 18 years old or younger,<sup>18</sup> and they are younger, on average, than the broader population of male students of color who were eligible for the study, also shown in Table 1. Students who identify as Hispanic or other make up a smaller proportion of the overall study group compared with the percentage in the larger MSSSI target population at CCBC.<sup>19</sup> While the distribution of characteristics is quite even across students in the program and control groups, the program group has a greater proportion of Black students born outside the United States (13 percent) and of students who speak a language other than English at home (37 percent). While these imbalances will likely decrease as the sample grows, they are noteworthy given evidence that foreign-born students may academically outperform native-born students — something to explore in future analysis.<sup>20</sup>

In their interviews, students discussed their feelings about their level of preparation for college, which varied. One-third of program group students were first-generation college students.<sup>21</sup> While some attended high schools that fostered a culture of going to college and offered college-prep courses, others attended schools they felt neither prepared them for college nor taught them to develop useful academic habits. Most students mentioned parents or other family members as the people in their lives who motivated or encouraged them to attend college.

One student elaborated: “My mom motivated me, told me there’s always something greater. It’s always better to have more education that will help you later on in life.” Some parents

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18. Throughout the rest of this report the term “Black” is used to describe students who consider themselves U.S.-born Black or African American, or non-U.S.-born Black.

19. Twenty-seven percent of the program group lives in the City of Baltimore.

20. See Conger, Schwartz, and Stiefel (2018).

21. The study team reached out to students enrolled in both the program and control groups to request interviews. The students agreeing to interviews were primarily randomly assigned to the program group.

**Table 1**  
**Baseline Characteristics of MoCCA Study Participants**  
**and Target Population**

<b>CHARACTERISTIC (%)</b>	<b>FULL SAMPLE</b>	<b>PROGRAM GROUP</b>	<b>CONTROL GROUP</b>	<b>TARGET POPULATION</b>
<b><u>Demographics</u></b>				
Age <sup>a</sup>				
18 and under	57.7	58.5	57.0	40.5
19 to 24	34.6	33.1	35.9	37.3
25 and over	7.7	8.4	7.1	22.2
Race				
Black, U.S.-born	77.4	69.7	83.7**	
Black, not U.S.-born	8.7	12.7	5.4*	68.2 <sup>f</sup>
Hispanic	5.2	8.0	2.9	13.0
Other	8.7	9.6	7.9	18.7
Primary household language is not English	30.6	36.7	25.6*	
Has at least one immigrant parent	27.1	36.2	19.6***	
Has at least one child	4.8	7.6	2.5	
<b><u>Education</u></b>				
First in immediate family to attend college	29.9	35.7	25.2	
Reason for enrolling in college				
Complete a certificate program	7.0	4.8	8.8	
Obtain an associate's degree	24.6	27.1	22.5	
Transfer to a 4-year college/university	62.1	62.2	62.1	
Obtain/update job skills	4.4	4.8	4.2	
Other	1.9	1.2	2.5	
<b><u>Financial</u></b>				
Employment				
Full time (more than 30 hours)	19.9	22.7	17.5	
Part time (30 hours or less)	37.4	38.2	36.7	
None	38.5	34.2	42.1	
Source of education funding <sup>b</sup>				
Employment	42.2	49.2	36.4*	
Financial aid <sup>c</sup>	56.3	57.4	55.3	
Student loans	16.1	17.0	15.4	
Parents/relatives <sup>d</sup>	41.0	39.7	42.1	
Other <sup>e</sup>	7.6	6.2	8.8	
Sample size	204	92	112	

continued

## Table 1 (continued)

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using self-reported data from a baseline survey completed by students at the time of random assignment and CCBC demographics data.

NOTES: The target population comprises incoming, first-time, male students of color at CCBC who were eligible for ACDV in the spring or fall 2019 semester.

Distributions may not add to 100 percent because of rounding. Estimates are weighted to account for differences in random assignment ratios across cohorts. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

<sup>a</sup>Age is calculated on date of random assignment.

<sup>b</sup>Distributions may not add to 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>c</sup>Financial aid includes all self-reported educational grants and scholarships from public or private sources.

<sup>d</sup>20.7 percent of students did not know if their parents would pay more than half of their educational expenses.

<sup>e</sup>This category includes credit cards, income from a spouse/partner, personal savings, and other funding sources.

<sup>f</sup>CCBC demographics data did not include national origin so this value represents all students identifying as Black.

also encouraged students to start at CCBC and weigh their options while exploring different areas of study and career paths. Students described family members and family friends as their principal role models. Older siblings and cousins helped them navigate the process of selecting transferable core classes and preparing for college financially.

One interviewee said his father's friend serves as his career mentor: "I look up to him because he's a company owner, and inspires me to keep going to do the same." Other students cited support from their high school counselors in shaping their college goals and preparing them for the college registration process: "My mother didn't go to college, and my father is deceased now — he didn't go to college. So, I didn't really know how to go about all this college stuff. I really depended on asking my [high school] counselor because I had a bunch of questions."

Many enrolled students balance other priorities outside of school. As Table 1 shows, 61 percent of program group students were employed at the time of enrollment, with about a third of those employed working full time. Some students said they had flexible work schedules while taking courses, but mentioned difficulties trying to balance work and school. When asked about hardships early in their college careers, students said a major concern was trying to find enough time to study and complete homework assignments prior to starting work, or having enough energy to complete coursework after long shifts. Older students also described their struggles with balancing family life and responsibilities with their college pursuits. One said, "I got six kids and mortgage and rent and stuff to pay... If I was 20, 21 years old, I could see me surviving easily, but I make a lot of sacrifices to be in school." Responsibilities in their work and family lives were concerns among students of all ages as they began managing the time and effort spent on academic tasks early in their college careers.

Looking ahead, many MSSSI program group students hope to continue their educations beyond CCBC, with 62 percent saying their primary goal in enrolling at CCBC is to transfer to a four-year college or university. Some students added that their parents encouraged them to eventually transfer to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or predominantly White four-year colleges outside the Baltimore area. About 25 percent of students said they enrolled primarily to obtain an associate’s degree.<sup>22</sup>

## THE MSSSI CONTEXT

This section presents findings on how MSSSI was organized and managed in 2019, and the broader context in which it operated at CCBC. It also explores operating challenges within MSSSI arising from unstable and time-constrained leadership, MSSSI team members’ impressions that MSSSI was not priority at CCBC, and limited visibility and integration of the program within the greater college community. The findings are drawn from analyses of MSSSI team member and other college staff member interviews. The results suggest that MSSSI faced many operational challenges throughout 2019, but the research team’s experience with MSSSI during 2020 indicates the program has made some improvements, particularly in terms of stabilizing its leadership. Some of those changes are explored in the conclusion of this report, and a fuller analysis of program operations will be provided in the final report for this study.

### How Does MSSSI Operate?

For all of 2019, the MSSSI team consisted primarily of Success Mentors — all men of color at one of three campuses (Catonsville, Essex, and Owings Mills), working as part-time staff members. Some Success Mentors also taught ACDV 101 classes linked with MSSSI and other classes at CCBC. That year, MSSSI also employed work-study students to provide administrative support for the program and act as peer mentors.

In preparation for spring 2019, all Success Mentors received basic academic advising training. In fall 2019, they received additional training to teach ACDV 101 and provide guidance for teaching MSSSI students. The mentors were encouraged to attend a culturally responsive teaching and learning workshop, a workshop on engagement principles for mentoring and teaching, and the Maryland Male Students of Color Summit.<sup>23</sup> Beyond this, each Success Mentor’s training and professional development varied. Some Success Mentors spent weeks shadowing their more experienced peers in the classroom. Others received no further formal

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22. In his study, Mason (1998) found that students’ certainty about their education goals was positively associated with persistence.

23. The training to teach the culturally contextualized sections of ACDV includes information about stereotype threat, implicit bias, and their effect on instruction. For more on stereotype threat, see Steele and Aronson (1995).

training or professional development, in part because they were hired quickly and began working with students right away.

To accommodate the study and an influx of program participants, the MSSSI team expanded at the beginning of fall 2018. So in 2019, most Success Mentors were relatively new and based across multiple campuses in the CCBC system. Although Hispanic students and students of other races and ethnicities represented 17 percent of program group students (see Table 1), in recent years, Success Mentors were exclusively Black. One MSSSI team member said this lack of representation of other races and ethnicities is a recruiting challenge that affects how the larger population of men of color is served at CCBC. He said MSSSI could emphasize recruiting more non-Black Success Mentors. Still, the Success Mentors come from diverse backgrounds, are different ages, and bring various attributes to the program. For example, some Success Mentors have a background in fields such as social work or education, and some younger team members either attended CCBC or work in, for example, the student services office or in another non-teaching position.

.....  
“Well, I think [this is the] opportunity for us to really solidify our leadership team, in terms of staffing, to scale up the program as an opportunity area for us as an institution to consider for improvement. The dedication of resources long-term will help us with that.”  
.....  
-MSSSI team member

Each Success Mentor served an average of six students in spring 2019 and 11 students in fall 2019. Students were assigned to mentors depending on their home campus, the instructor who taught their ACDV 101 class, and the mentor’s relative experience. Mentors’ caseloads were unevenly distributed, with some being assigned 16 students, while others had as few as six. Some Success Mentors expressed concerns about their capacity to serve their students, in part due to their limited working hours. The uneven distribution caused some resentment within the team.

Mentors met weekly throughout 2019 to talk about recruitment, discuss challenges and barriers with their work, and share important information about program execution. Mentors turned to their peers or supervisors for support and assistance when they needed it. They shared information about experiences with their students, and class instructors helped promote engagement between Success Mentors and their assigned mentees. For example, instructors walked students directly from class to their mentor’s office. Although differing campus cultures and personality conflicts sometimes caused teamwork to break down, some Success Mentors created strong working relationships, allowing them to strategize together around more effective ways to serve their students.

In 2019, the Success Mentors were led by a faculty liaison, a full-time faculty member with a set number of hours allocated specifically for MSSSI. The faculty liaison supervised the MSSSI team, provided a bridge between MSSSI and senior college leadership, and worked with college staff members and people from other departments to accomplish MSSSI’s goals.

Throughout 2019, the faculty liaison position experienced significant turnover; two individuals left the role within the year. After each individual left, the program struggled to find new leaders, which left the position vacant for several weeks. Following a recom-

.....  
*“I think it’s important for them to ... have ...  
mentors ... who look like them. Be a representative.  
Be a minority. Across the campus you may not see  
individuals who look like you .... we’re role models.”*  
.....  
–MSSI Success Mentor

mendation from the research team, CCBC hired a full-time program coordinator in spring 2020 (in lieu of a faculty liaison) to stabilize MSSSI’s leadership and to address the challenges arising from leadership’s limited time and capacity. A later report will explore how these changes affected MSSSI management and operations.

Beyond turnover, MSSSI’s management faced other challenges. Because MSSSI faculty liaisons had limited time and capacity, certain aspects of the work, such as training or documenting and monitoring program activities, did not receive the attention required to make implementation of program activities more consistent and impactful, according to several interviewees. A few interviewees also noted that supervision of the program was additionally made difficult due to interpersonal challenges between team members, unclear MSSSI team roles, and the relative distance and differing programmatic cultures between CCBC campuses within MSSSI. Further, the MSSSI team members who were interviewed expressed concerns about the transparency of program decisions, saying that sometimes these decisions did not take all staff members’ opinions or time constraints into account.

## How Is MSSSI Engaged with the Campus Community?

Several MSSSI-affiliated and other college staff members said that MSSSI was not well known on campus and had limited visibility. The program was not well understood by some student services staff members outside MSSSI. Some staff members said they did not understand who is in charge of the program, what team members’ roles are, how MSSSI impacts students, and how the program fits within CCBC’s broader initiatives around diversity and student success.<sup>24</sup> Some study participants said the program missed opportunities to gain broader recognition at the college, such as declining to present its work at a big campus-wide event.

In addition, interviewees noted that MSSSI was not well integrated with CCBC’s other student support services, partially because the program was being managed from within the Office of Instruction and not from Enrollment and Student Services, which houses many other student support services. MSSSI also had limited connections to other diversity and equity initiatives at CCBC, which was another significant barrier to forming strong connections with other departments. (See Box 4 for more information about interviewees’ general perception of diversity and equity on campus.) These challenges and the perception that

.....  
24. Other diversity and equity initiatives at CCBC include an education equity agenda that specifically highlights Black students, events hosted by the Office of Intercultural Engagement such as a culturally responsive teaching and learning program, and workshops in which the community college can discuss issues of diversity and equity.

## Box 4

### CCBC's Moves Toward Equity and Inclusion

While the stated priorities of the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) include student engagement, enrollment stabilization, and equity, some college staff who were interviewed for this report said that the college has yet to provide enough resources or support to retain students, especially students of color. One interviewee noted that CCBC has an educational equity agenda that highlights African American students specifically. However, the college's 2020 strategic plan does not directly reference race or ethnicity. This is important, given the diversity of CCBC's student body. Some staff members said the college does not provide sufficient opportunities to talk about race. Hiring more men of color for leadership positions is one example of how the college could be more equitable, staff members said. A second example involves addressing implicit biases identified by some staff, who reported that some faculty members have questioned whether a student is capable of writing a paper, and the student services staff have sometimes failed to recommend, for example, honors programs or challenging classes to students, based on preconceived notions of a student's ability. More recently, in light of increased attention on racial injustice and the marginalization of Black communities across the country, in June 2020 CCBC's president announced plans to address the achievement gap for students of color, especially Black men, compared with their White peers, and other actions to strengthen equity and inclusion on campus. Those initiatives include creating an ongoing forum for difficult conversations about race and expanding CCBC's culturally responsive teaching and learning program.\*

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\*Kurtinitis (2020).

MSSI lacked resources and sustained support from executive-level staff members helped fuel a widespread impression among its team members that the program was not a priority at the college. Although a few midlevel CCBC staff members were involved in the program's general oversight, the MSSI staff members who were interviewed had no consensus about who was an advocate for the program. None of the MSSI interviewees identified an executive-level staff member at CCBC as an advocate.

Nevertheless, a CCBC-wide student services staff member who knew the program called it a great resource for students. One respondent suggested the college community perceived MSSI students as scholars due to the high expectations the program sets for them, indicating the positive perceptions of the program that could be nurtured.

By fall 2019, MSSI had gained some visibility at CCBC, and as the program continued to grow and stabilize, MSSI team members named improvements to credibility within the college community as a key priority. MSSI staff members described building positive relationships with faculty and staff members across different departments throughout 2019 to foster better connections to support students in the program, and to inspire faculty to make future referrals to the program. One interviewee stated that laying this groundwork among faculty and frontline student services staff members was very effective at creating



opportunities to connect with more students. Furthermore, another interviewee suggested that executive-level staff members are also changing their perspectives on the program and are becoming more supportive of MSSSI, partially as a result of the research study and how it has helped to solidify the program model.

## How Students Engaged with MSSSI

The MSSSI program successfully enrolled and worked with students in 2019 after overcoming some operational challenges discussed above. Of the program group students who enrolled in the study in both cohorts in 2019, an average of 89 percent enrolled in classes in their first semester. This section presents each MSSSI program component and describes the program’s implementation experiences. Management information system data and analysis of interviews with MSSSI staff members show that the MSSSI program was not implemented consistently and student participation in program components fell short of expectations. However, there are early indications that program implementation strengthened over time.

### Academic Development 101 for MSSSI (ACDV-MSSSI)

Academic Development 101 is a one-credit course designed to familiarize students with CCBC and to help them develop skills and strategies to be successful in college. The MSSSI sections of this course (ACDV-MSSSI) run for 14 weeks. The curriculum is based on the common course outline developed for standard ACDV 101 courses but is culturally contextualized to relate specifically to men of color. Course content is tailored to draw upon the lived experiences of the instructors and the students; students have a safe space to speak freely about their experiences as men of color and how they relate to the topic of discussion. Instructors use

culturally relevant materials, including videos featuring speakers who are men of color or readings by or about men of color as conversation starters. One instructor described ACDV-MSSSI as a class where students learn to trust one another, how to address racial identity, and how to navigate structural racism.

.....  
“Why is it that MSSSI is only successful when there’s grant money? Why is this program not part of operational budget? Because if it was, then I think that would help people see it differently.”  
—former MSSSI team member  
.....

Each instructor interviewed said successfully engaging students depended on personalized content and allowing open discussion. Many of the students described the course as an opportunity to discuss and explore their academic and career goals, and how their current college responsibilities help them better plan for reaching those goals. Some students also said the course helped introduce them to many available student services and resources and how to use them to succeed at CCBC.

Instructors said they took different approaches outside of class time. For example, one instructor sent an email to his students after each class to review the class content for the

day and what the students needed to do in the coming week. Other instructors did not contact students outside of class.

Two sections of ACDV-MSSI were offered in spring 2019. ACDV-MSSI attendance data are not available for this first cohort. MSSI staff members reported a good deal of attrition in class attendance over the semester, sometimes starting with close to 20 students in a section and having only three or four students attending regularly

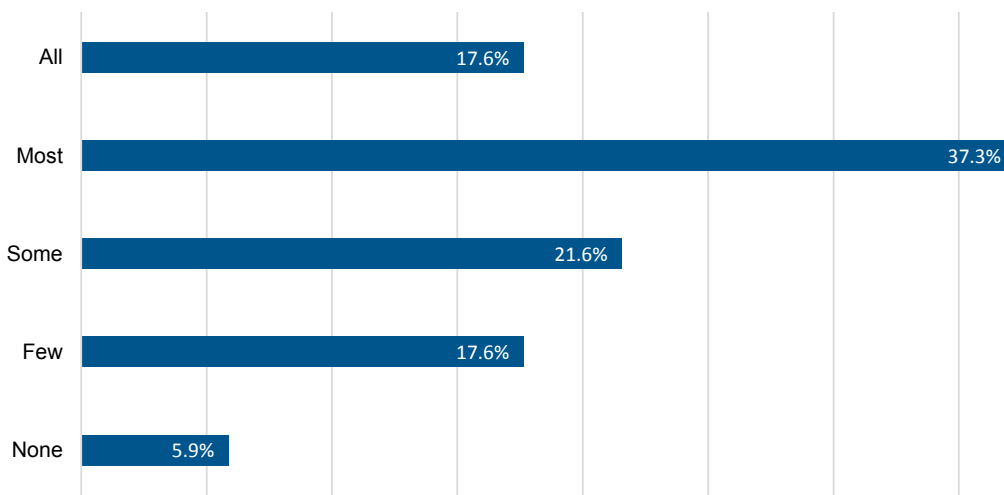
by midsemester. However, staff members said the attendance slide was likely because students had other obligations, such as work or family issues. Students cited the challenge of school-life balance in focus groups, with some indicating the difficulties of deciding between working full time to earn the needed income to pay rent and bills, or spending the time attending their classes and studying in order to stay successful in college.

The fall semester of 2019 offered five sections of ACDV-MSSI. Figure 1 shows data associated with this second cohort that instructors put into the MSSI management information system. More than 50 percent of students attended class at least two-thirds of the time (“all” or “most” in the figure) and about 25 percent attended less than one-third of the time (“few” or “none” in the figure).

.....  
*“I think [in] ACDV, [we’re] learning the things that you should know for the school, the kinds of resources that the school has, the kinds of things that you can do in the school, the kinds of things that the school can do for you, because that’s the main thing — what kinds of things can the school do for you, because that’s what services are here for you.”*  
.....  
-MSSI student

Figure 1

### Second Cohort’s Attendance at ACDV 101 Classes



SOURCES: Program data and transcript records received from CCBC.

NOTES: Distributions may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

Estimates are weighted to account for differences in random assignment ratios across cohorts.

ACDV 101 attendance information was only available for Cohort 2.

Attendance category definitions:

"Most" = Attended 2/3 to less than all classes

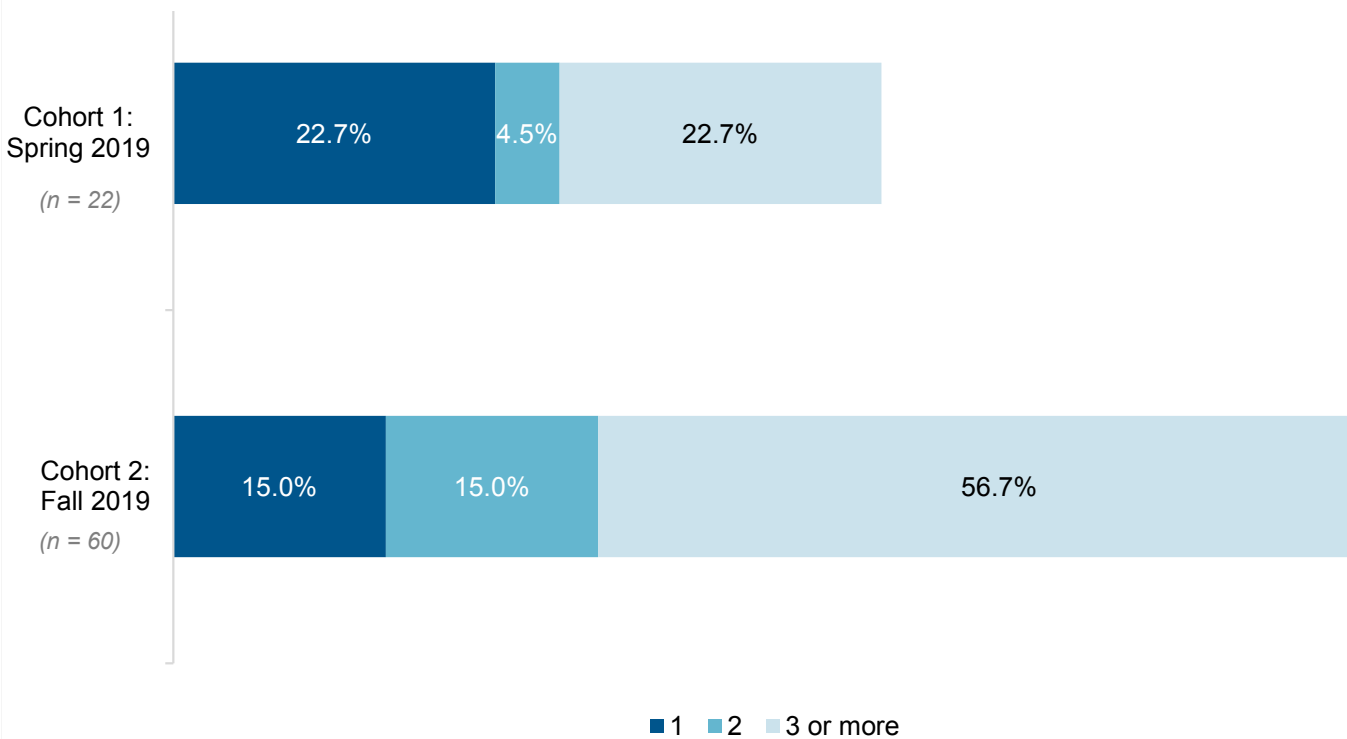
"Some" = Attended 1/3 to 2/3 of classes

"Few" = Attended less than 1/3 of classes

## Mentoring

Each student enrolled in MSSSI was assigned a Success Mentor and was expected to meet with his mentor at least three times a semester during the first semester. As shown in Figure 2, participation in mentoring varied by cohort. More Cohort 2 students completed more mentoring sessions than Cohort 1 students, suggesting the program’s approach to mentoring strengthened its implementation over time. Starting in the fall 2019 semester, students achieving their mentoring attendance goal were given \$150 — an approach developed to encourage participation. Overall, across two cohorts, 77 percent of enrolled students in the program group met with a mentor in their first semester in MSSSI but only about 50 percent of enrolled students met the goal of meeting with their mentor at least three times in their first semester.

**Figure 2**  
**Mentoring Session Attendance, by Cohort**



SOURCES: Program data and transcript records received from CCBC.

MSSSI staff members and students offered explanations for lower-than-expected levels of participation. First, MSSSI mentors said students may have commitments outside of school that make it difficult to attend mentoring sessions, which students corroborated in focus groups. Also, mentors said that they took different approaches to connecting with their assigned students, suggesting inconsistent implementation of the program component. Some

mentors said they met with students more than three times a semester — particularly those mentors who also serve as ACDV-MSSI instructors and saw students in their class at least weekly.

Mentors also reported different approaches to tracking down students who did not respond to their contact attempts. Some mentors reported going to a class to find a student who did not answer phone calls; some mentors also mentioned reaching out to other

.....  
*“If you need something, they’re there. It’s not hard to get in touch with them. They make themselves available to you. They make the students like their number one priority.”*

.....  
*—MSSI student*

faculty about how their MSSI students were doing. Success Mentors said they had different approaches to entering records about student contacts into the program’s management information system. This additional context suggests that these data do not fully capture the breadth of interactions that Success Mentors have with their assigned students.

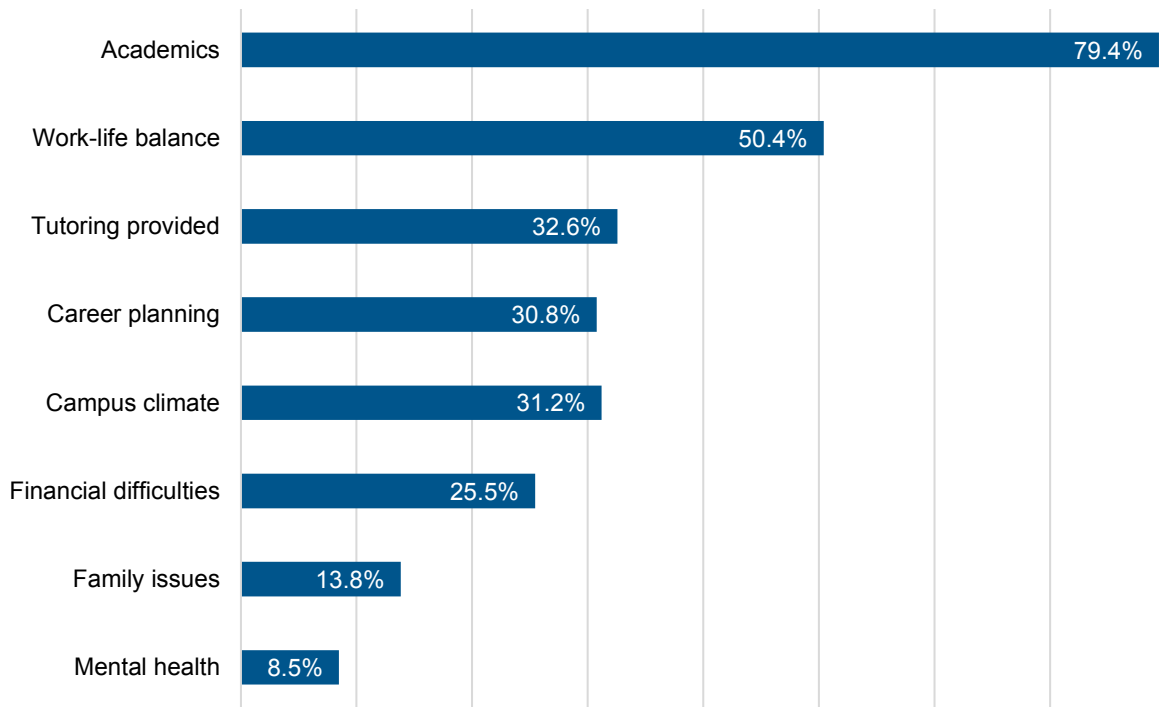
There is not enough data to report yet, but MSSI mentors said meetings with students typically lasted about 20 or 30 minutes each. Across both cohorts, students covered a wide variety of topics with their mentors, but mentors said they led with discussions about academics. Figure 3 shows that 79 percent of students discussed academics, and about half discussed work-life balance. Less frequently, they discussed campus climate, career planning, and financial difficulties. While mentors asked students about their academic performance, they also could go into the college’s computer system to check on grades and use that as a conversation starter, although not all mentors did this.

Many students in the focus groups mentioned how active and engaged their MSSI mentors were, especially in helping them talk and work through personal problems that interfered with their academic progress. Some said their mentors were easily reached, with one student saying, “it wasn’t hard to get in touch with them. They make themselves available.” Other students described their mentors as people on campus that cared about their success, encouraged and motivated them to be diligent — and to ask for help when needed. Another student said he sought out his mentor when he felt a sense of accomplishment: “...[I]f I do good in my classes, I want to tell somebody, [and he] hypes me up, makes me feel good about it.”

This report does not present information about students in their second semester and their interaction with their mentors, as little data were available to report for 2019. However, it was expected that students would continue to meet with a Success Mentor at least three times each semester. Attrition is expected between semesters, but the program is expected to proactively engage students beyond their first semester. According to staff members, participation by second semester students seems uneven.

Figure 3

## Topics Students Discussed with Their Success Mentors



SOURCES: Program data and transcript records received from CCBC.

NOTES: Distributions may not add to 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.

Only mentoring sessions from a student's first program semester are considered.

Estimates are weighted to account for differences in random assignment ratios across cohorts.

## Referrals and Connections

Success Mentors provide referrals to on-campus resources needed by their students. For example, students with basic needs can be referred to success “navigators” on campus who can connect them to resources for addressing issues with mental health, food insecurity, transportation, or utility assistance. Students needing extra academic support may be referred to tutoring or the writing lab. Although any CCBC student has access to these resources, some Success Mentors said they walked students to these other offices on campus to establish closer connections. Although there is not yet sufficient data to report, Success Mentors said they did not refer many students to on-campus resources, but it is not clear why: whether because of a lack of identified need or something else. However, a few students who were interviewed described how their mentors guided them to use on-campus resources they needed, such as applying for Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or identifying and enrolling in the right courses for their educational plans.

## Professional and Leadership Development

Professional and leadership activities in the MSSSI program include participation in campus events organized by campus offices and activities organized for MSSSI students only. MSSSI staff members also encourage students to attend various on-campus events planned by other offices that give them an opportunity to develop professional or leadership skills. Examples include the college’s “Distinguished African-American Lecture Series” and career fairs.

The program invites first- and second-semester students to all events, but staff members said first-semester students tended to participate more than second-semester students. It is not clear whether this was due to the students’ lack of interest or not knowing about these opportunities. MSSSI staff members said that the program was balancing multiple priorities for the program relaunch in the spring 2019 semester and therefore did not offer many opportunities for development early on. The number of professional and leadership opportunities grew between the spring and fall 2019 semesters.

Starting in fall 2019, program group students were encouraged to attend monthly MSSSI meetings. These were structured opportunities for students to discuss professional or leadership topics as well as issues they were experiencing that they could problem solve together. The meeting agendas were organized by MSSSI staff members. Other fall 2019 opportunities included participation in the Maryland Men of Color conference and a trip to the African American Museum of Art in Washington, DC; about a dozen students participated in each event. The program also hosted a luncheon for students to learn more about registering for the next semester. A prominent feature of the MSSSI program in past years was tours of four-year college transfer options, but those visits did not take place in 2019.

## Community and Brotherhood

Higher education literature has defined community and brotherhood as a feeling of connectedness and of being accepted and valued.<sup>25</sup> It has been linked to the retention, achievement, and success of students of color in postsecondary education.<sup>26</sup> MSSSI aims to foster a sense of community and brotherhood throughout its entire program. The staff members themselves and program activities reinforce community and brotherhood building among MSSSI participants.

.....  
“One thing that I like is that we don’t  
only learn from the professors, but  
also learn from each other.”

.....  
–MSSSI student  
.....

All Success Mentors and ACDV-MSSSI instructors are men of color, which is intended to help MSSSI students see themselves in leadership and professional roles and promote a positive cultural identity. Furthermore, each planned activity is an opportunity for students to come together to develop the feeling of community and

.....  
25. Strayhorn (2012).

26. Harris III and Wood (2013); Hurtado and Carter (1997); Perrakis (2008).

connectedness. As MSSSI was balancing multiple priorities for the program re-launch during the spring 2019 semester, the program offered relatively few activities to bring MSSSI students together. The program hosted several community-building activities in the fall 2019 semester, including a cookout for MSSSI students and staff members to mingle informally. Students mentioned to the study team that they sought more opportunities to come together socially — for example, to play video games or sports — a desire some Success Mentors also mentioned.

## CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

MSSSI offers multifaceted support for male students of color, but remains only one program among many CCBC initiatives competing for the college's limited resources. The analysis presented here finds that CCBC's MSSSI program was not yet implemented to its full potential, which is commonly experienced by newly formed or redesigned programs. There are promising indications of program improvements over 2019, and MSSSI staff members spent the 2019-2020 academic year working with MDRC to establish and support a stable management team and strengthen the consistency and documentation of Success Mentors' interactions with their assigned students.

Funding for MSSSI is now explicitly included in the college's operating budget, and in spring 2020 the college announced the appointment of a full-time program coordinator to replace the former part-time faculty liaison role. The research team hosted a series of workshop meetings prior to fall 2020, hoping to address some of the challenges presented in this report. During this meeting MSSSI secured stronger commitment from senior CCBC leadership. As part of the technical assistance aspect of this project, the research team will continue providing recommendations and support as the program evolves.

While this report focuses on program experiences in 2019, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide calls to address police brutality, racial profiling, and continued marginalization of communities of color threw CCBC and the country into a state of upheaval. These realities have implications for MSSSI moving forward. CCBC closed its campuses in mid-March 2020 and shifted to remote learning. The MSSSI program adapted and developed new ways to keep its community connected. Mentors reached out to their student mentees through texts and phone calls more frequently. Planned group events to support personal and leadership development were canceled and replaced with a weekly video conference for all MSSSI students to connect with one another. The absence of in-person connections on campus reduced opportunities for strengthening personal and professional support.

As the global pandemic raged, racial injustices soared to the forefront of the country's collective consciousness. The latest in a long history of Black men and women's deaths at the hands of police and private citizens spurred widespread protests urging an end to unjust law enforcement tactics and continued marginalization of people of color throughout the

United States. The renewed focus on these injustices also prompted CCBC to announce strategic institutional changes to foster a climate of equity and inclusion on campus. For example, in June 2020, CCBC’s president committed the college to analyze hiring patterns and develop strategies to increase the presence of Black employees to keep pace with the changing demographics of Baltimore County.<sup>27</sup>

MDRC’s evaluation of MSSSI will continue and the study team looks forward to understanding how the program is affected by this strengthened emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion at CCBC as well as by COVID-19. Additional program implementation data will be collected and analyzed to monitor adaptations in the program and student participation in each component; researchers will also continue to study the overall college environment at CCBC, paying particular attention to changes resulting from the college’s equity and inclusion goals. Additional student interviews will be conducted to learn more about student experiences in and outside of the program. Student enrollment in the study is anticipated to continue until fall 2021; a final report will present the full implementation story, program costs over the life of the study, and program impacts on academic outcomes such as persistence beyond the first year and number of credits earned. The study will also share findings through the College Completion Network, a group of postsecondary education researchers contributing to the existing evidence on college completion and college success.

.....  
27. Kurtinitis (2020).





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# ABOUT MDRC

MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization, is committed to finding solutions to some of the most difficult problems facing the nation. We aim to reduce poverty and bolster economic mobility; improve early child development, public education, and pathways from high school to college completion and careers; and reduce inequities in the criminal justice system. Our partners include public agencies and school systems, nonprofit and community-based organizations, private philanthropies, and others who are creating opportunity for individuals, families, and communities.

Founded in 1974, MDRC builds and applies evidence about changes in policy and practice that can improve the well-being of people who are economically disadvantaged. In service of this goal, we work alongside our programmatic partners and the people they serve to identify and design more effective and equitable approaches. We work with them to strengthen the impact of those approaches. And we work with them to evaluate policies or practices using the highest research standards. Our staff members have an unusual combination of research and organizational experience, with expertise in the latest qualitative and quantitative research methods, data science, behavioral science, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative design and program improvement processes. To disseminate what we learn, we actively engage with policymakers, practitioners, public and private funders, and others to apply the best evidence available to the decisions they are making.

MDRC works in almost every state and all the nation's largest cities, with offices in New York City; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles.