

2025

**REIMAGINING OUTREACH AND MARKETING:  
Insights to Strengthen SMC's  
Support for Prospective  
Black/African American  
Students**



SANTA MONICA COLLEGE  
**Data Coaching Program**

**Prepared by**  
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and Hannah Lawler

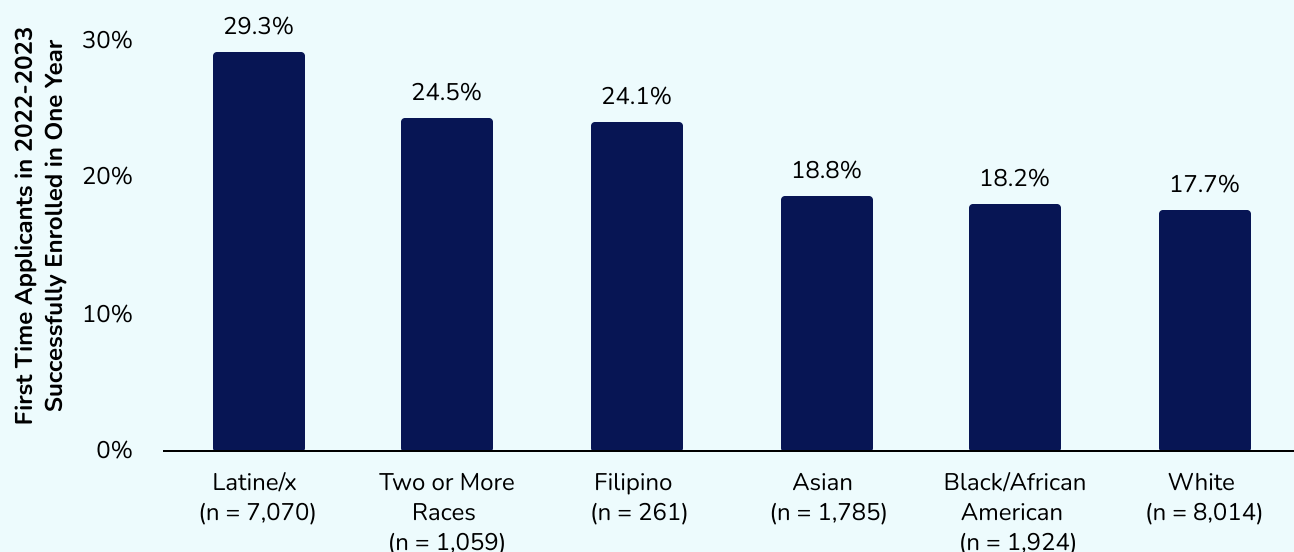


## INTRODUCTION

The Data Coaching Program at Santa Monica College (SMC), launched in 2017, builds the college's capacity to use data as a tool for advancing racial equity. Each year, the program supports a cohort of faculty, staff, and managers in developing the skills and shared inquiry practices needed to investigate the root causes of racial equity gaps in programs, practices, and classrooms. With an emphasis on race-conscious and equity-minded inquiry, the program prepares campus practitioners to identify where systemic redesign or new interventions are needed to improve the experiences and outcomes of racially minoritized students.

Among first-time applicants to SMC in 2022-2023, **Black/African American students** had one of the lowest enrollment rate, with only **18.2% enrolling within one year**.

As part of the program's eighth cohort, nine practitioners - three managers and six Classified Staff from the Outreach and Marketing departments - collaborated on an inquiry project examining why Black/African American students enrolled at SMC at low rates. Ultimately, the data coaches hypothesized that high school counselors held critical insight into the barriers, influences, and institutional factors that shape Black students' college enrollment decisions, and that learning from their perspectives would provide valuable guidance for developing more equity-minded outreach, marketing, communication, and partnership strategies at SMC.



# Methods

To assess their hypothesis, the data coaches conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with eight (8) high school counselor (educators) in April 2025 from high schools in Los Angeles County that feed students into SMC. The purpose of the interviews were to document the perspectives of high school educators and counselors on the barriers, influences, and institutional factors that shape Black students' postsecondary decisions.

Each interview was facilitated by a data coach, accompanied by a notetaker from the data coaching program administrative team. To ensure candid responses and avoid potential conflicts of interest, care was taken to avoid pairing educators with outreach specialists or SMC staff they had previously worked with. Interview participants selected pseudonyms, and all quotations are attributed using these pseudonyms. As a token of appreciation, participants received an Amazon gift card and SMC merchandise.

The interviews aimed to gather insight into the following areas:



## DECISION-MAKING & INFLUENCES

How Black/African American students make college decisions and the various personal, familial, and systemic factors that shape those decisions



## PERCEPTIONS OF SMC & OUTREACH

How SMC is viewed by students and educators, and what current outreach efforts are working or falling short



## TOOLS, SUPPORT, RECOMMENDATIONS

What HS educators need to better support students, and what advice they have for SMC in deepening partnerships and improving equity-minded outreach and marketing

Thematic analysis was conducted using a deductive coding approach, shaped by the inquiry's focus on racial equity and institutional decision-making. Special care was taken to surface race-conscious insights and avoid deficit-based framings of students' experiences. Direct quotes from participants were used to elevate educator voice and ensure the validity of the analysis.

## OVERARCHING THEME

Students ask, 'Are they really going to support me?' They've seen schools say one thing and do another.

### Rebuilding Trust in Higher Education Institutions in Essential for Outreach to Black/African American Students

While many recommendations in this report focus on outreach strategies and student support programs, a deeper, foundational insight emerged across all interviews: **Black/African American students and their families often carry a well-earned skepticism toward higher education systems.** This mistrust, rooted in generations of structural exclusion, broken institutional promises, and lack of culturally affirming support, shapes whether students even consider college as a viable, safe, or worthwhile path.

As Patricia shared: We even have parents who won't fill out the FAFSA. They don't want to share their financial info. **There's a lot of mistrust, like, 'What are you going to do with that? Who's going to see it?'**

Educators\* described families who were hesitant to support students moving far from home, skeptical about taking on debt, or unconvinced that a degree would lead to better opportunities.

These hesitations, they noted, are often seen as resistance, but in truth, they reflect rational concerns shaped by lived experiences in systems that have failed them.

**They want their student to go to college, but they've seen people go and not get a job after. They're asking, 'Is it really going to be worth it?'**

This mistrust extends to students as well. Several educators shared that Black students often ask questions like, "Will there be people who look like me?" and "Are they actually going to support me?" These are not just questions about programs—they are questions about whether the institution values them, sees them, and is prepared to serve them equitably.

\*High school educators and counselors are used interchangeably in the report

# THEME #1

## While Black/African American Students Explore Post-Secondary Options Similarly, They Face Unequal Access to Supports and Resources

High school educators shared that Black/African American students explore post-secondary options in many of the same ways as students from other racial/ethnic groups, often through their schools, online tools, peers, and conversations with family and counselors. However, they emphasized that the **difference lies not in how these students explore options, but in the structural barriers that limit their ability to do so fully and confidently.**

These barriers include limited school-based resources, underrepresentation in advanced coursework or college-readiness programs, and a lack of access to culturally responsive advising. For example, participation in HBCU tours was only available through the support of one district's Black Student Achievement Program (BSAP), a resource not consistently available across all high schools. This means that while Black/African American students are just as curious and ambitious about their future, they often navigate the college decision-making process without the same level of guidance, exposure, or encouragement. As Mark explained:

*"They don't explore differently, but **they don't always have the same tools or confidence.**"*

Amanda shared a similar observation:

*"Our students do attend field trips and college fairs, **but for Black students, it often depends on whether a trusted adult, like our BSAP counselor or social worker helps make it happen. Those relationships really matter.**"*

While the surface-level behaviors may look the same across racial/ethnic groups, the inequity lies in what students have access to, who is guiding them, and how affirmed they feel in the process.

### Information Channels Black Students Use to Explore College Options



COLLEGE  
TOURS



COLLEGE  
REPS



FIELD  
TRIPS



COLLEGE  
FAIRS



FAMILY



FRIENDS/  
PEERS



COLLEGE  
DATABASE



COUNSELORS  
TEACHERS



## THEME #2

### A Sense of Belonging and Community is Central to Black/African American Students' College Decision-Making

More than half of the high school counselors interviewed emphasized that **Black students seek more than just academic opportunities when choosing a college: they are searching for a space where they can feel safe, seen, and supported.** For these students, finding a strong sense of community is a critical factor that shapes whether they can imagine themselves thriving at an institution.

This emphasis on belonging stems from students' lived experiences navigating school environments where they are often racially isolated, underrepresented, or subjected to subtle and overt forms of exclusion. The desire for a welcoming and affirming environment is heightened at predominantly white institutions, making Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) particularly attractive for their culturally affirming environments, peer support, and visible Black excellence. As Mark shared:

“ I think that’s happening right now with saying yes to a college—it’s, **‘Do I see myself there? Am I going to be safe? Do I have community at that school?’** I think that’s the biggest thing: sense of community.”

High school counselors noted that Black/African American students often actively seek indicators of cultural belonging, **asking about Black Student Unions, drumlines, mentorship programs, or whether there are Black faculty or staff.** These cues help students assess whether they will be supported both academically and emotionally. As one counselor described, students frequently ask not just what supports exist, but who will be there to help them and what it feels like to be a Black student on that campus.

Shakira noted that because Black/African American students are often underrepresented at California colleges, it is especially important for outreach staff to **intentionally highlight spaces of Black cultural community and institutional care.**

**“My students often vocalize that they don’t see students who look like them.”**  
– Sophia

**“There are students who will openly tell me they want to go to a college that has more Black students than they have in their high school.”**  
– Renee

## THEME #3

### Black/African American Students Need to Know What Resources Exist Tailored for Them

Many high school educators expressed concerns about the challenges Black/African American students face when navigating community colleges. They emphasized the **importance of academic and support services that are tailored specifically to the needs of Black/African American students**, noting that these resources are vital to their success. Examples include tutoring, mentoring, and community-building initiatives. These supports not only equip students with tools for academic success but also foster a strong sense of community and belonging.

The challenge of having to navigate a predominately white institution, and **an institution that perhaps wasn't designed with you in mind**, that's difficult for a young teenager.

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**It's not just about tutoring. It's 'Will they support me as a whole person—culturally, emotionally, academically?'**

One high school educator, Bethany, recommended that SMC develop a **targeted newsletter** for high schools that spotlights programs and services specifically designed to support Black/African American students. She stressed that this information should not be buried within broad Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) communications, which she noted has been too general in the past.

Several educators also spoke about the importance of **equipping students to advocate for themselves** during interactions with college outreach representatives. They encourage students to ask questions like, *"What resources do you have for Black students?"* and *"How do you support them in their first year?"* This approach not only gives students agency in the decision-making process, but allows them to assess whether a college is truly prepared to meet their specific needs.

**What college has the right support for you? Because the goal is not to get to college, the goal is to graduate from college.**

## THEME #4

### Proximity and Transportation Significantly Impact Black/African American Students' College Decisions

All of the high school educators interviewed acknowledged that SMC has a strong reputation, particularly for its high transfer rates, academic offerings, and beautiful facilities. However, despite these strengths, **SMC's location was consistently cited as a barrier, particularly for Black/African American students**, many of whom live in communities that are geographically distant from the campus and face challenges with transportation access.

Educators shared that proximity often outweighs reputation when students are making enrollment decisions. Many students and their families prioritize colleges with the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) simply because they are closer to home or more accessible through public transit. As Patricia explained, reliable transportation is major issue:

***"Many of my students **lack access to consistent transportation**, so they end up choosing L.A. Southwest or West L.A., **colleges that are easier to get to.**"***

In another example, Bethany highlighted that the key difference between SMC and El Camino College is simply the proximity factor. While she does have students who attend SMC, the majority enroll at El Camino, not because it's better quality education, but because it is more convenient. She also observed that with the growing availability of online courses, physical distance is becoming less of a barrier for some students, though this shift does not benefit all students equally, particularly those who rely on in-person support services.



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**"WHENEVER MY STUDENTS ARE LOOKING AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE, THAT'S WHAT THEY LOOK AT: HOW CAN I GET THERE, AND HOW FAR OR CLOSE BY IT IS."**

#### 2024-2025 DATA COACHES

- Rebecca Agonafir
- Tracie Bucsa
- Giselle Gradilla
- Ileana Hernandez
- Jose Hernandez
- Patrisia Maldonado
- Laura Nario
- Estela Ruezga
- Deirdre Weaver



## THEME #5

### Black/African American Students Face Systemic, Personal, and Psychological Barriers when Pursuing College

A common belief among the high school educators interviewed was that **Black/African American students face multifaceted challenges during their pursuit of higher education**. Collectively, the responses highlight how personal circumstances, systematic inequalities, and psychological burdens often intersect to create barriers these students must overcome.

On a personal level, Sophia noted that many of her Black/African American students come from difficult upbringings or unstable home environments, which often makes it difficult for them to focus on schoolwork and maintain consistent academic performance.

Shakira highlighted that many colleges were never designed with the success of Black or Latine/x students in mind, resulting in **institutional environments that can feel alienating and difficult to navigate**. This challenge is compounded by long-standing educational disparities that begin as early as kindergarten. Additionally, Renee pointed out that Black students often enter high school without having had access to the same academic preparation and learning opportunities as their peers. As a result, they often **experience gaps in college readiness skills that make post-secondary options feel more limited and college-level coursework more difficult to navigate**.

We've got a group of kids trying to do some serious catch-up. If you look at the schools with the largest Black populations, a lot of them are in the lower deciles for testing.

They're playing catch-up. These kids are smart, but they weren't given the same start line

“

They feel like they're not good enough. You know, you can self-defeat yourself and ruin everything,

In addition to academic barriers, several educators described the **psychological toll that systemic inequality takes on Black students**. Mark described how Black students frequently don't feel they belong in college settings, and this internalized doubt is reinforced by the lack of racial representation and culturally tailored supports. Patricia echoed this sentiment, sharing that students from her predominantly Black high school (97% Black/African American) often feel anxious and out of place when visiting predominately white institutions, heightening fears that they will not find a space where they truly belong.

## THEME #6

### Families Act as Both Supporters and Gatekeepers in the College Decision-Making Process for Black/African American Students

High school educators consistently shared that **families, particularly parents, play a central role in the college decision-making process for Black/African American students.** For many students, this process is not made individually, but collectively with family, often involving deep discussions about finances, safety, and long-term goals. One high school educator, Shakira, observed that family involvement in college decisions is more pronounced among Black/African American families compared to other racial/ethnic groups.

Educators noted that family perspectives are shaped by their own educational and economic experiences. For example, families in which parents have attended college are often more familiar with the higher education landscape and may encourage a wider range of options. In contrast, first-generation families, many of whom have not navigated systemic barriers themselves, may have less exposure to the complexities of college admissions and financial aid, or may carry valid concerns about debt, displacement, and return on investment. As one educator put it: ***“Sometimes families question, ‘If you’re going to have to take out a loan, is it really going to be worth it?’”***

Rather than viewing families as gatekeepers, educators acknowledged that parents and caregivers are often weighing very real risks, such as student debt, relocation, or the loss of a child’s income or caregiving role at home. Amanda, Patricia, and Mark all described how these economic pressures shape decisions, sometimes leading students to choose nearby or more affordable colleges, or to delay enrollment. Mark explained: ***“A lot of our students have to work and help families out. So sometimes, unfortunately, the parents say, ‘We need you closer. We can’t afford for you to go away.’”***

Patricia also emphasized how mistrust of institutions, rooted in historical and generational experiences, can impact parental engagement, especially when it comes to financial aid forms

**“It’s not that they don’t care. It’s that they’re **afraid**. The system has failed them before.”**

(e.g., FAFSA). In some cases, families are reluctant to share personal financial information or question whether the investment will pay off, particularly if they have not seen higher education lead to social mobility in their communities.

Educators were clear that **families are not barriers, but critical partners** in students' college-going journeys. Effective outreach must engage families with transparency, respect, and support, recognizing their essential role in helping students make informed and empowered decisions.

# THEME #7

## Outreach/Engagement Strategies Should Center Relationships, Visibility, and Cultural Relevance

Overall results highlighted five recommended approaches to meaningfully connect with Black/African American students and their families, all centered on authentic relationship-building and cultural relevance. For these students, trust in an institution, and a sense of belonging within it, must be actively cultivated through consistent, visible, and affirming engagement.



### HOST ON-CAMPUS EVENTS WITH TRANSPORTATION PROVIDED

Bring students to SMC for guided tours and information sessions that highlight programs such as Scholars and Black Collegians Umoja Community and other support services tailored to Black/African American students. Invite current Black students to share their stories to help prospective students see what's possible.



### FACILITATE PEER AND FACULTY/STAFF CONNECTIONS

Representation matters. Connecting prospective students with Black students and staff/faculty help them envision themselves in the campus environment and strengthens early bonds of community and trust.



### UTILITIZE BLACK STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

Offer targeted presentations or collaborative events that speak directly to the interest and question of Black students already engaged in leadership and identity-based spaces.



### PARTNER WITH EXTERNAL PROGRAMS LIKE BLACK STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT PLAN (BSAP)

Collaborate on joint campus tours, Saturday workshops, and family-centered events. This would increase SMC's visibility among Black/African American communities and strengthen family engagement.



### INVEST IN CONSISTENT, IN-PERSON HIGH SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Avoid one-time visits. Build presence and trust by visiting schools regularly, attending school events, and forming personal connections over time. Students are more likely to enroll when they feel seen, valued and supported before they even set foot on campus.

## THEME #8

### High School Counselors Need Targeted Information, Training, and Resources to Better Support Black/African American Students in Considering Community College

Interview findings revealed that the information, training, and resources needed to better support Black/African American students should be centered on highlighting resources SMC has to help them succeed, and provide hands-on support. High school educators expressed a **clear need for more targeted, accessible, and culturally relevant resources to support Black/African American students in the community college decision-making process**. They emphasized that general outreach materials or broad DEI communications often miss the mark. Instead, they requested tools that explicitly speak to Black students' experiences and highlight the specific support systems in place to ensure their success.

*"Most of what we receive is general DEI stuff. It's not specific enough to really help us guide our Black students."*

The following six recommendations, offered by the interviewees, highlight the resources and support high school counselors need to more effectively guide Black/African American students toward enrollment at SMC.

1

#### Application & Enrollment Support

Counselors are unfamiliar with the current SMC application/enrollment process, making it difficult for them to effectively guide students through the process.

#### Recommendation:

Provide **hands-on training** for counselors to go through the **SMC application/enrollment process themselves**. Offer SMC-led application workshops directly for students, especially during peak college application periods.

2

#### Clear, Targeted Communication & Outreach to Counselors

Counselors want materials that showcase support services for Black students, beyond what's listed in general outreach brochures.

#### Recommendation:

Create a monthly or quarterly **newsletter** that highlights **culturally relevant** programs, services, and events for Black/African American students. Include **testimonials from current Black students**, information about programs like Black Collegians and Black student success outcomes.

3

### Highlight Culturally Relevant Support Systems

Educators stressed the importance of showing that SMC has intentional systems of support, not just academic resources, but also community spaces and racial affinity programs that affirm students' identities.

**The students ask, 'what do they have for us? Who's there for us?' If I can't answer that clearly, we might lose them.**

#### Recommendation:

- Share **clear descriptions of culturally relevant programs** like Black Collegians, Brotha to Brotha, Sista to Sista, and peer mentoring opportunities.
- Host **targeted events** for Black students and families at high school campuses or SMC
- Make it easy for counselors to share this information with families during 1:1 meetings or family nights

4

### Highlight Campus Life & Belonging

Students often view college as “just taking classes and leaving”, leading to a lack of connection with their college.

#### Recommendation:

Share information about **cultural events, student clubs and organizations** to foster a sense of belonging.

5

### Provide Clear Academic Pathways & Program Information

Students need easy-to-understand information about SMC's academic programs, especially competitive or high-demand majors.

#### Recommendation:

- Share program flyers that include **timeline to completion** and **career/transfer** outcomes
- Include entry requirements and **course information** to help students make realistic, informed choices

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**“It helps to know—how hard is it to get in? What do you need? What happens after you finish?”**

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6

### Provide Support for First-Generation Students

Many students are first-generation college students. Because of this, they often feel overwhelmed by the process of applying and enrolling in college.

#### Recommendation:

Offer **in-person support** through orientations and registration events. Assign **peer mentors** or outreach specialists to check in with Black/African American students to follow up with students after they express interest or begin applying.



# THEME #9

## Outreach and Marketing Should Be Centered on Trust, Representation, and Cultural Relevance

High school counselors emphasized that effective outreach to Black/African American students **must go beyond simply providing information**. To meaningfully support these students, SMC must be intentional in **cultivating trust, visibility, and culturally tailored supports** that help students and families envision SMC as a place they are not only welcome, but are seen, valued, belong, and expected to succeed.

High school counselors who were interviewed offered the following recommendation for improving SMC's outreaching and marketing efforts.



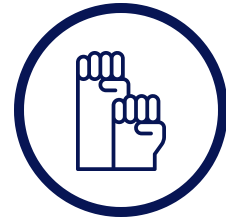
### Increase In-Person and Early Engagement

Start outreach events earlier in a high school student's academic journey, ideally by 9th or 10th grade. Avoid limiting visit so senior year or peak application season. By engaging students and families early and often, colleges can build awareness, trust, and a stronger sense of connection over time.



### Center Black Students' Representation and Belonging

Bring Black SMC students, staff, and faculty to high school events to show representation and community. Emphasize that students who look like them thrive at SMC, and reinforce that they are wanted, valued, and belong at SMC.



### Highlight Culturally Relevant Support Programs

Communicate clearly how these programs and services at SMC that are specifically designed to support Black/African students. Share success stories of students with similar backgrounds who have transferred or graduated, and emphasize how these programs foster community and on-time completion.

**"Outreach shouldn't just be about enrollment. Students need to know that there are people who look like them, who care about them, and who will help them thrive once they're on campus."**

**We shouldn't wait until senior year to introduce college. Start building those relationships earlier so students see it as a real option.** 99

*Theme # 9 continued:* **Outreach and Marketing Should Be Centered on Trust, Representation, and Cultural Relevance**

**Students know when you're just checking a box. You've got to show up, not just once, but over time.**



**Focus on Affordability**

Educators noted that affordability is a significant concern for families. Outreach should include clear, accessible messaging about the cost benefits of starting at a community college and the financial aid supports available. Host family-focused sessions that explain the true cost of attendance, the risk of student debt, and how community colleges can reduce financial burden.

**When the same person shows up again and again, students start to trust them. They know they're not just here to pitch something, [but] they care.**



**Build Authentic Relationships and Trust**

Students are more likely to consider and attend a college when outreach staff engage authentically, show up consistently, and take time to learn about students' goals, interests, and concerns.

## Conclusions

The high school educators who participated in these interviews shared valuable insights into how SMC can better support the enrollment of Black/African American students. Their recommendations emphasized increasing the visibility of Black students and faculty, building authentic relationships, and clearly communicating the support systems in place to help Black students succeed. Importantly, they stressed that outreach should not only focus on getting students to enroll, but also on showing them, explicitly and affirmingly, that they can thrive at SMC and that a community exists to support them. As a next step, the Outreach and Marketing departments will use these insights to co-design strategies that advance the successful enrollment of Black students, aligning with a key goal of SMC's 2025–2028 Student Equity Plan.

# Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

## Section 1: Understanding the College Decision-Making Process

1. How do Black/African American students at your school typically explore post-high school options? Who or what influences their decisions?
  - Do you notice any differences in how they approach this process compared to other student groups?
2. What role do families and communities play in these decisions? Can you share an example where family dynamics influenced a student's college choice?
3. What are the biggest challenges Black/African American students face in pursuing college? (Probe: financial, academic, personal, social, or structural barriers.)

## Section 2: Perceptions of Santa Monica College

5. How do you perceive Santa Monica College as an option for your students? How does it compare to colleges in the Los Angeles Community College District?
  - Based on your experience, how do Black/African American students perceive SMC compared to colleges in the LACCD?
6. How do students at your school currently learn about Santa Monica College? What types of outreach or engagement strategies do you think would be most effective in connecting with and supporting Black/African American students?

## Section 3: Knowledge Gaps & Recommendations

7. What information, training, or resources would help you better support Black/African American students in considering community colleges?
8. What is one key piece of advice you would give SMC's outreach and recruitment team to better serve Black/African American students, and how could SMC build stronger, more meaningful partnerships with your school or district to support these students?

## Closing

9. Is there anything else you'd like to share that we haven't discussed?



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