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# Utilizing Underserved Student Cultural Capital: The Tigers First Student-Initiated Retention Project

*Sheron Davenport, Jaclyn Rodriguez, and David Cox*

**Abstract**

Historically, U.S. underserved college students have lower college retention and completion rates. One explanation is a perceived gap between the student experience and college settings. Two main approaches used to address that gap are: colleges created programs to help students adapt to settings, and colleges have made changes in their settings to better serve and support the students. In both cases, colleges served as the agencies defining, designing, and guiding the change. While both approaches contribute to improved completion, a third approach may add another solution, student-initiated retention programming (SIRP). SIRPs are student organized, operated, and sustained efforts to persistence to graduation. Through a SIRP, underserved students can use cultural experiences to frame and deliver retention efforts. Drawing on a case study of Tigers First, a University of Memphis SIRP, this article will identify and describe the conditions and processes leading to the creation of a productive underserved student SIRP.

*Keywords: underrepresented students, student-initiated retention program, SIRP, first generation, cultural capital*

The level of student persistence to graduation rates in higher education institutions (HEI) has been a growing concern in the United States over the past several decades, especially for underserved students. Historically, students who are the first from their family to attend college, students of color, and students from lower income backgrounds have had even lower college retention and completion rates than the general student population (Terenzini et al., 2001). One explanation for that pattern is a perceived gap between the underserved students and their college settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Broadly, two factors have been identified as sources of that gap. One factor places the source with the background of the students (Astin & Oseguera, 2012). Programming is then designed to help the students change to adapt and fit within their college setting (Tinto, 1993). Another factor places the source with the practices of the HEIs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In response, the solution is to make changes within HEIs to better accommodate and adapt to the students (Tierney, 1993).

Although programs based on these factors may contribute to improved completion rates, both approaches present limitations. The first factor presumes that the personal and cultural backgrounds of the underserved students are deficient or irrelevant to a successful college experience (Tinto, 1993). Programming aimed at those presumed deficiencies and irrelevant backgrounds ignores and may conflict with the strengths that originate in students' experiences and cultures. The resulting tension may lead them to leave the institution (Tierney, 2000).

The second factor recognizes differences between the norms and beliefs of underserved students and the White, upper income, Eurocentric norms characteristic of many campuses. These differences lead to programming and practices that reflect the expectations of the dominant group while ignoring or dismissing those of minority groups. In response, institutions have sought to develop multicultural structures

and programming aimed at acknowledging those differences (Rendón, 1994). However, with that approach the institutions designing and implementing those changes are the very source of the problem (Freire, 1970). The results are institutional commitments that often do not go beyond symbolic exercises or programming with limited institutional support (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Again, the effect is that underserved students leave the institution. In both cases, failure to persist is blamed on the student rather than institutional approaches and supports.

A third approach, however, has arisen that provides another means of increasing underserved student college degree persistence and completion. Maldonado et al. (2005) identified this third approach as a student-initiated retention project (SIRP). In SIRPs, students are the source for identifying the need and designing, implementing, and sustaining the programming. A SIRP created by underserved students frames and delivers programming and policies based on their cultural experiences as an asset. SIRPs may lead to including more relevant and effective retention programming, more personally and culturally empowered underserved students, and, ultimately, a changed institution.

Although SIRPs provide another means of addressing underserved student persistence to graduation, organizations of any type do not just appear. Thus we must ask, what conditions and processes are necessary and conducive for the formation of an effective underserved student SIRP? Campuses across the United States vary in mission, culture, and student demographics. Accordingly, the conditions and processes for forming underserved student SIRPs on different campuses may vary (Maldonado et al., 2005). However, the creation of a SIRP at the University of Memphis provides a context for exploring those conditions and processes. A case study of that creation provides the framework for understanding those conditions and processes. As a means of analysis, a case study can produce new insights on an issue that can lead to innovative approaches and actions to address the issue, and new directions for further research (Mills et al., 2010; Swanborn, 2010). Drawing on observations by leaders of programs that contributed to it, insights will be applied in understanding the formation of the University of Memphis SIRP.

## Tigers First SIRP: The Campus Context

Tigers First, an underserved student SIRP, was formed as a student organization at the University of Memphis in 2017. The University of Memphis is a public research HEI located in the Southeastern United States. Its enrollment of approximately 22,000 students includes substantial proportions of underserved students: 33% of the students are African American, 17% are members of other minority groups, 34% are eligible for Federal Pell grant aid, and 38% are the first in their family to attend college. Consistent with other HEIs, underserved students have lower persistence and graduation rates than other groups on campus. As a result, attention to underserved student persistence to graduation is a campus priority.

Accordingly, the university has made efforts to close that gap. Programs and institutional changes were adopted aimed at improving underserved student persistence to graduation rates. Despite those efforts, these rates remained below the rates for other groups of students on campus and below university goals. In response, collaboration between two of the campus's existing programs and a U.S. Department of Education (DOE) grant gave rise to the third approach, a SIRP.

These SIRP programs were a U.S. DOE TRIO grant program and a Lumina Foundation and university funded first-generation program called First Scholars. Eligibility for the TRIO program required U.S. citizenship or permanent resident status plus meeting one of three criteria: neither parent has a bachelor's degree; the student's family meets Federal TRIO Program Family Low-Income guidelines; or the student requires special services due to a disability. Eligibility for entry into the First Scholars program included being a first-time, full-time, first-year student for whom neither parent earned more than 2 years of education beyond high school and no postsecondary degree. The student must also perform in the midrange of the university's admission standards and demonstrate financial need. The efforts of both programs provided programming and support for first-generation students and/or low-income, underrepresented students, reflecting the traditional approaches to underserved student persistence to graduation by including enhanced advising and counseling, academic skills

training, tutoring support, plus social and community engagement opportunities. These programs also initiated institutional changes such as living–learning centers and multicultural centers and programming.

The University of Memphis was part of a multiyear, multi-institutional research project led by the University of Minnesota starting in 2014. The First in the World (FITW) grant program sponsored by the U.S. DOE involved research on six campuses on the effects of community engagement and service-learning on underrepresented students. As part of this study, the University of Memphis examined the effects of the TRIO and First Scholars programs, including observation of the support those programs provided to participating students. During this study, students reflected on their special experiences and challenges, and students in the SIRP programs had opportunities to learn from students from other campus settings. Two factors arising from this combination of activities were central to understanding the formation of the SIRP organization. One was recognition of the role of cultural capital in affecting underserved student persistence to graduation. The other was a set of processes that led to translating underserved cultural capital in an active sustainable SIRP.

## Tigers First and Cultural Capital: A New Approach to Understanding Underserved Student Persistence to Graduation

The concept of cultural capital as proposed by Bourdieu (1985) refers to the linguistic and cultural understanding and skills that a group of people hold based on their social, economic, and cultural locations in a society. All groups possess cultural capital. Applied to student persistence, all HEI students come to a campus with the cultural capital formed by their backgrounds. However, HEI cultures tend to reflect the White, middle- and upper-class groups that they have traditionally served (Berger, 2000). Those cultures fit with the cultural capital that students from those backgrounds bring to the campus. The students share the same aspirational experiences and the language and social skills common to HEIs. They come from families and networks with past connections to HEIs, which in turn leads to an understanding by those students of the expectations and routines of HEIs (Bourdieu, 1971, 1985). The result is better fit between White, middle- and upper-class students' cultural capital and HEI cultures, leading to higher levels of persistence to graduation.

Most underserved students—as defined by Green (2006)—come to HEIs with different experiences and diverse cultural capital. Real and perceived barriers to their aspirations may differ from those of students from more privileged backgrounds. For example, underserved students may be less familiar with the language and social skills of the dominant HEI culture. Because of their diverse backgrounds, they have different social capital connections from students whose families have experience within HEIs. As a result, they may have less immediate knowledge of how to fit within and navigate the dominant culture of HEIs (Banning, 1989). These differences can lead to lower levels of persistence to graduation.

This lower level of persistence is often viewed as a gap created by a deficiency among underserved students (Berger, 2000) and can lead to programming focused on remediation of those deficiencies through deficit-focused strategies (Tinto, 1993). However, recognition of the cultural capital underserved students bring to a campus as an asset changes this faulty assumption. Acknowledgment and engagement of cultural capital can then become a crucial step for changing the relationship between underserved students and their HEIs in ways that can close the persistence gap (Berger, 2000; Wells, 2008).

Building on Bourdieu's concept, Yosso (2005) identified six forms of cultural capital:

- Aspirational capital—resiliency, the ability to dream and hope for a better future amid real and perceived barriers.
- Linguistic capital—intellectual value and social skills gained through experiencing communication in more than one language.
- Familial capital—resources of communal, cultural, and familial history passed on through the nurturing of cultural knowledge.
- Social capital—instrumental and emotional support through community resources and networks of people.

- Navigational capital—the ability to move through various social institutions and structures that were created without consideration of communities of color.
- Resistant capital—behavior that challenges inequity and fosters knowledge and skills in efforts to move toward collective freedom.

Each of these forms is applicable as a source of underserved students' cultural capital. To begin, their very presence on a campus is evidence of aspirational capital. The students have had to be resilient, have grit and have dreams for a better future despite the barriers that they faced to get there (Reid & Moore, 2008; Stebleton & Soria, 2013; Stephens et al., 2014). The language and speaking styles from underserved students' backgrounds are often different from the language and styles of dominant students on HEI campuses. Although in one form a barrier, the differences can be a source of linguistic capital for underserved students as they become translators and navigators from one culture to another. Rather than family and other precollege relationships being a detriment to persistence as proposed by some (Tinto, 1993), familial and social capital in the form of parents, other family members, schoolteachers and counselors, religious figures, and other mentors are often cited as primary supports by underserved students for choosing to enroll and succeed in a HEI (Goebl, 2015).

Recognition and validation of underserved student cultural capital occurs at the individual and group levels. Recognition at the individual level can be encouraged by opportunities for self-reflection. Validation often comes by reaching out and seeing the same strengths and responses to challenges of other students from the same backgrounds (Irlbeck et al., 2014). For an underserved student, validation of their positive aspirational, linguistic, and familial cultural capital forms an important base of social and navigational capital (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Stevenson, 1996). That capital can result in more effective links to the college world.

Together, these cultural capital strengths contribute to a group identity. With that identity the group begins to explore actions to address the needs of and opportunities for group members (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). The result is to increase social and navigational capital. Fully formed and organized, that capital leads underserved student SIRPs to apply their knowledge and skills to address institutional barriers to persistence to graduation, not only for group members but for others who share the characteristics of the group. The result is resistant capital (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). That capital can be expressed as an effectively functioning underserved student SIRP.

## Methodology

The term "case study" has a range of definitions that encompass a technical definition of a phenomenon (Eckstein, 2002), a mode of empirical inquiry (Yin, 2003), and a problem to be studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Additionally, case studies have been defined as research designs (Gerring, 2004) and a method or means of investigation (Merriam, 1988). The researchers align our use of case study with VanWynsberghe and Khan (2007), who propose an encompassing definition that reconciles other definitions: "a transparadigmatic and transdisciplinary heuristic that involves the careful delineation of the phenomena for which evidence is being collected" (p. 80). This definition brings relevance to the case study regardless of the research paradigm or disciplinary orientation. Heuristic means are utilized to reveal the essence of the case through analytic induction.

The researchers adopted a case study methodology concentrating on observations of participant action and interaction. Observation has the potential to identify detailed intricacies that may be left out of self-reports or focus groups. Observation enables the researchers to assess and see what people do rather than what they intend to do or say they will do. Our case study establishes and highlights necessary HEI settings that are conducive to the development of SIRPs.

To gather data, the researchers acted as nonparticipant observers in the initial meeting of students ($n$ = 24) from all participating universities and in the smaller focus group and debriefing of University of Memphis participants ($n$ = 4). Students were asked to reflect on what they experienced as participants in the general focus group. The researchers observed the formation and continuation of the SIRP for approximately two years.

## Tigers First: Translating Underserved Student Cultural Capital Into Organizational Capacity

Even when groups have shared interests, collective efforts to advance those interests do not automatically appear (Tosi, 2009). This problem is especially acute for underserved HEI students, who traditionally are less aligned with their college environment (Banning, 1989). Thus, a set of supports and processes connected to the TRIO and First Scholars programs and the FITW grant were important contributors to the creation and success of Tigers First.

One support was a campus environment for which improving persistence to graduation rates was a priority. Advanced education for the state in which the University of Memphis is located is a prime focus of its mission. That means increasing the number of college graduates in a region with a high level of underserved students. Student graduation rates are a part of the university's formula for state funding. That incentive combined with lower persistence to graduation rates of underserved students made providing services to underserved students an even greater priority. The TRIO and First Scholars programs were expressions of that priority.

A second support came from the experience that the leaders of the two underserved student programs, TRIO and First Scholars, brought to their programs. Both were well trained in student affairs theory and practice. Significantly, both directors were also underserved students when they attended a university. That shared background helped them to identify, understand, and appreciate the potential of building and employing the cultural capital their programs' students brought to the campus, and it placed within them a special commitment to help their students succeed.

The development of the SIRP began with a set of activities that led to recognition and validation by the students of elements of their cultural capital. One activity was a part of the FITW grant research. A consultant external to any of the programs and the grant conducted a series of focus groups with the programs' students (Goebl, 2015). The purpose of the focus groups was to elicit self-perceptions of the students' cultural capital and expectations of their college experience. Students were invited to participate via email and met at a neutral and familiar campus location. External leadership for the process enabled students to speak freely about their experiences and perceptions. The students were asked to draw "maps" showing their goals and the supports and barriers they faced and perceived in their journey toward those goals. As a result, each student was able to articulate their aspirational, linguistic, familial, and social capital.

For 80% of the students, graduation and career success were expressed as aspirational goals. Barriers included not having parents who attended college and limited finances. However, to overcome these barriers, a majority of participants demonstrated grit through strategies that included better time management and connecting to others for opportunities to succeed. Linguistic capital and navigational capital was demonstrated by one student's comment: "I learned to communicate properly to become an advocate for myself to administrators who denied me my accommodations." Especially significant were students' acknowledgment of their familial and social cultural capital. Specifically, 75% reported family members as significant sources of support, and 80% identified advisors, mentors, and the TRIO and First Scholars coordinators as key to their attending university and remaining enrolled (Goebl, 2015).

Though early in their academic careers, the students reported understanding the importance of building social capital. Forty percent specifically named building connections and networking on campus as strategies for success (Goebl, 2015). The self-reflection process helped the students recognize their own aspirational, linguistic, familial, and social capital. That recognition provided the framework for another stage in the development of cultural capital, validation of that capital through activities that also expanded the students' social capital.

Validation is important to mobilizing one's cultural capital. One way to achieve this validation is through interaction with others with similar backgrounds and experiences. To this end, the two identified programs provided opportunities for participants to regularly meet and learn together. The TRIO program brought first-generation students together for workshops on college success strategies, cultural events, graduate school tours, and connecting with mentors. Along with attending campus and creative arts events, TRIO students engaged in com-

munity service activities. The community engagement activities involved volunteering at the local food bank, planting trees at a park, speaking with high school students about their college transition, and serving as mentors for incoming first-year students. First Scholar students attended an off-campus retreat prior to enrollment as first-year students and lived together in a living–learning community for the first year of college. They also participated in workshops, attended cultural events, and took part in community service projects like the TRIO program. Their community engagement activities involved developing yearly service projects through partnerships with LeBonheur and St. Jude's Children's Hospitals, the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and the University of Memphis Tiger Pantry program to address food insecurities on campus. They also developed programs and events to address the continuation and need for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and social justice initiatives to address racial inequalities on and off campus. The effect of these interactions was validation of the shared aspirational, linguistic, and familial cultural capital of the students, leading to a group identity and expanded social capital.

At this point the research activities that were part of the FITW grant served as an important catalyst in furthering the students' cultural capital. Students from each of the participating FITW grant campuses were invited to participate in a cross-institution symposium. All the students ($n$ = 24) were part of programs that promoted their engagement in community-based experiential experiences. In this regard, the students in attendance were actively engaging their social and cultural capital in enhancing their college experience. The purpose of the symposium was to develop a broader understanding of underserved students' views of the factors influencing their and their peers' persistence to graduation. As a part of that process students shared and compared their experiences across the campuses (*FITW Student Debriefing Report*, 2016). The symposium was based on applying an asset-based approach in which the voices and perspectives that mattered the most were those of the students.

In sharing their stories, the students discovered differences among the campuses regarding the levels and types of underrepresentation at HEIs. They learned that some of the campuses had large populations of racial and ethnic minorities in contrast to other campuses; some campuses had high numbers of students for whom citizenship was an issue; others were residential versus commuter experiences. Despite these differences, each campus environment had an impact on the underserved students' experiences.

The students also found similarities with their self-described cultural capital and were able to see the ways in which cultural capital was exhibited by their cross-institutional peers. They found in their peers the same grit and shared aspirations and also shared examples of familial capital. They discussed the development of linguistic capital and how they were able to code switch and navigate two worlds. They described forms of social capital on their campuses. In short, the meeting provided opportunities for the students to recognize and validate the cultural capital that each brought to their campus (*FITW Student Debriefing Report*, 2016).

Additionally, the comparisons gave them insights into forms of navigational and resistant capital of underserved students on other campuses through engagement in community outreach and service. As examples, underserved students at one HEI had created and run a program aimed at recruiting and helping precollege underserved students to enroll at the college. At another, underserved students were active in creating and staffing a precollege underserved student college preparation and enrollment program (*FITW Grantee Report*, 2016). These processes led students attending the symposium to see the potential to form and apply community-outreach-focused navigational and resistant capital on their own campuses.

Four University of Memphis students attended the symposium, two from each program studied. The students reported that the meeting increased their awareness of their social and cultural capital; they saw their selection to participate in the symposium as an indicator of their own social capital. As with the other students who attended, they saw the potential for their own and fellow students' navigational and resistant capital. Seeing the examples of underserved students at other campuses initiating and managing programs triggered the thought to do so at the University of Memphis. The questions were what and how?

On their return from the meeting, the Memphis attendees shared their experiences with other participants in the TRIO and First Scholars programs. A series of brainstorming sessions followed about what to do with what they had learned. The question that emerged from the sessions was, "What might we do to take ownership of University policies and programming aimed at improving underserved student persistence to graduation?"

Toward that end, participants in the sessions reviewed data on campus programs and researched alternative programs. The outcome was a recognition that many students on campus shared their backgrounds and challenges. However, because of limits in size of the programs for underserved students, many students who might benefit from the programs were not being served. As Guinier et al. (1997) and Delgado-Gaitan (2001) have observed, seeing the opportunity to help others with shared backgrounds, combined with a recognition of their cultural capital, often leads members of an underserved group to want to give back to those who have not received the same supports. This process occurred with the University of Memphis students. The result was a decision to create a student organization initiated and operated by underserved students to serve as an advocate for programs and policies addressing underserved students' interests, and its creation would be the source for resistant capital. The resulting organization became Tigers First.

Creating Tigers First required completion of several tasks: It needed to articulate a purpose, select a structure to accomplish that purpose, assemble necessary resources, negotiate university processes for establishing a student organization, choose policies and programs for action, and recruit and retain members. This is where the support from university staff was critical to formation of an authentic SIRP. Staff knowledge of processes and resources could at times be helpful in forming and moving the organization forward. However, engagement without a request by students and too much staff involvement could have resulted in a university-led, rather than a student-owned and student-directed, organization.

The TRIO and First Scholars program directors provided a careful balance for support. They recognized that empowering the students meant that students must be the lead for all those tasks. They knew that an underserved student-led group could be more effective in advocating for student interests within the university than they could be as staff members. Instead of being leaders in creating the organization, the directors played the role of advisors and coaches for building the students' navigational capital. Their help was limited to showing the students templates on how to organize, how to navigate university student organization rules, how to plan events, and providing assistance in finding resources; the students created the organization.

Consistent with the mission of the organization, Tigers First used inclusiveness to foster social cultural capital toward building and sustaining the organization. Organization leaders held orientation and training workshops for any students who wished to serve on its executive board and planning committees. These workshops provided space for any underserved student or interested faculty or staff member to network, create policy and program ideas, and develop messaging in support of the organization's purposes. The organization now holds monthly meetings to decide on actions and plan events. Potential on- and off-campus collaborators are invited to the meetings, furthering the organization's social, navigational, and resistant capital.

## Tigers First: Exercising Cultural Capital

With Tigers First in place, members turned the organizational capacity of the group to expanding services to underserved students on campus who were not being served. One set of actions were initiatives to expand awareness of the availability of campus supports to meet underserved students' needs. To do so, Tigers First initiated an annual on-campus program providing awareness of campus services. Social gatherings organized around campus events like homecoming, campus orientation, and athletic events brought underserved students together to develop awareness and identity and to inform other underserved students about available campus services. Tigers First partnered with the University's Career Services Office to cohost Design Your Life Workshops aimed at students not already affiliated with other first-gen programs. The workshops helped students identify problem-solving techniques and ways to build a foundation for success through identifying goals and tools for developing their academic and

career plans. Each activity was an extension of member and nonmember social and navigational capital.

Tigers First members' involvement in expanding services to other underserved students had another effect leading to the exercise of resistant capital. Working with other underserved students, Tigers First members developed a broader awareness of other challenges that underserved students face. One example was a growing awareness of the presence and challenges for DACA students at the university. The DACA program defers deportation for individuals who were brought to the United States as children of undocumented parents. Due to Tennessee state policies, DACA students attending the University of Memphis are not eligible for standard financial sources of support or in-state resident tuition rates.

Expressing navigational and resistant capital, Tigers First members initiated two community engagement activities to address these issues. In one, Tigers First members partnered with the University's Office for Institutional Equity, Opportunity Scholars (a first-generation scholarship program for DACA, Temporary Protected Status, and undocumented students), and Equal Chance for Education to create a program titled Immigrant Journeys: America's Story. This community engagement initiative began with a panel of DACA and undocumented immigrant leaders in the Memphis community speaking about their experiences. The panel was filmed, providing a documentary to share those messages with the university's students and the greater Memphis community. For their efforts and the success of the event, Tigers First members were recognized as the Outstanding Departmental Program by the Student Leadership and Involvement Department during the Women's History Month Closing Ceremony.

In the other activity, Tigers First members wanted to continue their message of advocacy and support for the DACA students on campus during U.S. Supreme Court hearings for DACA. Members developed an initiative called the DACA Butterfly Project. Tigers First participants gathered handwritten notes of support for DACA students from the campus and larger community on blank butterfly-shaped cards. They then partnered with Equal Chance for Education, First Scholars, and the Opportunity Scholars Program to spread awareness about the importance of supporting DACA students as they awaited the impending Supreme Court vote to protect or dissolve the DACA program. The results of that vote would have an immediate impact on the more than 76 students at the University of Memphis within the DACA program. Over 500 cards were collected and then displayed on a tree in the middle of campus to show support for DACA students. The cards were then sent to state representatives urging support for the students. The display was featured on multiple regional print and broadcast media, extending the message to broader audiences.

## Tigers First: Lessons Learned and Opportunities for Future Research

### Lessons Learned

As a SIRP, Tigers First represents an innovative approach to advancing underserved student persistence to HEI graduation. One lesson learned was recognition of the forms of cultural capital that underserved students bring to a campus. That included recognition and validation of the aspirational, linguistic, and familial capital informed by their diverse backgrounds. Recognition and validation involved transformation of understanding at the individual level to social capital at the group level. It then meant applying navigational capital to create an organization capable of exerting resistant capital for advancing underserved student interests.

A second lesson learned was realizing the utility of Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of cultural capital as a guide for action in assisting the development of underserved students' cultural capital. Though Yosso's conceptualization is offered as a framework for identifying the elements of cultural capital, it also provides a guide for action. Programming can be developed to facilitate development of each of the elements. In the case of Tigers First, programming included focus groups and structured activities such as workshops and community engagement that supported the recognition and development of aspirational, familial, linguistic, and social capital. The development of those capacities formed the basis for creating Tigers First, which in turn led to actions informed by navigational and resistant capital.

A third lesson learned was the utility in providing underserved students the op-

portunity to share their experiences with underserved students in other settings. Doing so provided further development and validation for their social capital. Moreover, learning ideas and actions from different contexts broadened underserved students' recognition of opportunities to expand their navigational and resistant capital on their own campuses. Cross-institutional learning can be an important mechanism to trigger ideas for new avenues that underserved students can explore for action and change.

Finally, a fourth lesson learned is the importance of the availability of a particular type of navigational coach. Navigational coaches serve as advisors to help underserved students move through the interstices of HEI bureaucracies in the design of an effective SIRP (Strayhorn, 2015). They must do so in a manner that is culturally sensitive and that supports but does not supplant student self-empowerment (Korotov et al., 2012). That sensitivity is bolstered when coaches have shared experiences with the underserved students they seek to serve.

### Directions for Future Research

Tigers First was created in 2017. The aim of Tigers First was to improve the graduation rates of first-generation, low-income family, and minority students at the University of Memphis who were not receiving TRIO or First Scholars programming. As a new organization, Tigers First focused its energy on getting programming under way. Time constraints did not allow researchers to collect data comparing retention rates for Tigers First underserved student program recipients who were receiving TRIO and First Scholars services with those of underserved students who were not receiving TRIO, First Scholars, or Tigers First services. Future research should study the impact and effectiveness of Tigers First and other SIRPS on these rates.

Other possible research directions could look at whether underserved students not receiving TRIO or First Scholars services but participating in Tigers First programming had higher retention rates than underserved students not receiving TRIO, First Scholar, or Tigers First services or programming. A second measure could be the impact of Tigers First programming on underserved student graduation rates. In this case study, time was also a limitation. Six years from enrollment to graduation is a standard measure for graduation rates for public universities (Irwin et al., 2021). Since programming only began in 2017, there has not been sufficient time to measure the effects of Tigers First programming on degree completion.

The purpose of an underserved student SIRP is to provide services to students, a form of community service. Participation in community service activities as a part of the college experience has been found to improve persistence to graduation (Lockeman & Pelco, 2013). Another direction for future research is to consider the impact of participation in a SIRP itself on persistence to graduation.

The University of Memphis is a large public research university. Historically underserved students are a sizable portion of the university's enrollments. This profile is important, and on many campuses, underserved students are a much smaller percentage of overall enrollment than at the University of Memphis. In addition, campuses may vary in their commitment to serving underserved students. Those differences may affect the opportunities and support required for the formation and operation of a SIRP (Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Maldonado et al., 2005). Comparative studies should be conducted across different campus contexts to assess the conditions affecting the creation and effects of a SIRP.

## Conclusion

Increasing underserved student persistence to graduation remains a national priority for HEIs in the United States. Institutionally initiated programming and policies continue to be adopted to improve those rates. However, SIRPs in which underserved students lead the design and delivery of those programs and policies offer a different and potentially powerful means to achieve that improvement. With the development of underserved students' cultural capital, an underserved-student-driven SIRP can be a source for community engagement, expanding the production of relevant and effective retention programming. In the process, it becomes an effective source of change within a HEI.

In the case of the University of Memphis, the Tigers First SIRP initiated programming and policy efforts addressing opportunities and challenges for underserved students. Activities started with exercises aimed at identifying and validating the social capital

that the underserved students brought to the campus. Interactive events associated with already existing underserved student programming provided a platform for building group identity and social capital. When students representing the University of Memphis shared their experiences with students from other campuses, their perspective on the power of their collective social capital became significantly broader. It was also a stimulus for ideas of how that power could be used to advance underserved student interests. Returning home, they shared their learning with campus peers. The result was creation of Tigers First, a SIRP, as an organization to expand access to student services and advocate for underserved student policy issues. University staff who recognized, respected, and supported student leadership of the organization served as advisors.

Analysis of the creation and functioning of Tigers First reveals several lessons. One is the power of underserved students' cultural capital in initiating efforts aimed at improving student persistence to graduation. Another was the utility of Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of cultural capital to guide efforts to enhance and apply underserved students' cultural capital. A third was the importance of providing experiences for underserved students to expand their sense of opportunity to serve through exposure to underserved students from varying contexts. A fourth was the critical role of student advisors as culturally sensitive and supportive institutional navigators in the creation of a truly student-led organization.

The Office of First-Generation Student Success (OFGSS) was created in 2019 following the success of First Scholars, Student Success Programs, Tigers First, and other first-generation collaborative initiatives. This new office serves as a hub for all first-generation students, offering services such as peer mentoring, faculty mentors, career services, and advising. Many members of Tigers First serve as student workers and mentors within the OFGSS and help to highlight the needs of underrepresented students on campus

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## About the Authors

***Sheron Davenport*** *is the assistant director of TRIO Programs at the University of Memphis.*

***Jaclyn Rodriguez*** *is the director of the Office of First-Generation Student Success, First Scholars and Opportunity Scholars in the Department of Student Academic Success at the University of Memphis.*

***David Cox*** *is professor emeritus in the Department of Public and Nonprofit Administration at the University of Memphis.*

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