

Perceptions of Degree Utility Among Men of Color: Comparing Interactions Across Validation, Stressful Life Events, and Race

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The purpose of this study was to determine if there were differences in degree utility based on men's race, experiences with faculty validation, and stressful life events. Using CCSM[®] data, the sample for this study was delimited to a select subset of urban college men (N=1,415). A three-way (6x4x3) factorial analysis of variance (Factorial ANOVA) was employed to analyze the dataset. The findings of this study suggest that considerable amounts of faculty validation, even when given to men that are experiencing high stress levels, are associated with greater levels of degree utility. This data posits that campus climate has an effect on non-cognitive variables, such as degree utility. As such, the more validating experiences are given to men by faculty, specifically when experiencing high stress levels, the more likely a higher value of degree utility will be reported by men.

INTRODUCTION

Low persistence rates among students in postsecondary education are of significant concern to educators (Barnett, 2011). While education gaps within high school completion are closing, gaps in community colleges are widening, particularly racial gaps for enrollment and completion rates in college (Kane, 2004). This is of particular concern given that certain groups are outperforming others. For instance, women are now attending college more frequently than men (Ou & Reynolds, 2014). Moreover, men of color are falling behind and earning fewer college degrees than ever before (Perrakis, 2008). Deleterious student success outcomes (e.g., persistence, achievement, attainment, transfer) for men of color have become a topic of increasing concern among educators since men of color typically begin their academic careers at two-year institutions (College Board, 2011; Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda, & McLain, 2007; Perez & Ceja, 2010). Some research at the two-year colleges has highlighted the important role of degree utility in the success of men of color. Specifically, Mason (1998) conducted a quantitative study to investigate persistence for urban Black men attending a community college in Illinois. Based on data from 205 men attending the community college, Mason found that degree utility was a strong positive determinant of persistence. Specifically, the greater men perceived that school

was a worthwhile endeavor; the more likely they were to persist. Given the importance of degree utility to the success of Black men, this study sought to extend current understandings of this concept.

While male of color success is bolstered by degree utility, these men also experience different kinds of personal and financial responsibilities (in comparison to their peers) that affect their success in college. These men are faced with societal pressures around normative racial and masculine roles that can influence their success in school (Harris & Wood, 2014). For example, Latino male students may ascribe to a *Machismo* paradigm, which suggests that Latino masculinity is indicative of certain behaviors that can negatively impact men's navigation in school (Saenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2013). As such, these men may be more likely to *stop out* or drop out, preferring financial gain as a result of their personal responsibilities or obligations to their families in place of continuing school. As such, there remains a need to support men by validating their presence in classrooms and on campuses, and to eliminate negative ideas or feelings of academic inferiority (Wood, 2014). In addition, noting research on socialized behaviors about men of color refraining from school at an early age (Harris & Harper, 2008), it is particularly important to draw attention to these topics.

Given these concerns, the purpose of this study was to determine if there were differences in degree utility based on men's race, experiences with faculty validation (affirming messages from faculty), and stressful life events. Research in the field of education has linked degree utility (a non-cognitive variable) to student outcomes (Becerra, 2010; Krymkowski & Mintz, 2011; Mishler, 1983; Perterson del Mas, 2001-2002; Wood & Harris, 2013). As students' perceptions of the usefulness of their collegiate endeavors (i.e., degree utility) increase, research has supported that these perceptions or attitudes could enhance college completion rates (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Therefore, it is of interest to identify students' perceptions of whether obtaining a degree is valuable in order to limit the negative effects a lowered sense of degree utility could have for men of color. The results of this study will extend upon studies that have illustrated interlinkages between stress and degree utility. This is of great importance given that the success rate for men of color in community college is less than 20% (Wood & Harris, 2013). Thus, findings from this study could provide additional insights to policy and practice. The next section will provide a synopsis of literature that will add to the conceptualization of this study.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Recent literature among men of color has discussed the importance of validating students (Barnett, 2011; Dandridge-Rice, 2002; Perez & Ceja, 2010; Rendón, 2002). Validation refers to verbal acts of confirming ones actions in a positive manner. Research has shown that validation is an important contribution to success for students. The role of validation is critical to non-traditional students, as these students are in need of affirmation that has been shown to foster positive student attitudes, leading to academic development (Rendón, 1994). Although validation results have suggested increased academic performance, it is also important to note that the domain in which validation occurs is not solely limited to the classroom (Rendón, 1994). Out-of-classroom validation is also integral to student success, as scholars have documented the important role of institutional agents in contributing to the success of community college students (Ou & Reynolds, 2014).

The theoretical framework used in this study was guided by validation theory. Validation theory has suggested that experiences of validation have had an effect on the academic and

personal growth of students, mainly non-traditional ones (Rendón, 1994). Furthermore, validation theory posits that college faculty and staff affirm student's knowledge and ability to be successful in college (Rendón, 2002). Based on this theory, this study sought to explore whether degree utility scores would differ based on race, stressful life events, and faculty validation. The researcher hypothesized that decreased degree utility scores will likely be a result of minimal experience with faculty validation, as research has supported that validation experiences have positive effects on education (Ou & Reynolds, 2014). Results from this study will fill an important void regarding influential variables that add to the success of men of color.

METHODOLOGY

The sample was drawn from the Community College Survey of Men (CCSM[®]), “an instrument designed to examine predictors of student success for men in community colleges” (Wood & Harris, 2013, p. 333). Forty community colleges have participated in distributing the CCSM[®] instrument to their male students on college campuses across the United States. Over 7,000 men have participated in this survey thus far. The sample for this study was delimited to a select subset of urban college men who participated in this study (N=1,415).

Degree utility was the outcome variable employed in this study. This variable measured the value men placed on the pursuit of their collegiate endeavors (four items, $\alpha=.881$). The independent variables used in the study were *race*, *stressful life events*, and *faculty validation*. The fixed factor, *race* was divided into six separate categories, White, Asian,¹ Black, Mexicano,² Latino,³ and All Other⁴. Stressful life events represented the total *major* stressful life events students encountered in the past two years. This variable was reported on a scale ranging from ‘zero’ to ‘seven or more’. Examples of stressful life events were divorce in family, loss of job, incarceration, or death in family. Stressful life events were recoded into four categories; none, few (1 to 2), some (3 to 4), and a lot (5 or more).

Faculty validation reflected students' perceptions on the total number of professors who regularly communicated to them that they had the ability to do the work, belonged in college, and were believed in. This variable was collected on a scale from ‘zero’ to ‘five or more’. Faculty validation was collapsed into three groups, ‘none’, ‘1 to 2’, and ‘3 or more’ (See Appendix A for descriptive data).

A three-way (6x4x3) factorial analysis of variance (Factorial ANOVA) was employed to analyze the dataset. Factorial ANOVAs allow researchers to examine mean score differences across multiple factors on a single dependent variable (Mertler & Vannatta, 2010). In this case, three independent variables were employed. Effect sizes were interpreted using partial eta squared (partial n^2) and R^2 for the full factorial model. Partial eta effect sizes of .01, .06, and .14 were interpreted as small, medium, and large, respectively (Green & Salkind, 2009). Expectation maximization was employed to replace missing values. Bonferroni corrections for posthoc comparisons were used in order to reduce the likelihood of Type I errors. All tests were measured at .05. The next section presents the results from this study.

¹ Category for Asian comprised of Asian American, South East Asian, South Asian, Pacific Islander or Hawaiian, and Filipino.

² Category for Mexicano comprised of men that are of Mexican descent whether US born or non-US born, as well as any students self identified as Chicano (Navarro, 2005).

³ Latino is identified in this study as students that are federally noted as Hispanic and of non-Mexican heritage.

⁴ Students in this category are grouped by American Indian, Alaskan Native, Multi-ethnic, and Other.

RESULTS

This study examined whether there were significant differences in degree utility by men's self-reported validation from faculty, stressful life events, race, and the interaction between these factors. The main effects for faculty validation ($F=24.234$, $p<.01$), race ($F=4.014$, $p<.01$), and stressful life events ($F=2.954$, $p<.05$) were all statistically significant. Partial etas indicated effect sizes that ranged from small to approaching medium. The effect sizes were as follows: faculty validation (.04), race (.02), and stressful life events (.01).

Interaction Effects of Variables

The interaction effect for race and stressful life events on the outcome for degree utility was also significant, $F=1.891$, $p<.05$. The partial eta indicated that the interaction accounted for 2% of the variance in the outcome. The interaction effect for faculty validation and race was not significant, nor was the interaction effect for faculty validation and stress. In addition, the interaction effect for faculty validation, stress, and race (i.e., faculty validation*stressful life events*race) was significant, $F=1.590$, $p<.05$. The partial eta indicated that the interaction accounted for 3% of the variance in the outcome. The total model, including the three main effects and the four interaction effects, accounted for 12 percent of the variance in the outcome as indicated by the R^2 .

Pairwise Comparisons of Variables

Faculty validation. Pairwise comparisons for faculty validation indicated three significant differences across the factor. Male students that reported having no faculty validation had lower mean scores (by -1.112, and -2.186 points respectively) than those men that reported '1 to 2' or '3 or more' validating experiences with faculty ($p<.01$). Moreover, men who reported '1 to 2' instances of faculty validation had lower mean scores (by -1.075 points) than students who reported '3 or more' experiences with faculty validation, $p<.01$.

Race. Pairwise comparisons for race indicated two significant differences across the factor. Asian men had lower mean scores (by -1.311 points) than Mexicano men ($p<.05$). Asian men also had lower mean scores (by -1.732 points) than Latino men ($p<.01$).

Stressful life events. Pairwise comparisons with stressful life events indicated one significant difference across the factor. Men that had indicated having 'few' stressful life events had higher mean scores (by .872 points) than those men who reported having 'some' stressful life events ($p<.05$).

Race * Stressful life events. In terms of the interaction between race and stressful life events, two significant comparisons were identified. Latino men who experienced 'some' stressful life events, had higher mean scores (by 2.634 points) than those men who were grouped in the *All Other* category for race ($p<.01$). Asian men who experienced 'a lot' of stress had lower mean scores (by -2.588 points) than Latino men ($p<.05$). Both interactions are depicted in Figure 1.

Faculty validation * Stressful life events * Race. Lastly, the interaction between faculty validation, stressful life events, and race were analyzed. Eleven significant comparisons were identified. White men who experienced some form of stressful life event, but received no validation from faculty had lower mean differences (by -3.035 points) than those who reported ‘3 or more’ instances of faculty validation (see Figure 2) ($p < .05$). Similarly, Asian men who had few stressful life events, but ‘1 to 2’ instances of faculty validation had lower mean scores (by -2.547 points) than those men who received ‘3 or more’ validating experiences with faculty (see Figure 3). Black men also had a similar outcome. Black men who had reported ‘a lot’ of stress but received no validation, had lower mean scores (by -4.390 points) than those who received ‘3 or more’ (see Figure 4), $p < .05$. Mexicano men who reported ‘some’ stress and no validation, had lower mean scores than those men who reported ‘1 to 2’ or ‘3 or more’ validation from faculty (see Figure 5). This difference is significant at .001 and $p < .001$ respectively.

Data for Latino men identified three significant comparisons. Latino men who had ‘some’ or ‘a lot’ of stress and ‘0 through two’ reported interactions of validation, had lower mean scores than men who received ‘3 or more’ validating experiences from faculty. These differences are significant by $p < .01$ for men reporting ‘some’ stress and $p < .05$ for men reporting ‘a lot’ (see Figure 6.). Finally, men grouped into the *All Other* category for race indicated three significant comparisons. Men with ‘some’ stress and no validation, had lower mean scores (by -5.207 points) than those men who had ‘1 to 2’ instances of validation, $p < .01$. Those same students also had lower mean scores (by -7.044 points) than those reporting ‘3 or more’ faculty validation experiences ($p < .001$). Moreover, *All Other* men with ‘a lot’ of stress and no validation had lower mean scores (by -5.100 points) than men who received ‘3 or more’ validating experiences ($p < .001$) (see Figure 7).

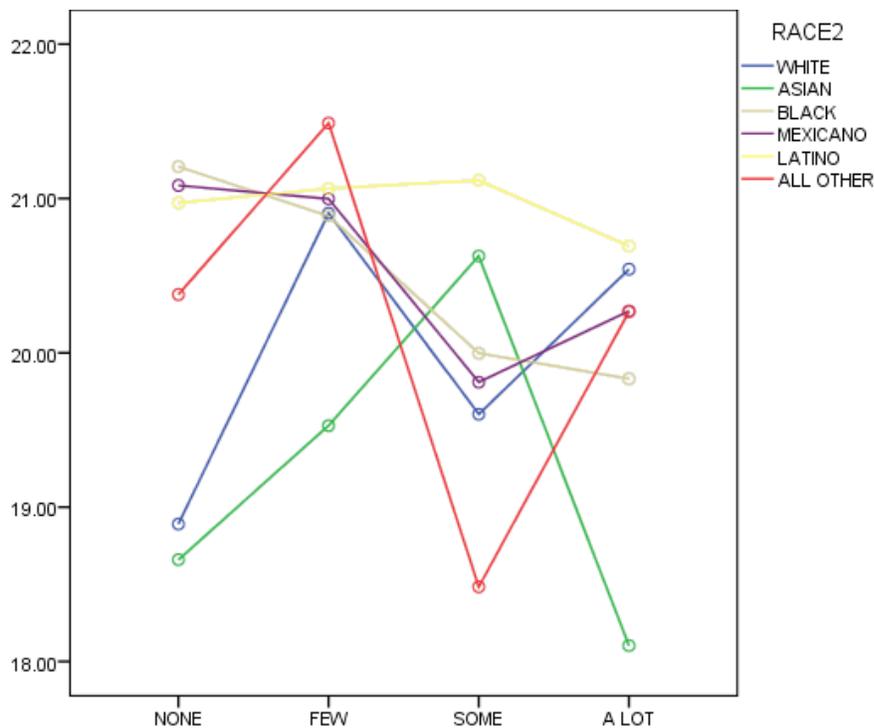


Figure 1. Estimated marginal means of utility by race and stress.

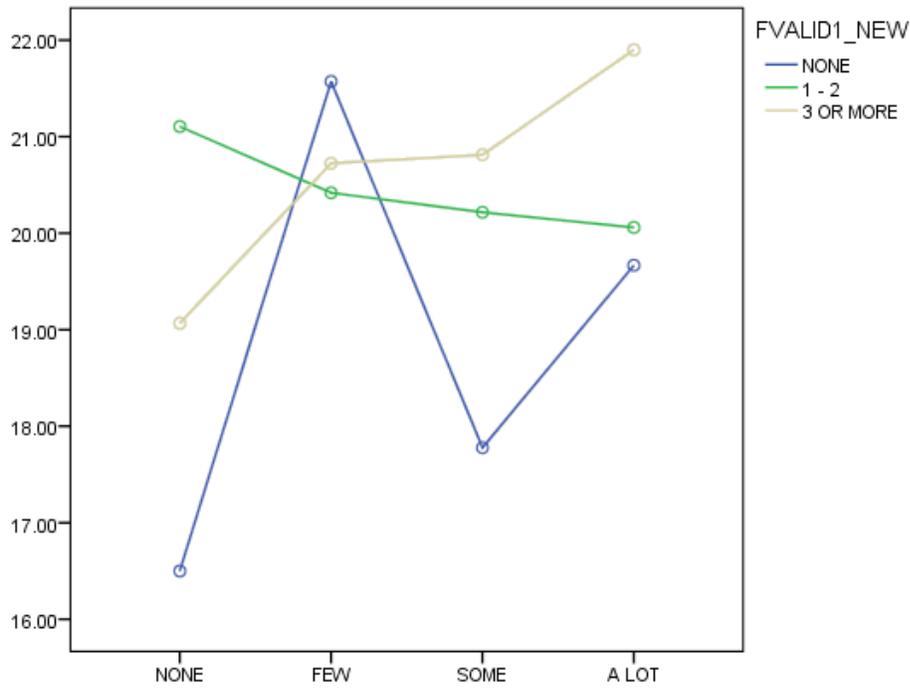


Figure 2. Estimated marginal means of utility by validation, stress, and White men.

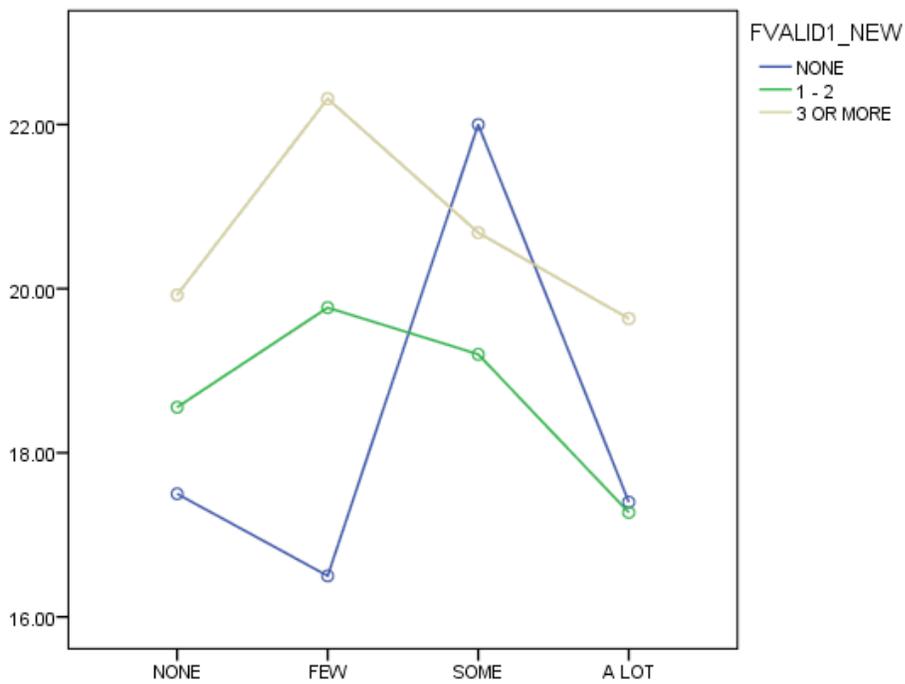


Figure 3. Estimated marginal means of utility by validation, stress, and Asian men.

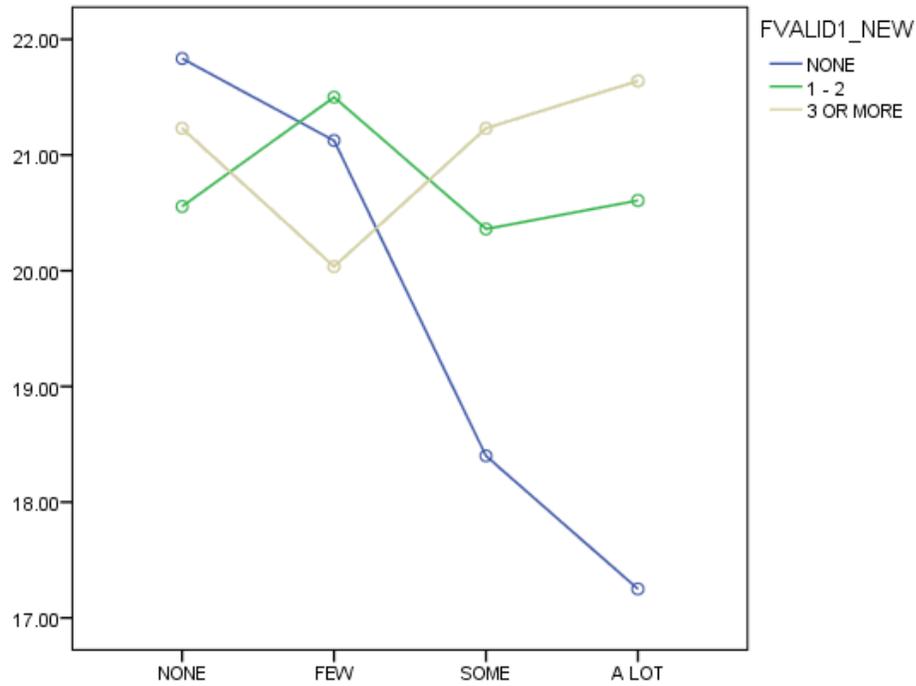


Figure 4. Estimated marginal means of utility by validation, stress, and Black men.

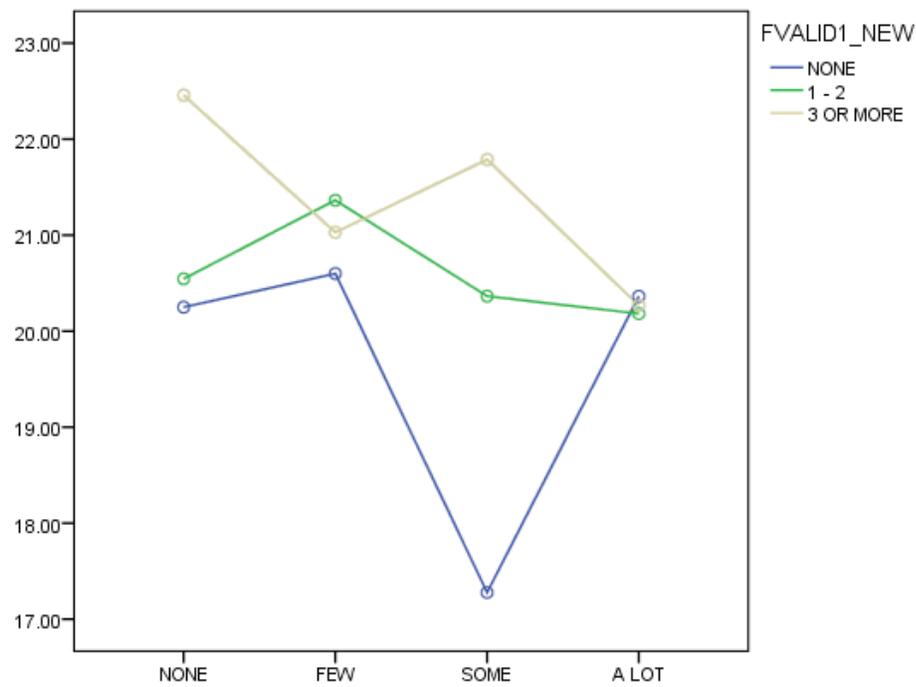


Figure 5. Estimated marginal means of utility by validation, stress, and Mexicano men.

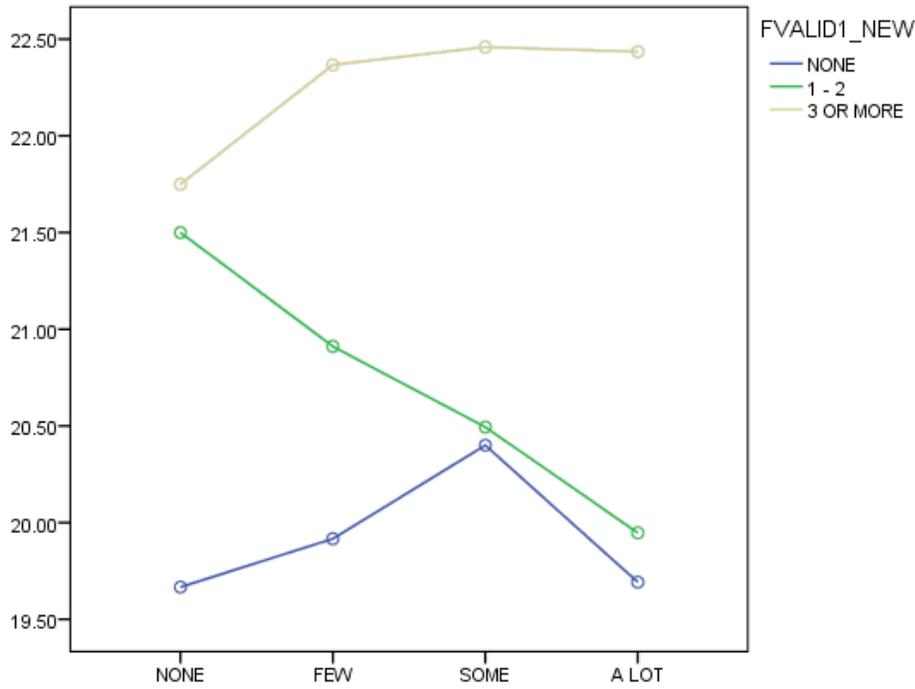


Figure 6. Estimated marginal means of utility by validation, stress, and Latino men.

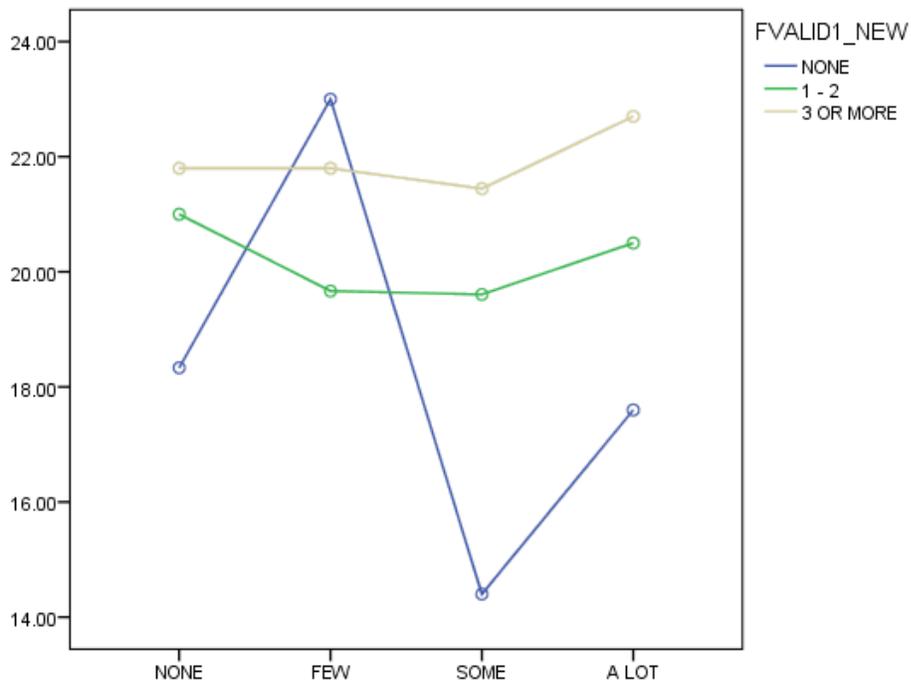


Figure 7. Estimated marginal means of utility by validation, stress, and All Other men.

DISCUSSION

As previously noted, this study explored whether there were significant differences in degree utility based upon men's self reported levels of faculty validation, stressful life events, and race. Findings from the three-way factorial ANOVA indicated that all models examined noted significant score differences on the basis of the number of faculty validation occurrences. Notably, the more validation men received from faculty, the higher their mean scores were for degree utility. Significant findings within the data noted that men who had 'zero to 2' occurrences of validation had lower mean scores in degree utility than men who reported higher levels of validation. Across race, Asian men generally reported lower levels of degree utility than Latinos and Mexicanos. Men who reported 'few' stressful life events had higher scores for degree utility than men who report 'some' stressful life events. In terms of the interactions, Latinos who reported 'some' stress had higher scores for degree utility than men identified as *All Other* within race. Additionally, Asian men who reported 'a lot' of stress had lower mean scores for degree utility than Latino men.

Lastly, the interaction between stress, race, and validation posed numerous significant comparisons. Generally, across all six race categories, men that experienced 'some', 'few' or 'a lot' of stress, while receiving '0' to '1 to 2' occurrences of validation, had lower levels of degree utility than men who received higher validation from faculty (generally three or more validating instances). These findings suggest that considerable amounts of faculty validation, even when given to men that are experiencing high stress levels, are associated with greater levels of degree utility. Indeed, this data posits that campus climate has an effect on non-cognitive variables, such as degree utility. Essentially, the more faculty validating experience received by men, specifically when experiencing high stress, are more likely to have a higher placement on the value of degree utility.

The notion that greater amounts of faculty validation experienced by men contributes to higher perceptions of degree utility, which therefore contributes to student success outcomes, corresponds with Harris and Wood's (2014) Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) model for student success. Rendón's (1994; 2002) validation theory also supports the importance of the developmental process of validation, as it is crucial to the academic careers of students early on. Additionally, findings from this research extend Bean and Metzner's (1985) study, which by illustrating interlinkages between variables in the psychological domain (e.g., stress and utility). Thus, a heightened sense of degree utility is influential to college men's success. These findings confirm the necessity for student-faculty relationships, particularly when students have high stress levels. Based on these findings, the researcher suggests that faculty validation is critical to men's success in education even when feelings of pressure are high. Moreover, validation is an essential component that may increase positive attitudes or perceptions about college completion.

CONCLUSION

Given the importance placed on degree utility in extant research, the results of this study suggest implications for practice. First, faculty could validate students more by initiating interactions with students. Perez and Ceja (2010), Rendón (2002), and Wood and Turner (2011), noted the importance of faculty instating sincere relationships with students. This first step could further build students' trust as well as students' willingness to approach faculty when in need. Second, institutions could train faculty to validate students and to look out for early indicators of

high stress among men, as validating students' self confidence for being in school is crucial to the success of students (Ou & Reynolds, 2014). Lastly, institutions could build student support centers for emotional support specifically geared for men of color. Support centers could aid men emotionally by creating a space where men feel comfortable interacting with support personnel. In those spaces, men of color could seek further validation or reassurance needed in order to motivate individuals to stay in school and to stress reasons why school would benefit them.

Future research certainly could expand upon this present study by conducting a study with a larger population sample. As such, future research could include other important environmental outcomes (e.g., external validating agents, hours worked per week, caring for dependents) with regard to student success. This study specifically touched upon influential factors to that of degree utility, faculty validation being one of them.

In sum, the implementation of recommendations from this study could allow men the support they need in order to be reassured that going to school is not a waste of time. It is understandable that students are under stress, particularly men of color, considering their responsibilities as well as major stressful life events. Though, colleges must find better solutions to encouraging men to continue with their studies. One way to support success for men of color within two-year colleges is to support the need to engage. Engagement practices employed could not only be limited to the interactions between faculty and students, but also encourage the increase of validating experiences for men of color attending community colleges.

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APPENDIX A
Descriptive Data

Variable	Coding	Descriptives
Degree Utility	Composite measure, 4 items on a 6-point scale, ranged from 4 to 24	M= 20.60 SD= 3.40
Race	1= White; 2=Asian; 3=Black; 4= Mexicano; 5= Latino; 6=All Other	White = 16.2%; Asian = 11.6%; Black, 15.0%; Mexicano, 26.3%; Latino, 22.9%; All Other 8.1%
Stressful Life Events	1= None; 2= Few; 3= Some; 4=A Lot	None = 14.3%; Few =29.1%; Some =36.9%; A lot =19.7%
Faculty Validation	1 = None; 2= '1 to 2'; 3= '3 or more'	None=12.9%; '1 to 2' = 50.3%; '3 or more' =36.9%