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# Pathways to Success at Four-Year Institutions as Perceived by Black First-Generation College Students

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the pathways to success at 4-year institutions from the perspective of Black first-generation college students (FGCS). This study was designed as a response to the large body of research that highlights the disparity between enrollment and degree attainment for Black first-generation college students. Specifically, Black FGCS are 4 times more likely to drop out after their first year at a 4-year institution compared to their non-first-generation college student (non-FGCS) counterparts. The research sought enlightening insights and lived experiences of Black FGCS who persisted to their junior and senior years of college at a 4-year college. A hermeneutic, phenomenological approach was employed to examine the factors that contribute to persistence, the factors that are most impactful upon persistence, and the strategies that are employed by persistent students that increase the likelihood of degree completion. A purposeful and convenient sample of six participants who attended 4-year institutions in the Northeast United States was utilized. A semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions was used to collect data. The data were analyzed and the emergent themes were categorized under three categories: contributors to persistence, impact on persistence, and persistence strategies. Recommendations included creating a college-readiness environment in high school and establishing a supportive campus environment within the institution.

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Pathways to Success at Four-Year Institutions as Perceived by  
Black First-Generation College Students

By

Raymond L. Warren Jr.

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Carla M. Smith

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Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

August 2017

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## **Dedication**

First and foremost, I would like to give thanks and praise to God, my Lord and Savior, for His continuous guidance and blessings over my life. I dedicate this manuscript to the people who served as a support system (knowingly and unknowingly) to me during this journey. I would also like to give special thanks to my loving wife, Veanne R. Warren, for her unending support and for believing in me. I could not ask for a better person to spend the rest of my life with. To my son, Roman Leviticus Leonard Warren, your birth was the absolute best thing to have happened to me during this process. Your face gave me endless motivation to move forward during this dissertation journey. I pray that I serve as an exemplar in your life; a reminder that no matter how hard life becomes, just keep moving forward because success comes to those who are not afraid to fail. To my mother-in-law, Elizabeth Benn-Pearson, you are simply amazing, and my family and I could not have done this without you.

To the Rev. Dr. Darren M. Morton, words cannot express how grateful I am for your love and support for the past 18 years of my life. I thank you for always challenging me to be better than I was the day before. To Dr. James Salnave, I thank you for your assistance and for serving as my Executive Mentor. To Dr. Sean Doorn, thank you for your support and for always checking in on me throughout this entire process. Thank you to my best friends, Niambi Dukette and Julie Agosto-King, who inspire me to always give it my best. To my close friend, Michelle McKie, whose drive and life story is an inspiration to all; thank you. To my father, Raymond L. Warren Sr.; my mother,

Joycelyn Ralph; my step-mother, Vernitt Warren; and siblings: Holly, Devorn, Kenroy, Sean, Dane, Nadia, and Brittney – I love you daily. To my aunt and uncle, Myrtle and Carlos David, you guys have done so much for me that my level of gratitude is inexpressible. “Thank you for always supporting all of my life’s endeavors” means a lot more than my words can express.

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To “Super 7” – the best cohort ever – this has been an amazing journey, and somewhere along this journey, my family has expanded by an additional 23 members. To my team, The Elements, I absolutely love and appreciate you guys. I cannot express how grateful I am for the level of support you have given me.

Last, but certainly not least, to the participants of this study, I am eternally appreciative for your participation in this study. Your lived experiences were the most important instrument of this study. Therefore, I thank you for sharing your personal stories and experiences with me. It is my hope that this dissertation serves as a beacon of light to other first-generation college students who seek motivation and guidance to persist toward degree completion.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Raymond L. Warren Jr. is currently a business manager with the New York City Department of Education. Mr. Warren attended the SUNY College at Old Westbury from 1998 to 2002 and graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology in 2002. He attended Alfred University from 2013 to 2014 and graduated with a Master of Arts degree in Public Administration in 2014. He came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2015 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. program in Executive Leadership. Mr. Warren pursued his research by examining the pathways to success at 4-year institutions as perceived by first-generation Black college students under the direction of Dr. Carla Smith and Dr. Andrea Coddett and received the Ed.D. degree in 2017.

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the pathways to success at 4-year institutions from the perspective of Black first-generation college students (FGCS). This study was designed as a response to the large body of research that highlights the disparity between enrollment and degree attainment for Black first-generation college students. Specifically, Black FGCS are 4 times more likely to drop out after their first year at a 4-year institution compared to their non-first-generation college student (non-FGCS) counterparts. The research sought enlightening insights and lived experiences of Black FGCS who persisted to their junior and senior years of college at a 4-year college.

A hermeneutic, phenomenological approach was employed to examine the factors that contribute to persistence, the factors that are most impactful upon persistence, and the strategies that are employed by persistent students that increase the likelihood of degree completion. A purposeful and convenient sample of six participants who attended 4-year institutions in the Northeast United States was utilized. A semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions was used to collect data. The data were analyzed and the emergent themes were categorized under three categories: contributors to persistence, impact on persistence, and persistence strategies. Recommendations included creating a college-readiness environment in high school and establishing a supportive campus environment within the institution.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), jobs within the United States are expected to grow to a total of 163.8 million by the year 2024. While this represents an increase in the number of employment opportunities across the country, it has been noted that the majority of these positions will require individuals to possess some level of higher education, and there will be limited opportunities for employment to those with less education (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Leith (2016) concurred with this thinking, indicating that individuals with more education will thrive more in today's high-tech economy than those with less education. Leith's study reinforces these assertions by indicating that those who attain at least a bachelor's degree are among the highest paid workers in the labor force, and they are less likely to be unemployed than those with less education (Leith, 2016). Additionally, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) indicates that workers 25-years old and older, who hold at least a bachelor's degree earned \$1,249.00 per week in the second quarter of 2016, while workers with only a high school diploma made \$690.00 per week in the same quarter. Other studies reinforce the suggestion that there is a correlation between degree attainment and lifetime earnings. Specifically, lifetime earnings for an individual who attended college and earned a bachelor's degree is over \$1 million more than someone who did not attend college (Baum & Ma, 2007; Baum & Payea, 2004; Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013).

When examining unemployment rates for these two groups, rates for college graduates are twice as low as those for high school graduates. Specifically, the Bureau of

Labor Statistics (2017) announced that the unemployment rate for college graduates in July 2016 was at 2.5%, compared to high school graduates who were reported at 5.0%.

Occupation reports also confirm the fact that those attaining higher degree completions will be better positioned for the developing employment sector. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) data indicates that 11 of the 15 fastest growing occupations between 2014 and 2024 will require some sort of post-secondary education. More specifically, seven out of 15 job opportunities will require a bachelor's degree or higher. This pattern has been noted since 2007, with previous data demonstrating that for the 10 fastest growing jobs between 2004 and 2014, six out of 10 required an associate degree or higher (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Further demonstrations of the shift in degree requirements can be seen from data reflected earlier in the Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005 report where 10 of the occupations with the largest job growth between 1994 and 2005 required only a high school degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

While it is clear that these changes have been consistent over time, it is also clear that projected job growth will have even greater implications for younger generations as they prepare for and begin to enter the workforce. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2017b) attributes the increase and anticipated additional increase in the projected number of individuals enrolling in college and other postsecondary programs through 2024 to an acknowledgement of the need for degree attainment.

NCES (2017c) indicates a possible correlation between an anticipated enrollment rate of 19.6 million students into an undergraduate program for the fall 2024 semester. This projection far outweighs the 13.2 million undergraduates that enrolled in the fall semester of 2000. According to NCES (2017c), there was a 31% increase in enrollment

in degree-granting postsecondary institutions between 2000 and 2014. During the fall 2014 semester, 17.3 million undergraduates were enrolled in college (NCES, 2017c). In further examining enrollment during this timeframe, it has been reported that 10.9 million students, out of the 17.3 million undergraduate enrollees, enrolled into 4-year institutions compared to the 6.7 million who went to community colleges (NCES, 2017c).

Individuals with a bachelor's degree are also noted to have access to better health insurance and, subsequently, improved health outcomes (College Board, 2013). Workers with higher levels of education are more likely to be covered by employer-provided health insurance than those with lower levels of education. Health insurance coverage declined by 6% between 1991 and 2011 for those who graduated college with a 4-year degree compared to the 15% decline for high school graduates (College Board, 2013).

Studies suggest that there are many benefits to having a degree in higher education (Baum & Payea, 2004; Baum & Ma, 2007; Baum et al., 2013). In addition to providing increased access to employment opportunities within a growing sector, during a career span of 40 years, the median earnings of bachelor's degree recipient are 65% higher than the earnings of a high school graduate (College Board, 2013). In addition to increased access and opportunities for higher earnings, bachelor's degree recipients are more likely not to live in poverty or be reliant on public assistance.

When examining statistics related to poverty, there are also variances between those with and without postsecondary degrees. Specifically, the U.S. Census Bureau in 2010 noted a 5% poverty rate for bachelor's degree recipients compared to a 14% poverty rate of high school graduates. According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2015, 52.2 million, or 21.3%, of the U.S. population participated in major means-tested government

assistance programs each month in 2012. The percentage of bachelor's degree recipients or higher who received public assistance, such as under the New York Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), was reported as 6 times lower than high school graduates (College Board, 2011). Research also indicates that 9% of adults with at least a 4-year college degree received Medicaid coverage in 2011 compared to 43% who did not have a high school diploma, and about 25% who were high school graduates.

Researchers Baum and Ma (2007) and Baum et al. (2013) asserted that there were lower participation rates for Medicaid and SNAP in 2011 than 2005, with the largest increase coming from those without a high school diploma and the smallest number from those with a 4-year degree. Furthermore, personal earnings reports indicate that adults with college degrees are directly correlated to a better-prepared workforce and thriving economy (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). According to the White House (n.d.):

Earning a post-secondary degree or credential is no longer just a pathway to opportunity for a talented few; rather, it is a prerequisite for the growing jobs of the new economy. Over this decade, employment in jobs requiring education beyond a high school diploma will grow more rapidly than employment in jobs that do not; of the 30 fastest growing occupations, more than half require postsecondary education. With the average earnings of college graduates at a level that is twice as high as that of workers with only a high school diploma, higher education is now the clearest pathway into the middle class. (para 1)

While many agree with the benefits of higher education, international recognition of these benefits seem more evident. Reports demonstrate that the number of individuals attaining postsecondary degrees in the United States is far less than those abroad.

Statistics reveal that this was not always the case, as the US ranked first in the world in 4-year degree attainment in 1990 among 25-34-year olds. Today however, the US ranks 12<sup>th</sup> among its international competitors in this age group (White House, n.d.).

When examining participation rates, reports demonstrate that high school graduates from the wealthiest families in the US are reported to continue on to higher education, while just over half of U.S. high school graduates from the poorest of families attend college (White House, n.d.). Variances have also been reported with respect to degree attainment timeframes with more than half of college students graduating within 6 years, and only 25% of low-income students attaining a degree within the same timeframe.

While research testifies to the personal and economic benefits of those who achieve a bachelor's degree, this accomplishment means even more for those who are the first in their families to graduate from college (Baum & Ma, 2007; Baum & Payea, 2004; Baum et al., 2013). Bui (2002) defined first-generation college students (FGCS) as those whose parents did not attend college. Rooney (2008) suggested that first-generation college students are "often clustered in the lowest socioeconomic strata of our society, and [they are] disproportionately members of the African American . . . communities" (p. 2).

According to the report from the U.S. Census Bureau (2015), the national poverty rate in the US is 14.8%. The percentage of Blacks living in poverty, when compared to their White counterparts, is approximately double the amount. Specifically, the number of Blacks living below the poverty level is 26.2%, compared to Whites at 10.1%. Statistics indicate that Blacks are economically at a disadvantage compared to Whites.

The report also indicates that the average household income for Blacks is \$35,398, compared to Whites at \$56,866 and the nation's average at \$53,657 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

The U.S. Census Bureau (2015) report states that as of 2014, there were 45.7 million Blacks living in the US. This was an increase of 1.3% from 2013. There were 3.8 million Blacks residing in New York City, which is home to the largest population of Blacks living in the US (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). In a neighborhood in Queens, NY, 26.0% of the population lives below the poverty level. In addition, as of 2010, Blacks made up 50.1% of the neighborhood, and Hispanics made up 25% of that same neighborhood (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Data also shows that only 21.5% of students who resided in these neighborhoods obtained bachelor's degrees or a higher degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

While the aforementioned statistics are not specific to Black FGCS, the study did indicate that FGCS tend to be Black and are from low-income neighborhoods (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Based upon the lower income and poverty percentage, FGCS have a higher chance of enrolling underprepared into college.

Bui (2002), Engle and Tinto (2008), Engstrom and Tinto (2008), and Gibbons and Woodside (2014) reported that, in general, all first-generation college students have a difficult time throughout their collegiate careers. Without the knowledge of experienced family members who have already graduated from college, FGCS are forced to transition from high school to college and advance through college on their own (Rooney, 2008). It is important to note that applying to college can be intimidating and tedious on its own. FGCS without access to visible family members who have successfully participated in

postsecondary education have to navigate through the college application process, which involves researching colleges, applying for admissions, completing financial aid applications, and making a decision as to what college to attend, perhaps with limited support (Rooney, 2008).

This chapter includes an identification of the problem, a review of the selected theoretical rationale that guided this study, the purpose of this study, identification of the research questions under examination, the significance of this study, and a defined list of relevant terms. Each of the chapters concludes with a summary and provides a preview of successive chapters.

### **Problem Statement**

The National Center for Education Statistics (2017c) defined college participation rate as the percentage of all students from ages 18 to 24 who are enrolled in 2-year and 4-year colleges or universities. According to Engle and Tinto (2008), the United States of America has one of the world's largest college participation rates. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017) stated that as of October 2015, the college participation rate was 69.2%.

While there are no current statistics on the college participation rate of Black first-generation college students, statistics demonstrate that Whites enroll in college at a higher rate than Blacks and Hispanics. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017c), of the 17.3 million undergraduate students who enrolled in fall 2014, 9.6 million were White, compared to 3.0 million Hispanics and 2.4 million Blacks. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2017c) also demonstrate that there was an increase in college enrollment of Blacks and Hispanics between 2000 and 2014. Specifically, the enrollment rate of Blacks into college increased by 57% (from 1.5

million to 2.4 million) while Hispanic student enrollment increased by 119%, from 1.4 million to 3.0 million (NCES, 2017c).

Despite these increases, there is a growing gap between college admittance and persistence toward degree as well as the timeframes associated with degree completion. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center data (2015) indicate that 61.8% of the fall 2007 national cohort completed a bachelor's degree within 6 years. Slight decreases were reported by NCES (2017c), which asserted that 60% of bachelor-degree-seeking students who enrolled in the fall 2008 semester completed their degrees within 6 years of starting their programs. The percentage of students who completed degrees decreased even further for students enrolled in the fall 2009 semester. Nationally, this number dropped to 52.9% (Fain, 2015). While the overall gap continues to increase between college enrollment and degree completion at 4-year institutions, the completion gap among Blacks and their White counterparts is even larger.

Variance in the degree completion has also been noted for those from different races. Specifically, for those entering in the fall 2008 national cohort, statistics demonstrate that 36.2% of Blacks completed their bachelor's degree within 6 years compared to their White counterparts whose completion rate was 59.5% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017b). While previous studies demonstrate that persistence toward degree attainment is lessening nationwide, statistics indicate that the percentage is even higher for first-generation college students from low-income families and who are considered minorities (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

The reasons for these variances have been widely reported. Some researchers have posited that underrepresented students often have overlapping barriers toward

degree attainment to overcome, including being first-generation college students and having a low-income status (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Nuñez & Cucarro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001; Winkle-Wagner, 2009b). According to the researchers, the number of first-generation students attending college is increasing. In fact, the data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2017b) indicates that FGCS makes up 30% of undergraduates. While this is positive, studies reveal that not all students who enter college persist to degree completion. Specifically, researchers have demonstrated that college completion rates for first-generation students continue to be lower than their non-first-generation college student counterparts (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2003; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nuñez & Cucarro-Alamin, 1998, Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). However, this is not always the case, and it has been noted that persistence can vary based on the type of institution attended (Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1975, 1984; Spady, 1970).

According to many researchers, FGCS tend to persist at much higher rates in community colleges than at 4-year colleges and universities (Bui, 2002; Ecklund, 2013; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Petty, 2014). Scholars attribute the decision of FGCS to enter community colleges rather than 4-year institutions to a possible lack of preparedness (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Petty, 2014). Specifically, Engle and Tinto's (2008) study suggests that large numbers of FGCS enter college with lower levels of academic preparation, and they are from low-income households. The researchers have further suggested that FGCS who enter 4-year institutions are 4 times more likely to drop out of a 4-year institution when compared to their peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

While there is a large amount of research (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014) that further discusses the barriers to persistence toward degree completion for first-generation college students, there is a paucity of research that identifies the factors that motivate the success of FGCS (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Martin, 2009; Petty, 2014).

Blackwell and Pinder's (2014) research demonstrates that FGCS' motivation to pursue higher education derives from an inner desire to succeed and attain better ways of living for themselves. Blackwell and Pinder's (2014) qualitative study involved two separate groups: the first group consisted of three FGCS, and the second group of three students were third-generation college students. All of the participants were women who attended college immediately after high school and graduated from college. The findings indicate that three causal conditions were determined to drive the motivation to persist in college: (a) participants had a love of reading at an early age; (b) participants felt different from their siblings; and (c) participants wanted a better life for themselves.

Petty (2014) asserted that students are driven by intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is defined as "being laboriously progressing toward a goal for an individual's sake" (p. 261). Studies show that FGCS' intrinsic motivation factors vary from family support to removing roadblocks that prevent progression toward a desired goal (Ecklund, 2013).

While intrinsic motivation is associated with a person's resolve, extrinsic motivation relies on the demeanor, mental outlook, and self-image of the individual (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) suggested that external rewards

can inspire academic achievement in unmotivated first-generation college students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Blackwell and Pinder (2014) reported:

Those of low socio-economic background and minorities face difficult challenges every step of the way. In addition to socioeconomic issues, inadequate academic preparation, lack of available information, lack of peer counseling are also some of the daily roadblocks these students face as they strive to become the first in their extended family to attend college. (p. 45)

Wendover (1994) asserted that in order to understand what inspires an individual, it is important to study their attitude and behavior, positing that looking closely at someone's background and environment can be a defining factor for motivation. The desire to obtain a better economic standing may serve as motivation toward degree attainment (Wendover, 1994).

### **Theoretical Rationale**

Given the call to respond to the paucity of research in this area as it relates to persistence to degree completion for Black first-generation college students, the theoretical framework used to guide this study was self-efficacy. According to psychologist Albert Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief regarding his/her capability to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over an event that affects that person's life.

Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory arose out of the framework of social cognitive theory. Bandura, Jeffrey, and White's (1974) social cognitive theory states that people learn from watching others. The social cognitive theory regarding self-efficacy

suggests that students are motivated to persist when they believe that their actions could produce favorable results (Bandura, 1997).

Bandura (1997) suggested that there are four sources of self-efficacy: (a) experience or *enactive attainment*, (b) vicarious experiences, (c) verbal persuasion or social persuasion, and (d) physiological states. Enactive attainment or mastery experience is based upon the level of perceived success. As success increases, so does self-efficacy; and, the same is true when success decreases, self-efficacy lowers.

According to Bandura (1997), the factors that affect the level of performance are:

1. difficulty of the task,
2. the amount of effort a person expends,
3. the amount of external aid a person receives,
4. the circumstance under which a person performs, and
5. the temporal pattern of a person's successes and failures.

The vicarious experience outlined in this social cognitive model is another way of strengthening self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). When individuals see someone, who succeeds with similar traits to theirs, their self-efficacy level increases, and they believe that they can accomplish the same level of success (Bandura, 1997). Likewise, when a person fails, despite extreme efforts, the individual's self-efficacy levels decrease; the same effect occurs for someone who the individual admires (Bandura, 1997).

Furthermore, Bandura (1997) posited that if individuals see a model that they do not identify with, success or failure has no effect on their self-efficacy level.

Verbal or social persuasion is widely used to persuade others that they possess the capabilities to achieve a specific task or goal (Bandura, 1997). However, verbal or social

persuasion can be limited in sustaining a long-term self-efficacy level, but it can contribute to success if the desired goal is within reasonable boundaries (Bandura, 1997). Factors that impact the effectiveness of persuasive experiences are: who the persuaders are, their credibility, and how knowledgeable they are about the nature of the activity (Bandura, 1997).

The last source of self-efficacy is one's psychological state. Bandura (1997) believed that people rely partly on their bodily or emotional state while judging their capabilities. These people interpret stress, reactions, and tensions, which may be moments of vulnerability, to poor performance. Mood can also affect peoples' judgment about their efficacy. Just as a positive mood can increase self-efficacy, lugubrious moods can lower it (Bandura, 1997).

Bandura (1997) asserted that a self-efficacy belief creates the infrastructure for human motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment. It is important that a person believes that his/her actions can result in a favorable outcome; otherwise, there will be little to no incentive for that person to persist in times of difficulty (Bandura, 1986). Researchers have posed that self-efficacy serves an important role in motivation; a higher level of self-efficacy results in a higher level of motivation (Jenkins, Miyazaki, & Janosik, 2004; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). This present study used the various factors associated with self-efficacy to examine contributors, impact, and strategies on persistence.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of what motivates Black first-generation college students to persist toward degree attainment at a 4-year

institution. The findings allow for an increased understanding of the factors that impact motivation and success to help increase persistence and graduation rates of first-generation college students at 4-year institutions. The study intended to uncover what makes this selected group of students different from what the body of research is saying about first-generation college students' barrier to success. Specifically, that first-generation college students are underprepared and are 4 times more likely to drop out after their first year of school at a 4-year college (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

### **Research Questions**

Research questions are interrogative statements that narrow the statement of purpose to specific questions (Creswell, 2013). This study focused on the pathways to success at 4-year institutions as perceived by Black first-generation college students. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What factors, from the perspective of Black FGCS, contributed to their persistence toward degree completion?
2. Of the factors identified, which factors were the most impactful on Black FGCS' persistence toward degree completion?
3. Given the factors identified, are there specific strategies employed by persistent Black FGCS that increased the likelihood of college completion?

### **Potential Significance of the Study**

Researchers continue to examine why Black first-generation college students are failing to persist at 4-year institutions at similar or higher rates than their non-FGCS counterparts. This study was designed to examine the pathways to success at a 4-year college from the perspective of Black first-generation college students. The study is

significant because there is a body of research that states that FGCS persist more at community colleges, and they are less likely to do so at 4-year colleges (Bui, 2002; Ecklund, 2013; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Petty, 2014). Additionally, the FGCS at 4-year institutions are 4 times more likely to drop out after their first year (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Contrary to the previous statement, the researcher had personal knowledge of FGCS who graduated from a high school in Queens, NY who persisted at 4-year institutions. Given this fact, additional research was needed to uncover systems that could be put into place to help increase persistence and to inform stakeholders.

Unlike the large body of research that highlights the barriers and roadblocks to success of FGCS at 4-year institutions, this study focused on the variables perceived by FGCS as contributors to their success. In doing so, this study sought the insights and lived experiences of FGCS who successfully completed their sophomore year at a 4-year college and who were on track to graduate within 6 years of their initial enrollment into college. This study was conducted to increase the body of knowledge relating to FGCS who successfully persisted through college in pursuit of a 4-year degree.

### **Definitions of Terms**

*Black* – individuals who identify themselves as African, African American, Caribbean, Caribbean American, and Hispanic (non-descendants of Spain).

*First-Generation College Students* – individuals whose parents did not attend college (Bui, 2002).

*Low Income* – having or relating to working families whose yearly earning is less than twice the federal poverty level.

*Socioeconomic Status* – a combined total measure of a person’s work experience and of an individual’s or family’s economic and social position in relation to others, based on income, education, and occupation.

*Success* – the accomplishment of an aim or purpose.

## **Chapter Summary**

This study fills a gap in the literature by focusing on factors that contribute to persistence of Black first-generation college students of at a 4-year institution. Contrary to the growing body of research that focuses on FGCS’ barriers to degree attainment in postsecondary education, and studies that highlight the success of FGCS at community colleges, little research has been done to examine the phenomenon that there are Black FGCS who are successfully persisting their way through 4-year institutions. It is critical that more attention is brought to the success of this underrepresented group, the strategies they employ, and resources they utilize that promote academic success.

Chapter 2, the review of literature, examines FGCS’ success and their academic accomplishment regardless of their low expected success rate. Chapter 3 describes the methodology that was used to conduct this study, including general perspectives, research contexts, research participants, instruments for data collection, and procedures for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 presents a detailed analysis of the results and findings, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research and practice.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

Although college participation rates for Blacks have increased (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; NCES, 2017c; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015), there is a gap between college enrollment and degree attainment (Bui 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008). The focus of this research was to examine the strategies employed by Black first-generation college students (FGCS) with respect to persistence toward degree attainment at a 4-year institution.

Themes of self-efficacy, in terms of persistence and parental involvement, were used to guide the research to examine the pathway to success by Black FGCS attending a New York-based 4-year institution. The research was used to analyze their experience as they persisted toward degree completion. The objective of this study was to gain a better understanding of what factors contribute to Black FGCS' persistence to degree completion at a 4-year institution. This study was conducted to uncover what makes this select group of students different from the body of research that focuses on FGCS' barriers to degree attainment in postsecondary education and that indicates that FGCS are 4 times more likely to drop out of college after their first year of enrollment into a 4-year college in comparison to their non-FGCS counterparts whose parents did attend college (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Researchers Bui (2002), Ecklund (2013), Engle & Tinto (2008), Engstrom & Tinto (2008), Gibbons & Woodside (2014), and Petty (2014) posited that FGCS persist at

higher rates at community colleges than at 4-year colleges and universities. According to some researchers, FGCS' decision to enter community college rather than a 4-year institution is due to the lack of preparedness (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Petty, 2014). Specifically, Engle and Tinto (2008) suggested that large numbers of FGCS enter college with lower levels of academic preparation, and they are from low-income households.

This chapter includes empirical exemplars of literature related to the characteristics of Black first-generation college students' persistence and factors that affect student persistence. The examination of the literature addresses: (a) persistence, (b) persistence in Black communities, (c) first-generation college students, (d) persistence in Black FGCS, (e) factors that affect persistence, and (f) strategies to increase persistence. The review also includes additional emergent factors that contribute to FGCS' persistence toward degree attainment.

### **Persistence**

According to Hagedorn (2005), persistence is defined as a student completing a postsecondary degree. Researchers have studied many variations of persistence pertaining to postsecondary education such as comparing first semester to second semester, first year to second year, year to year, and persistence toward degree attainment (Attinasi, 1989; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 1983, 1986; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolf, 1986; Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2000; Williamson & Creamer, 1988). First semester to second semester persistence or within-year persistence refers to a student returning for the spring semester after completing the fall semester. First year to second year persistence is the most common studied persistence for first-generation college students, because the

research states that FGCS are most likely to drop out after their first year in college (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008). First year to second year persistence focuses on students returning to college after the completion of their first year of college. Year-to-year persistence examines a student returning year after year, while degree attainment persistence looks at persisting until the completion of a degree. In addition to understanding the types of persistence that has been researched, it is important to understand the type of models that were used to conduct the research. Astin (1975, 1984, 1993), Spady (1971), and Tinto (1975) are among the most widely used models in degree-attainment persistence research.

The Civil Rights Movement resulted in equal rights, access, and opportunities for the Black community in America. As a result, there was a sudden increase in enrollment of Blacks into predominantly White institutions (PWIs) across the country (Fleming, 1984). While the influx of Blacks into PWIs was a step in a positive direction for Blacks, the crusade was met with other factors that greatly affected the Black college-going community. According to Colon (1991), Whites dominate the education system, therefore, the system is governed White influences. Therefore, Blacks were faced with being between the dominant institution culture and culture that they grew up in (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). According to Powell (1998), culture shock refers to the anxiety that a person experiences after entering into a new environment. Minorities may experience culture shock when entering a PWI, and Powell (1998) posited that Black college students tend to have a difficult time navigating their way through a PWI and acclimating themselves with the norms of universities. Difficulty in acclimating may lower student involvement, which can affect academic and social integration, which then

can affect student persistence (Astin, 1975, 1984; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975).

According to Guiffrida (2006), Black students are more likely to interact with Black faculty members than with White faculty members. If there is a disproportionate number between White and Black faculty members at a PWI, this may also have an effect on how Black students perceive the institution (Guiffrida, 2006). Guiffrida posited that the disparities between the number of Black and White faculty members may result in a disconnection between academic experience and extracurricular involvement.

Researchers have suggested that a campus-wide collaboration of Black administration, faculty, and staff through academic and social integration can change students' perception of the institutional support system (Seifert, Drummond, & Pascarella, 2006).

In a qualitative study, Herndon and Hirt (2004) researched the effects of family influence on the lives of African American college students. The study is important to this current research because it highlights how African Americans have historically been underrepresented in higher education. In 1994, Blacks or African Americans made up 12% of the United States population, yet only 10.7% were college students. Herndon and Hirt (2004) believed that it was important to draw attention to the roles of the family in the lives of these students.

Herndon and Hirt (2004) mentioned that "families are primary source of academic potential," (p. 493), and that there is a strong relationship between family union and the success of Black students. The participants of the Herndon and Hirt study were chosen from two public universities. One was from an urban setting and the other was from a rural setting. Both of the universities consisted of predominantly White students. The

study sample consisted of 20 African American students and 18 family members. All of the student participants were senior-level college students with a mean grade point average (GPA) of 2.66, they were considered successful, and they contacted their families an average of 5.1 times per week. The individual student interviews were conducted face to face, and the parent interviews were conducted via telephone (Herndon & Hirt, 2004).

The research provided supporting evidence that the success of African American students prior to college enrollment, upon entering, and after completion relied heavily on three areas of support: family, institution, and community. Three themes emerged from the coded data: pre-college, early-college, and later-college influences. The findings indicate that academic success was prompted by family support via financial, social, and emotional means pertaining to precollege influences. It was also cited by participants that they were taught by family members not to be intimidated by racial barriers (Herndon & Hirt, 2004).

During the discussion of early college experiences, the subjects spoke about how maintaining close relationships with their family members and that religion helped ease the feeling of isolation while dealing with the difficulties of performing academically at a predominantly White institution. In the discussion of later college influences, participants made reference to the importance of success in terms of being a role model and mentor to future generations as well as making their parents proud. While the Herndon and Hirt's (2004) study indicated that parental involvement was significant to student success, the generalizability of the research was limited to the sample study. Herndon and Hirt suggested that future studies should consider taking samples from

predominantly Black colleges, community colleges, and liberal arts colleges. They also suggested that in conjunction to the institution type, a quantitative study could be used to look at the three categories in greater detail (Herndon & Hirt, 2004).

### **First-Generation College Students**

**First-generation college students' barriers.** While persistence towards college completion has lessened nationwide, this is more so true for FGCS from low-income families and minorities (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Research defines first-generation college students as those whose parents did not attend college or did not complete college; they tend to disproportionately belong to Black and Hispanic heritage, and they are generally depicted as having come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Ecklund, 2013; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Petty, 2014). FGCS are 48% more likely to delay enrollment into college after high school compared to their non-FGCS counterparts at 19% (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2017a) data on non-FGCS suggests an enrollment rate of 82% compared to FGCS whose enrollment rate was 54%. Furthermore, the report indicated that FGCS whose parents did not have a high school diploma had an enrollment rate of 36%. In addition to delayed college enrollment, Valdez (2008) suggested that FGCS were likely to enroll into community colleges rather than in 4-year institutions.

The Horn and Nuñez (2000) multivariate analysis revealed that FGCS enrollment into 4-year institutions were impacted by family income, educational expectations, parental involvement, peer influence, and academic preparation. Furthermore, low

income contributed to FGCS enrolling into college academically underprepared (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2004).

According to research by Engle and Tinto (2008), there are 4.5 million FGCS who enrolled in postsecondary education with an estimated 24% pursuing a bachelor degree. Data from the Engle and Tinto and the National Center for Education Statistics (year) research suggests that FGCS from low socioeconomic backgrounds had a 26% chance of leaving college after their first year, in comparison to their counterparts who were not FGCS and who were not from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, and whose likelihood of dropping out was 7%. Studies also show, suggested by the low graduation rates of FGCS, only 11% of FGCS earn a bachelor's degree after 6 years, in contrast to their more advantaged non-FGCS peers who earn their bachelor's degree at rate of 55% (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Petty, 2014; Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014).

In spite of this gap, FGCS are 7 times more likely to obtain a bachelor's degree if they start postsecondary school at a 4-year institution rather than a 2-year institution. However, a large percentage of FGCS start and finish their academic careers at a 2-year institution (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Research indicates that only 14% of FGCS from low socioeconomic backgrounds transfer into 4-year institutions after completing their associate degrees, and only 5% earn a bachelor's degree within 6 years (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008;).

Bui's (2002) qualitative study examined the backgrounds of FGCS at a 4-year university. The focus was on reasons for the students pursuing a higher education and their first-year experiences. The FGCS participants ( $n = 64$ ) were compared to two other groups of participants, those whose parents had some college experience but no degree

( $n = 75$ ) and those with both parents who had at least a bachelor's degree ( $n = 68$ ). The FGCS participants were recruited from the Program Leading to Undergraduate Success at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The serves FGCS at UCLA by providing support such as professional academic counseling, informal peer counseling, and academic tutoring. The participants from the two comparison groups came from an Introduction to Psychology course at UCLA. How the participants from the comparison groups were chosen was not stated. All three groups of participants were freshman in their third quarter of their first year at UCLA.

A questionnaire was utilized in the study to determine students' background information, their reasons for attending college, and their first-year experiences. Background information included the participants': gender, age, ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, language spoken at home, and their SAT scores. All participants were asked to gauge the level of importance for pursuing college guided by 16 questions, using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (extremely important). The *questionnaire* included reasons such as familial expectations, financial goals, and career goals. A 7-point scale was also used to determine how true each of the 10 given experiences was to them. The indications were 1 (not at all true) to 7 (completely true). The experience included fear of failing at the university, concerns about financial aid, and feeling accepted at the university. Participants completed questionnaires in groups of three to 12 in a lab room or conference room.

The results of the study suggest that FGCS are more likely to be: ethnic minority students, of low socioeconomic backgrounds, speak another language other than English at home, and have lower scores on their SAT exams than their non-FGCS counterparts.

While there are other studies (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Ecklund, 2013; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Petty, 2014) that support Bui's (2002) findings that FGCS are more likely to be minorities from low socioeconomic backgrounds and have lower college entry scores, such as the SATs, Engle and Tinto (2008) did not suggest that FGCS were more likely to speak another language at home. The location of the UCLA campus in Los Angeles and its ethnic makeup might be a contributor to a language other than English spoken in the household of the FGCS participants. Two years prior to Bui's (2002) study, the 2000 U.S. Census indicated that out of a total population of 3,694,820 people, 1,719,073 people identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Given this self-identification, Hispanics and Latinos made up almost half of the population surrounding UCLA. Therefore, this factor may contribute to why FGCS at UCLA speak languages other than English at home.

The overall results for the reasons for pursuing higher education was distinctive among all groups. Findings indicate that the differences were due to the FGCS scoring lower on five reasons of an education's importance, than those whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree (Bui, 2002). However, FGCS scored higher for reasons of importance when it came to gaining respect/status, bringing honor to their family, and the ability to help out financially after degree completion. The three groups did not show any difference for 11 of the reasons for pursuing a college education. These reasons were: friends going to college, parents expected them to go, influence from high school counselor/teacher, obtain a degree for a particular career, enjoy learning, provide for their future families, independence, to be acquiring skills to function effectively in society, wanted to get out of their parents' neighborhood, and not wanting to work immediately

right after graduating high school. No comparison was made of the FGCS participants with the group whose parents had some college experience but did not obtain a degree.

The first-year experience questionnaire showed overall differences among the groups. The FGCS felt less prepared for college, had to dedicate more time to studying, and had more concerns about financial aid than those whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree (Bui, 2002). The FGCS participants also reported knowing less about the social environment at UCLA than the other two groups. These findings suggest that the FGCS were not engaging socially on campus. Areas of true first-year experiences where FGCS did not differ from the comparison groups were: comfortable making decisions pertaining to college, knowledge of academic programing prior to enrollment, making friends on campus, enjoy being a student at UCLA, and feeling accepted at the university. No mention of comparison was made in the literature of those whose parents had some college experience but did not obtain a degree.

**Black first-generation college students' persistence.** There are numerous factors that decrease the chances of bachelor degree attainment by FGCS from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. According to research, first-generation college students are less likely to live on campus, they have the tendency not to be involved in extracurricular activities, and they often perceive the college atmosphere as less supportive (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Furthermore, FGCS work more hours than their peers whose parents went to college and earned a degree (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Warburton et al., 2001).

African American college freshman, when compared to Whites, tend to vary greatly in social class, economic status, values, needs, and traditions (Cuyjet, 1997). These factors have considerable influence on the academic and social development of these students as part of their collegiate growth, which is impacted by social environment, developmental experiences, and personal relationships formed on campus during their first year at college (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

Pascarella (1985) applied Tinto's (1975) model to examine the persistence of Blacks and Whites at 4-year institutions using a quantitative design. The study used a sample size of 5,577 students from 353 institutions. Data were collected from the 1971-1980 Cooperative Institutional Research Program Surveys. According to the variables of the study, there was a 20%-degree completion variable for White men compared to White women at 15%, and 29% for Black men, while Black women were at 17%. Findings indicate that there was a correlation with the Tinto (1975) model for persistence toward degree completion. According to Pascarella (1985), degree attainment is associated with both academic and social integration for the entire sample size. Additionally, the Pascarella study asserts that there were differences in terms of race.

Academic integration was most important to both White males and females, compared to Black females, where both academic and social integration were equally important (Pascarella, 1985). Black men asserted that social integration took precedence. It was important to Black men that they served in some capacity in an organization on campus. Black women had no particular preference in the type of social integration significance, however, obtaining a major role in a play did indicate positive effects on persistence. It was more important to both White males and females that social

integration involved having a personal relationship with faculty members. Although the study indicates that persistence was affected by student integration, it also highlights that the types of activities and campus involvement that lead to persistence are different and may differ based on race. Additionally, the study supports Astin's (1984) student-involvement theory that states that the more a student becomes involved, the more that student succeeds socially and academically.

According to Tinto (1993), students are more likely to persist once they adapt to the culture of the institution. They then become committed to their success. Students who are committed are then likely to interact more with their peers and faculty members. These factors are all critical to students' academic success (Tinto, 1993). According to Kim and Sax (2009), first-generation college students are less likely to interact with faculty members compared to their non-FGCS counterparts. Kim and Sax (2009) posited that interaction with faculty members inside and outside of the classrooms could result in higher grades, which promotes motivation toward degree attainment, and it promotes commitment to the college.

Somers et al. (2000) asserted that FGCS are more likely to persist in college if they do not work full time. FGCS' lack of social integration may be linked to their working full time and not being able to spend much time on campus or participate in campus activities (Somers et al., 2000). Researchers have posited that college integration is important to persistence. Failure to integrate may result in student departure (Astin, 1975, 1984; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Hossler, Ziskin, Moore, and Wakhungu (2008), explored student persistence through the lens of what factors contribute to a student's decision to stay in college. Several researchers have developed theories on factors that affect persistence, which have been widely used to examine why some college students persist and why others decide to drop out (Astin, 1975; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). An overview of these factors that affect persistence will give accreditation to the research.

### **Social Integration, Student Involvement, Student Integration**

According to the Spady (1971) model on student dropouts from higher education, a student's decision to remain in an institution or leave it is based upon five variables: (a) normative congruence, which refers to the student's personality, attitude, and interests toward the existing conditions of his/her environment; (b) friendship support, which is the ability to develop close friendship with others; (c) grade performance; (d) intellectual development; and (e) social integration. Spady (1971) posited that all five variables lead to greater integration in a social college environment. Greater levels of social integration lead to higher satisfaction level; satisfaction leads to higher levels of commitment to the institution; and institutional commitment directly affects persistence (Spady, 1971).

Reason (2009) agreed with Spady's (1971) model that suggests that student persistence is greater when students become socially integrated into the college environment. Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2006) conducted a quantitative study to examine the social competence of first-year students in college. The study involved 30 different institutions, with a sample size of 6,687 full- and part-time students. A survey was completed by all participants through the National Survey of Students Engagement (NSSE). The findings indicate that there is a correlation between students' perception of

support from the institution and the level of their social and personal competence. Spady (1971) asserted that students enroll at an institution that has specific cultural characteristics. When these characteristics are confirmed by interaction with other sources on a college campus, such as other students, coursework, and faculty members, the student becomes integrated into the environment (Spady, 1971). Other researchers (Astin, 1975, 1984; Tinto, 1975, 1993) agreed with Spady (1971) that nonacademic factors can also contribute to persistence.

Fox (1986) used the Tinto (1975) model to examine persistence, using a sample size of 435 primarily minority students enrolled at a 4-year commuter institution. A survey was used at the beginning of the fall semester registration, and a follow-up survey was used during the spring semester. Fox then compared students who registered for the following fall semester to those who did not register. This was a first year to second year persistence study. The findings indicated that academic integration did have a compelling effect on persistence. Findings indicate that there was no significant effect on persistence found in social integration. It is important to reiterate that the Fox (1986) study was done at a commuter college, which had fewer activities compared to a traditional college with dormitories. This may have been a contributing factor to the low social integration and the effect on persistence.

A qualitative study by Lehmann (2007) was conducted to examine the college experience of FGCS who had left college or stepped out without earning a degree from their college between the years 2001 and 2003. The term *stepped out* was used in the study to refer to students who returned to college after taking a leave. The sample consisted of 25 participants, 15 of whom were FGCS. Of the 15 FGCS, eight had parents

who were of the working class. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. After coding the transcript, several themes emerged. The primary theme was “discontinuity” or lacking relatedness to the college experience.

The subjects expressed that they felt disconnected from their home culture. Finance was another concern as participants expressed financial hardship. Intimidation was another theme. The FGCS felt intimidated by non-FGCS who appeared to have more money and a better quality of education and resources than they had. The last theme was a sense of belonging. Participants expressed relief after dropping out of the institution, because they did not feel like they belonged there. The study indicated that FGCS face several barriers, such as low self-esteem, financial hardship, social integration, academic under preparedness, and other factors that prevented them from persisting.

According to Astin (1975), students are most likely to persist in college if they are academically prepared, reside on campus, participate in campus extracurricular activities, are not in a relationship (referring to women), do not have children, and are employed part time. Astin (1985) placed emphasis on a student’s active engagement in the learning process and less attention on the educator. Astin (1985) proposed the following:

(a) involvement requires an investment of psychosocial and physical energy;  
(b) involvement is continuous, and the amount of energy invested varies from student to student; (c) aspects of involvement can be qualitative and quantitative; (d) students’ knowledge gained and personal development is directly proportional to an educational programs’ quality and quantity; and (e) academic performance is correlated with a student’s involvement.

**Family involvement: Parents, family, and friends.** Astin (1975) found that it is critical for first-year college students to have a strong supportive family system in place when entering a new environment away from home, to help encourage them to persist and lessen the feeling of isolation. Parents who have a college degree are likely to encourage their children to remain in college because, through their own experience, they are aware of the benefits of having a degree. First-generation college students whose parents have no college experience may not be able to provide that same type of support because of their limited knowledge of the college experience and the type of support that they could provide to encourage their children to persist in such environments (Astin, 1975). Upon researching the significance of parental involvement in higher education of minority students, two contradicting factors arose. Some researchers (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Choy, 2001; Deffendall, Knutson, & Sacks, 2011; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Hsiao, 1992) pointed out that parents without a degree in higher education tend not to be supportive of their children in college. However, other researchers (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Gofen, 2009; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Kern, 2011; London, 1989; Wolf, 2011) insisted that parents play an important role in the motivation of FGCS.

***Negative impact.*** Hsiao (1992) believed that family members who have no college experience or no knowledge of the benefits of having a degree of higher education can serve as an obstruction or can be non-supportive of FGCS especially during their first year of college. Deffendall et al. (2011) revealed that parents of FGCS may have a difficult time supporting their children because they do not comprehend the student's need to attend college, spend time on a college campus, and to be engaged in the culture of a collegiate environment. Parents of FGCS might pressure their children to

stay at home, to assist with household responsibilities, such as financial assistance, taking care of younger siblings, family chores, and other duties, that might distract the student from academic responsibilities and social experiences. Deffendall et al. believed that parents with no college experience could serve as a hindrance to the academic and social progress of FGCS.

Dennis et al. (2005) asserted that peer groups may assist FGCS through their academic difficulties. Dennis et al. (2005) claimed that peer groups appear to be more supportive in the commitment of degree attainment than family members of FGCS. Parents of FGCS do not have the necessary knowledge required to assist their children in becoming college ready (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). It is unlikely that parents of FGCS assist their children with college entrance examinations plans or strategies for applying to college (Choy, 2001). Instead, FGCS are likely to seek assistance from an external family member or friend (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). While these researchers claimed that parents without a college education may not serve as a supportive system or motivation for college aspiration, enrollment, and persistence, other researchers claimed differently.

***Positive impact.*** A strong family support system can help students persist in college. London (1989) suggested that there are strong ties between students' attribution of family influence when it comes to making a decision to pursue college. London (1989) conducted a qualitative study using 15 first-generation college students as the participants. The findings indicate that family plays a significant role in students' development when it pertains to successfully enrolling into an institution and persisting. London (1992) later conducted another qualitative study to examine the affect parents

had on FGCS when they decide to go away to college as opposed to commuting. The research indicates that even though parents may have felt like the student had abandoned their home culture for a college culture, conclusively students benefited from the parental involvement and support.

A study conducted by Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) suggests that parents who are involved in their children's academic studies in high school may increase the college enrollment percentage by 18%. FGCS are likely to benefit from parental involvement as shown by their non-FGCS counterparts who experienced a positive effect on high school graduation rates, college application process, college acceptance, enrollment, and persistence. Similarly, Episten (1995) concluded the need for parental support for pre-college to enrollment and matriculation. Exposing students to ongoing messages about the importance of having a college education may serve as a motivational factor for persistence.

Kern (2011) conducted a case study using a purposeful sampling to examine the effects of family support and support from friends on persistence toward college completion. The sample was taken from a radiologic technology program at a community college. The study consisted of 14 participants. Three structured focus group interviews were conducted with five to six participants at a time. The findings indicated that family and friends' involvement through connections and interactions were one of the most influential factors in terms of persistence.

According to the McCarron and Inkles (2006) longitudinal study of over 1,800 first-generation college students, the results suggest that parental involvement and support are top contributors to college aspiration. The active engagement and support

factors were effective with increasing FGCS' aspirations to attend college while helping to decrease the negative effects of culture shock that many FGCS experience after enrolling into college.

In a qualitative study conducted by Gofen (2009), an examination of 50 FGCS was administered to see how the participants, retrospectively, remembered their parents' involvement in their pre-college education and also in how they perceived motivation. The FGCS participants' educational level ranged from pre-baccalaureate attainment to post-graduate degrees. The FGCS' parents' education ranged from no high school degree to high diploma and/or professional trade certification. The study used semi-structured interviews, and the students were asked open-ended questions. Parent involvement was defined as nonmaterial resources of a family such as priorities, belief systems, habits, and values.

According to Gofen (2009), family support allowed students to break the intergenerational cycle of not attending college, which led to college enrollment and persistence. Three categories arose from the analysis of the data: attitude toward education, interpersonal relationships, and family values. The participants' attitude toward education was a reflection of: their parents' attitude toward the students' education, the parents' attitude toward their own education, and the frequent interactions between family members in which these attitudes were expressed. The study indicated that the parents' support of their children's aspiration for pursuing college may be attributed to the parents living vicariously through their children, or it can be viewed as a chance at a better life for their children (Gofen, 2009).

Despite the lack of formal education by the parents of the Gofen (2009) FGCS participants, they were still able to serve as role models in their children's lives by informally educating them at home via reading newspaper, magazines, and books. The parents of the participants further motivated their children by enrolling in classes at the local community centers to further their education so that they could assist their children with their academics. Some parents used their lack of education to deter their children from making the same choice.

Interpersonal relationships among family members also served as motivation for FGCS to pursue college (Gofen, 2009). Participants recalled their parents stressing the importance of family and the sacrifice they made to support the students' educational aspirations. Therefore, the FGCS were motivated to succeed academically as a sign of appreciation for their parents' and family's sacrifice (Gofen, 2009).

Gofen's (2009) study highlighted that the family values by which the FGCS were raised were significant to the success of the students. Family values were centered on family solidarity, respect for parents, and the values linked to accomplishment and aspiration. Some subjects reported that the appreciation of these values was what guided them to their achievement. In contrast to other studies, although the FGCS in the Gofen study faced a number of challenges in their pursuit to attain a 4-year degree, their families often served as motivation and not as limitations.

Dennis et al. (2005) examined the ways in which motivational characteristics and environmental social supports serve as contributors to the academic success of FGCS. Motivational characteristics, here, are referred to as personal and career motivations to succeed in college. Environmental support involved patterns of interactions with family

and peers in which the FGCS' academic and socioemotional needs were met. The study defined academic success as a function of mental ability, academic skills, motivation, and goals.

The findings of the Dennis et al. (2005) indicate that the FGCS perceived their peers as more suitable to provide academic support in college rather than their parents or family members. The FGCS relied more on their peers for academic support by creating support systems such as forming study groups and sharing course work assignments. Family played a role in the emotional support of the FGCS. Dennis et al. suggested that family and peer support are significant contributors to academic success of FGCS; however, it is important to note that the research also showed that the lack of support had little effect on those FGCS who were doing well in college.

**Non-cognitive factors affecting persistence.** Researchers have repeatedly stated that first-generation college students tend to enroll in college academically underprepared (Choy, 2001; Darling & Smith, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hellman & Harbeck, 1996; Jenkins et al., 2004). Taking rigorous high-school courses, such as advanced mathematics, increases the preparedness of FGCS for a collegiate academic curriculum (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Jenkins et al. (2004) conducted a study to examine the difference between FGCS and non-FGCS' attitude toward college readiness. The study consisted of 194 participants: 123 of the subjects identified themselves as FGCS. All of the participants were given a survey pertaining to their pre-college academic profile. The survey sought to find out whether the participant enrolled in advanced courses during high school, their capability of seeking or asking for assistance from their teachers, need for remedial

courses, and their study habits. Perceived academic ability and academic self-efficacy were other factors of the study between which the research indicated a correlation. The FGCS participants who perceived themselves as being more academically prepared were reported to have a higher belief of their academic self-efficacy. The FGCS participants who viewed themselves as having low-academic preparedness were reported to have a lower belief in their academic self-efficacy (Jenkins et al., 2004).

According to Bandura (1993), self-belief plays a vital role in the self-regulation of motivation. Oftentimes, motivation is cognitively generated. People are capable of motivating themselves and enthusiastically guiding themselves to anticipation (Bandura, 1993). This occurs when an individual believes that anything can be done, while anticipating the outcomes of the perceived actions through set goals and course of action (Bandura, 1993). “Forethought is translated into incentives and appropriate action through self-regulatory mechanisms” (Bandura, 1993, p. 128).

In a qualitative study conducted by Zimmerman et al. (1992), 102 high school ninth and 10<sup>th</sup> graders were examined to determine their perceived self-efficacy regarding a number of cognitive abilities. The cognitive abilities were planned and organized around their academic capabilities, structured environments conducive to learning, usage of cognitive strategies to enhance their understanding, utilization of teachers, counselors, and peers, to obtain needed information, self-motivation to complete task within the deadline, and persistence of academic attainment and social activities. The Zimmerman et al. (1992) findings suggest that the higher the students perceived their self-efficacy, the more they were able to cultivate their academic abilities. Self-efficacy did not mirror the students’ academic abilities but, rather, influenced the procurement of their skills.

The effect of students' perceived self-efficacy aided them in the promotion of academic attainment and influenced their personal goals (Zimmerman et al., 1992). In addition, the parents played an important role in students' academic self-efficacy by creating high academic standards for their children. Parents believing in their child's abilities help the students increase their sense of self-efficacy and their ability toward academic achievement (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Zimmerman et al., 1992). This may be considered a hindrance to FGCS, because their parents have limited to no experience with higher education. Therefore, they may not be able to set expectations or even assist in the college application process.

Ecklund's (2013) qualitative study aimed to provide information that may be of value to Christian universities who are committed to closing the success gap between the underrepresented group of first-generation college students and the non-first-generation college students in their populations. Ecklund utilized data from her previous research involving in-depth interviews with FGCS and their families, along with quantitative research from secular universities. Seven FGCS were selected to form a small group for the study. The group consisted of two males and five females. No descriptive method was noted on how the group of seven participants was selected. The group was given all of the literature reviews of the study to read and comprehend. The group met face-to-face on a bi-weekly basis to share their experiences orally and in writing. The study group also communicated electronically over the course of a single semester. The dialogue focused on the diverse group of FGCS' experiences, perceptions, needs, and wishes that were alike or different from the existing literature and, further, how being a student at a Christian institution impacted their experience as a FGCS (Ecklund, 2013).

After the completion of the semester, Ecklund's (2013) research group of seven FGCS led an open-group forum involving other FGCS who were offered campus-wide participation in a 2-hour discussion on their experiences. There were 56 self-selected FGCS who volunteered for the 2-hour discussion. The 56 FGCS group were given the literature review of the study, and a forum was opened up for discussion afterward. The researcher observed and took detailed notes of the small and large groups. At the conclusion of the large group discussion, the smaller group reviewed the narrative of the larger group and related it to their semester-long work. The collection of ideas was developed into recommendations for ways Christians universities can support FGCS. Recommendations for supporting FGCS consisted of categories such as promotion of self-efficacy, parental involvement, engagement in students' lives, and mentoring and advising. The research suggests that there is a correlation between school engagement, self-efficacy, and persistence for FGCS (Ecklund, 2013).

Powers (1991) argued in his brief commentary to the *American Psychologist* that Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy theory had a negative effect on performance. The negative effect was based on two premises. First, that self-efficacy and goals worked independently and at cross-purposes, and secondly, that individuals loosen their efforts as they draw near to a goal (Powers, 1991). Powers suggested that motivation is governed by two optimistic belief systems that operate independently and counteract each other. Powers' notion was that optimistic goal beliefs can raise efforts by increasing the discrepancy in the negative loop, which, by so doing, will require more effort to attain the goal. The opposition is that optimistic goal beliefs decrease the perceived discrepancy between performance and ambition comparison (Powers, 1991). Powers believed that a

reduction in discrepancy will cause individuals to decrease their drive, therefore, weakening their motivation for achievement. The second premise of Powers' (1991) argument focused on the decrease in drive as an individual gets close to goal attainment, consequently, reducing goal discrepancy. According to Powers, goals and self-efficacy function separately from each other. Thus, to achieve a positive effect, the individual must focus solely on the goal achieving part of the equation while completely ignoring the discouraging half (Powers, 1991). Powers' research, however, did not provide support of his theory that self-efficacy and goals function at cross-purposes.

Yeo and Neal (2006) argued that specific self-efficacy reduces performance while general self-efficacy increases it. Yeo and Neal disputed Bandura's (1993) theory that self-efficacy simultaneously strengthens and weakens performance. Yeo and Neal presented two hypotheses to support their theory involving self-efficacy. First, the negative effect of specific self-efficacy that was examined at the within-person level. Second, the positive effect for general self-efficacy that was examined at the between-person level (Yeo and Neal, 2006). Bandura (2015) addressed Yeo and Neal's finding by stating:

Yeo and Neal (2006) found that self-efficacy is positively related to performance, but the relationship changes to a miniscule negative one when the mean of specific self-efficacies is added as a control for specific self-efficacy. The aggregate self-efficacy is simply an arithmetic mean of itself, not a different conceptual variable with its own functional properties. This is a peculiar control strategy in which self-efficacy, which is auto correlated, is partialled out from

itself. It makes no theoretical sense to partial out the influence of the future in gauging the influence of the present. (p. 1029)

Bandura (2015) argued that Yeo and Neal's (2006) experiment was confounded and offered no theoretical rationale as to why low self-efficacy is energizing.

**Strategies to increase persistence.** Research demonstrates that students employ a variety of strategies that facilitate persistence toward degree completion. These strategies are actions taken outside of the classroom setting that contribute to their persistence. Research indicates that underrepresented students, like FGCS and Blacks, often use strategies surrounding relationship building to motivate them to persist in college (Holodick-Reed, 2013; Noldon, 1998). Additionally, experts in higher education also developed strategies that institutions can apply to increase persistence for underrepresented students.

***Student strategies.*** Holodick-Reed (2013) conducted a phenomenological case study to examine factors that contributed to persistence involving 15 FGCS in their junior and senior years at a 4-year institution. Holodick-Reed applied questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and field notes for data collection. The findings resulted in the following strategies that were employed by the participants as contributors toward persistence: knowledge acquired for college preparation, focusing on the future, good friends, caring faculty members and staff, supportive family, financial aid, and feeling comfortable on campus (Holodick-Reed, 2013).

Of the 15 participants, 14 mentioned that they took College Now and/or advanced placement courses during high school. Those who took College Now courses in high school earned college credits and gained the experience of a college academic

environment. Furthermore, earning college credits toward an intended major prior to attending college allowed for some flexibility when choosing elective courses at the institution (Holodick-Reed, 2013).

Participants in the Holodick-Reed (2013) study spoke about their supportive relationships with friends who also resided on campus. Many of their friends were described as upperclassmen or mentors that the participants met during their freshmen orientation at college. Friends of the participants assisted with first-year transitions from high school to life on campus, coping with being homesick, and studying. Some of the participants' friends were teacher assistants who helped the participants with their course work. Friends also served as role models, providing emotional and moral support and encouraging the participants to persist in college when they thought about dropping out of college during high stress moments (Holodick-Reed, 2013).

Participants mentioned staff and faculty members providing academic assistance and career guidance. They also stated that they often turned to familiar staff or faculty members when they encountered a difficult course. Faculty or staff would often provide assistance or guidance to obtain the proper support needed to assist them in a specific subject area. Several participants indicated that some faculty and staff also served in the role of family while they were away from their family. The participants acknowledged that knowing that their instructors cared about their well-being served as a motivating factor to persist (Holodick-Reed, 2013).

A sense of belonging to the institution played a significant role in the participants' persistence. A comparison was made about the small campus size that reminded the participants of high school. The small community caused residents to have more intimate

relationships with each other. Freshmen orientation played an important role because it offered the opportunity for participants to become acclimated with the campus (Holodick-Reed, 2013).

Noldon (1998) conducted a qualitative study applying a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to critically interpret the lived experiences of five successful Black college students. The study was conducted at a PWI, and each of the participants was described as academically successful. Noldon (1998) interviewed the participants in a group using open-ended questions. The participants were asked a variety of questions regarding their lived experiences on campus to highlight factors that contributed to their success at the institution.

One of the discussions pertained to student-faculty relationship. The participants in Noldon's (1998) study explained that they often turned to Black faculty members for help rather than White faculty members. One participant mentioned that he/she felt more comfortable approaching a Black faculty member because there was a sense of relatability, and he/she did not feel judged or that his/her intellect was questioned. The interaction with Black faculty members allowed the students to feel more welcome at the institution, and they contributed to the student participants persistence in college (Noldon, 1998).

A participant noted that while there was a sense of comfort to seek help from a faculty member of the same race, it was also important to know when to step out of one's comfort zone to network and obtain viable information. The participant shared that she had to step out of her comfort zone to network with a White faculty member with whom

she shared no common grounds. The exchange led to an internship that transpired into job (Noldon, 1998).

*Higher education experts' strategies.* According to some researchers, FGCS are less likely to be engaged in college including in the areas of academics and social experiences, which both promote college success. The more students interact with faculty, utilize supportive services, study in groups, and participate in extracurricular activities, the higher their chances of success (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Irlbeck, Adams, Akers, Burris, & Jones, 2014). Researchers Engle & Tinto (2008) and Tinto (2004) offered suggestions as to how higher education experts could increase persistence toward degree attainment of FGCS at 4-year institution: (a) improve academic preparation for college, (b) provide additional financial aid for college, (c) increase transfer student rates to 4-year institutions, (d) ease the transition to college, (e) encourage engagement on the college campus, and (f) promote entry or reentry for youths and working adults.

*Improve academic preparation for college.* Increasing preparation for college involves increasing FGCS' knowledge and level of coursework during high school. FGCS should take more rigorous courses, such as advanced placement courses and College Now courses, which are offered on and off campus, have a strong college-going awareness culture in their high school, and receive more support from well-trained college advisors (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008). According to Choy (2001), and Horn and Nuñez (2000), students who take rigorous courses, such as advanced placement mathematics in high school, are more likely to enroll into a 4-year college. Engle and Tinto (2008) asserted the importance of sufficient support for FGCS, while they take advanced courses in high school, because insufficient support can lead to early

failure. FGCS are more likely to persist in college if they are given additional academic and study skill support when taking challenging courses in high school. These supports may involve integrating note-taking, time management, and self-advocacy skills (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

*Provide additional financial aid for college.* Providing additional financial aid to FGCS for college increases enrollment. If this provision was possible the financial strain of an education would be reduced, and FGCS would be able to afford enrolling in a 4-year institution, and they might even be able to attend full time (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2004). Suggested strategies by Engle and Tinto (2008) for increasing aid for FGCS from low-socioeconomic backgrounds are: (a) workshops for both students and parents about the financial aid process, trends, FAFSA, and other state and local government applications for aid; (b) improved financial literacy about options for covering the cost of attendance at 4-year institutions, including the economical use of student loans; (c) increased amounts of grant aid from federal, state, and institutions, which would require a change from merit aid at the institutional and state level; and (d) better assistance with covering unmet financial needs, such as through the use of federal work-study program (Engle & Tino, 2008).

*Increase student transfer rates to 4-year institutions.* Due to economic and other life-changing circumstances that cause FGCS to enroll in 2-year institutions, Engle and Tinto (2008) noted that there is a greater need for increasing the transfer rates for students from 2-year to 4-year colleges. They suggested that a systematic way of doing this would be to have a clear vision for the long-term pathway of the student who is transitioning from high school to community college and then to a 4-year college by supplying

competent financial counseling, giving additional financial aid for transfer students and academic, and giving social support to ensure degree attainment after transfer (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

*Ease the transition to college.* Considering the amount of extra support FGCS from low-socioeconomic backgrounds need, it is important to ease the transition from high school to college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Engle and Tinto (2008) suggested actions such as advising, tutoring, mentoring, early intervention programs, and other special programs for at-risk populations.

*Encourage engagement on the college campus.* Engle and Tinto (2008) posited that institutions must work to remove the roadblocks, such as financial constraints that prevent FGCS from fully engaging on college campuses by increasing college exposure at an early age through college tours and other college-planning activities. Other methods suggested by Engle and Tinto (2008) involve increasing classroom interaction and engagement to utilize the majority of the time FGCS' spend on campus, also expanding work-study opportunities to assist with financial needs while increasing the time the student spends on campus.

*Promote entry or reentry for youths and working adults.* Promoting (re)entry for youths and working adults involves providing support to students to complete programs, such as high school equivalent certification and contacting students who have a limited amount of credits needed to graduate (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Institutions can support working adults in degree completion by awarding credits for their experience in the workplace (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Additionally, Engle and Tinto suggested that institutions consider increasing financial aid eligibility and making additional resources

available such as childcare assistance for part-time students in order to increase persistence.

### **Chapter Summary**

The literature review in Chapter 2 provided a detailed description of first-generation college students and discussed barriers they are often faced with; furthermore, it examined factors that can affect persistence. According to the literature, FGCS are 4 times more likely to drop out of a 4-year institution after their first year in comparison to non-FGCS (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008). FGCS are also said to have entered college academically underprepared (Bui, 2001; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Fallon, 1997; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Petty, 2014). The literature focused on several different theoretical perspectives and models that constructed the foundation of persistence (Astin, 1995; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Regardless of the model, the research indicates that persistence is affected by how students interact with all components of the college environment they are enrolled in. The literature illustrated that there is a correlation between self-efficacy and persistence. According to Bandura (1993), students with stronger levels of self-efficacy show greater persistence during academic and personal challenges, and they are able to seek and utilize the necessary resources. Additionally, Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) posited that self-efficacy has the potential to affect long-term collegiate attendance, which can contribute to persisting in college. The literature review produced evidence that minimal research was conducted on year-to-year persistence of Black first-generation college students in their third and fourth year at a 4-year college. Therefore, this study addresses the existing gap in the research on persistence.

Bandura's (1993) self-efficacy theory was used to guide this research to examine the pathways to success at a 4-year institution as perceived by Black first-generation college students in their junior and senior year of college. Research indicates that Black FGCS are more likely to drop out after their first year of enrollment in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The research analyzes Black FGCS' experiences of successfully transitioning from high school to college and their motivation toward degree attainment. The objective of this study is to gain a better understanding of what motivates Black FGCS to persist as well as what strategies they employed to enroll, engage, and persist at a 4-year college.

In Chapter 3, the research instruments are identified, and the methods used are explored to determine the factors that contributed to the success at a 4-year institution from the perspectives of Black first-generation college students.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The goal of this study was to determine what factors contributed to Black FGCS persisting in a 4-year institution. The National Center for Education Statistics (2017c) refers college participation rate as the percentage of all 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in 2-year and 4-year colleges or universities. The United States of America has one of the world's largest college participation rates at 69.2% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Despite this, there is a growing gap between college admittance and degrees being earned. This is particularly true for FGCS from low-income and minority families (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation college students are defined as those whose parents did not attend college (Bui, 2002). Engle and Tinto's (2008) research suggests that large numbers of FGCS enter college with lower levels of academic preparation; therefore, they are 4 times more likely to drop out compared to their non-FGCS. There is a large body of research that outlines this and other barriers to degree completion for all first-generation college students (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014); however, there is a scarcity of research that reflects the motivation and perceived success of Black FGCS (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Martin, 2009; Petty, 2014).

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of what motivated Black first-generation college students to persist toward degree attainment at a 4-year institution. The findings may increase the understanding of the factors that impact the

motivation and success of Black FGCS in order to increase persistence and graduation rates of this underrepresented group at a 4-year institution. This intent for this study is to uncover what made this selected group of students persist despite a large body of research that identifies barriers to success for first-generation college students. Specifically, Black FGCS are underprepared and are 4 times more likely to drop out of college after their first year of school at a 4-year college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This chapter gives a detailed description of the research design that was utilized to carry out this study.

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What factors, from the perspective of Black FGCS, contributed to their persistence toward degree completion?
2. Of the factors identified, which factors were the most impactful on Black FGCS' persistence toward degree completion?
3. Given the factors identified, are there specific strategies employed by persistent Black FGCS that increased the likelihood of college completion?

Given that very little is known about the factors that contribute to the academic achievement of Black FGCS, the researcher determined that a qualitative methodology would be the most informative design to use for this study. According to Creswell (2013):

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of the research problem addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in the natural setting

sensitive to the people and places under the study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns of themes. The final written report of presentation includes the voices of the participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature of a call for change. (p. 44)

It is for these reasons a qualitative study was used to examine the pathways to success at a 4-year institution from the perspective of Black FGCS, using a hermeneutic, phenomenological approach.

Constructing a hermeneutic, phenomenological, qualitative design allowed the research to surface the understanding of the lived experiences of the Black FGCS. This approach gives voice to this population in a manner that shifts the focus away from barriers to the academic success of Black FGCS and onto what contributed to their success. According to van Manen (1990), hermeneutics and phenomenology are both human sciences that are implanted in philosophy, furthermore, they are also philosophies and are reflective fields of study. Creswell (2007) stated that hermeneutic phenomenology is “a form of phenomenology in which research is oriented towards interpreting the ‘texts’ of life (hermeneutical) and lived experiences (phenomenology)” (p. 235).

### **Research Context**

For the purpose of this study, the high school is referred to as *MT*. For the 2015-2016 school year, the estimated student population at MT was between 600 and 650 students. MT shares a campus with three other public schools. The student demographics of MT population were: 56% of the population was female, and 44% of the

population was male; 75.2% of the students received a free or a reduced-fee lunch, compared to the national average of 52%. At the time of this study, MT's student diversity included: 49% African American, 38% Hispanic, 8% Asian, 2% White, 1% Native American, and 1% other (i.e., Pacific Islander, Multiracial).

The average SAT score at MT was 1480 (Math 480, Reading 500, and Writing 500). According to the 2014-2015 School Quality Snapshot (New York City Department of Education [NYCDOE], n.d.), 55% of MT's graduates enrolled into college within 6 months after completing high school. The 2014-2015 school year report from the School Quality Snapshot (NYCDOE, n.d.) indicated that for post-secondary options, students from MT pursued: the City University of New York (CUNY) 4-year (11%), CUNY 2-year (15%), New York State public universities (11%), New York State private universities (14%), out-of-state colleges (5%), and other (0%).

MT is located within Queens, New York, in a high poverty-ridden neighborhood. It was reported that 26.0% of the neighborhood population lives below the poverty level. In addition, Blacks made up 50.1% of the neighborhood, and Hispanics made up 25% of the neighborhood (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Data also shows only 21.5% of students residing in neighborhood obtained a bachelor degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

### **Research Participants**

To grasp a better understanding of the core experience of Black first-generation college students and their perception of success, the researcher used a random, purposeful, and convenience sampling. According to Creswell (2013), purposeful

sampling allows the researcher to obtain a sample of the participants who are thoughtfully and purposefully recruited in order to fully answer the research questions.

The sample was purposeful because each participant self-identified as a Black FGCS from a low-socioeconomic background, during the first semester of their senior year of high school, which was during the college application process. The sample was convenient because all of the participants graduated from MT high school in 2012, 2013, 2014, or 2015.

All of the graduates from MT had access to the researcher's work e-mail and phone number. The researcher's work contact information was on all of the students' college application as their college advisor/counselor. Of all potential participants, 10 kept in sporadic contact, via e-mail and telephone, with the researcher after they graduated from MT. The nature of the contact involved them stating how well they were doing in college and to volunteer to speak at assemblies for the current MT students about their college experience. The researcher had a means of contacting each potential participant because their e-mail addresses and phone numbers were stored in the researcher's work e-mail contacts from previous communications.

The potential participants were sent e-mail with a letter of introduction (Appendix A), inviting them to participate in the study, along with a participant eligibility questionnaire (PEQ) (Appendix B), and an informed consent form (Appendix C). The introduction letter outlined the purpose and nature of the study as it pertained to the potential participants. The PEQ included questions that allowed the researcher to determine the criteria for inclusion, which ensured the following: (a) all potential participants were eligible Black first-generation college students, (b) all successfully

completed their sophomore year in college and were on track to graduate within 6 years from their initial time of enrollment, (c) all were enrolled at a 4-year institution in the Northeast region of the United States, (d) all resided in the college dormitories or near the campus, but they did not live at home with their families, and (e) all attended college without a taking any time off.

All 10 potential participants responded, expressing their interest in the study; however, based on the required criteria of the study only six were qualified to participate. Two of the unqualified participants transferred to institutions where they commuted to college from their parents' home. The PEQ stated that the participants must reside on campus or live in an off-campus apartment, but not in the home of their parents or with family members. Another participant enlisted in the military and attended college on a part-time basis. All of participants had to be attending college on a full-time basis. The fourth potential participant's parent had enrolled into college, and because an FGCS is defined as a student whose parents do not attend college (Bui, 2002), that individual was not eligible to participate in the study. The remaining six potential participants were all chosen to participate in the study.

The qualitative nature of the study required the researcher to ensure that equal human rights were granted to all participants. The study was reviewed and approved by St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that the rights of the participants were protected. According to Roberts (2010), IRBs "main purpose is the protection of those participating in a research study, particularly around ethical issues such as informed consent, protection from harm, and confidentiality" (p. 32). All of the participants were fully informed of every aspect of the study including possible risk of

involvement in the study before agreeing to participate. Prior to each interview, the participants were reminded that they had the autonomy to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without any denunciation.

The six participants who were chosen to be a part of the study each received a \$25 Visa card at the conclusion of the interview. The participants were not aware of the \$25 Visa gift card prior to the conclusion of the interview. There was no reimbursement necessary on behalf of the participants because they were not required to travel or purchase anything for the study.

Roberts (2010) asserted that it should be the primary objective of the researcher to ensure confidentiality of the participants. Specifically, Roberts (2010) mentioned that confidentiality refers to the participants' identifications and the information from the participants. To protect their identity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. No names were used during the study at any point. The participants were labeled *Participant 1-6*. The identity of each participant was known only to the researcher. All data are being kept in the researcher's possession in physical files that are locked in a file cabinet, and the computer files are stored in a password-protected zip file. All data will be kept for 3 years from the publication of this study. Thereafter, the physical files will be destroyed by shredding, and all computer files will be deleted.

### **Instruments Used in Data Collection**

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to gather data via face-to-face and video conference interviews, using open-ended questions (Appendix D). In addition, field notes were recorded to gain more contextual data. In conjunction to being used as a

selection tool, the participant eligibility questionnaire was also used to collect demographic data and determine eligibility for participation in the study.

The spring semester of college ended before the interviews commenced; therefore, interviews were not conducted on the participants' respective campuses. Four face-to-face interviews were conducted at a library in the participants' neighborhoods, and two interviews were completed via video conference because the participants had travelled out of state. The interviews were approximately 40-50 minutes in length for each participant. An audio recorder was used to record all interviews, which were then transcribed, verbatim, electronically by an outside transcriptionist.

To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher used a peer reviewer for intracoder reliability to actively critique the data analysis once the data was coded by the researcher. The peer reviewer had served as an Associate Vice President of Student Affairs and had over 25 years of work experience in higher education at a 4-year institution in the New York City metropolitan area. The peer reviewer was given a confidentiality agreement form (Appendix E) that was signed and returned to the researcher prior to the peer reviewer reviewing the data. In this study, triangulation occurred once the researcher collected data through the PEQ, semi-structured interviews, and field notes.

### **Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

The instruments chosen for data analysis were based upon the hermeneutic phenomenological nature of the study. van Manen (1990) described the method of hermeneutical phenomenology as research geared toward lived experience (phenomenology) and an interpretation or explanation of the *texts* of life (hermeneutic). During the data analysis process, a phenomenologist "reflects on essential themes on

what constitute the nature of the lived experience” (Creswell, 2013, p. 79). Additionally, “phenomenology is not only a description, but it is also an interpretive process in which the researcher makes an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experience” (Creswell, 2013, p. 80).

According to Creswell (2014), data analysis should be presented in a sequence of steps so that the reader can see how one step leads to another and is able to fully understand the text. Creswell (2013) suggested that in a qualitative research design, the researcher prepare and organize the data for analysis, reduce the data into themes through a coding process, and produce the data in figures, tables, or discussions. Prior to beginning the coding process, an inductive approach to the data is warranted, which allows the data to speak for itself (Seidman, 2006).

**Data organization.** According to Creswell (2014), organizing the data involves transcribing interviews then sorting and arranging the data. The researcher first took the interview recordings and moved them into an organized system of text via an outside transcriptionist. The researcher then compared the transcribed texts to each audio recording in an effort to cross check the reliability of the transcription. Thereafter, the researcher created a log of data by gathering activities, and outlining dates, places, activities, who, and what.

**Reading/adding notes.** Creswell (2014) asserted that researchers should immerse themselves in the data. In order to get a sense of the entire interview, the researcher read each transcript several times in its entirety. Following the immersion in data, the researcher read through the text again and made margin notes and conducted initial coding.

**Coding, themes, and representing the data.** Saldana (2016) defined coding as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data” (p. 4). According to Creswell (2014), phenomenological research requires the use of significant statements, generation of meaning units, and materialization of what Moustakas (1994) referred to as *essence description*. The researcher applied the following three phases of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding as described by Saldana (2016) to analyze the transcribed data.

During the open or initial coding, the researcher paid close attention to the following information gathered from the interviews while making field notes to be used for additional data:

- Behaviors – distinguishing acts
- Events – unique happenings or stories
- Activities – involving people in a specific setting
- Settings – a full context of events under the study
- Strategies – practices or systems
- States – general conditions experienced by people or found in organizations
- Relationships – a connection, association, or involvement
- Interactions – reciprocal actions, effects, or influences
- Conditions – situations with respect to circumstances
- Meanings – what directs the participants’ actions (Saldana, 2016).

The observational data was compared to the audio recordings and transcriptions for additional support and to ensure the accuracy of the information presented.

During axial coding, the researcher classified the data into codes and themes. Specifically, the researcher described the essence of the phenomenon, developed significant statements, and grouped the themes into meaningful units by distinguishing major themes from sub-themes. To ensure trustworthiness and the potential impact of researcher bias, the researcher used an alternate coder to independently analyze the data using the same method of: (a) organizing the data, (b) immersion in the data, (c) coding the data, (d) generating categories and themes, (e) interpreting the data, and (f) searching for alternative understandings. Variances between the alternate coder and the researcher occurred during the coding stage of the data; however, the frequency of the codes was too low to generate themes, therefore, they were not used.

Selective coding involved the researcher's final stage of data analysis. The researcher then interpreted the data and searched for alternative understandings. Specifically, the researcher developed a textual description of the phenomenon, focusing on what had occurred and giving a descriptor of the lived experience. The themes are presented in Chapter 4 in a way that reflects Black first-generation college students' perceived pathways to success at a 4-year institution.

**Background of researcher.** It is critical to the study that the researcher's possible bias toward the participants of the study is noted. As the previous College Advisor at MT, the researcher worked closely with all the participants during their junior and senior year of high school, assisting them with the college application process.

The researcher is a Black male who is also a first-generation college student. Higher education has tremendous personal and professional significance in relation to the researcher's commitment to the educational advancement of the less fortunate and the

researcher's vocational affiliation with MT, a New York City Department of Education public school. MT's mission is to offer an innovative college preparatory program that recognizes students as individuals, enabling them to explore educational interests in an atmosphere of dynamic interchange. The researcher worked as a college advisor at the high school from 2010-2016. His responsibilities included ensuring that students were educated and prepared for college. The participants of the study were all graduates of MT.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 was designed to give a detailed account of the qualitative methodology and the hermeneutic phenomenological approach that was selected for this study. The concept of self-efficacy pertaining to persistence was used to guide semi-structured interviews to examine the pathways to success as perceived by Black first-generation college students attending a 4-year institution in the Northeast United States. The 4-month process began with a letter of invitation to participate that was sent out to 10 potential participants. The letter of invitation was accompanied by a participant eligibility questionnaire and an informed consent form. The PEQ ensured that all requirements for participation outlined by the study were met. Furthermore, the PEQ was used to collect demographic data. The informed consent form described the study, the role of the participant, information pertaining to confidentiality, and the rights of a participant to refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study without any penalty. The researcher used a random, purposeful, and convenience sampling to select six participants who had graduated from MT high school in the years 2012, 2013, 2014, or 2015. The participants in the study had at least completed their sophomore year at a 4-

year institution, resided on , and were on track to graduate college within 6 years of their initial enrollment into college without taking time off at any point since they enrolled.

The study was triangulated by semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions, the PEQ, and field notes. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and via video conference. Data collected by the study were audio recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Communication of the findings are reported in Chapter 4 in a hermeneutic phenomenological narrative.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

This study examined the pathways to success at 4-year institutions as perceived by Black first-generation college students (FGCS). For the purpose of this study first-generation college students were defined as those whose parents did not attend college (Bui, 2002). The research analyzed their perceived experience of successfully transitioning from high school to college and their motivation toward degree attainment. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of what factors motivated these individuals who successfully enrolled, engaged, and retained while pursuing a degree at a 4-year institution. This study hoped to uncover what made these students different from the large number of first-generation college students that research indicates are 4 times more likely to drop out after their first year at a 4-year college (Bui, 2002; Ecklund, 2013; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Petty, 2014).

Information collected from the research provides insights into the lived experiences of persistent Black FGCS at 4-year institutions. The findings reveal the participants' perceptions of the factors that contributed to their persistence, factors that were identified as most impactful to their persistence, including specific strategies that were employed by the Black FGCS that increased the likelihood of their degree completion.

Chapter 4 presents an account of the outlined qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study. It also provides a summary of the findings from the face-to-

face and video conference interviews. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for coding. The findings in this chapter resulted from a combination of information gathered through a semi-structured interview protocol using open-ended questions, field notes, and a participant eligibility questionnaire (PEQ). Follow-up questions were utilized due to the participants' responses to the open-ended questions. The follow-up questions were used to capture a richer understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What factors, from the perspective of Black FGCS, contributed to their persistence toward degree completion?
2. Of the factors identified, which factors were the most impactful on Black FGCS' persistence toward degree completion?
3. Given the factors identified, are there specific strategies employed by persistent Black FGCS that increased the likelihood of college completion?

### **Research Participants**

Of the 10 participants, six were chosen for this study by way of a purposeful and convenience sampling. The other four individuals were determined ineligible based upon a review of inclusion criteria that was established for the study. This criteria stipulated that in order to be eligible for the study, the participants had to:

1. self-identify as a first-generation college student.
2. have graduated from MT high school in the years 2012, 2013, 2014, or 2015.
3. self-identify their race as Black.

4. have enrolled in a 4-year institution in the Northeast United States.
5. have lived on or off campus but not live with family.
6. be on track to graduate within 6 years of enrollment.
7. not have taken any time off since initial enrollment.

Table 4.1 presents data on qualified and unqualified candidates for the study, based on the participant eligibility questionnaire. The table shows that only six of the 10 individuals were qualified for the study. Candidates 2, 7, and 8 were disqualified because they began commuting to college from their parents' home. Candidate 9 enlisted in the military while attending college part-time as a commuter. Candidate 10's parent enrolled in college shortly before the study began. Therefore, Candidate 10 was no longer considered a FGCS by the definition of the study.

The sample was purposeful because all the participants self-identified as Black first-generation college students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds during the college application process of their senior year in high school. The sample was convenient because all the participants graduated from MT high school and the researcher had a means of contacting them. The participants had kept in contact with the researcher, sporadically, after they graduated from high school, and the researcher had volunteered to speak to students at MT high school during assemblies for college awareness week. The participants were from the graduating classes of 2012, 2013, 2014, or 2015. Their socioeconomic status was confirmed during their college application process.

Table 4.1

*Participant Qualification Data From the Participant Eligibility Questionnaire*

Candidate	FGCS	Black	Graduation Year – MT	Attend 4-Year College Full Time	Campus Resident	On-Track Graduation in 6 Years	No Break
1	Yes	Yes	2015	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Yes	Yes	2014	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	Yes	Yes	2013	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	Yes	Yes	2014	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
5	Yes	Yes	2014	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	Yes	Yes	2012	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	Yes	Yes	2013	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
8	Yes	Yes	2014	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
9	Yes	Yes	2013	No	No	No	Yes
10	No	Yes	2015	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) economic eligibility guidelines were used for all MT high school seniors during their college application process to determine eligibility for an application fee waiver (Table 4.2). The State University of New York (SUNY) Educational Opportunity Program provides access to a postsecondary education, along with academic and financial aid support, to economically disadvantaged students who show academic potential (State University at New York [SUNY], 2017). Each participant was determined to be eligible based on their household size versus the total household income. According to Engle and Tinto (2008), a large number of first-

generation college students come from low-income households. Two of the six participants were admitted into college under the EOP. The other four were admitted under general admissions because their high school grade point average (GPA) was higher than what was required for the program at their prospective institution. Prior to the start of each interview, all six participants mentioned that there were no changes to their household incomes since they applied to college.

Table 4.2

*EOP Economic Eligibility Guidelines for Participants, Academic Yr. 2018-19*

Household Size (including head of household)	Total Annual Income 2016 Calendar Year
1	\$22,311
2	\$30,044
3	\$37,777
4	\$45,510
5	\$53,243
6	\$60,976
7	\$68,709
8	\$76,442

*Note:* For families/households with more than eight persons, add \$7,733 for each additional person. Adapted from State University at New York [SUNY], 2017.

The following tables demonstrate various data collected on each of the six participants. Table 4.3 illustrates household size, number of parents in the household, total income of household, and it differentiates first-generation American participants from non-first-generation American participants. Four of the six participants were first-generation Americans. Table 4.4 describes each participants' collegiate demographic

data. It highlights race, gender, age, the year the participant enrolled into college, GPA, undergraduate class status, and whether the participant was on track to graduate within 6-years of enrollment in the institution.

Table 4.3

*Total Household Income for Each Participant*

Participant	Household Size	Total Parents in Household	Household Income	First-Generation American
1	2	1	<\$29,000	Yes
2	3	2	<\$35,000	Yes
3	4	1	<\$33,000	No
4	3	1	<\$30,000	Yes
5	9	2	<\$65,000	Yes
6	2	1	<\$25,000	No

Table 4.4

*Collegiate Demographic Data for Each Participant*

Participant	Gender	Age	Year Enrolled in College	GPA	Status	On-Track Graduation in 6 Years
1	Female	19	Fall 2015	3.76	Junior	Yes
2	Female	21	Fall 2014	3.43	Senior	Yes
3	Female	21	Fall 2013	3.42	Senior	Yes
4	Female	20	Fall 2014	3.54	Senior	Yes
5	Female	21	Fall 2014	3.49	Senior	Yes
6	Male	25	Fall 2012	2.49	Graduated May-2017	Yes

Participant 1 was a 19-year-old Black female who was raised in a single-parent household. She had three older siblings who no longer lived at home. Participant 1 was also a first-generation American. Her mother was from Guyana, and her father was born in Barbados. Her father was not involved in her life. The highest degree that her mother or siblings attained was a high school diploma. At the time of her college application at MT high school, her household size was two, with a total annual household income of less than \$29,000.00. Participant 1 was admitted into college under general admissions, where she majored in criminal justice. At the time of the study, she was in her junior year of college, and her GPA was 3.76. Participant 1 worked several part-time jobs while in college including a work-study position on campus. She was also involved in multiple clubs and organizations on campus including the Student Government Association (SGA).

Participant 2 was a 21-year-old Black female who was raised in a two-parent household. She had three older siblings, whose highest degree earned was a high school diploma. Her siblings did not live at home. Participant 2 was a first-generation American. Both of her parents were born in Jamaica. Her parents earned their high school diplomas. At the time of her college application at MT high school, her household size was three with a total annual household income of less than \$35,000.00. Participant 2 was admitted into college under general admissions at a private institution on a full academic scholarship, where she majored in biology. She transferred to one of the Ivy League colleges at the end of her sophomore year and switched her major to engineering. She was awarded a full academic scholarship by the Ivy League college. At the time of the study, she was in her senior year of college and her GPA was 3.43.

Participant 2 worked an average of 25 hours per week at her part-time job while in college, and she interned at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) over the summer of 2017. She was also on a step team at her college.

Participant 3 was a 21-year-old Black female who was raised in a single-parent household. She had two younger siblings who lived at home. Participant 3 and her parents were born in America. Her father was not involved in her life. The highest degree that her mother attained was a high school diploma. One of her younger siblings attended community college, and the youngest sibling was still in high school. At the time of her college application at MT high school, her household size was four with a total annual household income of less than \$33,000.00. Participant 3 was admitted into college under EOP, where she majored in psychology. At the time of the study, she was in her senior year of college and her GPA was 3.42. Participant 3 worked several part-time jobs while in college including a work-study position on campus. She was also involved in the psychology club on campus.

Participant 4 was a 20-year-old Black female who was raised in a single-parent household. Her parents were never married, and her father did not live in the household. She had four siblings, three older, who lived on their own, and one younger who lived at home. Participant 4 was a first-generation American; her mother was born in Jamaica, and her father was Panamanian. Her mother graduated from high school but her father did not. None of her older siblings attended college. Her younger sibling was still in junior high school. At the time of her college application at MT high school, her household size was three with a total annual household income of less than \$30,000.00. Participant 4 was admitted into college under general admission, where she majored in

criminal justice. At the time of the study, she was in her senior year of college and her GPA was 3.54. Participant 3 worked several part-time jobs while in college. She was also involved in the annual fashion show on campus.

Participant 5 was a 21-year-old Black female who was raised in a two-parent household. She had 10 siblings, four older and six younger. Her parents earned high school diplomas, along with her four older siblings. Three of her younger siblings were sophomores in college, and the other three were in elementary school. Her older siblings did not live at home. Participant 5 is a first-generation American. Her mother was born in Haiti, and her father was born in Nigeria. At the time of her college application at MT high school, her household size was nine with a total annual household income of less than \$65,000.00. Participant 5 was admitted into college through general admissions. She double majored in political science and criminal justice. At the time of the study, she was in her senior year of college and her GPA was 3.49. Participant 5 worked several part-time jobs while in college, and she was a part of several clubs and the track team.

Participant 6 was a 25-year-old Black male who was raised in a single-parent household. He had two older siblings who no longer lived at home. Participant 6 and his parents were born in America. Her father was not involved in his life. The highest degree that his mother attained was a high school diploma. Neither of his two siblings attended college. At the time of his college application at MT high school, his household size was two with a total annual household income of less than \$25,000.00. Participant 6 was admitted into college under EOP. He majored in business administration. He graduated from college 1 month prior to his interview with a GPA of 2.49. Participant 6 worked several part-time jobs while in college including having a work-study position on

campus. He was involved in several clubs and organizations on campus including being a member of a fraternity.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

There were 13 major themes that emerged from the data and which were frequently used by the participants who gave an account of their pathways to success at their 4-year institutions. The themes were derived from the participants' reports on factors that contributed to their persistence, factors that were most impactful on their persistence, and strategies they employed that increased the likelihood of degree completion. In addition to the 13 major themes, there is also one sub-theme that was commonly mentioned. Tables 4.5, 4.7, and 4.10 present emergent themes of the study, category, and description of themes.

**Research Question 1.** What factors, from the perspective of Black FGCS, contributed to their persistence toward degree completion?

Table 4.5

#### *Research Question 1 Themes and Definitions*

Theme	Description
Familial Support	Academic, moral, and social support given by an immediate or extended family member who offers positive support.
Self-Efficacy	An individual's belief that he or she has the capacity to execute a specific task or goal (Bandura, 1997).
Social Elevation	To reside in a neighborhood or community that is more economically sound than one's previous place of residency.
Career Opportunity	The favorable attainment of an occupation or career.

According to Bandura (1997), there are four sources of self-efficacy: (a) enactive attainment or mastery experiences, (b) vicarious experiences, (c) verbal persuasion or social persuasion, and (d) physiological states. Enactive attainment or mastery experience is based upon the level of perceived success. As success increases, so does self-efficacy. Vicarious experience refers to when individuals see someone who succeeds with similar traits to theirs, individual self-efficacy level increases, and they believe that they can accomplish the same level of success. Verbal or social persuasion is used to persuade individuals that they possess the capabilities to achieve a specific task or goal. Physiological states rely partly on individual bodily or emotional states while judging their capabilities.

Table 4.6

*Four Major Themes and Frequencies Reported by Participants as Factors That Contributed to Persistence Toward Degree Completion*

Contributors to Persistence	Participants Per Theme	Theme Frequency
Self-Efficacy	5	51
Familial Support	6	49
Social Elevation	3	18
Career Opportunity	3	14

Four major themes were identified as factors that contributed to persistence toward degree completion as perceived by the Black FGCS: self-efficacy ( $n = 51$ ), familial support ( $n = 49$ ), social elevation ( $n = 18$ ), and career opportunity ( $n = 14$ ). The four major themes are illustrated in Table 4.6. There were no sub-themes for Research

Question 1. Below are responses, during the interviews, from specific participants that highlight how the themes unfolded.

**Theme 1: self-efficacy.** For the purpose this study, self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief that he or she has the capacity to execute a specific task or goal (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy emerged as a major theme during the data analysis process. The theme was mentioned 51 times by five participants, as a factor that contributed to their persistence toward degree completion.

Self-efficacy was a factor that was cited 10 times in Participant 1's responses to the interview questions. Participant 1 indicated three sources of self-efficacy: enactive attainment ( $n = 7$ ), verbal persuasion ( $n = 2$ ), and vicarious experience ( $n = 1$ ). She stated that she was "self-motivated." She further mentioned that, "my high school pushed me to be college ready." She reflected on a roommate she had in college.

My roommate in my sophomore year, she was a senior and just seeing that she was going through kind of what I was going through as well, but she was graduating, like on track to graduate, is kind of like, well, if she can do it, I can do it. If she can continue doing it despite all the stresses that class brings and everything else she was experiencing, then I can also do it. Like it's possible to be done. Like, it can be done.

Self-efficacy was reported 10 times by Participant 2; her sources of self-efficacy were enactive attainment ( $n = 9$ ) and verbal/social persuasion ( $n = 1$ ).

I feel like everything just kind of fell into place. I always valued school, there was not any point where I necessarily had to be like okay, it's time to or it is time to get serious about going to college. Teachers from my high school also helped. .

. I think my mom played a very, very big role because I have older brothers who either didn't attempt to go to college, or went to college and didn't, like, finish college. As the youngest child, my mom was, like, this is her last her last chance to have a child that, like, goes to college and finishes. She's always put a big emphasis on, like, graduating high school and then going to the college because those are things she didn't get to do. However, more importantly I definitely think it's just me wanting better for myself, because my parent, the motivation from your parents, like, can only bring you so far, after a while, it's just, it's like, "what do you want?" Therefore, it's definitely just my desire to, to build a house with certain luxuries that I never had, and also just proving to myself that I can actually do certain things.

Self-efficacy was reported 13 times as a factor that contributed to persistence to degree completion by Participant 4. Her source of self-efficacy was enactive attainment. She explained her drive in her response:

I motivate myself, you know, because I know this is what I want to do. I know this is the goal that I have set for myself, like, I'm going to do this, I'm going to graduate from college. I'm going to become a forensic psychologist. I'm going to make myself proud.

Participant 5 attributed her persistence to an inner desire she had from a young age. Her source of self-efficacy was enactive attainment ( $n = 11$ ).

I can remember [in] elementary school thinking about what I wanted to do and knowing that I wanted to go to college. I even [picked] out the different colleges that I wanted to visit. I started just literally thinking about my future, which is

very important. That was one of the biggest steps that I took was just thinking about my future and research a lot about what I wanted to do and the different paths that I could take to get where I wanted and, just literally, just really indulging into my future and really figuring out what I needed to do to get there. Pretty much, that's pretty much how I prepared myself. What motivated me is that, like, whatever I start, I have to finish . . . I always say stress now, relax later. Although the process is stressful, and I felt, like, I just wanted to come home, it's, like, I start something, and I know that the end goal is going to be much sweeter than the process. I am going through this right now. I always had that in my head that it's all about the end goal.

Participant 6's sources of self-efficacy were verbal/social persuasion ( $n = 5$ ) and enactive attainment ( $n = 2$ ).

My sister is one of [my] motivation[s] to go to college . . . She's always put in my head that you will go to college. There's no ifs, ands, or buts about it . . . some of the teachers at my old high school helped me get to where I am today. They always believed in me, and they always pushed me. Prior to starting college, I would call my college to make sure they got everything that they needed from me. [laugh] I called several times per week. By the time I actually started college, people [in] the admission and financial aid office knew my name. I even went to look at their virtual tour. The college even had a list up there of what can you bring. I made sure I followed that list. I printed it out and brought it to my sister, and we went shopping on Walmart and shipped everything over to the school, so

by the time I got there, it was already there. I was really college ready, and prepared, I guess, because I was just so excited about the new chapter of my life.

During the course of the interviews, five participants mentioned that a major factor contributing to their attending college or persisting was that they were either self-motivated, persuaded, encouraged, pushed by someone, or they believed they were capable of being successful in college. Research asserts that self-belief plays a central role in self-regulating motivation; people are able to motivate themselves (Bandura, 1993). The self-efficacy theme emerged from the participants belief that they were capable of persisting in college. Majer (2009) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the impact of self-efficacy on the education of first-generation college students. The findings indicate that self-efficacy is an important factor that impacts persistence of first-generation college students toward degree attainment. The self-efficacy theme is supported by the literature.

**Theme 2: familial support.** During the interviews, all six participants reported 49 times the support of their family as a contributing factor for pursuing a college education. Each of the six participants reported a positive account of the support given by their parents or family members that motivated them to attend college and persist.

Participant 1 attributed her persistence to her family and her mother ( $n = 7$ ).

According to Participant 1:

There, are three people . . . um, three factors that motivated me to go to college, one being my family, myself, and my mother. My mother because she always pushed for me to do well in school academic wise. My family because I see

where they are in life, not all of them, but most of them, and I wanted a different outcome for myself.

Participant 2 reported her parents ( $n = 11$ ) as a major support system. She reflected:

It definitely was my parents. Um, my mom always, like, pushed me to go to school and stuff, and it's always about, like, being better. They want me to go further in my education than [they] ever did before. It, like, just my family is, like, very supportive, and, like, they're very like encouraging. For example, educational success can look, like, something as little as getting perfect attendance; they make, like, a really big deal, and, so, like, it's easy to want to do more.

Participant 3 credited her mother ( $n = 6$ ) as a contributing factor for her to attend college and to reside on campus:

I'll probably say my mother. Well, my mother, she played a big role. Um, I guess she more so wanted me to go where I wanted to go, but I feel like she talked me into like going away. . . . She was very supportive.

Participant 4 asserted that it was her mother ( $n = 7$ ) who motivated her to pursue a postsecondary education. She undoubtedly stated:

Definitely my mom. You know, the way I grew up, she was a single mom, she struggled with me. My dad's there . . . on the phone, but I know she always wanted me to be greater than the situation that she was placed in, so I definitely wanted to strive to make herself and I very happy.

Participant 5 affirmed that her parents' ( $n = 7$ ) and older siblings' ( $n = 2$ ) economic status was the motivating factor that contributed to her persistence.

Furthermore, not attending college was not an option in her household for her:

My motivations were my family, because seeing those before me and seeing how they weren't able to achieve the things that they wanted to achieve, I wanted to achieve everything that I can and surpass them so, that it will [make] them happy. You know, I did it for my mom; I did it for my older siblings, because the greatest thing or gift I could have gave them was doing what they couldn't do. That is why I wanted to go to college.

Participant 6 credited his older sister ( $n = 9$ ) for motivating him to go to college.

He shared:

My sister is the main person, she is why I wanted to go to college. My sister has always been there for me. I look at her as my mother honestly. I don't know, it's just, I've seen her work hard. I've seen her do what she needed to do to better for herself, her family, and her life. She's just someone I've always looked up to. She's someone that always looked out for me. She just always pushed me, like, even when I was younger. She was, like, well, "this is what you would do when you go to college" or "this is what you'll need when you go to college." She's always put in my head that I was going to go to college. There's no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Even when I was looking at colleges, I was looking at CUNYs. She's like, "no, you're going away, so start looking at SUNYs and private colleges." She was a major influence on me going to college.

There is a body of research that contradicts the familial support theme. There are researchers who suggest parents who did not go to college tend not to be supportive of their children in college (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Choy, 2001; Deffendall et al., 2011; Dennis et al., 2005; Hsiao, 1992). However, other researchers have asserted that parents play a crucial role in the motivation of their children attending college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Gofen, 2009; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Kern, 2011; London, 1989; Wolf 2011). Specifically, results of the qualitative study by London (1989) involving 15 FGCS indicate that family plays a significant role in their children persisting in college. Furthermore, Astin (1975) suggested it is vital that first-year college students have a strong system from their family whenever entering a new environment away from home. Based on the literature, the familial theme is supported.

**Theme 3: social elevation.** Social elevation emerged as a theme based on the frequency of responses from the participants as they reflected on the elements of their neighborhood where they resided. Three participants reported, 18 times, their desire to attain a more affluent lifestyle was what motivated them to persist in college to degree completion.

Participant 2 credited seeking a better lifestyle ( $n = 7$ ) from the one that she grew up in as a contributor to her persistence:

When I watch television, and I see how some other people's lifestyle and the luxurious things that they have, I say to myself, "one day I want to be able to afford those things for myself." I feel like, um, as far as I know, college is like the best way for me to be able to get to that point in life. I see college as a gateway to success.

Participant 4 associated her persistence with her determination not to be labelled a statistic of the community ( $n = 5$ ) in which she lived. She explained:

For me, I felt like I had to be . . . greater than everyone else, you know? Especially when people hear what neighborhood you came from, they're, like, "Ew, you come from there? It's so dirty over there! Like, there's nothing flourishing over there." Therefore, I always felt like I had to do better and be better, so that no one can say that I'm a product of my environment, and that I exceeded the expectations of where I came from.

According to Participant 5, her neighborhood was not a desirable place to reside ( $n = 6$ ). She explained:

Growing up in my neighborhood, you don't really see great things from that area. From a young age, I already knew that I had to go to college, because college was the only way for me to get out of where I was at. It was the only way for me to better myself, really, to reach the goals that I wanted to reach; so, that was one of my motivations. It's all about me making my parents proud, securing my future, making sure that my future kids have someone to look up to, have a life that I didn't have.

According to Wendover (1994), in order to understand what inspires an individual, it is important to study their attitude and behavior. A close look at someone's background and environment can be a defining factor for motivation. The participants' desire to obtain a better economic standing served as a motivational factor that contributed to their persistence toward degree attainment. According to the researchers, a bachelor degree can provide individuals with increased economic and social

opportunities. Goals of an improved quality of life can eliminate barriers to academic success in college and increase persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 1983, 1986).

The social elevation theme is supported by the existing research on contributing factors to persistence toward degree completion.

**Theme 4: career opportunity.** The career opportunity theme emerged during the interviews from three of the participants who reported that they persisted in college so that it could open the doors to intended career opportunities ( $n = 14$ ).

Participant 1 reported that her persistence toward degree attainment has created more career opportunities ( $n = 6$ ) for herself:

Going to college is going to open up doors to more career opportunities for me. I need to be financially stable in a career that pays well after I graduate college. It's a better choice, opposed to just jumping into the workforce right after high school, where I would have then been stuck for a few years just doing work and probably not going back to school. My career goal is to become a lawyer. In order to do so, I must first earn my bachelor[']s degree and then go to law school.

Participant 2 credited her persistence in college toward a degree and it had earned her s "gateway to success." It had opened doors of opportunity ( $n = 4$ ) for her, which she described:

I'm in training in California at JPL, the Jet Propulsion [Laboratory], which is a NASA facility. What I am doing is interning under, centering around, engineering. It [has] actually been my dream to work at NASA, and it's definitely something that I would do like as a career. It's a great opportunity, and I'm learning so much there.

Participant 4 credited her drive to complete college partially to her career path ( $n = 4$ ). She explained that through her research, she became interested in forensic psychology:

The path that I'm on now will lead me to my career choice. I motivate myself, you know, because I know this is what I want to do. I know this is the goal that I have set for myself, like, "I'm going to do this; I'm going to graduate from college. I'm going to become a forensic psychologist. I'm going to make myself proud."

Salnave (2013) conducted a qualitative study to examine the perceptions of 16 Black males who successfully enrolled, retained, and persisted toward degree completion at St. John's University. Of the 15 participants, five were Black FGCS. The findings indicate that future career opportunities contribute to motivation, self-discipline, and persistence toward degree completion (Salnave, 2013). This study supported the findings that career opportunity may contribute to persistence toward degree completion for Black FGCS.

**Research Question 2.** Of the factors identified, which factors were most impactful on Black FGCS' persistence toward degree completion?

There were five major themes that were identified when examining the most impactful factors on persistence as perceived by the participants during the interviews: (a) close friends and positive relationships ( $n = 85$ ), (b) social integration ( $n = 81$ ), (c) academic integration ( $n = 71$ ), (d) campus residency ( $n = 61$ ), and (e) faculty recognition ( $n = 45$ ). Table 4.8 illustrates the five major themes and the frequencies of the themes as they were mentioned by the participants during the course of the

interviews. In addition to the five major themes, there was one sub-theme: modeling ( $n = 24$ ) as demonstrated in Table 4.9.

Table 4.7

*Research Question 2 Themes and Definitions*

Theme	Description
Close Friends and Positive Relationships	Moral and social support in a time of need among individuals, usually by friends, acquaintances, classmates, or faculty in an academic setting.
Social Integration	A student's extracurricular activities, interactions with peers, and interactions with faculty and staff on a college campus (Tinto, 1975).
Academic Integration	Interaction between student and faculty/staff for academic performance. It also involves the use of academic facilities and resources.
Faculty Recognition	Acknowledgment or accolades given by faculty/staff in an academic setting.
Campus Residency	Residing on a college campus for the purpose of academic conveniences.
Modeling	An exemplar of a set standard.

Table 4.8

*Five Major Themes and Frequencies Reported by Participants as the Most Impactful Factors That Contributed to Persistence Toward Degree Completion*

Contributors to Persistence	Participant Per Theme	Theme Frequency
Close Friends and Positive Relationships	6	85
Social Integration	5	81
Academic Integration	5	71
Campus Residency	5	61
Faculty Recognition	4	45

**Theme 1: close friends and positive relationships.** Close friends and positive relationships theme surfaced during the course of the interviews ( $n = 85$ ) as all six participants reflected on factors that were most impactful on their persistence toward degree completion.

Participant 1 reflected on positive relationships ( $n = 19$ ) that she experienced with other students during her first 2 years in college:

I decided to stop being inside of my room and actually go out and attend programs on campus; I started meeting people. One of the club leaders, she encouraged me to be part of the clubs on campus opposed to just coming out to events. She encouraged me to shadow her for an executive board position, which was very new to me . . . I also joined the Student Government Association mainly due to my RA. She encouraged me to apply to be a member of SGA. She's kind of like a student mentor to me. We both have the same major, and we both have the same goals and career path.

Participant 2 described how close friendship ( $n = 16$ ) with other college students on campus positively impacted her to persist when she felt overwhelmed. She explained:

This year [has] definitely been like the most strenuous on me. I've definitely had my few breakdowns this past year. But I guess towards the end, in the third trimester, it didn't get any easier, but I guess I kinda surrounded myself with a group of people who were motivating, and that helped me to get through it . . . because we are from similar background. They understand what it's like being on a campus like this one. Being surrounded by people who look different from you do, or they have different socioeconomic background from yours. Being around

those group of girls like was really helpful. A lot of people on that campus, they're not really open about how rigorous things there are. Hey, maybe it's not as hard for them, but being around people who will just, like, openly admit, "I'm struggling with this, but I'm just trying to my best," you know, it kind of helps me to feel like I actually belong there, and it's not just, "hey, I came to this new school and I'm not prepared for it."

Participant 3 reflected on the time where she felt like giving up in school but her friendship ( $n = 9$ ) with other college students motivated her to continue. Participant 3 explained:

I would say my group of friends, like, we all motivate each other to push ourselves. There was point in time where I didn't want to go to school anymore, but I feel like more, so, like, my sisters and my friends, um, just being there and supporting me. They like pushed me and made me want to continue school.

Participant 4 credited her motivation to her boyfriend ( $n = 5$ ) and how he challenged her to do more. She asserted:

Before my boyfriend became my boyfriend, we were really good friends, and he used to always tell me that I lack motivation. He said I just do things because I have to do them. We used to have these talks all the time. Being with him, it just makes me strive to be a better person, and I'm more of a go getter now. I've even become more of a positive person, because I used to be very negative at one point.

Participant 5 recalled how her circle of friends ( $n = 16$ ) had been a great support system for her since her freshman year of college. She credited them as impacting her motivation. She expressed:

I'm very grateful for my circle of friends. I've had the same circle of friends since freshman year, which is very hard to say in college because your friends really start to rotate a lot. You cancel, you make some, but my friends have really motivated me because they both strive for success and that is something that I'm very lucky to have. You know, my friends know when it's time to have fun and when it's time to study. You know, it's hard in college to really have friends that you can stay up with to actually study and friends that will be there for you through your mental breakdowns, which I have many mental breakdowns throughout the semester, and really just to be a very good support system for you.

Participant 6 spoke about his relationship with his fraternity and sorority brothers and sisters ( $n = 20$ ), and he credited them for impacting his success toward degree completion. He reported:

It just so happens that all of my friends are part of my Greek life. My brothers or my sisters. We always want to see each other succeed. We would go to resumé workshops together, etiquette dinners. We did a lot of things together. There is this one thing my fraternity does, well it's a quote that we have. "Building a better man, building a better fraternity," that I live by. There is another thing we do that I hated a lot, but it motivated us all. We had a rule, if anyone got a C or a D on their midterms or finals, then they would be fined \$50. No one wanted to get fined \$50, so that kind of, like, made us strive to do better academically.

A case study was conducted by Kern (2011) to examine the effects of family and friends' support on persistence toward college completion. The findings indicate that family and friends' involvement through connections and interactions were one of the

most influential factors in terms of persistence (Kern, 2011). According to the Spady (1971) model on student dropouts from higher education, a student's decision to remain in an institution or leave it is based upon five variables. Variable two is friendship support, which is the ability to develop a close friendship with others. The existing research supports the findings, close friends and positive relationship are essential and are most impactful on persistence toward degree completion.

**Theme 2: social integration.** The social integration theme emerged during the interviews as five participants reflected on their involvements on campus ( $n = 81$ ) and how it impacted their persistence toward degree completion. According to Spady (1971), higher levels of social integration lead to higher satisfaction level; satisfaction leads to a greater level of commitment to the institution, and commitment directly affects persistence.

Participant 1 reflected on how her involvement on campus ( $n = 23$ ) gave her a sense of belonging at the institution. She reported:

I learned to be less antisocial and becoming more social. In college, they call that networking. Just grabbing opportunities, not sitting back and waiting for things to come your way, actually going out there and making a name for yourself. Getting into things that'll push you further and motivate me to continue. I use to be a tour guide for the campus. I did it to push myself to be more social, which motivated be to be involved in other things. A lot of students and faculty know me because I am a part of SGA, so I have a good relationship with them both. Just being a student leader, overall, leads to a sense of responsibility and duty . . . you're

known for a good thing. Like helping the students on campus be more engaged and involved. That offers a sense of belonging, my sense of belonging.

Participant 2 spoke about how her involvement on campus ( $n = 13$ ) kept her motivated. She mentioned, “I joined a step team and it was really great. I surrounded myself with people who motivated me . . . I was also a part of Fujima, which is Black organization on campus that met once per week.”

Participant 3 reported that it was important for her to become more social on campus ( $n = 10$ ).

I was a really shy person when I started college, so I kind of wanted to change that. I kind of forced myself to like be more social, be more active on campus, talk to more people, hang out more. I felt like that helped actually.

Participant 5 spoke about various clubs and organizations that she became involved in on campus ( $n = 14$ ). She cited,

Since freshman year of college, I was on the track and field team. I’ve joined many clubs including African Unity, which is a club that bases on unifying Africa and educating people about African cultures. Black Onyx, which is our Black student union, which focus on civic engagement and so forth. Black Student Law Association, which is actually a law organization that is nationwide. I found myself attending different clubs, meeting and just staying involved.

Participant 6 ( $n = 21$ ) recalled,

I just wanted to get involved. I joined a fraternity. I joined SGA. that was my main thing, to get out there and network and get involved. I focused more on networking and making connections. I’m a social person. I like to be, like, out

there with people. I like to enjoy the vibes of people. I started a dance team when I first went there. Then, as the years went on, I joined the college activities board. Then I became the president of the college activities board, which allowed me to oversee tons of events.

Pascarella (1985) conducted a quantitative study using Tinto's (1975) model of persistence to examine Blacks and Whites at 4-year institutions using 5,577 participants from 353 colleges. The findings indicate that there is a correlation between social integration and degree attainment. More specifically, the findings report that social integration was more important for persisting Blacks compared to their White counterparts. According to Spady (1971), a greater level of social integration leads to a higher satisfaction level; satisfaction leads to higher levels of commitment to an institution; and institutional commitment directly affects persistence. The findings of this current study indicate that social integration impacted the Black FGCS. This was supported by the existing literature that states that social integration plays an intricate role in persistence toward degree attainment.

**Theme 3: academic integration.** The academic integration theme transpired as the participants reflected on factors that were most impactful on their persistence. Academic integration refers to interpersonal interactions between students and faculty or staff for academic performance, it also includes the use of academic facilities and resources (Tinto, 1975). Out of the six participants, five reported that they sought out additional academic assistance ( $n = 71$ ) from professors outside of the classrooms, classmates, roommates, or friends. The following are accounts of the five participants'

reports involving academic integration. Participant 2 spoke about seeking academic assistance ( $n = 20$ ). She mentioned:

The first semester, last year, this class that I took, I got, like, one of the lowest exam grades I ever [had] gotten. It wasn't from not preparing myself for the exam, but more, like, not preparing in the right way. It was taking a quantum physics course, it wasn't something I was used. If I didn't study for the exam, it would be, like, easier to accept the grade I got. I went to the professor, and I spoke to him. He gave me a lot of tips on how to prepare for his type of exams. Like, how to study, and, like, what to study. It definitely helped me the next time around.

Participant 3 spoke about study with her classmates and roommate ( $n = 14$ ). She mentioned:

Me and my classmates, we would study, we're all psych majors, so we would study together. . . . We would study together, because we had a bio class together. I will also study with my roommate, or people who actually wanted to study. Those study sessions are great.

Participant 4 recalled two professors who challenged her academically ( $n = 9$ ). She reflected:

My Research Methods II professor; he was a great professor. My Theories of Crime professor was great too. They are so helpful, any problem that I had, they offered to help me. More importantly, they just kept pushing me to do better, go to greater lengths, go more in-depth with my research, and that finally fit the requirements of a professor that I wanted.

Participant 5 recalled a professor who motivated and challenged her to produce more academically ( $n = 12$ ). She explained:

This one professor really motivated me. I was in one of his classes, and he really taught me how to really think deeper about things. It was a political ideology class, and he really taught me to really think deep about how politics works.

During the beginning of his class, I was actually failing the class. He kind of re-gearred me and helped me understand the material much better. I ended up getting an A in the class, and he ended up asking me to be the teacher's assistant for the following semester.

Participant 6 mentioned having trouble in a college algebra course and professor he received assistance from ( $n = 61$ ). Participant 6 explained:

I will often go to the library where the math lab is located. Within the math lab there were tutors, along with the professors. So [I] got one-on-one tutoring from my own professor. Right after class, we would go over to the library, the math lab, and she would basically describe to me what we just learned, and she would give me some examples to take away, so that I can figure out how to do my homework. I would actually meet up with her before class to see if a few of my homework problems were accurate, and she would allow me to redo them if they weren't.

According to a study conducted by Pascarella (1985), degree attainment is associated with both academic and social integration. The findings of the quantitative study involved 5,577 participants and indicate that academic integration impacts persistence (Pascarella, 1985). However, the findings demonstrate that academic

integration for persistence was more important to Whites than their Black counterparts. The findings of this current study support Pascarella (1985) research, the Black FGCS responses to the interview questions indicated that social integration ( $n = 81$ ) had higher frequency compared to academic integration ( $n = 71$ ) for impact on persistence toward degree attainment. Fox (1986) conducted a study to examine persistence using a sample size of 435, primarily minority, students enrolled at a 4-year commuter institution. The findings indicate that persistence was impacted by academic integration (Fox, 1986). This current study supports the existing research that academic integration impacts persistence.

**Theme 4: campus residency.** The campus residency theme materialized throughout the course of the interviews as a factor that impacted motivation to persist. Out of the six participants, five credited their motivation to persist with residing on campus ( $n = 61$ ). Participant 1 explained how residing on campus made it easier for her to manage her schedule ( $n = 14$ ).

Living on campus offers me more flexibility with classes, extracurricular activities, and work, as opposed to living away from campus. Since I live far, the commute is, kind of would have been too lengthy. So, it's easier to get to and from class, to do other things aside from class, and to work around my schedule. Since I'm much closer to school, my job was within the area.

Participant 2 mentioned how living on campus ( $n = 11$ ) made continuing in college easier for her. She stated:

A big motivator for me is the fact that I actually dorm, and I feel like it would have been easier for me to not return to school if I was, like, a commuter. I made

attachments with, like, the actual school and the people there. I also like being away from home, only being submersed in like the school environment, living on campus really helped me to, like, to stay focused on that. I'm not worrying about anything else other than school.

Participant 3 stated that living on campus ( $n = 14$ ) made her college experience less difficult for her. Participant 3 unfolded:

I think it was better for me to dorm. I feel like if I would've commuted, my experience would've been different. I think dorming actually helped me. I feel like the roommate I had, too, me and her, like, we just clicked. I motivated her and she motivated me. There was never a point in time where I completely felt like I was by myself, even though I was away. I had easy access to everything on campus. Like the library, the tutoring centers, the math center. If I needed help, I could quickly walk to those places. I feel like if I was at home, at home struggling with homework, it would've been so much different.

Participant 4 spoke about the convenience of residing on campus ( $n = 10$ ). She reported:

If I had to commute, it would just be awful. I would probably never make it to my classes on time because I live far. I love that I can just wake up and walk across to the building, and you are there.”

Participant 5 reflected on her personal and educational growth she experienced due to residing on campus from living on campus ( $n = 12$ ).

I had to learn how to wake up on time, know that I have to do laundry, I have to eat at this time, I have to take care of myself like this, I have to clean my room, so

being on campus really made me who I am today because it really forced me to be an independent person. It forced me to know that I have to go study right now, I cannot go play right now. I have to go to the library, I have to do this assignment, if I can't do this assignment now, I'll have time to do this later. So it really taught me time-management skills, discipline skills, so that's what being on campus taught me.

According to researchers Pascarella et al. (2004) and Pike and Kuh (2005), FGCS are less likely to live on campus, have the tendency not to be involved in extracurricular activities, and often perceive the college atmosphere as less supportive. Astin (1975) concurred with Pascarella et al. and Pike and Kuh that students are most likely to persist in college if they are academically sound, reside on campus, and participate in campus extracurricular activities. The findings of this current study is supported by the existing research that residing on campus can impact persistence. The participants of this current study reported that residing on campus motivated them to persist, furthermore it allowed for more flexibility between academics, work, and participating in on-campus activities.

**Theme 5: faculty recognition.** The faculty recognition theme was derived as the participants gave a retrospective account of factors that impacted their persistence toward degree completion. Out of six participants, four were motivated to persist from their perception that faculty members and staff ( $n = 45$ ) took a special interest in them. Participant 1 reported how a staff member positively impacted her motivation ( $n = 14$ ) to persist toward degree completion. She recalled:

In the Office of Services for Students with Disability, the secretary there she . . . she was very much involved in my life. I'm not sure how to put it, but she always

told me how impressed she was with me. It was a good feeling to hear that, and I wanted her to always feel that way about me. It motivated me to keep working hard, so she or anyone else, may continue to look at me that way.

Participant 3 talked about her interpersonal relationship with her advisor ( $n = 9$ ).

She explained:

I would see my advisor probably, like, every couple [of] weeks or every month. Every time we were together, it was calm. I really liked her, she was supportive. I feel like she actually listened when I talk[ed] to her. Whenever I had a problem, I would go to her, and she would help me. I feel like we actually built a relationship. I feel, like, that made it things even easier to go to her when I needed something or if I needed help. She always went above and beyond to make sure I was okay. If she didn't see me for a while, she would send me[an] e-mail or call me and just ask me if everything was okay.

Participant 5 spoke about a professor that saw the potential ( $n = 9$ ) in her that she did not see in herself. She recalled:

He saw a lot of potential in me that I didn't really see in myself. He spoke really highly of me to classmates in the classroom and other class, and even now, after taking his class 2 years ago, I'm still talked about in his class, and he just lets me know that he really sees that I'm going to be successful. That really impacted me, just hearing that from someone who is so successful and who doesn't have to say that. [It] actually kind of made me feel good because, sometimes, I felt like my work is not enough. I'm not doing good enough, I'm not that great, I'm not better than other people, people are better than me, but hearing him speak so highly of

me, and kind of seeing the greatness in me, kind of, made me, kind of want to look for the greatness that he sees in me and, kind of, really continue to evolve, to be a better person.

Participant 6 reflected on his advisor ( $n = 13$ ) who played a significant role in his life during the first 3 year of college.

I really like my EOP advisor because not only was she my advisor, she was also a confidant for me as well. If anything was going on in my life, I would use that as an opportunity to go and talk to her about it. My struggles, my weaknesses, my strengths; even on a regular day, I would just go by and talk to her. She was nothing but supportive. Always lending an ear, always a shoulder to cry on. I didn't really see her as my advisor, I saw her as more than that because she was so close to me.

Kim and Sax (2009) posited that interaction with faculty members inside and outside of the classrooms may result in higher grades, which promotes motivation toward degree attainment and promotes commitment to the college. Researchers have suggested that campus-wide collaboration of administration, faculty, and staff through academic and social integration can change students' perception of the institutional support system (Seifert et al., 2006). This current study is supported by studies from the literature review that imply faculty support can impact persistence toward degree attainment.

Table 4.9

*Sub-Theme Reported by Participants as a Factor That Was Most Impactful to Persistence Toward Degree Completion*

Impact on Persistence	Participants	Theme Frequency
Modeling	3	24

**Sub-theme: modeling.** The modeling theme unfolded ( $n = 24$ ) during the course interviews as three out of the six participants reflected on factors that were most impactful on their persistence towards degree completion.

Participant 3 explained that it is important for her to model ( $n = 6$ ) the way for her two younger sisters. She mentioned:

I feel like a big part of my drive are my sisters. I guess to be like a role model for them, I need them to know that it is possible and it can be done. So that also pushed me to continue school.

Participant 4 stated some of her motivation derived from her drive to turn out “better” than her mother did and to serve as an exemplar ( $n = 8$ ) to her younger brother. She reported:

My biggest goal is just to be better than my mom’s situation. I don’t want to struggle like how she did. I want to be able to do so much more in the future, for myself and for others. I want to have a positive outlook on life. Growing up I was very negative and sheltered person. I wasn’t prepared for life, especially college life. Everything that was new to me, I didn’t take it on as I should’ve. But now, I’m learning to interpret things differently, and find a better meaning to life.

It's also important that I am successful; my younger brother needs to see it.

Young people in my neighborhood don't see that much, especially Black boys.

Participant 5 explained she would like to be a "beacon of hope" in her community ( $n = 12$ ). She explained:

My main goals, actually, for graduating college is that when I go back into the community in which I was raised, I can speak to the youths and really show them that I did it, and tell them they can do it too. I know it's tough, I know it's hard, I know you're struggling every day, I know what it's like, it seems like the world is never going to get better. But if you just find some motivation, it's going to get better.

Herndon and Hirt (2004) conducted a qualitative study to examine the effects of family influence on the lives of African American college students. During the study, participants made references to the importance of success in terms of being a role model and mentor to future generations as well as making their parents proud. The finding is supported by the literature. In this current study, the participants expressed that they wanted to be an exemplar for others to follow, similar to statements made by the participants during Herndon and Hirt (2004) research.

**Research Question 3.** Given the factors identified, are there specific strategies employed by persistent Black FGCS that increased the likelihood of college completion?

Table 4.10

*Research Question 3 Themes and Definitions*

Theme	Description
Peer Academic Accountability	The act of having one's peers hold him or her liable for academic progress and vice versa.
Time Management	Effective or productive use of time for academic success.
Campus Resources	Source of readily academic support in an academic setting.
Access to Faculty	Ability and opportunities to meet with faculty/staff for academic, moral, or social support.

Table 4.11 depicts the four major themes that surfaced during the interviews as persistent Black FGCS described strategies they employed that may have increased the likelihood of college completion. The following themes emerged with high frequencies: (a) peer academic accountability ( $n = 66$ ), (b) time management ( $n = 64$ ), (c) campus resources ( $n = 42$ ), and (d) access to faculty ( $n = 33$ ).

Table 4.11

*Four Major Themes Relating to Persistence*

Persistence Strategy	Participant Per Theme	Theme Frequency
Peer Academic Management	5	66
Time Management	6	64
Campus Resources	4	42
Access to Faculty	3	33

***Strategy theme 1: peer academic accountability.*** The peer academic accountability theme unfolded as five out of the six participants described their strategies used for studying ( $n = 66$ ). Five of the participants spoke about studying in groups or with a friend or roommate in order to motivate the group to excel academically. Participant 4 mentioned that she tried studying in a group setting, but it was not beneficial to her. The following are statements from the other five participants who found studying with someone else to be beneficial.

Participant 1 explained that she used upper classmates to study in groups ( $n = 14$ ). She mentioned,

My friends and I studied in groups to motivate each other, because it can be stressful. My friends, being that they're seniors and juniors, they had a lot of work as well. And [it] kind of made sense, like, we each motivated each other to do more to get our work done.

Participant 2 reported having her roommate as a study partner ( $n = 15$ ), which kept her motivated. She explained,

I also have a roommate that transferred for engineering. We've taking a lot of the same classes . . . so we've definitely helped each other out in that sense. She's also very, very focused . . . that's very helpful for me, because it helps me to stay on track. Because, like, we're friends I guess [we] study with each other. If I, like, have question on anything, she's probably either taken the class or is in the class

Participant 3 reflected on her group of classmates ( $n = 8$ ) that she often studied with. She stated:

Me and my classmates we would study; we're all psych majors, so we would study together . . . . We would study together, because we had a bio class together. I will also study with my roommate, or people who actually wanted to study. Those study sessions are great.

Participant 5 reported that her close circle of friends was a great support system, and they encouraged each other academically ( $n = 11$ ). She explained,

My friends have really motivated me because they both strive for success and that is something that I'm very lucky to have. You know, my friends know when it's time to have fun and when it's time to study. You know, it's hard in college to really have friends that you can stay up with to actually study . . . and really just to be a very good support system for you.

Participant 6 recalled utilizing a study group with some classmates ( $n = 18$ ) for a math course that he struggled in. He reported:

There was a statistic class that pretty much everyone was struggling in. What we would do is we would go to the math lab. Me and a couple of my classmates, would go to the math lab, and we would sit there for hours doing our homework, or reviewing our old tests so that it can prepare us for our new test. That was something that I did with my classmates frequently. Especially with my math classes, and it helped a lot.

Dennis et al. (2005) and Gofen (2009) conducted studies to examine the ways in which motivational characteristics and environmental social supports serve as contributors to the academic success of FGCS. The results indicated that FGCS perceived their peers as more suitable to provide academic support in college rather than

their parents or family members. FGCS relied more on their peers for academic support by creating support systems like forming study groups and sharing course work assignments. Participants credited utilizing study groups and study partners with their peers as a strategy of motivation to persist towards degree completion. The existing studies are supported by emerged theme, peer academic accountability. In this current study, the participants relied heavily on their peers for academic support, which they employed as a strategy to persist toward degree completion.

*Strategy theme 2: time management.* The time management theme unfolded during the interviews as the participants reflected on their busy schedules. All six participants employed time management strategies ( $n = 64$ ) to increase their likelihood of persistence toward degree completion.

Participant 1 described how she applied time management ( $n = 12$ ) to her daily routine in college. She reported,

The structure of my classes really plays a big role. I make my schedules, whereas I have at least a day off or a gap within my schedule to do other things aside from the meetings. I had to schedule everything around my classes. For example, my schedule has me taking the classes I needed, and also still have some time to myself during the day to like eat or things of that nature. I took classes on specific days because I knew I wouldn't be able to do much within the others, so I balanced it out. I don't think anyone has a perfect set time management strategy, your time management is based on how your life is going at the moment, well, at least for me, that's how it was. I'm going into this semester taking more of my major classes, so I have to focus more on my classes as opposed to everything. I

have to feel out the classes and the professors to, like, get a view of how the semester will go, and then I can focus on everything else.

Participant 2 credited her motivation to her time management strategy ( $n = 12$ ), which she employed to assist her in navigating through her classes and extracurricular activities. She reported,

Time management is really important to me, because I think if I had too much free time, I wouldn't be motivated to stay organized. Campus involvement forces you to stay on top of other things. Knowing that I have performance on Tuesday, if I have an exam on Wednesday, I have to be on top of that before Tuesday. I can't put the Step Team first just because I wanna participate. I have to be on top of other things.

Participant 3 explained that she struggled with time management ( $n = 6$ ), but whenever she practiced it, she excelled academically. She reported,

Time management was a big thing, because I procrastinated a lot. So, yeah, it . . . like, there was a point in time where I didn't procrastinate and everything flowed. Time management was harder for me, because I just always like pushed it off until, like, the last minute. Whenever I actually, like, took my time and plan things out, everything was better, especially my class work. So, it's important to manage your time properly.

Participant 4 reported that she managed her time ( $n = 8$ ) better by not procrastinating on anything academic. Participant 4 stated:

Depending on what class I took for the day, I will go to the library and do some more research or whatever. Get any homework done. Depending on the

homework assigned, a five-page paper and up, I will try to start that right away. Same thing [for] minor homework, I'll just do it. If it's not something that's due for, a month or two, I'll maybe start it over the weekend if I'm bored. Then probably just go hang out with my friends, go back to my room, and chill.

Participant 5 explained that living on campus forced her to be on top of all her affairs in college. She reported “it really taught me time management skills ( $n = 13$ ), discipline skills, so that's what being on campus taught me.”

Participant 6 explained how he switched most of his classes to online courses so that he could better accommodate his work and student activity schedules ( $n = 13$ ). He reflected,

I had about four jobs on campus. I decreased my classes to one face-to-face a week, so most of my classes were online, this way I had more time to work. I would get up in the morning at about 9:00 or 10:00 and head over to the office and get some work done there until about 1:00. And then from 1:00 to 2:00, I would have a class. Then from 2:00 to 3:00, I would be in meetings and then usually from 4:00 to 7:00, I would be working in the campus store. And then, after I would close down the campus store, my typical evening would be to go back to my suite, um, cook dinner for me and my roommates, and we would sit down, do homework, and watch TV.

According to Engle and Tinto (2008), FGCS could increase the likelihood of persisting in college toward degree completion if given the proper study skill support, such as integrating note-taking, time-management, and self-advocacy skills. In this current study, the participants reported time management as a strategic means of aiding

their persistence. According to a study conducted by Salnave (2013), students who are socially integrated develop both communication and time-management skills that are transferable to the classroom, which impacts persistence. These findings are supported by previous studies that time management is utilized as a strategy for persistent students.

*Strategy theme 3: campus resources.* The campus resources theme unfolded as four out of the six participants reported the various resources ( $n = 42$ ) they used on campus to assist them academically, in order to increase the likelihood of their college completion.

Participant 1 encouraged college students to use campus resources for academic gains. She explained,

Utilize the resources available to you, because there are resources available, and just because you don't have a perfect grade point average coming out of high school, it can change in college. You can also go from being a not so good student in high school to being a great student in college, it all depends on you.

Participant 2 reported ( $n = 15$ ) "I go to every single TA session that they offer, and this past semester, my college just started offering free tutoring, so anyone can get free tutoring. I signed for a tutor this past semester."

Participant 3 stated utilized campus resources ( $n = 13$ ) as a strategy to assist her with her writing. She explained,

I would go to the writing center, because, as psych majors, you write a lot of essays . . . they helped you [with] whatever questions you had, they help you break down your essays. Psych students worked in the center too. If there was a student that had that class before, they would help you, and it was easier that way.

They already know what the professor wanted and how they wanted the essays to be. Overall, they were really helpful in the writing center.

Participant 6 explained that he utilized the resources on campus ( $n = 5$ ) to assist him in his math courses. He reported,

I didn't realize is that the EOP office had counselors there that were willing to help me. All I needed to do was just ask. They were great. I would go there about three or four times a week, and they would tutor me in math.

Bowie (2006) asserted that students who have knowledge and access to campus resources are more likely to develop certain skill sets to progress academically.

According to Bandura (1993), students with stronger levels of self-efficacy show greater persistence during academic and personal challenges, and they are able to seek and utilize the necessary resources. The participants in this current study were able to strategically utilize resources on campus for academic gains. The findings are supported by the existing research.

***Strategy theme 4: access to faculty.*** Access to faculty emerged as the participants responded to strategies they employed to that increased the likelihood of them completing college. Three out of the six participants reported ( $n = 33$ ) going to faculty members for academic, moral, and social support, and they assisted them in progressing academically.

Participant 2 spoke about her previous advisor ( $n = 7$ ) who she found to be very supportive. She stated,

My advisor, Professor Blank was very helpful. He gave me, like, opportunities to do research with him on two queries in a row, and he is just always available in terms of if I have any questions, I can always go to him.

Participant 3 reflected on the support of the faculty at her college ( $n = 12$ ). She spoke about how comfortable they made her feel to approach them for assistance. She stated,

The faculty members that I've met or talked to were really nice, they were helpful. They were willing to help you, if you asked for help. Except for one lady, she was kind of rude . . . . Other than that, everybody else just was really helpful, they were willing to help you. Any questions that you had, they found answers for you. I feel like everybody was helpful.

Participant 6 expressed the support system that faculty and staff provided for students ( $n = 14$ ) at his college. He reported,

The institution is like a family. Faculty and staff want to see you succeed. They want you to come out and hang out with them or come to a mixer with them.

They even come to the dorms to encourage students to come out to more campus events. Just communicate with them what you need, because they'll provide it for you.

According to Seifert et al. (2006), campus-wide collaboration of administration, faculty, and staff through academic and social integration can change students' perception of the institution support system. According to Kim and Sax (2009), first-generation college students are less likely to interact with faculty members compared to their non-FGCS counterparts. Kim and Sax (2009) posited that interaction with faculty members, inside and outside of the classrooms, may result in higher grades, which promotes motivation toward degree attainment and promotes commitment to the college. This existing literature supports the emerged theme that the participants in this current

study credited access to faculty for academic and moral support as an aid to persisting toward college completion.

### **Summary of Results**

Chapter 4 presented the findings based on the three research questions that guided this qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study. The findings consist of data gathered through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questionings. The participants were six self-identified Black first-generation college students who attend 4-year institutions and resided on campuses in the Northeast United States.

The findings unfolded based on the participants' responses to the factors that contributed to persistence and that were most impactful on their persistence toward degree completion. Additionally, the findings also emerged from the data that was gathered from the participants who identified specific strategies that increased their likelihood to college completion. Four major themes emerged as contributors to persistence; five major themes and one sub-theme emerged as factors that impact persistence; and four major themes surfaced as persistence strategies. The frequencies of the respondents' answers determined whether the theme was major or a sub-theme. High-frequency responses by three or more participants constituted a major theme. In contrast, frequency with responses from two to three of the participants were deemed a sub-theme. The majority of themes that surfaced in this chapter were in alignment with the Chapter 2 literature review with the exception of the social elevation and campus residency themes. This indicates the need for additional research on effect of social elevation and campus residency on persistence.

The first research question addressed the perceived factors that contributed to persistence to degree completion for the Black first-generation college students. The findings imply that self-efficacy, familial support, social elevation, career opportunity, and potential earnings are factors that contribute to persistence.

The second research question determined what factors were most impactful on persistence toward degree completion. The findings suggest that there is a significant relationship between persistence toward degree completion and close friends/positive relationships, social integration, academic integration, campus residency, faculty recognition, and modeling.

The third research question highlighted specific strategies employed by Black first-generation college students that may increase the likelihood of degree completion. The emergent themes consisted of time management, peer academic accountability, campus resources, and access to faculty. The findings gave an account of strategies utilized by the participants to increase academic success and which increased persistence to degree completion.

Chapter 5 summarizes the research findings and identifies the implications and limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with recommendations for stakeholders as well as suggestions for further studies.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine pathways to success at 4-year institutions as perceived by Black first-generation college students. The findings give an increased understanding of: (a) the motivational factors that contribute to persistence, (b) the motivational factors that are most impactful upon persistence, and (c) the persistence strategies that Black first-generation college students at 4-year institutions used to ensure graduation. This chapter discusses the findings of the study in further detail and provides insight to stakeholders in relation to professional practices. The following research questions were used to guide the study.

1. What factors, from the perspective of Black FGCS, contributed to their persistence toward degree completion?
2. Of the factors identified, which factors were the most impactful on Black FGCS' persistence toward degree completion?
3. Given the factors identified, are there specific strategies employed by persistent Black FGCS that increased the likelihood of college completion?

The research questions were constructed in response to previous studies that state that FGCS tend to persist at much higher rates in community colleges than at 4-year colleges and universities (Bui, 2002; Ecklund, 2013; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Petty, 2014). More specifically, FGCS are 4

times more likely to drop out of a 4-year institution after their first year when compared to their non-FGCS counterparts (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Previous studies indicate that underrepresented students often have to overcome imbricating barriers toward degree attainment, including first-generation and low-income status (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Nuñez & Cucarro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini et al., 2001; Winkle-Wagner, 2009b). According to the literature, the number of first-generation students attending college is increasing; however, college completion rates for first-generation students continue to be lower than their non-FGCS counterparts (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2003; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nuñez & Cucarro-Alamin, 1998, Warburton et al., 2001). There is a large body of research (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014) that further outlines the barriers to persistence to degree completion for first-generation college students; however, there is a paucity of research that reflects the motivation and success of Black FGCS (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Martin, 2009; Petty, 2014). In response to the existing body of research on barriers to academic success, it was the intention of this study to examine the pathways to success at 4-year institutions as perceived by Black FGCS.

Self-efficacy theory was used to provide the theoretical framework for the researcher to use the appropriate lens that framed the study. The researcher used a hermeneutic phenomenological design to interpret the findings. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the lived experience of Black FGCS. The qualitative approach supported the data analysis process and constructed patterns and themes extracted from the participants' narratives. A semi-

structured interview protocol was utilized using open-ended questions. The participants consisted of six Black first-generation college students who attended 4-year institutions in the Northeast United States.

The findings of this study created an opportunity to provide suggestions to stakeholders of professional practices. Chapter 5 provides an overview of the findings from Chapter 4 by reviewing the themes, theoretical framework, and implications of the findings. Chapter 5 also includes a discussion on the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study indicate that while Black FGCS may experience more barriers and challenges that affect their success at 4-institutions, in comparison to their non-FGCS counterparts, there are factors and strategies that can contribute and be employed by FGCS regarding persistence that can play a critical role in their persistence toward degree completion. This section provides an overview of the themes that emerged from the data that were gathered from the participants. As noted in Chapters 3 and 4, a hermeneutic, phenomenological approach was used to examine the lived experiences of six Black FGCS who were persisting toward degree completion at 4-year institutions in the Northeast United States.

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions produced 13 major themes and one sub-theme. The themes were divided into three categories: (a) contributors to persistence, (b) impact on persistence, and (c) persistence strategies.

**Contributors to persistence.** The themes self-efficacy, familial support, social elevation, and career opportunity were derived from the first of the three research questions of the study: Research Question 1 asked:

What factors, from the perspective of Black FGCS, contributed to their persistence toward degree completion?

*Self-efficacy.* As noted in Table 4.5, self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief that he or she has the capacity to execute a specific task or goal (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy was mentioned 51 times, by five out of the six participants who believed that they possessed the competence to persist toward degree completion. While self-efficacy is based on people's beliefs in themselves to execute an intended goal or task, the participants self-beliefs were motivated by different sources of self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) stated that there are four sources of self-efficacy: (a) enactive attainment or mastery experiences, (b) vicarious experiences, (c) verbal persuasion or social persuasion, and (d) physiological states. Enactive attainment or mastery experience is based upon the level of perceived success. As success increases, so does self-efficacy. Vicarious experience refers to individuals seeing others who succeed with similar traits to theirs, and their self-efficacy level increases and they believe that they can accomplish the same level of success as others. Verbal or social persuasion is used to persuade individuals that they possess the capabilities to achieve a specific task or goal. Physiological states rely partly on bodily or emotional states while one judges his or her capabilities.

Each of the five participants used enactive attainment as a common source of self-efficacy. They believed that they were cable of persisting toward degree completion

based on their academic success. In addition to enactive attainment, Participants 1, 2, and 6 received verbal persuasion. Each of the three participants reported that someone from their high school pushed them to be ready for college by insisting that they would be successful in college.

Participant 1 was motivated by vicarious experiences. She mentioned her senior college roommate in her sophomore year. She reflected upon how stressed her roommate was due to personal events in her life, yet she was still on track to graduate. Participant 1 stated, “if she can continue doing it, despite all the stresses that class brings, and everything else she was experiencing, then I can also do it. Like, it’s possible to be done. Like, it can be done.”

Bandura (1986) asserted that it is important for a person to believe that his/her actions can result in a favorable outcome; otherwise, there would be little to no incentive for that person to persist through difficult times. In a qualitative study conducted by Zimmerman et al. (1992), 102 students were examined to determine their perceived self-efficacy regarding a number of cognitive abilities. Findings suggest that the higher the students perceived their self-efficacy, the more they were able to cultivate their academic abilities (Zimmerman et al., 1992). Self-efficacy aided five of the six participants in this study to persist. Therefore, as it pertains to Research Question 1, self-efficacy was a contributing factor to the five Black FGCS’ persistence toward degree attainment.

***Familial support.*** As illustrated in Table 4.5, familial support refers to academic, moral, or social support given by an immediate or extended family member who offers positive support. The participants were asked what or who motivated them to attend college, and all of the participants credited their motivation to their parents or siblings.

Familial support was mentioned by all of the participants ( $n = 6$ ) a total of 49 times. There was a variance in the ways the participants were motivated by family members. Participant 2 indicated that her parents always encouraged education and celebrated all of her educational accomplishments while growing up. She further mentioned even perfect attendance in school was acknowledged by her parent, therefore, attending college was another celebration. She stated that her mother “always put a big emphasis on . . . graduating high school and then going to the college, because those are things she didn’t get to do.” Participant 6 stated that his older sister had always spoken to him about going to college from a young age and had supported him throughout the entire process. According to him, “my sister has always been there for me. I look at her as my mother, honestly . . . she’s just someone I’ve always looked up to. She’s someone that always looked out for me.” He noted that his sister even insisted that he go away to college and reside on campus. Participants 1, 3, 4, and 5 stated that their parents supported their decisions to attend college because they wanted their children to accomplish higher degree attainment than they did. Pertaining to the first research question, familial support was a contributing factor in the participants’ motivation to pursue and persist toward degree attainment. This study is in alignment with previous research that insists that parents play an important role in the motivation of FGCS (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Gofen, 2009; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Kern, 2011; London, 1989; McCarron & Inkles, 2006; Wolf, 2011). More specifically, in the McCarron and Inkles (2006) study of over 1,800 first-generation college students, the results suggest that parental involvement and support are the top contributors to college aspiration. Familial support clearly was a

contributing factor that was crucial to each participant's motivation to persist toward degree completion.

***Social elevation.*** Social elevation was mentioned 18 times by the participants ( $n = 3$ ). In this study, social elevation is defined as residing in neighborhood or community that is more economically sound than the participant's previous place of residency, and that information is reflected in Table 4.5. Participants 2, 4, and 5 expressed that a contributing factor to their motivation to persist in college was to one day reside in a more desirable community than the one that they grew up in. Participant 2 mentioned witnessing others living a luxurious lifestyle, and she expressed that one day she wanted to be able to do the same. She reported that, "I know college is, like, the best way for me to be able to get to that point in life. I see college as a gateway to success." Participant 4 stated that she did not want to be a product of the neighborhood that she had originally resided in. Therefore, it motivated her to persist in college, so she could experience a different lifestyle. Participant 5 mentioned,

Growing up in my neighborhood, you don't really see great things from that area. From a young age, I already knew that I had to go to college because college was the only way for me to get out of where I was at.

According to Wendover (1994), to understand what inspires an individual, it is important to study their attitude and behavior. A close look at someone's background and environment can be a defining factor for motivation. The three participants' desire to change the environment that they resided in motivated them to persist toward degree completion. More specifically, social elevation is a factor that contributed to the persistence of these participants.

**Career opportunity.** Career opportunity refers to a favorable attainment of an occupation or career, as shown in Table 4.5. Out of the six participants, three credited their motivation – 14 times – to persist towards degree attainment in order to earn a way to their intended career. Participant 1 explained, “My career goal is to become a lawyer. In order to do so, I must first earn my bachelor[‘s] degree and then go to law school.” Participant 2 asserted that a higher education would open up doors of opportunity for her. She described college as her “gateway to success.” Participant 2 interned at a NASA facility, and she stated that, “it has actually been my dream to work at NASA, and it’s definitely something that I would do like as a career.” Participant 4 used her intended career path as motivation to persist to degree completion. She explained,

I motivate myself, you know, because I know this is what I want to do. I know this is the goal that I have set for myself, like, I’m going to do this, I’m going to graduate from college. I’m going to become a forensic psychologist.

Salnave (2013) conducted a qualitative study to examine the perception of 16 Black males who successfully enrolled, retained, and persisted toward degree completion at St. John’s University. Of the 16 participants, five were Black FGCS. Findings indicate that future career opportunities contributed to the persistence toward degree completion (Salnave, 2013). This study supported the findings that career opportunity may contribute persistence towards degree completion for Black FGCS.

**Impact on persistence.** As an impact on persistence, the following themes were categorized from the second research question: (a) major themes: close friends and positive relationships, social integration, academic integration, faculty recognition, and campus residency; and (b) sub-theme: modeling. Research Question 2 asked:

Of the factors identified, which factors were the most impactful on Black FGCS' persistence toward degree completion?

*Close friends and positive relationships.* Holodick-Reed (2013) conducted a phenomenological case study to examine factors that contribute to persistence that involved 15 FGCS in their junior and senior years at a 4-year institution. The findings resulted in: knowledge acquired for college preparation, focus on the future, good friends, caring faculty members and staff, supportive family, financial aid, and feeling comfortable on campus. As shown in Table 4.7, close friends and positive relationships refer to moral and social support in a time of need among individuals, usually by friends, acquaintances, classmates, or faculty in an academic setting. This theme surfaced during the course of the interviews as the participants reflected upon the factors that were most impactful on their persistence toward degree completion. Close friends and positive relationships were mentioned 85 times. All of the participants ( $n = 6$ ) cited their friends as having an impact on their motivation to persist toward degree completion. Participant 1 spoke of a friend on campus who had the same major and career path as she did. She stated that her friend encouraged her to become more active on campus, which, in turn, expanded her support system. As a result of her increased support system, she became more persistent toward degree completion. Participant 4 referred to her boyfriend in college as her main source of support and external motivation. She stated, "being with him, it just makes me strive to be a better person, and I'm more of a go getter now." Of the six participants, four reported to be grateful for their circle of friends on campus. They credited their friend with giving them academic and moral support. More importantly, their circle of friends motivated them to persist toward earning their degrees.

***Social integration.*** As shown in Table 4.7, social integration consists of a student's extracurricular activities, interactions with peers, and interactions with faculty and staff on a college campus (Tinto, 1975). The participants ( $n = 5$ ) credited interacting with their respective college communities with impacting their persistence; the theme was cited 81 times. The participants were members of various clubs and organizations including the Student Government Association, a fraternity, academic clubs, a step team, sports clubs, and other clubs on campus. Participant 1 mentioned becoming more involved on campus was her way of "grabbing opportunities, not sitting back and waiting for things to come your way, actually going out there and making a name for yourself. Getting into things that'll push you further and motivate me to continue." Spady (1971) posited that students who are involved in a higher level of social integration have higher satisfaction levels in college. Satisfaction leads to a greater level of commitment to the institution, and institutional commitment directly affects persistence. Reason et al. (2005) conducted a quantitative study to examine the social competence of first-year students in college. The findings concluded that there is a correlation between students' perception of support from the institution and the level of social and personal competence.

***Academic integration.*** Academic integration encompasses interactions between student and faculty/staff for academic performance as shown in Table 4.7. Academic integration also involves the use of the academic facilities and resources. The participants ( $n = 5$ ) reported seeking additional academic support outside of the classroom from various departments, faculty members, staff, and from their peers. Academic integration was mentioned 71 times during the course of the interviews.

Participant 3 mentioned, as a psychology major, she would often study with other students in her major as a way of increasing her academic performance and to keep her motivated. Participants 2 and 6 spoke about seeking help from their professors in order to increase their understanding of the material. Participants 4 and 5 credited their professors with challenging them to become more academically-sound students by showing them ways to go more in-depth with their research.

Fox (1986) conducted a study to examine persistence using a sample size of 435 primarily minority students enrolled at a 4-year commuter institution. The findings did indicate that academic integration had a compelling effect on persistence. The literature supports the findings of this study. Specifically, academic integration impacts Black FGCS to persist at toward degree completion.

*Campus residency.* As shown in Table 4.7, campus residency, for the purpose of this study, was defined as residing on college campus for the purpose of academic convenience. The participants ( $n = 5$ ) reported that residing on a campus allowed for more flexibility between academics, work, and involvement in extracurricular activities, which positively impacted the participants' motivation to persist. The theme was noted 61 times during the interviews. Furthermore, Participants 2 and 4 explained that commuting to college would have had a negative impact on their motivation to persist toward degree attainment. According to researchers, FGCS are less likely to reside on campus or become involved in extracurricular activities, and they are less likely to view their campus environment as supportive (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Astin (1975), posited that students are most likely to persist in college if they are

academically sound, reside on a campus, and participate in extracurricular campus activities.

***Faculty recognition.*** Faculty recognition, as shown in Table 4.7, refers to acknowledgment or accolades given by faculty/staff in an academic setting. The theme was mentioned 45 times by the participants ( $n = 4$ ), when they reflected on the factors that were most impactful on their persistence toward degree completion. The factors consisted of some level of connection between faculty members and the participants that involved acknowledgment, and moral or social support. Participants 1 and 5 recalled their experiences with faculty/staff members who frequently and publicly acknowledged their academic abilities and performances on campus. Both participants stated that it was a “good feeling” and it kept them motivated because they wanted the faculty/staff members to continue to view them in that way. Participants 3 and 6 spoke of advisors from whom they sought moral and social support from frequently. Participant 3 stated that she and her advisor “built a relationship.” Her advisor was someone who went “above and beyond” by personally calling or e-mailing her to check in on her. Participant 3 felt motivated by the support from her advisor. Participant 6 reported that his advisor was his “confidant,” and she knew about the intimate details of his life. He mentioned that she was “always lending an ear, always a shoulder to cry on.” He said, “I didn’t really see her as my advisor, I saw her as more than that because she was so close to me.” According to researchers, interaction with faculty members inside and outside of the classroom may result in higher grades, which promotes motivation toward degree attainment, and this encourages commitment to the college (Kim & Sax, 2009).

**Modeling.** In this study, modeling refers to an exemplar of a set standard. The sub-theme, modeling, unfolded as the participants ( $n = 3$ ) mentioned it 24 times when they spoke of wanting to be a role model to others who grew up in identical communities as they did. Participants 3, 4, and 5 explained that they want to be a role model to their younger siblings because their neighborhood was not a reflection of success. Participant 5 also mentioned that one of her goals after college was to return to her community to speak to the younger generation to show them that a college education is attainable and to give them hope for the future. Herndon and Hirt (2004) conducted a qualitative study to examine the effects of family influence on the lives of African American college students. During the study, the participants referenced the importance of success in terms of being a role model and mentor to future generations.

**Persistence strategies.** The following major themes were categorized by the third research question as persistence strategies: (a) peer academic accountability, (b) time management, (c) campus resources, and (d) access to faculty. Research Question 3 asked:

Given the factors identified, are there specific strategies employed by persistent Black FGCS that increased the likelihood of college completion?

**Peer academic accountability.** As shown in Table 4.10, peer academic accountability was defined in this study as the act of holding one's peer liable for academic progress. The participants ( $n = 5$ ) utilized a study partner or study groups with their peers as a strategy of motivating them to persist toward degree completion. The theme was cited 66 times. Of the six participants, five mentioned that their circle of friends held each other accountable for their academic success; therefore, studying in

groups was done often. Participant 6 explained that his group of friends had set mandatory library hours, and failure to complete 10 hours per week resulted in a fine. Participant 4 mentioned that she rarely utilized a study partner, and she felt like others were benefiting from it more than she did. She explained that she felt more like a tutor than a study partner therefore she stopped. Of the six participants, five stated that the study sessions were always motivational. The findings indicate that there is a significant relationship between peer academic accountability and persistence to college completion with Black FGCS.

Researchers have conducted studies to examine the ways in which motivational characteristics and environmental social supports serve as contributors to the academic success of FGCS (Dennis et al., 2005; Gofen, 2009). The studies suggest that FGCS relied more on their peers for academic support by creating support systems like forming study groups and sharing course work assignments.

***Time management.*** For the purpose of this study, time management refers to the effective or productive use of time for academic success as shown in Table 4.10. The participants ( $n = 6$ ) reported that time management played a strategic role in their persistence. Time management played a vital role in the daily routine of each participant, and it was mentioned 64 times throughout the course of the interviews. The participants balanced their classes, work schedule, and social activities by planning. Participant 1 described how she scheduled her classes a day apart. On the days where she attended classes, she created a gap between classes. This method allowed her to make time for to work, study, extracurricular activities, and relax. Participant 2 explained, “time management is really important to me, because I think if I had too much free time, I

wouldn't be motivated to stay organized." According to Engle and Tinto (2008), FGCS may increase their likelihood of persisting in college toward degree completion if given proper study skills support, such as integrating note-taking, time-management, and self-advocacy skills.

***Campus resources.*** Campus resources refers to readily available academic support in an academic setting, as shown in Table 4.10. The participants ( $n = 4$ ) claimed that the utilization of resources on campus was strategic to their academic success on campus. This theme was noted 42 times. Furthermore, the participants expressed that the use of campus resources increased their self-confidence about passing the courses that they took. Participant 2 stated that she took advantage of every tutoring teacher's assistant sessions offered at her college for engineering. She even signed up for a personal tutor. Participant 6 mentioned that math was a challenging subject for him. Therefore, he went to the Education Opportunity Office three to four times per week for tutoring. Participant 3 stated that she utilized the writing center on her campus to assist her with APA writing, and as a result of it, her writing improved significantly, which motivated her to persist in college. Bandura (1993) posited that students with higher levels of self-efficacy display greater persistence during academic and personal challenges; they are able to seek and utilize the necessary resources for academic gain.

***Access to faculty.*** In Table 4.10, access to faculty refers to the opportunity to meet with a faculty or staff member. The participants ( $n = 3$ ) stated 33 times that they progressed academically due to having access to faculty members for academic moral, and social support. Participant 2 transferred from a smaller college at the end of her sophomore year to another college with a larger student population. She reflected on

how much she missed the open-door policy to faculty at her previous college. She recalled one of her former professors who she was always able to turn to for academic assistance. She indicated that having access to faculty increased her confidence level academically, which motivated her to persist. Participant 2 explained that at her present college, it was difficult to meet with faculty members due to short office hours and long student lines.

Participant 6 expressed that faculty at his college was very supportive, they encouraged students to meet with them outside of classes. He stated that faculty were also available at the resource center to assist students. Furthermore, they encouraged faculty and student integration. Participant 6 reported,

The institution is like a family. Faculty and staff want to see you succeed. They want you to come out and hang out with them or come to a mixer with them.

They even come to the dorms to encourage students to come out to more campus events. Just communicate with them what you need, because they'll provide it for you.

Researchers have asserted that campus-wide collaboration of administration, faculty, and staff, through academic and social integration, can change students' perception of the institution support system (Seifert et al., 2006). According to research, FGCS are less likely to interact with faculty members compared to their non-FGCS counterparts (Kim & Sax, 2009). Kim and Sax (2009) posited that interaction with faculty members inside and outside of the classroom may result in higher grades, which could promote motivation toward degree attainment, and it promotes commitment to the college.

**Implications for stakeholders.** The findings of this study have two implications for stakeholders in secondary education and residency campus stakeholders at 4-year institutions. As the research indicates, there is a growing gap between enrollment and degrees earned for first-generation college students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). It is vital that best practices and programs are improved upon or established to aid students in persistence toward degree completion. The shared responsibility belongs to all stakeholders involved, both in high schools and colleges. The following are implications that emerged from the study.

***Stakeholders in secondary education implications.*** Black first-generation college students experience various barriers that can negatively impact their persistence towards degree attainment. Stakeholders during a Black FGCS' time in high school plays a valuable role that can contribute to persistence in college. Stakeholders include: students, parents/guardians, and high school staff (principal, assistant principal, guidance counselors, teachers, parent coordinators, and community coordinators). Collectively, each stakeholder has a role to play. The findings of this researched align with previous research that indicates that parents and high school staff members are contributing factors to Black FGCS persisting in college. Despite the findings, there has been limited research that recommends that action be taken by all stakeholders.

Scholars attribute the decision of FGCS to enter community colleges, as opposed to 4-year institutions, to a possible lack of preparedness (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Petty, 2014). Specifically, Engle and Tinto (2008) suggested that large numbers of FGCS enter college with lower levels of academic preparation and are from low-income households. While the findings of this study indicate that Black FGCS were persisting at

4-year institutions, the participants mentioned that they felt underprepared academically, which caused them to seek help from their peers through study and tutoring sessions. However, when Black FGCS rely heavily on their peers to assist them academically, their peers risk their own academic gain due to the additional burden of their friends.

According to researchers Choy (2001) and Horn and Nuñez (2000), FGCS can improve their college academic preparedness by taking more rigorous coursework in high school, with a focus on advanced mathematical courses. High schools' administration may support Black FGCS academically by offering after-school tutoring to reinforce the classroom materials. In addition to rigorous courses taken in high school, high schools' administration should partner with local colleges to offer College Now courses to high schoolers. In conjunction with earning college credits while in high school, Black FGCS could also gain the experience of being on a college campus among other college students while learning how to navigate the environment.

High school counselors and parent coordinator should collaborate with the Parent Teacher Associations to encourage more parents to get involved in their children's postsecondary education. Parents of Black FGCS' education level can vary from elementary school to high school. Therefore, parents may feel intimidated by being directly involved in the college-readiness process, because they did not navigate the pathway themselves. High schools' administration can encourage college tours involving both parents and students, so they may feel more at ease while providing moral support for their children. A study may offer more insight on the impact of high school staff and parents' collaboration to help Black FGCS persistence in college.

*Residency campus stakeholders at 4-year institutions implications.* The findings of this study indicated that although Black FGCS are persisting toward degree attainment, they still have trouble navigating the college environment, especially at PWIs. The participants in this study reported not feeling a sense belonging on campus. According to Colon (1991), Whites dominate the education system; therefore, the system is governed by their influences. Therefore, Blacks were now faced with conflicting culture between the dominant institution culture and culture that they grew up in (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). According to Powell (1998), culture shock is the anxiety that a person experiences after entering into a new environment, and this anxiety seems to be increased for entering a PWIs. Black college students tend to have a difficult time navigating their way through a PWI and acclimating themselves with the norm of the university. This may lower student involvement, which can affect academic and social integration, which then affects student persistence (Astin, 1975, 1984; Cabrera et al., 1999; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975).

While academic integration is essential to academic gain, residency campus stakeholders at 4-year institutions must also take into account the environment's role in planning for success for all students, including Black FGCS. According to Bandura (1997), there are four sources of self-efficacy: (a) enactive attainment or mastery experiences, (b) vicarious experiences, (c) verbal persuasion or social persuasion, and (d) physiological states. Bandura (1997) posited that physiological states rely partly on a person's bodily or emotional state while judging their capabilities. The individual interprets stress, reactions, and tensions as moments of vulnerability to poor performance. Mood can also affect judgment about one's efficacy, as a positive mood increases self-

efficacy, and a lugubrious mood can lower it (Bandura, 1997). If Black FGCS' physiological state interprets the college environment as unsupportive, their level of self-efficacy may decrease which, in turn, may negatively impact persistence.

Executive leaderships at residency campuses should invest more in Black FGCS and other minority groups on campus via integration. This can be accomplished by promoting more social integration without the barrier of finance. Additionally, executive leaders can seek to increase more work-study opportunities on campus because, while Black FGCS are earning money, more importantly, they are interacting with the campus community. Furthermore, this would eliminate the need for Black FGCS to seek employment off campus, which takes them away from academic and social integration on campus. Researchers have credited integration on campus with persistence (Astin 1975, 1984, 1993; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975).

### **Limitations**

This study gathered information on the pathways to success at 4-year institutions as perceived by Black FGCS to help identify the factors that contribute and impact persistence, and the strategies the students use to persist to graduation. The findings can be used by institutions to inform professional practice and implement new programs or policies to aid Black FGCS to persist to degree completion at 4-year institutions. Albeit the findings have added to the body of existing research on persistence to degree completion, the study had several limitations. Limitations consist of geographic differences, cultural differences, sample size, and the role of the researcher.

**Geographic limitations.** Geographic limits were associated with this study. The study examined the perceived factors regarding persistence from the perception of Black

first-generation college students who attended and resided on campus at 4-year institutions in the Northeast United States. Additionally, all of the participants graduated from the same high school and lived in the same community while attending high school. Therefore, the findings may not reflect the experiences of Black FGCS from different communities inside and outside of the New York City area. Out of the six participants, three attended the same college, while the other three attended different institutions. The data collected was solely from the interviews and the PEQ, and no data was collected from the colleges or universities. Therefore, no comparison can be made between the different institutions regarding policies or practices. Furthermore, due to the limited geographic scope of the study, the findings may not transferable to other Black FGCS.

**Sample size limitation.** Despite the findings being valuable to the existing body of research, the sample size was limited to six participants. Furthermore, five out of the six participants were female, therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to Black FGCS males. An increased sample size might have added more volume to the research if participants' familial support were included in the study. Familial support may have offered a different perspective in terms of barriers and for the perceived role in Black FGCS' persistence.

**Cultural difference limitation.** Amongst the six participants, cultural difference may have played a role in the findings. Out of the six participants, four were first-generation Americans with immigrant parents from the countries of Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana, Panama, Africa, and Haiti. Furthermore, with the exception of one of the first-generation college participants, the other three parents were from different countries.

Therefore, the households were multicultural. A narrowed focus on a specific culture may have altered the findings.

**Role of the researcher bias.** A hermeneutic, phenomenological approach was used to examine this study, which can leave room researcher bias. The researcher is a Black, first-generation male college student, who was employed as the college advisor at MT high school with an extensive history of working with FGCS. While there were steps taken to minimize bias throughout the research by utilizing transcription services and a peer reviewer for intracoder reliability, all biases may not have been eliminated.

### **Recommendations**

This section offers recommendations that surfaced from the responses of the participants during the course of the interviews and what was recorded in Chapter 4. Colleges and universities' executive leaders and administration have long concerned themselves with students' retention and persistence rate. The increasing gap between enrollment and degrees earned for Black FGCS is not only a concerning factor for the individual who drops out of college, but it is also a concern for the institution. The findings can inform college administrators on the best practices to better support Black FGCS.

**College readiness.** First-generation college students are said to have a difficult time throughout their collegiate careers (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). Without the knowledge of experienced family members who have already graduated from college, FGCS are forced to transition from high school to college and advance through college on their own (Rooney, 2008).

Of the six participants, three stated that they felt academically and socially underprepared for college. Of the remaining three participants, two stated that they felt socially underprepared. Rigorous course work taken in the high school setting may increase students' academic success in college. In addition, secondary schools should partner with neighboring colleges to create a college link program. College link programs allow students to earn college credits while still enrolled in high school. Furthermore, college link courses help Black FGCS become acclimated by taking courses in a college setting. Black FGCS also need social competence to help navigate themselves through college. A college-readiness atmosphere in high school can consist of:

- an assigned day of the week for staff and students to wear college paraphernalia,
- college fairs hosted on the high school's campus,
- college personnel speaking at assemblies, and
- monthly college tours to various campuses with traditional residence halls.

Teachers could frame the name of their alma mater and hang it by the entrance to their classrooms. A college-readiness environment in high school may contribute to Black FGCS' motivation to attend college and be better prepared for campus life.

**Establish a supportive campus environment.** Of the six participants, two attended predominantly White institutions. Both participants explained that they felt like an outcast on campus, and they experienced acts of racial discrimination on or around campus. The participants mentioned that their institution did not do much to address the acts of racial discrimination. In order to cope, the participants surrounded themselves

with other Black students. It is imperative that colleges establish a supportive campus environment that benefits all students. Academic, moral, and social support should be easily accessible by all students. Right before the fall semester begins, PWIs should create a separate freshmen orientation program for newly enrolled Black other and other minorities. The orientation could run into the campus-wide freshmen orientation with no more than a day gap between the two. During the orientation, administration, faculty, and staff can inform the incoming Black students about all of the available resources on campus, both academic and social. Campuses should develop a culture where faculty and staff are encouraged to attend Black organizations' events to show support for the clubs. PWIs should recruit greater numbers of Black faculty. Black FGCS are more likely to associate themselves with other people with whom they can identify. This may ease the burden from the peers of Black FGCS.

**Recommendations for future research.** The following are suggestions for future studies.

***Replicate the study.*** Out of the six participants, four reported that their parents were immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa. Based on the responses from the interviews, using two separate samples, the study could examine the differences in persistence between Black FGCS with non-American parents compared to Black FGCS with American parents.

***Impact of fraternities on persistence.*** Participant 6 credited much of his academic success to his fraternity brothers. He stated that most of his friends in college were his fraternity brothers. They motivated him and kept him on track by keeping him

accountable for his education. A study could be done to examine the impact of Black Greek-lettered organizations on persistence toward degree completion.

*Interpersonal relationships between faculty and Black FGCS.* Out of the six participants, three reported having developed close relationships with a faculty or staff member. The participants stated that their relationship with the faculty members motivated them to continue towards degree completion. A study could be done to examine the impact of interpersonal relationships between faculty and Black FGCS regarding persistence toward degree completion.

*Impact of a father figure on Black FGCS pursuing higher education.* While familial support was a major theme under the category of contributors to persistence, none of the participants cited their fathers as a motivational factor. Out of the six participants, two fathers resided in the same home. However, when participants spoke of familial support, they mentioned their mothers and siblings. A study could be done to examine the impact of a father figure on Black FGCS regarding persistence toward degree completion.

## **Conclusion**

According to Engle and Tinto (2008), the United States of America has one of the world's largest college participation rates. Despite this, there is a growing gap between college enrollment and degree completion. While the overall gap continues to increase between college enrollment and degree completion at 4-year institutions, the completion gap among non-FGCS Blacks and their Black FGCS counterparts is even larger.

Researchers indicate that FGCS persist at a higher rate at community colleges than at 4-year colleges. According to the research, FGCS are 4 times more likely to drop out of 4-

institutions after their first year in comparison to their non-FGCS counterparts. There is a large body of research (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014) that further outlines the barriers to persistence to degree completion for first-generation college students; however, there is a paucity of research that reflects the motivation and success of for Black FGCS (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Martin, 2009; Petty, 2014).

Unlike the body of research that highlights the barriers and roadblocks to success of FGCS at 4-year institutions, this study focused on factors perceived by Black FGCS as to the contributors to their success. Instead of building upon the large body of research that discusses barriers and roadblocks, this study sought to gather the insights and lived experiences of Black FGCS who successfully completed their sophomore year at 4-year colleges and were on track to graduate within 6 years of their initial enrollment into college. This study's goal is to increase the body of knowledge relating to Black FGCS who successfully persisted to degree completion at 4-year institutions.

To address the gap, a hermeneutic, phenomenological study was conducted involving six Black FGCS who were enrolled at 4-year institutions in the Northeast United States and who resided on campus. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the factors that contribute and impact persistence, and the strategies the students employed for persistence toward degree attainment at a 4-year institution. The following research questions were used to guide the study.

1. What factors, from the perspective of Black FGCS, contributed to their persistence toward degree completion?
2. Of the factors identified, which factors were the most impactful on Black

FGCS' persistence toward degree completion?

3. Given the factors identified, are there specific strategies employed by persistent Black FGCS that increased the likelihood of college completion?

Guided by Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, 13 major themes and one sub-theme emerged in this hermeneutic, phenomenological design. The themes were placed into three categories: (a) contributors to persistence: self-efficacy, familial support, social elevation, and career opportunity; (b) impact on persistence: close friends and positive relationship, social integration, academic integration, faculty recognition, campus residency, and sub-theme: modeling; and (c) persistence strategies: peer academic accountability, time management, campus resources, and access to faculty.

The findings of this study support the body of literature regarding the factors that contribute and impact persistence (Attinasi, 1989; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Elkins et al., 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 1983, 1986; Pascarella et al., 1986; Somers et al., 2000; Williamson & Creamer, 1988). The findings suggest that despite the known barriers to academic success for Black FGCS at 4-year institutions, all of the participants were able to persist based on the aforementioned themes.

The participants of this study persisted through a combination of their self-efficacy, familial support, a circle of friends on campus who they relied heavily upon, and accessing the resources around them. While these participants were able to persist, they also experienced a difficult time becoming acclimated to their college environment before they were able to navigate through it. It is crucial that high school administration teams and executive leaders at residency campus at 4-year institutions continue to use best practices and improve and create systems to support Black FGCS. These

recommendations are imperative if the goal is to increase graduation rate at 4-year colleges, and for Black FGCS to feel welcomed and supported in an unfamiliar environment. High schools' administration may increase motivation for Black FGCS to pursue college by creating a college-readiness atmosphere in the school. Executive leaders at residency campuses can promote more social integration without the barriers of finance, and they should invest in recruiting more Black faculty members. While there is no overnight solution or blanket fix to increase Black first-generation college students' persisting at 4-year institutions, this study has identified 14 factors that increase persistence toward degree completion at 4-year institutions for these students.

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## **Appendix A**

### **St. John Fisher College**

#### **Invitation to Participate in Study**

Hello Fellow Graduate,

I hope all is well, it has been a while since our last communication. Since then I have been working on a study and I will like to invite you to participate. I am a student in a doctoral program at St. John Fisher College (SJFC) and that this research is part of my dissertation. This study was reviewed and approved by the SJFC Institutional Review Board (IRB). Here are some interesting facts regarding my research. There has been a significant increase in enrollment rate of first-generation college students like yourselves at 4-year institutions. First-generation college students is defined as students whose parents did not attend college. Research indicates that first-generation college students are four times more likely to drop out of college after their first year in comparison to their counterparts. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of what motivates Black first-generation college students to persist towards degree attainment at a 4-year institution. Your participation may help generations of others like yourself who enroll in college after you. Findings may allow for an increasing understanding of the factors that impact motivation and success to help increase persistence and graduation rates of first-generation college students at 4-year institutions.

I am writing to respectfully request that you participate in this study by completing the attached “Participant Eligibility Questionnaire” and “Informed Consent to Participate in Research” and signifying your rights as well as willingness to participate in the study. Participants for the study will be randomly selected from the pool of responses, therefore your participation may not be needed. In this study, participants will be asked to voluntarily participate in a semi-structured interview protocol via face-to-face, video conference or telephone using 13 open-ended questions. The length of the interview is approximately 60-90 minutes and is audio recorded.

All information collected in this study will remain confidential. In order to maintain the utmost confidentiality of each participant in this study, no data will be released identifying participants or the institution they are attending. All research will be conducted with the highest ethical standards for confidentiality. All data will be in the researcher’s possession; physical files will be locked file cabinet and computer files will be stored in a password protected zip file. All data will be kept for three years. Thereafter, physical files will be destroyed by shredding and all computer files will be deleted.

I would like to thank you in advance for considering my request and I am hopeful that you will participate in this study so that your feelings on this important topic as individuals and as social justice change agents can be known. If you have further questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me at \_\_\_\_\_ or by e-mail at \_\_\_\_\_.

Best Regards,  
Raymond L. Warren Jr.  
Doctoral Candidate

**Appendix B**

**St. John Fisher College**

**Participant Eligibility Questionnaire**

**Date:**

**Name and designation of person completing this form:**

#	Questions	Yes	No	
1	Did you graduate from MT?			
2	What year did you graduate from high school?			
3	Are you a first-generation college student?			
4	Do you identify your race as Black?			
5	Are you currently enrolled at a 4-year institution in Northeast region of the United States?			
6	Do you live on or around campus (Does not include living at home with family)?			
7	Are you currently on track to graduate from college within 6-years since your initial date of enrollment?			
8	At any point since you enrolled in college, did you take any voluntary time off from college (one semester or more)?			

## Appendix C

### St. John Fisher College

#### Informed Consent to Participate in Research

<b>Title of Study:</b>	“Pathways to Success at Four-Year Institutions as Perceived by Black First-Generation College Students”
<b>Researcher:</b>	Raymond L. Warren, Jr.
<b>Dissertation Chair:</b>	Dr. Carla Smith
<b>Committee Member:</b>	Dr. Andrea Coddett

#### **Introduction:**

You are being asked to participate in a study being conducted by Raymond L. Warren Jr. for a doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Carla Smith of the Ed. D. in Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College (SJFC). This study was reviewed and approved by the SJFC Institutional Review Board (IRB). You are being asked to participate in this study because during your senior year of high school you self-identified yourself as Black and a first-generation college student during your college application process. Participants for the study will be randomly selected from the pool of responses, therefore your participation may not be needed. Please read the form carefully and feel free to ask any questions that you may have before deciding whether you will like to be considered to participate in the study.

#### **Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of what motivates Black first-generation college students to persist towards degree attainment at a 4-year institution. Findings may allow for an increased understanding of the factors that impact motivation and success in order to increase persistence and graduation rates of this underrepresented group at a 4-year institution. The study intends to uncover what makes you persist in college despite a large body of research that identifies first-generation college students' barriers to success.

#### **Study Procedures:**

In this study, you will be asked to voluntarily participate in a semi-structured interview protocol via face-to-face, video conference or telephone using 13 open-ended questions. The length of the interview is approximately 60-90 minutes and will be audio recorded.

**Approval of Study:** This study has been reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**Risks and Benefits:** A risks involves the researcher inability to guarantee anonymity. In addition, factors associated with being a Black first-generation college student may cause emotional distress to you in this study. You may refuse to answer any question in this research study. Benefits involves an increasing understanding of the factors that impact motivation and success to help increase persistence and graduation rates of first-generation college students at 4-year institutions. Your participation may help generations of others like you who enrolls in college after you.

**Confidentiality/Privacy:**

All information collected in this study will remain confidential. In order to maintain the utmost confidentiality in this study, no data will be released identifying you or your college/university. All research will be conducted with the highest ethical standards for confidentiality. The researcher will maintain any records associated with this study in a locked cabinet and/or in a password protected zip file for a period of three years following the completion of research and then the records will be destroyed. For any reason during your participation in this research, you may discontinue your participation.

**Your rights:**

As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to you.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.

I have read the above, and by participating in this semi-structure interview. I understand that the interview will be audio recorded. I agree and give my consent to participate in the above-named study.

\_\_\_\_\_

Print

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Sign

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

This study serves as a requirement to obtain a doctoral degree (Education in Executive Leadership) at St. John Fisher College. This research will be published as a doctoral dissertation. It will be disseminated through the St. John Fisher College Library and accessible through the St. John Fisher College webpage.

If you have further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher, Raymond L. Warren Jr. at \_\_\_\_\_ or by e-mail at \_\_\_\_\_.

experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact the Health and Wellness Center at (585) 385-8280 for appropriate referrals.

Concerns or complaints about this study may also be addressed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John Fisher College, 3690 East Avenue, Rochester, New York 14618, \_\_\_\_\_ or by e-mail at \_\_\_\_\_.

## Appendix D

### Qualitative Interview Guide

- 1. What factors from the perspective of Black FGCS contributes to persistence towards degree completion?**
  - a. What or who motivated you to attend college?
  - b. Describe how did you prepare yourself for college?
  - c. What role if any did your parent(s)/family played in your decision to attend college?
  - d. What were your family initial feelings about you going away to college?
  - e. Now that you are in your Junior/Senior year, describe how have their views or opinion changed since?
  
- 2. Of the factors identified, which factors were most impactful on persistence toward degree completion?**
  - a. Describe what motivated you to return year after year?
  - b. How did living on campus contributed to your education?
  - c. Describe your transitional experience from year to year.
  - d. Describe any level of involvement you have on campus including membership in any organization
  
- 3. Given the factors identified, are there specific strategies employed by persistent students that increase the likelihood of college completion?**
  - a. Describe a typical afternoon and evening when you get done with class.

## Appendix E

### Confidentiality Form

#### CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Name of Signer: \_\_\_\_\_

During my activity in analyzing data for this research: “Pathways to Success at Four-Year Institutions as Perceived by Black First-Generation College Students”, I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement, I acknowledge and agree that:

1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant’s name is not used.
4. I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
5. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
6. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
7. I will only access or use systems or devices I’m officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F

### Categories and Frequency of Themes

Theme/Code	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6	Total
<b>Contributes to Persistence</b>							
Familial Support	7	11	6	7	9	9	49
Self-Efficacy	10	10	0	13	11	7	51
a) enactive attainment	7	9	0	13	11	2	42
b) verbal persuasion	2	1	0	0	0	5	8
c) psychological state	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
d) vicarious experiences	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Career Opportunity	6	4	4	0	0	0	14
Social Elevation	0	7	0	5	6	0	18
<b>Most Impactful on Persistence</b>							
Close Friends/Positive Relationships	19	16	9	5	16	20	85
Social Integration/Student Involvement	23	13	10	0	14	21	81
Academic Integration		20	14	9	12	16	71
Faculty Recognition	14	0	9	0	9	13	45
Campus Residency	14	11	14	10	12	0	61
Modeling	0	0	6	8	12	0	24
<b>Persistence Strategies</b>							
Time Management	12	12	6	8	13	13	64
Peer Academic Accountability	14	15	8	0	11	18	66
Campus Resource Centers	9	15	13	0	5	0	42
Access to Professors/Faculty	0	7	12	0	0	14	33