

12-2018

The Key to Academic Success: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study on First- Generation African American Students Who Successfully Graduated from a Predominantly White Institution

LaToya Blount

St. John Fisher College, itb02431@sjfc.edu

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Follow this and additional works at: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Blount, LaToya, "The Key to Academic Success: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study on First- Generation African American Students Who Successfully Graduated from a Predominantly White Institution" (2018). *Education Doctoral*. Paper 370.

Please note that the Recommended Citation provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit <http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations>.

This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd/370 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

The Key to Academic Success: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study on First- Generation African American Students Who Successfully Graduated from a Predominantly White Institution

Abstract

First-generation African American students are graduating from college at lower rates than their White counterparts. Researchers have identified factors such as having kids, being a minority, and socioeconomic status as reasons that may hinder a first-generation African American student from completing college. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that led to the academic success of first-generation African American students from predominantly White institutions. The study employed qualitative methodology, specifically, a phenomenological approach. It found that first-generation African American graduates succeeded by being involved in clubs, student government, being an athlete or a Resident Assistant. This study also showed that the graduates formed bonds with both White and African American administrators who served as their support system. The graduates mentioned creating their own programs to feel included on campus. The graduates suggested institutions do more programming geared towards creating a sense of belonging and provide their administrators with the resources to support them throughout all 4 years. Although previous studies refer to first-generation students as coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds, that was not the case for the graduates in this study.

Document Type

Dissertation

Degree Name

Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department

Executive Leadership

First Supervisor

Josephine Moffett

Second Supervisor

Janice Girardi

Subject Categories

Education

The Key to Academic Success: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study on First-
Generation African American Students Who Successfully Graduated from a
Predominantly White Institution

By

LaToya Blount

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

Supervised by

Dr. Josephine Moffett

Committee Member

Dr. Janice Girardi

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

December 2018

Copyright by
LaToya Blount
2018

Dedication

First and foremost, I give thanks to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Lord, thank you for allowing me to truly understand, believe, and know that I must continue to walk by faith and not by sight. It is by your grace and mercy that I was able to make it through this journey.

The road to obtaining my doctorate was long but enjoyable. I would like to thank my amazing and encouraging family for being there whenever I needed words of wisdom. Thank you to my mom for instilling in me the importance of obtaining my education. To my grandmother, thank you for your laughter and words of wisdom. To my extended family and close friends, thank you for understanding how important this was to me and being supportive all the way to the end. Thank you to my dissertation committee, Dr. Moffett, and Dr. Girardi, for all the support and direction.

Biographical Sketch

LaToya Blount is currently the Area Coordinator for Residence Life and Housing Operations at The College of New Rochelle. Ms. Blount attended the State University of New York College at Buffalo where she obtained her Bachelor of Science in Speech-Language Pathology with a minor in Spanish Literature in 2002. She attended the State University of New York College at Buffalo where she graduated with a Master of Science in Multidisciplinary Studies in Human Service Administration in 2004. She began doctoral studies in the St. John Fisher College Executive Leadership program in the summer of 2016. Ms. Blount conducted her research on the factors that lead to the academic success of first-generation African American graduates from predominantly White institutions under the direction of Dr. Josephine Moffett and Dr. Janice Girardi. She earned her degree in 2018.

Abstract

First-generation African American students are graduating from college at lower rates than their White counterparts. Researchers have identified factors such as having kids, being a minority, and socioeconomic status as reasons that may hinder a first-generation African American student from completing college. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that led to the academic success of first-generation African American students from predominantly White institutions.

The study employed qualitative methodology, specifically, a phenomenological approach. It found that first-generation African American graduates succeeded by being involved in clubs, student government, being an athlete or a Resident Assistant. This study also showed that the graduates formed bonds with both White and African American administrators who served as their support system. The graduates mentioned creating their own programs to feel included on campus. The graduates suggested institutions do more programming geared towards creating a sense of belonging and provide their administrators with the resources to support them throughout all 4 years. Although previous studies refer to first-generation students as coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds, that was not the case for the graduates in this study.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	iii
Biographical Sketch.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Tables.....	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Background.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	3
Theoretical Rationale.....	4
Statement of Purpose.....	8
Research Questions.....	8
Significance of the Study.....	9
Definitions of Terms.....	10
Chapter Summary.....	12
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.....	14
Introduction and Purpose.....	14
Graduation Rates.....	14
First-Generation African American Students.....	16
African Americans and Predominantly White Institutions.....	19
Black Student Involvement at PWIs.....	24

African Americans and Historically Black Colleges and Universities	25
Chapter Summary	27
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology	29
General Perspective	29
Research Context	31
Research Participants	32
Instrument Used in Data Collection.....	34
Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis	35
Chapter Summary	38
Chapter 4: Results	39
Introduction.....	39
Research Questions	41
Participants.....	41
Data Analysis and Findings	42
Findings by Research Question	54
Summary of Results	74
Chapter 5: Discussion	76
Introduction.....	76
Implications of Findings	78
Limitations	83
Recommendations.....	85
Future studies	90
Conclusion	91

References.....	97
Appendix A.....	106
Appendix B.....	107
Appendix C.....	109
Appendix D.....	113
Appendix E.....	116

List of Tables

Item	Title	Page
Table 4.1	Participants Childhood Household Type	42
Table 4.2	Highest Level of Education of Participant Parents	43
Table 4.3	Participants Family Income While in School	44
Table 4.4	Demographics for All Participants	45
Table 4.5	Description of Themes	48
Table 4.6	Categories and Themes (Frequencies)	49

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Although recent evidence suggests that retention and completion rates at 4-year colleges and universities are steadily increasing, further examination of the data shows a continued disparity among racial and ethnic demographics (DuBois Baber, 2012). From 2000 to 2010, enrollment numbers for all college students increased from 13.2 to 18.1 million students (Aud et al., 2011). However, extracted data from the United States Department of Education (USDOE) found that African American students attending public colleges had a 6-year graduation rate of 39.2%, compared to 60.2% of White students (Harper, 2010). Thus, college completion rates for African American students in the United States are disproportionate and concerning (Harper, 2010). Approximately two-thirds of African American students who enroll in college departed without obtaining a degree (Engle & Theokas, 2010). A 2010 report from The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) stated “if first-time African American students earned degrees at a rate like White students, there would be 16,000 more with bachelor’s degrees from public 4-year institutions and 11,000 more from private nonprofit institutions” (p. 4). According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) (2017), Black students had the lowest retention rate for students who remained at the institution at 54.5% as compared to that of White students who persisted at 64.4%. There has been slight progress in closing the degree attainment gap for African American students although they are catching up to their White counterparts in terms of college enrollment

(Postsecondary National Policy Institute, [PNIP] 2017). Less than half of African American college students graduate within 6-years (PNIP, 2017). In 2015, 21% of African American college students ages 25 to 29 held a bachelor's degree compared to 43% of White students in the same age range (PNIP, 2017).

First-generation students – those whose parents never attended college – are graduating at notably lower rates than those who represent the second, third, or fourth generation in their family to attend college (Concordia, 2012). First-generation students differ from their peers in ways that reduce the likelihood that they will attend and persist to degree completion (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation students tend to be older, minority, more likely to be female, have dependent children, and come from low socioeconomic homes with parents who did not obtain a college degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). When combined, these characteristics are independently associated with lower rates of college attendance and degree attainment (Engle & Tinto, 2008). As of 2015, 30% of college students were the first in their family to attend college, while 24% or 4.5 million were both first-generation and low-income (Opidee, 2015). Concordia reported on a University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) study which showed 42% of students with parents who attended college graduated within 4 years as compared to only 27% of first-generation students who graduated in the same time frame (Concordia, 2012). Within 5 years, nearly 60% of students whose parents attended college graduated as compared to less than 45% first-generation students in the same time frame. When looking at students who graduated within 6 years, 64% of students whose parents attended college, graduated as compared to only 50% of first-generation college students (Concordia, 2012). The average age for college enrollment for first-generation college

students is 22, whereas the average age for non-first-generation college students is 20 (Concordia, 2012). First-generation college students are unlikely to start college right after high school as compared to students who are the second, third, and fourth in their family to attend college (Concordia, 2012). First-generation students are often faced with the responsibility of having to work and take care of their children, both of which can challenge their ability to focus on school. They also may lack family support as they are the first to attend college (Concordia, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

According to a 2017 report by the National Student Clearinghouse, the 6-year graduation rate for the 2010 cohort was higher for Asian and White students (63.2 % and 62%, respectively) than Hispanic and Black students (45.8 % and 38 %, respectively). The 6-year graduation rate for African Americans who attended predominantly White colleges was 42% compared to 67% for their White counterparts (Aud et al., 2011). Although factors such as student's family background and academic performance predict student retention, it is still uncertain if students understand these factors in relation to their desire to graduate (Oldfield, 2007). A student's family socioeconomic status (SES) is said to contribute to variations in educational outcomes among African American men and women (Tekleselassie, Mallery, & Choi, 2013). When looking at bachelor's degrees awarded for a cohort starting in 2006 with a 6-year graduation expectancy, the National Center on Education Statistics (2013) found that 35.2% were awarded to African American males and 43.6% to African American females, compared to 59.8% White males and 64.9% White females (Aud et al., 2011). In 2011, Concordia reported on a study done at the UCLA, results showed that while 42% of students whose parents

obtained a college degree graduated within 4 years, only 27% of first-generation students graduated within the same time frame (Concordia, 2012).

Theoretical Rationale

Between 1970 and 1980, theoretical perspectives that dominated research on college retention were initially developed. At the core of existing research in retention is the distinction between *what* students experience in the first year of study and *how* they experience college (Woods-Warrior, 2014). Although much of the literature diverges on *the way* first-generation students experience the first year of college, scholars agree that first-generation experiences diverge significantly from those of their peers (Woods-Warrior, 2014). Choosing a college is as important as the types of activities in which students engage in while attending college (Woods-Warrior, 2014).

There are two theories that serve as a foundation for this study: (a) Tinto's (1975) student retention model, and (b) Padilla, Trevino, Trevino, and Gonzalez (1997) local model of minority student success in college. The student retention model by Vincent Tinto is commonly used to define factors associated with student drop out. Tinto's model looks at whether academic integration and social integration predict if a student will persist or drop out (Tinto, 1975). This perception, according to Tinto, evolves over time, as integration and commitment interact with each other to help predict if a student will drop out . This is dependent upon the student's commitment at the time of the decision. Substantial gains in student retention by some institutions have been challenging (Tinto, 2006). The reflection of students' individual skills, attributes, and motivation, or the lack thereof, is closely connected to retention. Students who left institutions were said to be less motivated, less skilled, and lacked an understanding of the benefits realized with

college graduation (Tinto, 2006). Motivation (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012) is considered a factor in students' persistence and retention.

Tinto's (1975) student retention model addressed the complex relationship between students and the institutional environment. Tinto postulates that academic and social integration work together to influence ongoing goals and institutional commitments. Goal and institutional commitment leads to the students' decision to remain or to leave college. Tinto's theory is unique in that it takes a longitudinal approach. The theory asserts that a student's decision to remain or depart from an institution is the result of a series of interactions between that student and members of the college environment (Tinto, 1975). A critical piece of the retention puzzle as identified by Tinto, is the student's integration into the academic and social environments of the campus community. Tinto concludes that integration occurs through experiences between the student and other members of the institution.

The amount of time and energy a student applies to academically focused activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Schofield & Dismore, 2010). Colleges and universities that excel at engaging their students in the variety of the activities they provide, add to valued outcomes of higher education and can retain students at a higher rate compared with other colleges and universities where students are less engaged (Woods-Warrior, 2014). According to Tinto's (1975) conceptual framework, poor attendance and the lack of academic success are early signs that a student is disengaging from school. Furthermore, Tinto (1975) noted that before they matriculate in higher education, students will develop attributes that are shaped by their upbringing.

Simultaneously, students develop academic skills, social skills, and other abilities which in turn, influence their goals and commitments regarding college, the workforce, and their place in society (Tinto, 1975). While a student is enrolled at an institution, he or she will encounter formal and informal college experiences which ultimately influence the student's level of integration into the college (Tinto, 1975).

The local model of minority student success in college by Padilla et al. (1997) offered a way to examine the experiences of minorities (African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans) in college. This model-based mainly upon Padilla's (1994) model of successful minorities in college and Tinto's (1993) model of student departure argues that student success requires a combination of both theoretical (formal/book) knowledge and heuristic (campus specific) knowledge which is specifically important during the crucial first year of college (Padilla et al., 1997). The findings of Padilla et al. (1997) are supported by other researchers who also emphasized the importance of students acquiring campus-specific knowledge to assist in adjusting to their institution (Hausmann, Scholfield, & Woods, 2007; Nora, 2004; Smedley, Meyers, & Harrell, 1993). Padilla et al. (1997) stated,

Student success involves more than preventing students from abandoning their studies. To promote student success, one also must understand why many students, some of them under the most challenging circumstances, are able to complete all program requirements and actually graduate with a diploma or degree. (p. 9)

The local model of minority student success in college looks at barriers represented in four categories, (a) discontinuity barriers, (b) lack of nurturing barriers, (c)

lack of presence barriers and (d) resource barriers (Padilla et al., 1997). The obstacles students face as they transition from their home environment to that of the campus community is addressed in the discontinuity barrier (Padilla et al., 1997). This barrier is shown in the student's transition from high school to college. To be a successful college student, one must learn how to adjust to the new environment, learn to become more independent, and lastly, adjust to new vigorous academics (Padilla et al., 1997).

The nurturing barrier looks at the absence of supportive resources that students need on campus to help facilitate their adjustment and development, especially for minority students (Padilla et al., 1997). A successful student recognizes that they must nurture themselves or seek nurture from others while on/off campus. Lack of presence (third barrier) includes the absence of minorities in the classroom curriculum, in the college or university's programs, and in the general population comprised of students, staff, and faculty on campus (Padilla et al., 1997). The lack of structured diversity adds to the students' feelings of isolation and alienation while on campus (Padilla et al., 1997).

Successful minority students acknowledge the importance of students having support from others who identify as being a minority. Often, students try fulfilling this by participating in ethnic-based student organizations (Padilla et al., 1997). Lastly, when looking at the resource barriers, this may be attributed to the difficulty students may have with financial aid and the process of acquiring aid (Padilla et al., 1997). For students who need financial aid to attend college and more importantly, persist to degree completion, any changes to their financial aid can be very important (Bergerson, 2007; Charles, Roscigno, & Torres, 2006; Perna, 2000).

Statement of Purpose

This study examined first-generation African American students who successfully graduated from a predominantly White institution and the factors that led to their academic success. The overarching theme was degree completion. Factors such as social integration, academic integrations, barriers, college preparation, and family support were explored. The researcher took a qualitative approach. This study examined the graduates' lived experiences and factors that influenced their successful completion. Examining a private, predominantly White institution that awards bachelor's degrees and enrolls African American first-generation students, the researcher interviewed graduates to obtain data. The researcher's study not only helps African American first-generation students at predominantly White colleges achieve degree completion but also increases the institution's knowledge of factors that affect students' academic success.

Research Questions

To help fill the current gap in the literature, the researcher focused on the following research questions to guide the study:

1. What led first-generation African American graduates to attend a predominantly White institution?
2. To what extent, did factors such as social integration, academic integration, barriers, college preparation, and family support influence first-generation African American student's decision to remain and graduate from a predominantly White institution?
3. What barriers and obstacles did first-generation African American graduates encounter at a private predominantly White institution?

Significance of the Study

In 2012, data from students who took the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) indicated that a total of 46% of African American students, 62% of Hispanic/Latino students and 42% of Native American students who took the test identified as first-generation; whereas only 26% of the SAT class classified as first-generation White students (Mattern & Wyatt, 2012). In the United States, an estimated 24% of the total undergraduate population are first-generation students, totaling over 5 million students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; NCES, 2014). Postsecondary completion is more critical than ever. Postsecondary training is required by most jobs of the 21st century (USDOE, 2014). Thus, a workforce lacking the necessary skills acquired with degree completion and certificate programs threatens the United States as a global economy (USDOE, 2014). Predictions by Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010) show that by 2018 in the US, approximately 101 million jobs will require a postsecondary degree. In 2014, United States college graduates with a bachelor's degree earned 62% more (\$48,000 vs. \$30,000), in comparison to individuals with only a high school diploma (Kena et al., 2016). As of March 2014, the unemployment rate in the United States for individuals with a bachelor's degree was nearly half that of those with only a high school diploma at 4% and 7.5% respectively (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

This study is crucial for postsecondary institutions, so they can do more to help first-generation African American students succeed in society and help them establish themselves as competitors in an ever-increasing global economy. The institution may benefit by helping to create a more socially just society, by serving more college students across ethnicities, genders, and levels of socioeconomic status to increase their

graduation rates. This could be a win-win situation for postsecondary institutions as it is in their best interest to enhance mechanisms for academic success for all students on campus. Furthermore, this study is significant in helping higher education administrators develop a strong understanding of the relationship between first-generation African American students and the campus environment in predicting student persistence or withdrawal behavior. A better understanding of this relationship will allow higher education administrators to more clearly design and manage institutional programs that will have the greatest influence on student persistence.

Additionally, this study is significant in establishing an understanding of the interaction of students, both socially and academically, which can help faculty and student affairs administrators to better understand the importance of merging the two to increase persistence and academic success (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). As postsecondary educators, there needs to be a concern regarding the reasons why first-generation African American students leave college before degree completion. An educational dream is not fulfilled for every student that leaves before graduating. In turn, unfulfilled dreams have a lasting long-term impact on not only the student but also society.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms are defined for this study:

African American – For this study this term refers to a student born in the United States whose origin is one of the Black racial groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010)

Academic Integration – The process of student assimilation into the formal (i.e., classroom and laboratories) and informal educational system (Tinto, 1975).

Caucasian – For this study this term will be used interchangeably with *White* and refers to a student born in the United States whose origins is one of the White racial groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Degree Completion – For this study refers to a student obtaining a bachelor’s degree from their institution.

Graduation Rate – is defined as the rate of the percentage of first-time full-time students who enrolled in the fall term and completed their bachelor’s degree within 6 years (Selingo, 2012).

Institutional Commitment – For this study this term refers to the student’s ability to feel comfortable and familiar with the institution in which she/he is enrolled (Tinto, 1975).

First-Generation – For this study this term refers to students whose parents have not received a 4-year degree (Harackiewicz et al., 2013).

Retention – For this study, this term refers to a measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution expressed as a percentage (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS], 2008).

Persistence – For this study this term refers to the completion of at least two semesters of college or developmental studies work (Alfonso, Bailey, & Scott, 2005; Barr & Rasor, 1999; Bers & Smith, 1991; Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2008)

Postsecondary Education – For this study, this term refers to coursework taken at college that is considered as being on a post-high school graduate level (Casazza & Bauer, 2004; Cohen & Brawer, 1996).

Predominantly White Institution – For this study, this term will be used to describe

institutions of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment (Brown & Dancy, n.d.).

Sense of Belonging – For this study, this term refers to the sense that people feel that they belong or matter to one another within a community (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012).

Social Integration – For this study, this term refers to peer-group interactions and faculty interactions, which can be influenced by grade performance and intellectual development (Tinto, 1975).

Chapter Summary

In 2015, an additional 2.3 million students were enrolled in higher education institutions. However, retention and graduation rates have remained relatively low although enrollment has increased (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). Former President Barack Obama’s administration aimed to increase college enrollment and to close the achievement gap for minority students as their persistence and college completion rates remain low (Olson & Riordan, 2012). The achievement gap is categorized by different sectors of the United States population (e.g., male, non-majority, low-income, first-generation) failing to complete postsecondary credentials at comparable rates (USDOE, 2014). Moreover, a lack of focus on postsecondary degree completion has devastating consequences for not only individual students but also for the future of our country (USDOE, 2014).

The remainder of this paper is organized into four chapters. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature. The review of the literature examines areas related to

the factors that led to the academic success of first-generation African American graduates from a predominantly White institution. Chapter 3 will present the methodology employed for the study. This section includes general perspective, research context, research participants, instruments used in data collection, and procedures for data collection and analysis. The findings of the study are presented in Chapter 4. This chapter includes major findings, qualitative research methods, research questions concluding with a summary of the findings. The final chapter highlights the implications of the findings, the limitations of the study, and the researcher's recommendations for practice and future studies.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

In 2013, the United States Census Bureau indicated yet another emerging demographical shift in enrollment and diversity for college campuses. The college enrollment rate for White students is expected to increase by 4% between 2010-2021; enrollment is projected to increase at least 20% for Black and Asian students and 42% for Hispanic students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). This literature review provides the context for this qualitative study on first-generation African American students who have successfully graduated from predominantly White institutions, identifying factors that led to their academic success. The review provides an explanation of the research related to influences on the African American college student's ability to attend and persist to graduation. The chapter reviews graduation rates for first-generation African American students and concludes with an explanation of the study's contribution to the literature.

Graduation Rates

The graduation rate is defined as the rate of the percentage of first-time, full-time students who enrolled in the fall term and completed their bachelor's degree within 6 years (Selingo, 2012). Graduation rates are viewed as indicators of success directly related to the quality of education and returns on investments for institutions and the students they serve (Cueto, Escobal, Penny, & Ames, 2011). Before the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, African Americans still faced significant challenges to earning a postsecondary degree (Cohen & Ibrahim, 2008). Prior to this case, African American college students were heavily excluded from attending predominantly White institutions and nearly all Black students who sought a college

degree attended historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Gasman, 2008). A key indicator of this struggle is the college graduation rate gaps. Tragically, the graduation gap between White and African American students continues to widen (Cohen & Ibrahim, 2008). According to Knapp, Kelly-Reid, and Grinder (2010), Black students graduated at a rate of only 42%, compared to 55% for their White counterparts.

The United States graduation rates have plummeted to 16th after once having the highest graduation rate of any nation, thus causing a risk that the next generation will be less educated than the previous one (Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development [OECD], 2011). If graduation rates remain low, America will inevitably be short 3 million college graduates at the current level although 4.7 million new workers will be needed by 2018 (Bautsch, 2010). Thus, analysts have concluded that increased graduation rates will be related to the economic progression of the United States (Cueto et al., 2011). First-time, full-time undergraduates who failed to graduate in 6 years after beginning college in 2002 attributed to a loss of \$3.8 billion dollars in income, \$566 million in federal income taxes, and \$164 million in state incomes taxes nationwide (Schneider & Yin, 2011). As we move into a world that is becoming more technologically and ecologically interdependent, initiatives affiliated with globalization will look to citizens who are educated to offer solutions that affect the marketplace worldwide (Montalvo, 2010).

Enrollment rates and graduation trends by race and gender are reported by the United States Department of Education as far back as 1967 (USDOE, 2013). In 1967, African American ages 18-24 were enrolled at a rate of 13% at degree-granting

institutions (USDOE, 2013). By 1972, approximately 21.1% of enrolled college students ages 18-24 were men (USDOE, 2013). During that time, African American male enrollment outnumbered that of African American females at the rate of 15% (USDOE, 2013). However, as time progressed, African American females began to outperform African American males in both college enrollment and graduation (USDOE, 2013). The number of degrees awarded to males in 2013 showed rates of 70.9% for White males, 8.9% for Black males, 9.8% for Hispanic males, 7.9% for males who identified as Asian/Pacific Islanders and 2.5% for males who were of other ethnicities. In comparison, in 2013 the number of degrees awarded to females showed rates of 67.3% for White females, 12.1% for Black females, 11% for Hispanic females, 6.9% for Asian/Pacific Islander females and 2.7% of females who were of other ethnicities (USDOE, 2014).

First-Generation African American Students

Sanacore and Palumbo (2016) noted numerous first-generation college students drop out of school due to their inability to handle the academic requirements. A student's social (sense of belonging) and academic involvement at an institution aid in his or her persistence to remain and complete the degree (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). First-generation students are defined as those whose parents have not received a 4-year degree (Harackiewicz et al., 2014). These students often face many unique barriers to postsecondary success such as bridging two cultures and not feeling a sense of belonging in either (Jehangir, 2010). These obstacles can relate to issues that deal with transition based on family, social life, culture, and academics (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). First-generation students face hurdles, unlike their peers which ultimately creates hurdles for them to succeed. The process by which they enroll in college, the goals they pursue

during college, and the lack of family support impacts first-generation students' success (Shelper & Woosley., 2011). Other factors that hinder their success include preparation, motivation, and self-efficacy (Shelper & Woosley, 2011).

Difficulties in social and cultural integration have also been factored in as concerns that first-generation students face (Shelper & Woosley, 2011). A feeling of depression or loneliness is a result of first-generation students lacking a sense of belonging (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). First-generation students are not as academically engaged as their non-first-generation peers (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). First-generation students tend not to participate in high impact educational practices as frequently as traditional students, although evidence suggests they benefit from participation even more so than non-first-generation students (Jehangir, 2010). Several other factors, such as lack of college preparation, indicate that first-generation students have the potential to experience problematic transition into higher education (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012).

First-generation African American students who attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs) enter without the knowledge of cultural capital (Kiser & Price, 2008; Oldfield, 2007; Saunders & Serna, 2004). According to Oldfield (2007), cultural capital refers to “the knowledge, skills, education and other advantages a person has that makes the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily” (p. 2). Therefore, first-generation African American students lack assistance in navigating the culture of higher education as they do not have parents who attended college and can share their experience (Borrero, 2011). Thus, first-generation African American students enter college with inadequate instruction on how to navigate their college experience to achieve academic success (Borrero, 2011). For first-generation

African American students, their socioeconomic background is a key factor in college enrollment, attendance, and graduation. Furthermore, first-generation African American students often enter college with more understanding of the social and cultural capital from their home environment (Borrero, 2011). The historical significance of race and class in American society put first-generation African American college students at a marked disadvantage when it comes to understanding the context of a selective campus environment and how to successfully navigate while attending these institutions (Johnson, 2013).

In a quantitative study by Stebleton and Soria (2012), they examined the perceived academic obstacles that first-generation students face in comparison to their counterparts. The researchers surveyed 145,510 students identified by the Carnegie Foundation from six research universities with the use of the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey. The researchers analyzed the difference among first-generation students and non-first-generation students regarding their academic success (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). The SERU contained approximately 600 items depending on the module used by each of the six institutions. During the survey, each student answered a set of core questions and was randomly assigned one of four modules that contained items on a specific research theme (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). The four areas used for the SERU included: academic engagement, community and civic engagement, global knowledge/skills, and lastly, student life and development. Of the participants surveyed 52.8% were female, 60.1% White, 17.9% Asian, 7.7% Chicano-Latino, 5.8% African American, 5.1% unknown, 2.9% International and 26.4% identified as being first-generation (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Results indicated that first-generation

students showed a statistically significant higher instance ($p < .05$) of obstacles that hindered their success such as job responsibilities, family obligations, weak math skills, poor English skills, poor study skills, and feelings of depression or being upset. In competing responsibilities, first-generation students displayed lower means than non-first-generation students ($p < .05$). This suggested that overall, first-generation students experience greater obstacles to their academic success than non-first-generation students (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012).

African Americans and Predominantly White Institutions

For African Americans attending predominantly White institutions, the transition may be challenging and very overwhelming, which contributes to their degree persistence and completion based on racial and ethnic categories (DuBois Baber, 2012). African American students encounter more challenges in adjusting to a college environment that is primarily structured around the needs, attitudes, and values of White students (Fischer, 2007). For some, African American students who were raised in a predominantly minority community, entering a PWI triggers a culture shock as this may be their first time in an environment that is racially/ethnically different from the community where they were raised (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Museus & Quaye, 2009). African American students with perceptions of a negative or hostile campus environment may leave them feeling less reluctant to engage with other members of the community (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2001). These negatives perceptions of a campus racial climate may attribute to the observed differences in the educational attainment rates among African Americans and other racial/ethnic groups by negatively impacting the students' academic performance and overall

institutional persistence (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Charles, Fischer, Mooney, & Massey, 2009; Fleming, 1984; Smedley et al., 1993). Previous researchers noted that African Americans can be influenced or pressured to change/adjust their behavior to adapt or fit in their new environment with their White peers on campus (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Padilla et al., 1997; Tinto, 1993; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Some African American students actively try to resist these behaviors through self-segregation or seeking out students who are of the same ethnicity (Harper, 2013). These behaviors, as noted by Feagin and Sikes (1995), are coping mechanisms which allow the students to shield themselves from institutional racism (Harper, 2013). While these methods may protect African American students in some ways, it can also limit opportunities for them to engage with the dominant peer groups, who are often extremely influential on campus and can serve as a potential source for networking and other prime opportunities (Strange & Banning, 2001; Tinto, 1993).

Researchers in higher education have learned a lot about how Black students at PWIs are affected by their relationship with faculty, their families, friends from home, and their peers who are involved in Black student organizations (Giuffrida & Douthit, 2010). Furthermore, researchers looking at cultural studies offered valuable perspectives for understanding the cultural aspects and practices found in the Black community, and how those factors can influence achievement and persistence (Giuffrida & Douthit, 2010). Prior research indicated a strong faculty relationship is crucial to a student's postsecondary success (Giuffrida & Douthit, 2010). Although earlier research suggests that relationships with faculty are especially important for the success of minority students, further studies showed that Black students at PWIs are unable to form healthy

relationships with White faculty. (Giuffrida & Douthit, 2010). Black students at PWIs often perceive White faculty as culturally insensitive, which makes fostering positive relationship hard. Stereotypical comments about Blacks, generalizing students' opinions while in class, and failing to acknowledge and incorporate Black perspectives into the curricula also make it hard for students to connect with White faculty (Giuffrida, 2005).

Vereen and Hill (2008) suggest the importance of diversification on higher education campuses. Specifically, Vereen and Hill speak to creating a paradigm shift in higher education toward hiring African American faculty members. This shift can be used to create academic change and promote institutional diversity consciousness (Vereen & Hill, 2008). Having minority faculty creates cross-cultural learning and exchange of multiple perspectives and dialogues in class. This classroom setting is valuable for both faculty and students in the overall learning process (Mohamed, 2010). According to Mohamed (2010), "the presence of minority students and professors in college classes enriches the quality of cross-cultural communication and advances the educational benefits to both White and non-White students" (p. 42). Furthermore, Mohamed (2010) states, "without diversity, it sets the stage for an impoverished learning environment devoid of diverse interactions and discussions" (p.42). Thus, a diverse faculty is beneficial to everyone and not only exclusive to African American students and faculty. Institutions with diverse faculty and staff are better equipped to lead students in a direction where they can adapt to the world's complex and culturally sensitive climate. Therefore, students will learn how to work and live in a globalized economy with people from various backgrounds and nationalities (Igwebuike, 2006).

It is critical to examine issues related to the transitional experiences of African American students attending PWIs as a strong connection to persistence and degree attainment. This is especially pertinent to first-year students (DuBois Baber, 2012). In a qualitative study conducted by Dubois Baber (2012), he looked at the first-year college experiences of African American students and explored ways in which racial identity helped develop and shape their first-year experience at a PWI. The researcher hoped to investigate the complex process of identity development and contextual transition for African American students in hopes of adding to current research on the consistent issue of persistence and attainment among traditionally marginalized students (DuBois Baber, 2012). For this study, the interpretive theoretical framework – the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI) was used (DuBois-Baber, 2012). The participants for this study were selected using purposeful sampling with the help of the Office of Student Affairs. Fifteen self-identified first-year, African American students enrolled at a PWI, Mid-Atlantic University (MAU) was used for this study (DuBois-Baber, 2012). Students and the university were given pseudonyms to provide anonymity. The sample included nine females and six males. Of the 15 participants, six students participated in a scholarship program referred to as the Drew Program for this study. The aim of this program was to increase participation of students of color in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields (DuBois Baber, 2012). The questions for this study were centered on the continuing academic and social experience of students at MAU (DuBois Baber, 2012).

Findings from this study found five major themes that emerged which were (a) established racial identity, (b) reconsidering identity through heterogeneous community

experience, (c) conflict between ideologies, (d) resiliency and hostility, and (e) uncovering the complexity of identity (DuBois Baber, 2012). The first theme established that racial identity represented how students entered college with an established disposition of African American culture (DuBois-Baber, 2012). These dispositions signified positive and negative memories. The experiences discussed were said to trigger an evaluative process where racial centrality and racial salience were influenced by connections between internalizing self-concepts (DuBois Baber, 2012). When looking at the second theme, shifting salience and centrality through various community experiences, this described peer and structural influences on racial identity at MAU. The participants in this study stated that there was a connection to a diverse mass of African American students at MAU (DuBois Baber, 2012). This diversity created multiple subcultures that were both formal and informal, where students could find a place for the support they needed. For many of the participants, it was the first time they experienced extended exposure to the heterogeneity of African American culture that was evident on campus (DuBois Baber, 2012).

The conflict between ideologies, which is the third theme, was evident during the interviews conducted with the participants after spring break. Student participants provided information about the tension they felt at home as they began to express a racial ideology that diverged from previous influences. The participants in the study appeared to shift between various racial ideologies during their first year at MAU. The contrast became more noticeable when the participants returned home, particularly if their home community related to White dominant institutions (DuBois Baber, 2012). The fourth theme looked at the students' level of resiliency based on the judgment they received

from others. Students described ways in which they confronted challenges to their identity, rather than internalizing stereotypes and accepting labels placed upon African Americans (Dubois-Baber, 2012). Peer support, which was lacking in their previous educational context, appeared to both strengthen perseverance and reduce vulnerability to assumptions connected to racial identity. Lastly, the complexity of identity was said to develop during the latter part of a student's first year in college. Participants spoke of how their racial identity interacted with other forms of identity to include gender, socioeconomic background, and sexual orientation (Dubois-Baber, 2012).

Black Student Involvement at PWIs

Another important factor related to Black college student academic achievement and persistence at PWIs was involvement in Black student organizations. These include Black student government, Black academic honor groups, local advocacy groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Black Greek letter associations (Giuffrida & Douthit, 2010). The norms and values of Black students differ from those of the White majority at PWIs thus, making it especially important to become socially integrated into the life of the university to succeed (Tinto, 1973). Similarly, a study conducted in PWIs suggested that school and college counselors encourage Black students to actively participate in Black organizations for several reasons. First, contact with other Black students can help provide a way for students to give back to the Black community. This involvement creates a sense of purposeful belonging during a time when students are coping with issues of abandoning their family, friends and home environment (Giuffrida & Douthit, 2010).

Secondly, students' participation in organizations can help Black students connect with mentors, find a comfortable place to socialize, and connect with and be themselves with other Black students (Giuffrida & Douthit, 2010). For Black students, this contact can begin to fill some of the void left by leaving the familiarity of home. It also can help students to process feelings about identity along with fostering close relationships with people who have experienced similar feelings and have found ways of reconciling these emotions (Giuffrida & Douthit, 2010). Black students and their families should be introduced to the normal dilemmas and issues students experience as they attempt to integrate their new and old lives. This effort can be made by inviting Black faculty and administrators to participate in assuring students that they do not have to sacrifice their relationship with friends and family or jeopardize their personal identity to be successful (Giuffrida & Douthit, 2010).

African Americans and Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Over the last 40 years, there have been many studies on the impact of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) on African American students. Many studies compared aspects of African American undergraduate college years at HBCUs and PWIs and found that African American students learned best and ultimately were more satisfied at an HBCU. Within these studies, the topic of student satisfaction was briefly discussed. However, many lacked a full understanding of student engagement and satisfaction. Prior research showed that positive student satisfaction is linked to higher student persistence, better word of mouth, more alumni involvement, and increased financial contributions by alumni (Schreiner, 2009).

In a qualitative study conducted in 2006 and 2007, African American students at 4-year colleges and universities were analyzed using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). During 2006 and 2007, 920 4-year institutions with more than 550,000 randomly selected first and senior year students were invited to participate in the NSSE. From the selected schools, 26 were HBCUs and 754 were identified as PWIs (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2014). The NSSE consists of two scales that students would address. The first one focused on (a) how you evaluated your entire education, and (b) If you could start over again, would you go to the same institution you are attending now?

The second scale built upon the first one and added engagement related environment variables (Chen et al., 2014). The research questions asked, (a) What demographic and institutional characteristics may predict African American students' overall satisfaction with HBCUs or PWIs, (b) Is student engagement a predictor of overall student satisfaction for African American students at HBCUs and PWIs after being controlled for other input and environmental factors, and (c) Is there a significant difference between HBCUs and PWIs regarding African American students' overall satisfaction after being controlled for student engagement and other variables (Chen et al., 2014).

Findings concluded that gender did not have a statistically significant relationship with African American student satisfaction at either HBCUs or PWIs. When looking at first-generation students, there was a statistically significant effect on African American students' satisfaction at HBCUs ($p < .05$), however, the effect size was small (Chen et al., 2014). When factoring institutional characteristics, which included total enrollment and selectivity, an institution size had no statistically significant effect on African American

satisfaction at HBCUs, whereas, at PWIs there was a negative correlation with African American students.

The last group focused on three non-engagement related student variables to include enrollment status (part-time versus full-time), transfer student status, and student grade point average (GPA) as self-reported information. Based on the three variables, a student's GPA showed a statistically significant positive correlation with African American student satisfaction at both HBCUs and PWIs ($p < .001$). Part-time students were generally more satisfied at their college or university as compared to full-time African American students at PWIs ($p < .001$). Transfer status had zero effect on African American satisfaction at both HBCUs and PWIs (Chen et al., 2014). The results for the second research questions which centered on student relationship between engagement and African American overall satisfaction showed that of the five student engagement indicators, a supportive campus environment was the only one that had a statistically significant relationship with African American students at both HBCUs and PWIs.

Lastly, the difference between HBCUs and PWIs regarding African American students' overall satisfaction failed to reject the null hypothesis in that the difference between HBCUs and PWIs were caused by chance (Chen et al., 2014). The researcher found that of the five student engagement measures developed by NSSE, a supportive campus environment was the only one that had a positive correlation with African American students' satisfaction at both HBCUs and PWIs.

Chapter Summary

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016) reported that the number of minority students attending college would increase significantly. College

enrollment rate for White students is expected to increase by 4% between 2010-2021; enrollment is projected to increase at least 20% for Black and Asian students and 42% for Hispanic students. Over the past 10 years, an increasing number of students has entered college. However, attainment rates have not changed, prompting a shift in focus from attendance to completion (NCES, 2013). Graduating African American students remains one of the most pressing issues facing higher education today. The graduation rates for African American students comparatively remain low in the United States (Engle & Theokas, 2010).

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

General Perspective

Enrollment numbers for all college students increased from 13.2 to 18.1 million students between 2000 and 2010 (Aud et al., 2012). Approximately two-thirds of African American students who enroll in college depart without having earned a degree (Engle & Theokas, 2010). Demographers have estimated that African Americans and Hispanics will comprise as much as 50% of the United States population by the year 2050 (Caffey, 2007). As of 2016, African Americans comprise 13.3 % of the total United States population (Census, 2016).

Previous research has studied eight significant factors that contribute to the academic success of first-generation African American college graduates at predominantly White institutions (Green, 2014; Rodgers, 2013). These factors were financial support, academic integration, family support, personal knowledge, race, challenges, spirituality, and social integration. Additionally, Green (2014) reported the following subthemes were also important for first-generation African American academic success: relationships, having a child, discipline/myself, independence, esteem, injury, and being homesick. Similarly, Gibbons and Borders (2010) concur with Green (2014) regarding a student's academic intentions and actions, and their own self-efficacy and confidence as important factors for academic success at predominantly White institutions. The research for this phenomenological study provides a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to the academic success of first-generation African American

students who graduated from a PWI. The researcher's goal was to contribute resources for first-generation African American students, families of college students, mentors, faculty, and people who work in the areas of retention on college campuses.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What led first-generation African American graduates to attend a predominantly White institution (PWI)?
2. To what extent, did factors such as social integration, academic integration, barriers, college preparation, and family support influence first-generation African American students' decision to remain and graduate from a PWI?
3. What barriers and obstacles did first-generation African American graduates encounter at a PWI?

The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological research design for this study. Qualitative research allows the participant's voice to be heard and participants to feel a sense of ownership of experiences (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research allows the researcher to gain firsthand in-depth knowledge from the students. This type of research is an approach to exploring and understanding the meaning of the experiences of certain groups or people. It can be used to gain an understanding or insight into the attitudes, behaviors, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, culture, or lifestyles of specific groups of individuals. Qualitative research uses methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, content analysis, ethnography, program evaluation, and research methods to collect data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological approach is a distinct qualitative method for discovering the underlying structure of a shared experience of some social phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). This approach is fit for

studying effective, emotional, and often intense human experiences as phenomenology is the study of experience (Merriam, 2009). Its purpose is to understand an experience and how an individual makes meaning of that experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Merriam (2009) describes a basic qualitative research study as

having been derived philosophically from constructionism, phenomenology, and symbolic interaction and as being used by researchers who are interested in (a) how people interpret their experiences, (b) how they construct their worlds, and (c) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences. (p. 23)

Currently, there is limited research regarding factors that led to the academic success of first-generation, African American students who successfully graduated from a predominantly White institution. Since the researcher's focus was not on understanding this issue from an external level, but rather from the graduates lived experience, a phenomenological inquiry was a good fit for this study. Unlike other studies that have sought to identify the factors that contributed to the departure of first-generation, African American students at PWIs, the researcher's desire was to explore how this population made meaning of their experience and successfully graduated. The researcher gained insight into the significance of the experiences from the students' perspective. The researcher gave a voice to the graduates, made meaning of their experiences, and explored their reasons for persisting in college.

Research Context

The research was conducted during the spring of 2018 with first-generation, African Americans who graduated from predominantly White institutions between 2010-

2016. According to NCES (2015), during the 2014-2015 academic years, degrees were awarded to 1.8 million students. Of that, at public 4-year institutions degrees were awarded to 168,582 Blacks, 1,132,973 Whites, 825,004 males and 1,072,058 females. Furthermore, during the same academic year, at private institutions, degrees were awarded to 609,529 Whites, 100,183 Blacks, 622,388 females and 432,382 males.

To gather data within the allotted time, the participants were recruited through National Greek Letter Organizations. Through personal contact, the researcher compiled a list of potential Greek letter organizations to use for the study (Appendix A). The researcher used graduates from schools in states along the east coast (Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida). There are approximately 1,193 colleges and universities found within this geographic location. The researcher received verbal support from a member of each fraternity and sorority.

Research Participants

The participants in the study were college graduates who met the following criteria: (a) self-identified as being first-generation, (b) African American, and (c) graduated with a bachelor's degree from a predominantly White institution between 2010-2016. Participants were recruited using the snowballing method. Snowball sampling is a form of non-probability sampling utilized when probability sampling techniques are either cost prohibitive or impossible (Handcock & Gile, 2011). The snowball sampling method uses an initial research subject who provides the name of another that provides the name of another, and so on (Vogt & Johnson, 2011). The

researcher reached out to a member of each listed organization through personal contact and a professional network. The contacts were given general information regarding the study and informally asked if they would like to be the initial contact for their respective organization. Upon receipt of approval from St. John Fisher College (SJFC) Institutional Review Board (IRB), each contact was sent an email with a letter of introduction (Appendix B) and link to the pre-demographic questionnaire (Appendix C). The initial contact was asked to refer or recruit members of their organization who had graduated between 2010-2016, to participate in the study. The newly recruited respondents were asked to refer or recruit others, and so on.

The researcher looked up each of the respondents' schools through the National Center on Education Statistics' website to verify that it qualified as a PWI, according to the researcher's definition. Once confirmed, the researcher sent all qualifying respondents a consent form (Appendix D). Purposeful random sampling was used to help select and identify the participants. Purposeful random sampling chooses participants from a specific sample to inform the study (Creswell, 2014). Purposeful sampling is "based upon the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). All qualifying respondents who graduated from a PWI were assigned a number starting with one, along with a pseudonym. All respondents were identified according to their geographic location (northeast and southeast). The researcher identified eligible participants, created a random list, selected a random starting point, and then selected each *n*th person on the list. To ensure that there was a minimum of at least 8-12 participants, those whose number was not selected were kept on a separate list to draw

from should anyone decline the interview later or remove themselves throughout the duration of the study. Creswell (2014) recommends that a heterogeneous group comprised of 8-12 individuals be identified to participate in a phenomenological study. The selected participants did not receive compensation for their participation.

Instrument Used in Data Collection

The main tool for data collection for this study was a semi-structured one-on-one interview. A pre-demographic questionnaire was used to collect demographic data and to serve as a selection tool. The demographic questionnaire is presented in Appendix C.

Pre-demographic questionnaire. The first instrument the researcher used for data collection was a pre-demographic questionnaire. The purpose of this instrument was to gather qualitative, demographic data from potential participants. The data was not quantitative. There was no statistical analysis performed. The questionnaire included 14 questions (Appendix C). The questionnaire was sent via a link to a survey of first-generation African American alumni who graduated between spring 2010 and spring 2016. The researcher tested the questionnaire with a select group of recent college graduates. The college students were asked if the directions were clear or if there were areas of ambiguity. The questionnaire was edited accordingly. The questionnaire was distributed over a 4-month period between the spring and summer of 2018.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data collection for this study. According to Given (2008) “semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection strategy in which the researcher asks informants a series of predetermined but open-ended questions” (p. 23). This structure allowed the researcher to capture first-generation African American graduates’ experiences and beliefs about what led to their

academic success. The researcher assigned all participants a pseudonym to be used throughout the study to protect their identity. The semi-structured interview protocol was informed by the researcher's theoretical framework and literature review, to address a broad range of questions relating to students' social and cognitive experiences including students' goals, family, and institutional support, perceptions of campus climate, their perceptions of their embodied racial class, and gender identities. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by a third party. The researcher ensured trustworthiness by establishing that the study was credible, transferable, confirmable, and dependable. The researcher had two colleagues who work with student success and retention review the questions. The interviews were conducted over a month during spring 2018 (Appendix E).

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

The goal of the study was to gain an understanding of the factors that led to the academic success of first-generation African American college graduates. The researcher sought to hear in the participant's own words what factors led to their academic success. The researcher employed in-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interviews as the conduit to reach the desired outcome. To conduct the study, the researcher primarily collected data in the forms of interviews and a demographic questionnaire to gain a better understanding of the factors that led to the academic success of first-generation African American graduates who attended a predominantly White institution. The demographic questionnaire served well as a tool to help collect demographic statistics that were used to select the participants. The benefit of using a pre-demographic questionnaire was that it

was easy to disseminate, monitor the responses, and provided an efficient way to analyse the data.

The interviews employed in this study allowed the researcher to explore in depth, the factors that led to the participants' academic success. The participants were able to articulate in detail, their personal experiences at a PWI. Semi-structured interviews were the primary instrument for data collection. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to gain rich detailed information about the students' lived experiences.

Data analysis leads to meaning-making and is often reported as findings arranged in the form of descriptive accounts of a person's experience and themes that cut across all participants in a given study (Merriam, 2009). The researcher analyzed the data in different stages. The researcher began by reading the transcripts multiple times while highlighting phrases in the same color to indicate general themes that were emerging. Next, the researcher began to code the emerging themes.

Coding process. Code is simply "a short 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" (Saldaña, 2009, p.4). Using the research questions, theoretical framework, and literature review as a starting point, the researcher identified a set of coding categories to reflect the factors identified as important for understanding the academic success of first-generation African American graduates. The researcher developed a codebook that included the code, definition, and an example from the participant's interview. The codebook will be stored electronically, and password protected. The interviews were transcribed by a third party. The results were captured and presented in tables.

The content of the transcriptions was read, analyzed, and coded by the researcher. Coding was completed in three cycles. The first cycle used in vivo and a priori codes. In vivo codes are derived directly from the voice of the participants (Saldaña, 2016). In vivo coding for interview transcripts serve as a method for attuning yourself to the participant's perspective and actions (Saldana, 2016). NVivo software was used to create auto codes based on the interview transcripts from the participants. Examples of in vivo codes that emerged were words such as *my choice*, *in-class experience* and *I felt supported*. These codes speak to the participant's lived experience and perception of college. A priori codes were also employed in the first cycle of coding to categorize and analyze the qualitative, narrative data (Saldaña, 2016). A priori coding is the generation of a list of codes beforehand that harmonize your study's conceptual framework and provide analysis that correlates directly to your research questions (Saldaña, 2016). The a priori codes were drawn from the research related to the graduates' experiences at PWIs and supported the research questions. A sample of the a priori codes that were supported by the research are as follows: *high school experience*, *family income*, and *home environment*.

The second cycle used axial coding to help combine the codes into categories. According to Saldaña (2016), "grouping similar coded data reduces the number of initial codes you developed while sorting and relabeling them into conceptual categories" (p. 14). Axial coding serves to determine which codes in the research are dominant and which are less important (Saldaña, 2016). Examples of categories derived through axial coding are: *barriers at home and school*, *deciding to attend*, and *high school classes*.

The third cycle of coding was done using selective coding. Selective coding allows you to find the primary theme of the research (Saldaña, 2016). In this phase of coding, all categories and concepts now become systematically integrated around the core category that suggests a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon. The categories which derived as a result of selective coding were *college preparation*, *administration*, and *academic integration*.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explained the methods used in a qualitative study that explored factors that led to the academic success of first-generation African American graduates from predominantly White institutions. Moreover, it makes meaning of the lived experiences of the college graduates. The goal of this study was to fill in the gap in the literature by providing the students' perspectives based on their lived experiences. This information may, in turn, provide answers to the institution on how to increase retention and uncover ideas of how to better serve an underprivileged population.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This study sought to determine the factors that led to the academic success of first-generation African American college graduates from a predominantly White institution. The researcher used the local model of minority student success in college developed by Padilla et al. (1997) as a starting point for the research. Researchers Padilla et al. (1997) used four barriers – nurturing, lack of resources, discontinuity, and lack of presence, to examine the experience of minorities. A review of the literature on this topic in Chapter 2 showed that there is a great disparity of graduation rates of African Americans attending PWIs as compared to their counterparts who attended other schools. The research focused on identifying what led to the graduates' successful completion at a PWI. The factors explored in the study included resources, barriers, and the level of college preparation that led to their success.

The purpose of this study was to examine the graduates' lived experiences and factors that influenced their successful completion. The study will inform PWIs so they can do more to help first-generation African American students succeed in society and help establish them as competitors in an ever-increasing global economy. Furthermore, this study aimed to help higher education administrators develop a strong understanding of the relationship between first-generation African American students and the campus environment, in predicting student persistence or withdrawal behavior. A better

understanding of this relationship will allow higher education administrators to more clearly design and manage institutional programs that will have the greatest influence on student persistence.

The research study utilized a phenomenological approach, carried out by employing qualitative methods. Qualitative research allows the researcher to gain firsthand in-depth knowledge from the graduates. The primary data collection tool was in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. Ten graduates who met the selection criteria were interviewed. The qualitative study included a pre-demographic questionnaire to obtain demographic information to provide descriptive background information on the participants. It also served as a criteria selection tool to identify possible participants. One hundred and twenty-one surveys were returned of which 18 met all selection criteria. Out of the 18 qualified respondents, 10 individuals were randomly selected for interviews. The questionnaire obtained participant's age, marital status during school, education level, parent education level, socioeconomic status while in school, gender, highest degree received, and whether they commuted or lived on campus. The data was compiled, analyzed, and categorized into themes.

This chapter begins with an overview of the research questions. It provides the data analysis and major themes that were identified by the participants. The African American graduates' experiences and perspectives give voice to their individual experience at a PWI. Their stories, told in their own words, convey the barriers and motivations that led to the successful completion, as they described their experiences as a minority attending a PWI.

Research Questions

The three research questions investigated were:

1. What led first-generation African American graduates to attend a predominantly White institution (PWI)?
2. To what extent, did factors such as social integration, academic integration, barriers, college preparation, and family support influence first-generation African American students' decision to remain and graduate from a PWI?
3. What barriers and obstacles did first-generation African American graduates encounter at a PWI?

Statements from the interviews were used to capture the lived experiences of the participants and provide major themes that surfaced during the interviews.

Participants

The total number of respondents that completed the survey was 121. Twenty schools (41%) of the 48 listed, qualified as a predominantly White institution where 51% or more of the student body is White. Sixty-four respondents (52.89%) stated they would participate in an interview. Eighteen (28.1%) respondents met the selection criteria of being a first-generation African American college graduate from a PWI. Ten graduates were chosen for interviews using a systematic random sampling process. The researcher made contact, either by phone or email with the 10 selected for an interview. The remaining eight were contacted but failed to reply to a request for interviews should one or more of the 10 selected not be available or declined to participate.

Data Analysis and Findings

This section describes the processes used for data analysis. Findings will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.

Questionnaire data. Significant to this study is the understanding of the demographic background of the participants. A questionnaire was used to collect demographic data and serve as a selection tool. The descriptive statistical data obtained through this mechanism gave the researcher an understanding of who the participants were and this set the stage for the research. The results of the questionnaire provided the researcher with insight and background information which aligned with specific research questions, however, this research was a phenomenological study aimed at presenting a textual visualization of the graduates' experience. No quantitative analysis was performed. The data supports the research surrounding African American first-generation college students.

Table 4.1

Participants' Childhood Household Type

	Single Parent (Mother)	Single Parent (Father)	Two Parent (Mother & Father)	Other
All Respondents (<i>N</i>)	43	2	57	19
Interviewees (<i>N</i>)	5	-	2	3

The parental educational background of the graduates and the value that the graduates' families placed on higher education played an important role in this study.

Table 4.1 provides the data on family background. Five (50%) of the graduates came from a single-family home with the mother as the head of household. Two (20%) came from a two-parent household and three (30%) came from a household classified as “other.” Sixty percent (6) of the graduate's mothers earned a high school diploma whereas 70% (7) of fathers earned a high school diploma. Thirty percent (3) of the graduates’ mothers earned at least an associate degree. Thirty percent (3) of the graduates’ fathers and one (10%) graduate's mother earned some college credit but did not receive a degree. Table 4.2 indicates education levels of participants’ parents.

Table 4.2

Highest Level of Education of Participants’ Parents

	None completed	Elementary (K-5)	Middle (6-8)	High or GED	Some Associate	Bachelors	None
Respondent’s mothers	-	-	1	33	32	19	35 1
Interviewees	-	-	-	6	1	3	- -
All respondents’							
Fathers	-	1	7	52	20	8	23 10
Interviewees	-	-	-	-	7	3	- -

Thirty percent of the respondents stated they came from a household where the income was between \$25,000- \$44,999. Similarly, 30% also came from a household income of \$45,000 to \$64, 999. The remaining 40% was divided among those with household incomes less than \$25,000, \$65,000-\$84,000, and \$85,000-\$99,000, which is contrary to the research which states most first-generation students come from low

socioeconomic backgrounds with income less than \$25,000. Table 4.3 indicates the family income while the participants were in school.

Table 4.3

Participants Family Income While in School

Family Income	< \$25,000	\$25,000– \$44,999	\$45,000– \$64,999	\$65,000– \$84,999	\$85,000– \$99,999
All Respondents	19	36	30	25	11
Interviewees	2	3	3	1	1

Six of the respondents (60%) were between the ages of 22-25. Three of respondents (30%) were between the ages of 26-30 and one (10%) was between the ages of 31-40. One of the respondents was male (10%) whereas nine (90%) were female. One school (10%) was urban. One school (10%) had both an urban and suburban campus. The remaining eight schools (80%) were in a rural setting. Two (20%) of the respondents did not work on campus. Three (30%) of the respondents worked part-time on campus. Two (20%) of respondents worked part-time off campus and three (30%) worked full-time on campus. Eight (80%) of the respondents were residents. One (10%) of the respondents lived off campus with family and one (10%) lived off campus with friends. Five (50%) of the institutions had student population under 5,000. Three (30%) of institutions had populations between 5,000-10,000. Two (20%) of the institutions had populations over 10,000. Table 4.4 provides details of the demographics of the participants.

Table 4.4

Demographics for All Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Type of School	Employment while in School	Commuter or Resident	Population Undergrad
Graduate 1	22-25	M	Rural	No Employment	Resident	3,800
Graduate 2	26-30	F	Urban	P/T on campus	Resident	7,963
Graduate 3	31-40	F	Rural	No Employment	Resident	6,980
Graduate 4	26-30	F	Urban	P/T off campus	Off-campus with friends	4,015
Graduate 5	22-25	F	Urban and Suburban Campus	P/T on campus	Resident	28,850
Graduate 6	26-30	F	Urban	F/T on campus	Off Campus with family	7,087
Graduate 7	22-25	F	Urban	P/T off campus	Resident	1,473
Graduate 8	22-25	F	Urban	P/T on campus	Resident	1,072
Graduate 9	22-25	F	Urban	P/T on campus	Resident	1,072
Graduate 10	22-25	F	Urban	F/T on campus	Resident	1,072

Coding process. The content of the transcriptions was read, analyzed, and coded by the researcher. Coding was completed in three cycles. The first cycle used in vivo and a priori codes. In vivo codes are derived directly from the voice of the participants (Saldaña, 2016). In vivo coding for interview transcripts serve as a method for attuning yourself to the participant's perspective and actions (Saldana, 2016). NVivo software was used to create auto codes based on the interview transcripts from the participants.

Examples of in vivo codes that emerged were words such as *my choice*, *in-class experience* and *I felt supported*. These codes speak to the participant's lived experience and perception of college. A priori codes were also employed in the first cycle of coding to categorize and analyze the qualitative, narrative data (Saldaña, 2016). A priori coding is the generation of a list of codes beforehand that harmonize your study's conceptual framework and provide analysis that correlates directly to your research questions (Saldaña, 2016). The a priori codes were drawn from the research related to the graduates' experiences at PWIs and supported the research questions. A sample of the a priori codes that were supported by the research are as follows: *high school experience*, *family income*, and *home environment*.

The second cycle used axial coding to help combine the codes into categories. According to Saldaña (2016), "grouping similar coded data reduces the number of initial codes you developed while sorting and relabeling them into conceptual categories" (p. 14). Axial coding serves to determine which codes in the research are dominant and which are less important (Saldaña, 2016). Examples of categories derived through axial coding are: *barriers at home and school*, *deciding to attend*, and *high school classes*.

The third cycle of coding was done using selective coding. Selective coding allows you to find the primary theme of the research (Saldaña, 2016). In this phase of coding, all categories and concepts now become systematically integrated around the core category that suggests a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon. The categories which derived as a result of selective coding were *college preparation*, *administration*, and *academic integration*.

Interview data. The primary method for data collection was semi-structured interviews. The in-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 graduates who were systematically selected from the pool of candidates that met the selection criteria. The researcher began by audio recording and sending out the interviews to be transcribed by an approved third party. Two audio recording devices were used to capture the voice of the graduates. The data was reviewed, interpreted, and coded using NVivo software. An excel document served as a backup to NVivo and was used to house recurring phrases and pertinent statements obtained from the graduates.

Identification of themes. The researcher had each interview transcribed by a professional third-party transcription company. The researcher then thoroughly analyzed and reviewed each transcript line by line, extracted key phrases, and put them into a codebook using NVivo. Again, keeping the theoretical framework in mind, the researcher used the four barriers to minority success (discontinuity, lack of presence, nurturing, and resources) (Padilla et al., 1997) to group the key phrases, which also aligned with the research questions. Responses from the interviews were coded into themes and categories using NVivo software. Once the codebook was created, the researcher used NVivo to generate themes. Microsoft Excel was used as a back up to house the codebook and frequency of themes. NVivo was essentially used for analyzing the participants' data for each research question and identifying the frequency of each theme. The researcher was able to categorize the themes into nine categories (barriers/obstacles, decisions, college preparation, support, home experience, administration, campus culture, classroom experience, and financial aid) based on the four barriers to minority success (Padilla et al., 1997). Table 4.5 highlights the barriers related to categories and themes.

Table 4.5

Four Barriers Connected to Categories and Description of Themes

Padilla et al. (1997) Four Barriers	Category and Themes	Description of Category and Theme
Discontinuity	Barriers/Obstacles	This refers to events or experiences the graduates had to face while at college. This also refers to personal issues the graduates experienced while attending college.
Discontinuity	Decisions	Decisions speak to choices the graduates had to make to attend, remain and graduate from college. It also looks at decisions the students made with friends and incidents that occurred on campus.
Discontinuity	College Preparation	This category spoke to the graduate's high school experience. It looked at coursework taken in college along with any participation in a summer preparation program prior to college.
Nurturing	Support	This refers to the degree of support the graduates received before and during college.
Nurturing	Home Experience	This looks at the family dynamics. It also dealt with the environment that the graduate was raised in.
Lack of Presence	Administration	This include the lack of minority administration on campus. It also includes the graduate's interaction with the administration in various capacities.
Lack of Presence	Campus Culture	The graduates experience walking around campus, attending campus events and in the residence hall. This also refers to the overall feeling the graduates had while walking around campus.
Resources	Financial Aid	This referred to how students paid for college. This also refers to the lack of receiving aid.

Frequency of themes. Findings revealed a list of emerging themes, the categories, and their frequencies, as displayed in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6

Categories and Themes (Frequency)

Category	Theme (Frequency)
Barriers (30)	Interacting with peers (7) Personal issues (14) Incidents on campus (5) Everyday life (4)
Decisions (15)	Life choices (7) Time contemplating (2) Majors (5)
College Preparation (23)	School visit (1) Summer program (2) Advanced placement classes (9) Overall preparation (11)
Support (51)	Friends and family support (9) Support while at school (9) Support from faculty (33)
Home Experience (43)	Community (30) Family background (13)
Administration (45)	Things administrators did (5) Lack of minority administration (25) Helpful administrators (10)
Campus Culture (185)	Student engagement (39) Campus environment (20) Student center (2) Classroom experience (14) Guys (2) Kids (2) People (3) Residence life/commuter (4) Class year (5) Goals for academic success (90)
Financial Aid (22)	Loans (10) Scholarships (12)

The analysis and coding of 411 statements yielded the development of 34 themes. The themes were analyzed for similarities and then grouped into the various categories. Two themes mapped to the category of financial aid, four themes linked to the category of barriers, three themes linked to the category of decisions, four themes linked to the category of college preparation, three themes linked to the category of support, two items linked to the category of home experience, two themes linked to the category of administration and 15 themes linked to the category of campus culture.

Major Findings

This study identified nine factors that the graduates associated with their academic success. These factors were barriers/obstacles, decisions, college preparation, support, home experience, administration, campus culture, classroom experience, and financial aid. To conceptualize the findings using the local model of minority student success (Padilla et al., 1997), the researcher related each factor to one of four barriers from the local model. Barriers/obstacles, decisions, and college preparation related to the discontinuity barrier. Support and home experience are correlated with the nurturing barrier. Administration, campus culture, and classroom experience connect to the lack of presence. Financial aid coincides with the resource barrier.

Discontinuity barrier. The first major factor that surfaced was the lack of college preparation. The graduates spoke about the high schools they attended and their lack of knowledge about college. One graduate spoke about attending a college prep high school and not taking any college courses. This lack of knowledge affected and influenced the graduate's decisions on which college to attend. Another graduate stated that regardless of the advanced courses taken in high school, the graduate was unaware of

how to formulate essays and was unable to keep up with the college-level coursework. The graduates also spoke about their family's lack of knowledge regarding college.

The second factor to emerge dealt with the obstacles/barriers the graduates encountered while attending their predominantly White institution (PWI). Several graduates spoke about interactions both inside and outside the classroom with students of other ethnicities. It was stated multiple times that the graduates encountered other students who had never met or had never spent time with African Americans, therefore, they would very often say inappropriate things to the graduates. They further explained that along with the inappropriate remarks their fellow classmates made, it was frowned upon when the graduates rebutted.

Finally, the last factor focused on the decisions the students made. The graduates spoke about what occurred prior to their deciding to attend college. For some, their family only gave them two choices after high school – college or the military. One graduate spoke about the difficulty of choosing between the two given her family's military background. For others, they wanted to rise above the stereotype placed on African Americans and prove to themselves and others that they would not be a statistic. Deciding which school to attend also created anxiety for the graduates, as some of them stated they had never been on a college tour and were unaware of the different types of schools, such as historically Black colleges and universities, PWIs, and private and public institutions. It was stated that some graduates decided on their school based on the financial aid received.

Nurturing. Support emerged as the leading category in this barrier. Support refers to the students need for feeling nurtured before and during college. Many of the

graduates expressed concern for not wanting to repeat their parent's path. The families expressed mixed feelings about their attending college. Some families did not see college as being important as it impacted the finances of the family. One graduate spoke about having anxiety knowing she was not going to be there to provide financial help at home. Another spoke of having siblings who did not care about anything other than themselves. This gave the graduate the fuel to attend college.

While attending college there was a lack of supportive resources on campus for those who needed remedial help. One graduate spoke of an encounter she and a friend had with the chair of her department. The chair stated to her friend, who was also African American, that she did not know why the student was in the major and that she was not “fit” to be in the department. The graduate stated that she asked for clarification and the chair stated that it is hard for African Americans to do well in the department. The graduate reported the incident, yet nothing was done, as the chair was tenured. Other graduates spoke about having limited access to tutoring and not having the skills to keep up with the coursework, thus causing them to fail.

Lack of presence. The graduates spoke of three overarching categories in this barrier – the lack of minority administration, the campus culture, and their classroom experiences. The graduates spoke about their initial thoughts when they first arrived on campus. One graduate spoke about feeling like she was in unfamiliar territory. She went on to say that college was a world in which she was not given the tools to navigate. Another student spoke about her experience at college parties. She referenced how the White students would wearing certain clothes or request certain music that they felt was indicative of the Black community. This made the graduate feel uncomfortable and

ultimately shaped how she interacted with others outside of her race. Another student spoke on the interaction with campus safety/university police. It was stated that if a Black student was stopped on campus, they were questioned for an extended amount of time, whereas if a White student was stopped, they were often just told to walk home and/or walk it off if they had been drinking. The graduates spoke about having some events that were geared toward minorities but how ultimately, they had to create their own events on campus for minorities.

When looking at minority administration on campus several graduates were unable to recall if they had anyone on their campus that fit this demographic. One graduate noted that she only saw minority administration in the lower level positions. She further went on to state that it was “Caucasian land” the higher up you go. Another student noted that aside from her residence hall director, she could not recall seeing any minority professors or administrators. One graduate noted that there was an Indian dean of students at the school and everyone would whisper about him. The students who attended the school who were not minorities did not know how to perceive the dean because he was a minority.

The graduates spoke about being the only minority, or one of two minorities in the classroom. Many of the graduates stated it made them feel uncomfortable at times, depending on what was discussed in class. The graduates shared stories of having to feel like they were defending all Blacks when topics such as poverty and homelessness were discussed. During one of the courses, a minority student was paired with a White for a group assignment and received a different grade. She went to ask the professor and was

ignored and told that her grade was final. The graduate spoke about speaking with the chair and having the process take longer than she thought it should have to get resolved.

Resource barrier. Financial aid was a major category in this barrier. When asked why the graduates attended their respective school a significant amount of them stated it was the school from which they received the most financial aid. When asked how their families felt about their attending a PWI, an overwhelming number stated that their families did not really care as long as they did not have to contribute any money. The graduates felt pressured to get as many scholarships and financial aid as they could. One graduate spoke about having to sit and explain the financial aid process to her mother, who stated her cousin did not have to pay. The graduate explained the cousin went to a community college, whereas she attended a private college which cost more. The parent then told the graduate that she should have attended a community college.

Findings by Research Question

These themes reported by the participants are included in the analysis and discussion as they pertain to each of the three research questions. Significant quotes from the graduates were used to provide further analysis. Due to the number of quotes, the researcher did not use the quotation in its entirety.

Research question 1. Research question 1 asked: What led first-generation African American graduates to attend a predominantly White institution? The graduates stated that they were given two choices after high school: to attend college or join the military. Although some graduates spoke about coming from military backgrounds they elected to attend college. The PWIs that the graduates chose were selected according to the amount of financial aid/scholarships they received. Multiple graduates spoke about

choosing their school because they received the most financial aid from that school, although it was not their first choice. They decided to attend their particular college as they were aware of the financial constraints their families had. Graduate 6 stated, “my family is poor so whatever school gave me the most money, I knew I had to go there regardless of how it looked.” The graduates also related this question to their family background and school major. Many of the graduates spoke about having siblings who never made the right choice in life and their wanting to be different. They wanted to break the generational cycle and create a life that was better than what their parents had experienced. In this regard, the graduates felt that obtaining a college degree was the only way this could be achieved. They stated they were committed to making their lives better than those from their home environments.

Family background. The graduates spoke about their home environment regarding traditions and sibling experiences. As stated in the research, many first-generation students come from single-parent homes. Many of the graduates confirmed this by speaking about being raised primarily in a single parent home. Although they initially started with two parents at home, single mothers raised many of the graduates. Graduate 1 spoke about his father leaving and the impact it had on his decision to attend college:

My father was around until I was about 8 or 9. I had somewhat of a relationship with him after he left, however, I am very close to my mom. I have one older and younger sibling, both of them live very interesting lives. I knew that I wanted more so I decided to attend college. I was aware of the State University of New

York school system from my high school counselor, so I applied, got in and went with it.

Like Graduate 1, Graduate 10 indicated that her decision to attend college was based on her family background and upbringing, and the choices of her siblings. Graduate 10 explained:

My mother and father separated when I was in middle school. Although I had a good relationship with both parents, my mom primarily raised me. She expressed the need for my siblings and I to attend college. My sister went to a community college and was not into the school thing. My one younger brother did not want to attend college, so he never looked into it. My little brother is still very young, so he has time to figure it out. I wanted more for myself and looked for a 4-year school where I could go and leave my mark. I attended my school because they kept sending brochures to my house, so I said hey, they must really want me to go there, so I went.

Other graduates spoke about having immigrant parents and the influence their family had on their decision to attend college. Graduate 3 stated:

I grew up in a home with immigrant parents who made it a priority that we focus on our education. Growing up I had the desire to become a nurse and a teacher. In order for me to have either profession, I would have to further my education. So, deciding to go to college was easy for me. I wanted to stay local, so I looked for schools with a nursing program and just went for it. My school was still close to my parents, so the decision was easy.

Majors. The participants spoke about their career and professional dreams they had since they were young. Many of the graduates stated they decided on their career path based on what they saw on television. Some graduates talked about not having a career plan and hoping that attending college would give them the exposure they needed to help determine their profession. Graduate 2 stated:

So this was not my first choice because it did not have my major. The college I was really planning to go to for my intended major, I thought I got in. Then they had a really bad reputation for partying and things like that. So, I kind of was like at the last minute, hmm, let me explore other options. I chose this one because it was closer to home.

Graduate 5 stated:

I was very interested in communications. I like to talk, like Oprah. So, when I was applying, I decided to kind of see what happens. I did want to kind of stay local. I chose my school because I think it was far enough from home that it would still be considered local.

Research question 2. Research question 2 asked, to what extent did factors such as social integration, academic integration, barriers, college preparation, and family support influence first- generation African American student's decision to remain and graduate from a predominantly White institution? When looking at the graduates' social integration they focused on their experiences on campus regarding their level of student involvement. Social integration speaks to the graduate's institutional commitment, which is important to a student's academic success. Many of the graduates felt that the minority population was an afterthought. They felt that certain events and programs were only

done to keep them quiet and minimize the amount of conflict that arose. The graduates spoke about having to create their own *Black events* such as carnivals, festivals, and *March madness* events to attract the minority students. This ultimately made their social experience more enjoyable throughout their time at the institution. Some graduates also spoke about living in the residence halls to connect and meet new people. Living on campus helped them to form relationships with others who looked like them while learning to adapt to change through the resolution of incidents that occurred in the residence halls. This connection to other residents helped the graduates to create *family-like* bonds with other students which made persisting at the PWI more enjoyable.

Academic integration looks at the student's goal commitment. For this study, their goal commitment was related to their successful completion of college.

Academically, the graduates spoke to wanting to *beat the odds* regarding how well they did in class. Some graduates mentioned the importance of finding someone in class who they connected with to serve as their tutor or study group partner. One graduate spoke about her institution lacking tutors, so she walked around campus asking people what classes they were in and how well they were doing so she could use them as her tutor. Other graduates mentioned forming relationships with faculty and having them help in areas where they were lacking. Graduate 3 stated "I would arrive early to class to ask the professor questions so I knew what I needed to work on. This helped me to do well in classes that I was failing." The perseverance the graduates demonstrated in remaining at their institution, along with their personal factors such as being the first in their family to attend college, aided in their commitment to their institution. This ultimately led to their successful completion of college.

When looking at barriers, all the graduates stated that they used each negative experience as fuel to graduate. Each graduate shared an experience, whether it happened to them or a close friend, and how it helped them to view the school and their experience differently. Barriers that the graduates faced included faculty not wanting to support their choice of major and personal barriers surrounding their family finances. Many graduates felt that they needed to be home to financially support their families as they came from low socioeconomic homes. One graduate spoke about having so much anxiety that it led her to become a commuter. However, being home did not stop her from finishing school. Instead, she stated, “I knew that being back home meant I needed to work harder to graduate and I did just that.” The graduates spoke to overcoming their barriers and achieving academic success at their PWI, with the help of school officials with whom they made connections. Speaking with someone proved to help them learn coping skills and gave them a different outlook on why they needed to remain at their institution.

College preparation was something that the graduates stated they lacked. Several graduates spoke to attending what they considered a college preparatory high school, however, they did not participate in college prep courses. Two graduates mentioned that although they did not attend a college preparatory high school, they were enrolled in programs geared towards their academic interests, such as nursing and education. They stated that these prep programs helped them to gain an understanding of what college classes would be like and set the tone for how they viewed their classes once they arrived on campus. This led to their academic success, to include graduating from their PWI. The graduates who did not take college prep courses stated that their success in

completing high school, despite their lack of attending prep classes, led them to focus more and ultimately graduate from their institution.

Family support was mentioned by all the graduates in this study. The graduates came from various types of families such as single parent, two parents, and being raised by others, such as grandparents. Although the graduates were all first-generation, not all of them had supportive families. Multiple graduates felt disconnected from their family at times, which caused a shift in how they interacted with them. Those who had family support still felt a sense of disconnect as they were unable to relate to their college experience. Ultimately, many of the graduates felt it was their responsibility to graduate college although they did not have the family support they imagined. Those who lacked family support wanted to prove to themselves and their family that they were capable of breaking the generational curse. The graduates spoke to wanting to gain the approval and respect from their family, but that more importantly, they did not want to let themselves down.

Residence life/commuting. The participants felt that there was a difference in how others viewed them based on where they lived. Several participants explained their excitement for wanting to live on campus and what they learned from that experience as a result. Graduate 2 shared:

I think that if I had stayed at home I would not have been exposed to as much as I was on campus. I think that I learned how to handle certain situations and personalities due to my campus experience. I think that was the benefit of me living on campus. You did not feel as isolated as someone who may have been a commuter because you were always around students of other ethnicities.

Graduate 4 stated:

I wanted to live on campus so that I could connect more with the institution.

However, I just did not feel comfortable in the dorm. There were too many people that did not look like me there, however, it did help me feel more aligned with the institution. But I still decided to move off campus.

Graduate 5 stated:

Living on campus changed my thoughts about the institution. There were so many people from different places there that you could learn from. I never felt alone or isolated because people would walk around, knock on your door and introduce themselves. So, to me, that was very inviting and made me feel like hey, there are people here that actually care about me.

Graduate 1 stated:

I lived on campus and I enjoyed it. It makes me put into perspective what I wanted to do in life. Although my school was mostly White, the residential population was majority African American and Latino. It was nice to see other people that looked like you. It was a little weird though being that most of the students who lived in the dorm were Black although the school is mostly White.

Graduate 9 stated,

It's like, you kinda had to make yourself known in the sense of like, don't be scared to like ask someone for help, or don't be isolated. You have to try to let people get to know you. We had suites, so it made it harder to meet people, but I eventually did.

The difference in living on campus versus commuting appeared to have a positive impact for some graduates although the school was a PWI. The experience in the residence halls helped the graduates gain exposure to other ethnicities while broadening their views on the institution. Those who lived off campus expressed feeling like college was just something they did. They did not see it as a place where they needed to make a connection, but rather a place where they obtained their education. Graduate 6 stated “I went to class then back home. I really did not participate in many events. I just did not feel that it was important.”

College preparation. The graduates spoke about various ways in which they prepared for college. Although many of the graduates attended college prep high schools, they were not given the opportunity to take college or advanced courses. Graduate 8 spoke of the conversations she had with her siblings and that being her only form of college preparation. She stated:

I would ask my siblings questions about what campus was like or what I should be doing as a freshman. But I didn't have any classes, I wasn't in any AP courses, that were used for college credit. Yeah, I was academically prepared because I was very studious in high school. And so, like you know what I wish though is . . . I don't think I was prepared for the time management portion of it.

Like Graduate 8, Graduate 5 also attended a college prep high school and did not take any advanced classes. Graduate 5 went on to say:

So, I didn't take college or prep classes, but I did have teachers who noticed that I would be able to do them. If a teacher wants to send you into a college class- basically, they would just have my test with A's on it, but they would need my

whole work of other things to be able to have put me into those classes. So, I was eligible for things like that, in regard to what my knowledge base, but when it came to actual documentation and how's my attendance, that was the thing that kept me from participating in like college prep and AP courses.

Graduate 5 spoke of realizing the importance of college prep classes after she graduated. She mentioned the need for more high schools to properly prepare students for college and how college prep high schools provide a good transition for students, especially those who may need remedial help. Similarly, Graduate 3 spoke about not specifically taking college prep courses but enrolling in a nursing program through her high school.

Graduate 3 noted:

To prepare for college I didn't take any college courses per se, but I was in a nursing program in high school. My junior, my senior year I took nursing classes, I had to go to clinical. Things like that, but it wasn't to prepare me for college, it was just a program that they had in my school in conjunction with it. I think that I wasn't prepared in the sense of . . . The nursing program was like that one heavy course. Compared to when you're in college, all of your courses are heavy. You know? It's not isolated. In high school, the nursing was the heavy part and everything else was kind of just like, Oh. I know I'll do good. Compared to where in college everything holds the same weight. It's not like one weighs more than the other, where the nursing program weighed the most in high school.

Unlike the female graduates, Graduate 1 spoke of attending a college prep high school and taking advanced classes. However, during his first semester at college, he was placed in remedial classes. Graduate 1 mentioned, "I took AP classes, but my college never gave

me credit for them. I would mention to them that I took these specific classes, but they still enrolled me in remedial courses. I thought that was weird.” Although the advanced classes were not accepted for credit, Graduate 1 felt that he knew enough to get by in college.

Graduate 5 spoke of her college preparation experience which differed from that of the other graduates. Graduate 5 attended a 3-week summer program through the educational opportunity program (EOP) which helped prepare her for college. Graduate 5 mentioned,

The program is in the summer for 3 weeks and that's our orientation, but we also took classes, went around campus to prepare ourselves for how it would be traveling from class to class, the homework and study and tests and papers. Graduate 5 credits the program for helping her successfully transition to college.

Family support. Family was very important for many of the graduates. They spoke about their connection to their families and how important they were to them. However, many graduates stated it was hard relating to them because they lacked the knowledge of their college experience. Graduate 7 spoke about not being able to get help completing her financial aid forms and having to wait until she got to school to get help. This was hard for her as she was an inexperienced teenager and unaware of what she needed to complete. Although this was a task, she still felt support from her family.

Graduate 3 explained:

Because, my siblings were commuters to their college, but then within my immediate community such as my best friends there were people who attended both high school and college with me. They understood what was going on. Yes.

They motivated me in the sense of reminding me of my goals, reminding me that there are hiccups in everyone's life. They may just appear at different times. Just because you may not pass something, just because you don't understand something right away does not make you less than. They just reminded me that everything that you want you have to work for, which reminded me of the same ... More with my parents. As far as like, you have to work for the lifestyle that you want. It all kind of tied into each other.

Graduate 1 explained his support came from administrators more so than his family. He explained that:

I feel like the support that I was able to get from anybody that I really needed it from really on campus in terms of my RD[Resident Director] when I was there, my advisor again, I felt like I just know the right things to do. I feel like I have the sixth sense of knowing what to do and what not to do. And I felt like that always pushes me to do good things.

Graduate 2 explained her support and how limited it was. She stated:

Just the people that went to my school, or there was one person down the street. I mean, I could go back and still like talk to them about it, they just may or may not get it. It didn't really bother me that much. Obviously, my mom, the school my mom went to was predominantly White. But she went back so late, she didn't live on campus. And it was kind of like just literally just going there for the class. I don't know. I was okay with it.

Campus culture. Although all graduates attended a predominantly White institution (PWI) their experiences on campus varied. The graduates spoke of feeling

unsafe with campus police and hearing multiple times that they were the first African American some students ever saw. Each participant took time to really assess how they felt and what they learned as a result of attending a PWI. Graduate 4 shared her experience:

The professors were good, the students were okay, but the police were different. I never had any White friends, so seeing professors, and only one professor was my skin color, it was a little different for me because I had to learn that through my peers as well. I would say it was a definite culture shock. There wasn't much diversity being done on campus, but I never felt like I was a target. If I felt like I was a target, it was more so being a female.

Graduate 2 explained her campus as,

The culture on the campus was, it was big enough, so it depended on where you were. Know what I mean? Like if you were here at this moment, then as an African American student, you felt like, "Oh, there's a lot of things for us". For example, in the first week, there was like African American symposiums and things like that. But then you go over here, to this part of campus, then you're like, "Wow. I'm really the token one or the minority, so to speak." And then when you actually look at the numbers, you realize how much of a minority you really are. So, the good part about it was that you could kind of choose . . . As long as you could choose what type of environment you wanted, even though it was a PWI.

Graduate 1 explained his campus culture,

I feel like a lot of the complaints when I was there was that, we felt like it was catered to the environment and not to the college population itself. We kind of

had to make it our own in terms of wanting to do more Caribbean events and parties. All that kind of stuff. Even Labor Day parades and all that kind of stuff we did on campus. I feel like it was more created by us. And we just had to take ownership of that. It was very good. A very welcoming environment by the staff and the students. I feel like every campus has its cliques and fights and all that kind of stuff but in terms of what it is on a typical basis, I felt like it was always very welcoming and very open to what we wanted it to be again. I felt like I never had an issue with that.

Graduate 10 views on culture were as follows.

The campus was run by student government/ activities and student affairs. I think student government really enforced that and being in student government the ending of my freshman year all the way through, I realized how big it was. Anything that happened on campus, whether it has to do with student activities or academics. My dance team was all minority, so whenever we hosted anything you would see minorities a lot more than you would see the Caucasians. Not that they wouldn't attend our events, but they wouldn't be the first ones there. That's it. They would come with somebody. That was the only kind of division I saw.

Although each graduates' school culture was different, they all expressed that they gained valuable information that helped them later on in life. Many of the graduates felt that they were able to understand different ethnicities and how to handle various situations based on the experiences they gained at their institution.

College experience. The graduates were involved in various activities on campus. Some expressed being resident assistants, a part of student government and athletes. The

graduates spoke about their experience as it related to administration, the classroom, and professors. Each experience showed a different perspective on being African American at a PWI. Graduate 10 shared her experience:

I was a competitive dancer in college, and it was difficult trying to keep up with academics and dance and RA and OL and student government. There were times when I was like, I don't know if I should do this. I don't know if I should just give one up. My mom would always be like, "No. You pay enough money. Then she goes back! You better take everything this school has to offer you."

Graduate 8 explained,

While I was on campus, it was good, but it was also like, "Damn, I wish I had more time to get these cool experiences, to join a dance team or to join a club." Wish I was able to do more of that stuff, but my schedule made it difficult to. Going to college was a culture shock.

Graduate 2 shared, "I feel like my experience in college was that I learned how to adapt to different situations, you know what I mean? Like I learned what was appropriate from when and where."

Classroom experience. The classroom provided a unique experience that was different for each of the graduates. Many spoke of their feelings of never seeing a Black professor. Some graduates shared stories of how helpful the faculty was during their time at the PWI. Graduate 6 explained,

Mostly, there are White professors. I believe that my whole 4 years, I've had a Native American teacher, and that was a choice of mine to take that class. And

then my senior year, my last year, that's when I actually got the Black professor. It started to get a little better, slow, but a little better.

While Graduate 4 shared that it took time to encounter a minority professor, she explained that she felt comfortable approaching her White professors and asking them questions. She mentioned that she did not realize that she never had a minority professor until the question was asked. This helped her to reflect on her overall experience at a PWI. Graduate 5 shared an encounter in the classroom. She explained,

I did have one experience that really annoyed me, which was an argument with me and a girl who was Jewish, in regard to arguing back and forth about slavery versus the Holocaust. And I'm the student whose kind of like I don't want to argue back and forth about what was worse, I just want to talk about how the experiences happened, how they affected people. And some people like to do - I don't know if you've heard people call it things like an oppression Olympics? In my experience, we sometimes, we don't lead, but the people around us lead us in just thinking that we're gonna just attack them. Thinking that everyone just wants to talk about slavery, and Black people don't have this, and Black people don't have that, so I feel like she kind of was wanting to attack me because she thought that that's what I was going to do, right? And so, she's thinking I'm going to try to act like she can't experience oppression because she's White. I never said you couldn't. So, it was just the learning how to discuss the experiences without someone needing to feel more oppressed or privileged. Like, let's just have the conversation about what we're experiencing, and figure out how do we make it better for everybody. (Graduate 5)

Graduate 10 spoke on her experience with the chair of her department and how she and other students were affected. She explained,

I was always making certain and trying to have my voice at the same time but also trying to respect the chair. At one point, we all felt like she didn't really want to be there. I mean, there was a lot of things that I had to learn on my own and they never told me. If they would have never told me, I would have still been trying to be a teacher at this point, as far as exams and things that we needed. As a chair, I felt like she should have been the one to tell us. For her, she was like, “No, you guys had to figure that out. We can't do everything for you.”

The classroom experience that the graduates spoke of also focused on their interactions with peers during group projects. One graduate mentioned receiving a different grade than her teammates and how they did not want to share what they received. The graduate stated she did not dispute the grade out of fear of retaliation. Another spoke of a graduate who walked into a classroom and a student stated that she must be smart if she was in their class. The graduate spoke of how this made her feel uncomfortable, but she remained in the class despite hearing the comment.

Academic success. Graduating college was the major driving force around the graduate's decision to remain at their institution. Each graduate shared stories of how they wanted to make an impact on their younger siblings and those in their communities. The graduates spoke about the various ways in which they adapted to their institution. Four out of 10 graduates cited their college advisors as being influential in helping motivate them to graduate. Three mentioned the support that they received from family, whereas others spoke of the support they received from their peers as being a motivational factor

for them. Graduate 3 attributed her academic success to having positive influences around her. She explained that “having positive influences, as far as people who were there to kind of motivate you, remind you of what you're trying to do, why you're trying to do it.” Likewise, Graduate 2 shared, “Finding people that were good at what I was not good at. But people that I had met freshman year in my dorm, or you know, in other classes that I found my fortune in.” Similarly to Graduate 2 and Graduate 3, Graduate 8 shared her reason for success as,

I think I guess I go back to the saying bad company corrupts good character. And so, I think it was finding the right kind of people and so now I call them like the core four, because we're still really great friends, but I found a group of friends who understood my struggles, who were on the same like path as me, who were encouraging, who were supportive and surrounding myself with those girls.

All three graduates spoke to the relationships and bonds they created with the people they met at college. The graduates shared how they created study groups and looked to the teacher assistants for guidance when needed. Many of the graduates felt that their on-campus living experience helped them to create more friends and provided additional motivation for them to succeed.

Research question 3. Research question 3 asked: What barriers and obstacles did first-generation African American graduates encounter at a PWI? The graduates spoke openly about their experience on campus as a minority. Several graduates stated that although there were some students who looked like them, it was not enough to immediately create a sense of belonging and comfort. While on campus, not all graduates felt safe walking around alone, depending on where they were. One graduate stated “I

would never walk alone. I also had someone that looked like me with me, ya know. You just never know what will happen.” This graduate stated that she developed a sense of comfortability over time, once more people on campus who were not minority got to know her.

There were several incidents mentioned by the graduates that impacted their overall experience at a PWI. Some of the incidents involved administration while others were things experienced by their African American peers. The graduates seemed emotional and took time to pause when necessary while sharing their experiences. The graduates spoke of the barriers as it related to incidents on campus and personal issues they had to overcome.

Incidents on campus. Graduate 6 shared that she was a student during the 2016 election and how uncomfortable she felt. Graduate 6 shared:

My last year, when President Trump was elected, and everything was going down, things got a little heated, especially because we found out certain people voted for him. There was a thing where some, that was White would walk around campus in boots and the *Make America Great Again* hats. This made the minority students very uncomfortable, no one ever spoke about it though.

Graduate 2 shared her on-campus incident:

There were instances of, I would call it racism. Not directly towards me, but you know what I mean? Like things on campus that were spray painted and things like that. And it was kind of . . . that those were the moments where I was like, “Hmm. Do I really need to be here?” But at the same time, I was like, Yes, I’m going to

stay here and hopefully change their opinions, you know what I mean? It'll open their eyes more so than opening my eyes.

Graduate 4 shared, "I would say people of color probably get stopped more, yeah. If you're walking around drunk Caucasian, most likely they'll just say, Yo, why don't you walk home." Graduate 10 shared an incident on campus involving residents:

I know there was one incident where there was a fight, and it had nothing to do with even people in leadership roles. Usually, we get the better half because if you mess with us, you mess with a whole bunch of people. There were just regular students, and they were fighting. It was against minority and Caucasians. The Caucasians had said something to minorities that was like "whoa." They were calling them the N-word, and they were saying go back to where you came from. It was intense, and this was in the residence halls. Students were listening, recording. No one really knew about it. As RAs, we didn't even really know about it. It was weird that we didn't know because it's a small school.

Personal issues. Many of the graduates spoke about how they felt guilty for going to college given their family circumstances. They did not want to be someone who was running away from family issues. Five of the graduates spoke about having to deal with their family saying things such as "you think you are better than us" and how disconnected that made them feel. Graduate 9 shared her personal issues:

There were a few obstacles, there was a point in time where I . . . because I was living off the campus, and I was approximately 2 hours and 45 minutes away from home, there were a few things that were going on. I kind of thought about numerous times Let me just go home and take care of my loved ones, that they're

going through their problems. I had a family member that was really going through a serious court case I wanted to give up everything just so that I could be with them, but even that person kind of told me, “No, don't do that, focus on your dream, it's okay.”

Graduate 7 spoke about struggling to find herself while in college. She mentioned trying to figure out how to navigate college and obtain her goals at the same time. Like Graduate 7, Graduate 6 struggled with finding herself and deciding what to major in. Graduate 7 shared,

Yeah, I went into college thinking that I wanted to be a doctor, and I started taking classes, but I failed a few classes. I failed chemistry and physics. From there I was thinking that I could still do it, and I kept doing it until sophomore year. After I evaluated myself, I saw that I could take another direction of helping people, but not necessarily to be a doctor. I switched my major junior year and then I graduated with Health and Human Services.

The graduates shared how overcoming their obstacles helped them to focus more on school and overlook the other incidents that were happening on campus. The graduates stated that both the good and bad experiences and obstacles helped push them to their academic success.

Summary of Results

Chapter 4 presented the analysis and findings based on the research questions that guided this qualitative phenomenological study. It presented the data gathered by the researcher in conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 African American first-generation college graduates from a predominantly White institution (PWI). The

participants provided personal, meaningful, and detailed descriptions of their experiences, not only as an African American student but as the first in their family to attend college as a first-generation student.

The researcher characterized common themes into eight major categories, which included barriers, support, decisions, college preparation, home experience, administration, campus culture, and financial aid. The 10 graduates gave personal accounts of their experience and highlighted things that they learned due to attending a PWI. Each graduate's story was unique to their experiences although there were commonalities among each of them. The researcher mapped the four barriers of Padilla et al. (1997), to the eight categories to enrich the reader's experience, allowing them to share in the lived experiences of the graduates. Chapter 5 will provide the implications of the findings, which will speak to previous research findings. It will also provide recommendations for the future.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Using a phenomenological approach, this research was conducted to gain a better understanding of why first-generation African American students believe they persisted and graduated from a predominantly White institution. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the factors that led to the academic success of first-generation African American students who successfully graduated from a predominantly White institution. Factors such as social integration, academic integration, barriers, college preparation, and family support were explored to examine the graduates' lived experiences. This study aims to help African American first-generation college students at predominantly White colleges to achieve degree completion by sharing the lived experiences of graduates, in hopes of increasing institutional knowledge of factors that affected their academic success. The barriers and challenges faced by first-generation students are known to decrease their persistence to graduation, but minimal research has been done exploring reasons why some first-generation students perceive they are able to overcome these obstacles and complete degree programs (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Ishitani, 2006; Murphy & Hicks, 2006). The retention, persistence, and graduation rates, of first-generation African American students who attend PWIs, are areas of interest and concern for these institutions. The study's findings increased the knowledge base concerning factors that contribute to the academic success of first-generation African

American college graduates at PWIs. This chapter presents the limitations of the research, suggestions for future research, and recommendations for PWIs that aspire to increase enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of first generation African American students. Research related to first-generation African American students has been conducted over the last several decades. Research supports the fact that first-generation students are often faced with challenges such as having to work, a lack of family support, and having children, which can challenge their ability to focus on school, as they are the first in their families to attend college (Concordia, 2012). Furthermore, despite the representation of first-generation African American college students in higher education, they are still graduating from college at lower rates than their White counterparts (Aud et al., 2011). With this knowledge, PWIs retention efforts can incorporate the full range of factors influencing the academic success of African American first-generation students, including but not limited to, students' social and academic integration. This research used semi-structured interview questions based on the literature introduced in Chapter 2. The results of the study provide answers to the research questions introduced in Chapter 1:

1. What led first-generation African American graduates to attend a predominantly White institution?
2. To what extent, did factors such as social integration, academic integration, barriers, college preparation, and family support influence first-generation African American student's decision to remain and graduate from a predominantly White institution?
3. What barriers and obstacles did first-generation African American graduates encounter at a private predominantly White institution?

Implications of Findings

This study expands upon existing literature that explores factors related to student retention and academic success. The findings from this study concur and contribute to the existing research which has already been done on African American first-generation students and their persistence to graduation. This knowledge can be used by PWIs as the basis of continual programs and initiatives that assist first-generation African American students to persist and graduate. Contribution and connection to literature from this study involve college preparedness, support, the decision to attend college, campus culture, as well as academic and social integration. Furthermore, the findings from this research study have implications in reviewing current practices at PWIs, as well as informing faculty and staff about the needs and desired outcomes for first-generation African American students.

The nature of a phenomenological qualitative research approach limits the ability to generalize the experiences of first-generation African American students. It is also important to note that the intention of a qualitative study is not to generalize the information discovered, but to share the lived experiences of the participants.

The study's eight factors – barriers, decisions, college preparation, support, home experience, administration, campus culture, and financial aid were separated into four categories based on the local model of student success by Padilla et al. (1997). The categories included discontinuity, lack of presence, resources, and nurturing. Based on the findings, the lack of presence of African Americans had the greatest impact on the academic success of the graduates. Many graduates stated attending a PWI was a *culture shock* given their home environment consisted of primarily minorities. This coincides

with previous research of Feagin and Sikes (1995), and Museus and Quaye (2009), who state, for some African American students who were raised in a predominantly minority community, entering a PWI triggers a culture shock as this may be their first time in an environment that is racially/ethnically different from the community from which they came.

Although many of the graduates spoke about expecting to be the *token Black kid*, it was not until they arrived on campus and began class that they really understood what that meant. The graduates spoke about not seeing another student who looked like them until their junior or senior year, and how it became the norm after a while, which caused them to block it out of their minds. This created a sense of loneliness as stated by the graduates. Several graduates stated they felt displaced, as if they did not belong. Graduate 4 stated “I felt weird walking around at times. It was as if I was doing something wrong.” This supports earlier research which states a feeling of depression or loneliness is a result of first-generation students lacking a sense of belonging (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). The students noted that they felt secluded at times, but strived to make friends and help create their own environment while on campus.

The lack of African American faculty was something that many of the graduates failed to realize until they graduated. This validates previous research from Giuffrida and Douthit (2010) which states relationships with faculty are especially important for the success of minority students. Furthermore, Black students at PWIs often perceive White faculty as culturally insensitive, which makes fostering positive relationships hard (Giuffrida & Douthit, 2010). An unexpected finding from this research was generated from four graduates who shared that looking back made them sad as they thought about

not seeing any African American staff and students on campus. They went on to say the *vibe* on campus may have been different had there been others at the college who looked like them. Many spoke of enjoying their time on campus despite it being a PWI, however, they wondered what their experience would have been, had there been a better representation of African Americans. The lack of African American presence on a college campus can create the feeling of isolation. This feeling can cause students to slack in their involvement and classroom attendance.

As a first-generation minority student attending a PWI, each graduate had their own experiences with the *lack of presence* barrier associated with the absence of minorities in the curriculum while experiencing an institutional culture that “marginalized, devalued, and omitted ethnic minority students” (Padilla, et al., 1997, p. 131). Research shows African American students encounter more challenges adjusting to a college environment that is primarily structured around the needs, attitudes, and values of White students (Fischer, 2007). Although four of the graduates spoke about making a connection with a White faculty/administrator, the remaining six felt that it was hard connecting with White faculty, administration, and students.

Nurturing. One of the four major categories revealed that the graduates did not feel supported by their families. The graduates felt an unexplainable separation from their families at times. This was prevalent while visiting family during breaks. They expressed that they felt judged and purposefully isolated as it was stated “they cannot relate” to their family. Similarly, Borrero (2011) noted, first-generation African American students, lack assistance with navigating the culture of higher education as they do not have parents who attended college who could share their experience. Thus, first-generation

African American students enter college with inadequate instruction on how to navigate their college experience to achieve academic success (Borrero, 2011). Previous studies have also found that family members of first-generation and minority college students can have a negative influence on college persistence (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; London, 1992; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). The graduates in this study did experience negativity from some family members. The graduates shared that when they would see their family and share their experience at school, their family would tell them they were not interested in hearing what they had to say. This study revealed that many graduates stopped going home for breaks as they felt so disconnected that the friends they made at school were said to be more supportive and family-like. The graduates expressed they did not want to be judged based on their decision to attend college. So, it was easier to avoid going home. The graduates did not regret attending college; most of them tried to help their siblings see the importance of attending college. One graduate was successful in doing so.

Discontinuity. The graduate's decision to attend college was heavily influenced by the students' family backgrounds. Many graduates spoke about having to decide between joining the military and attending college. One graduate spoke in detail about coming from an all-military family and how the family did not understand the decision to attend college. Despite feeling uncomfortable with what their family thought about the decision, the graduate still decided to attend college. This also aided in the graduates' decisions to move away to attend college. It is important to note that although the families of the graduates allowed them to make their own decision after high school, the graduates still second guessed themselves through their first semester, as they felt a lack

of support from their family. The process by which first-generation students enroll in college, their goals during college, and lack of family support, are more common concerns as compared to their peers, which ultimately creates hurdles for them to succeed academically (Shelper & Woosley, 2011). These obstacles can relate to issues that deal with transition based on family, social life, culture, and academics (Stebleton & Soria, 2012).

Lack of resources. A students' family socioeconomic status (SES) is said to contribute to variations in educational outcomes among African American men and women (Tekleselassie, Mallery, & Choi, 2013). First-generation students tend to be older, minority, more likely to be female, have dependent children, and come from low socioeconomic homes with parents who did not obtain a college degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Despite previous research, 80% of the graduates in this study came from homes where the average income ranged from \$25,000-\$99,000. The students stated although they came from homes where their parents/guardians worked, it was still hard for them to afford college. Scholarships were very important to the graduates. Many stated the amount and/or lack of scholarships further assisted in their decision on which college to attend. One graduate mentioned attending their school due to receiving a scholarship for the first 2 years, which offset the number of student loans and family support that was needed. For first-generation African American students, their socioeconomic background is a key factor in college enrollment, attendance, and graduation. If students do not receive loans or scholarships, many of them would not be able to afford postsecondary education. This concept supports early finding from Borrero (2011) who states, for first-generation African American students, their socioeconomic background is a key factor in

college enrollment, attendance, and graduation. The historical significance of race and class in American society put first-generation African American college students at a marked disadvantage when it comes to understanding the context of a selective campus environment and how to successfully navigate while attending these institutions (Johnson, 2013).

Limitations

This study included 10 participants who fit a selective participation criterion. Originally, male/female African American Greek organizations would be used to recruit participants; however, after several attempts to contact males through African American Greek organizations, more females participated in the study. Of the 10 participants, nine were females and one was male. This shows that more variability was needed to examine whether gender influences how a first-generation African American student experiences college and makes meaning of that experience. The deficiency of male participants may have limited the ability to identify common themes and gain the male perspective of being African American first-generation at a PWI. Although, in a qualitative study the number of participants does not lessen the importance of the findings; it is important to note, however, that because of the number of female participants in the study and the lack of males represented, the study may be limited in the ability to be expressive of the experiences of African American first-generation male graduates.

Although the study was open to graduates who attended a PWI along the east coast, the snowball method made it difficult to find students in all states. The majority of the graduates who participated lived in one state and referred their peers who attended the same institution. The findings from this study were not inclusive of all states along the

east coast, which may have presented different perspectives given their geographic location. This study also focuses solely on first-generation African American graduates. This was purposeful to gain the experience of first-generation African American graduates to gain a better understanding of their positionality at a PWI. Another limitation was that students were reluctant to participate out of fear that they would be recognized. This caused the participant pool to decrease over time making it hard to have graduates from multiple states.

Further limitations included not having students who were not student leaders or heavily involved in their campus. The participants in this study all had some level of involvement on campus, whether as a resident assistant, member of the student government, or student-athlete. There was a lack of participants who did not have a leadership role. Gaining an understanding of why students with no direct leadership role remain at a PWI is important in gaining an understanding of other motivational factors that lead to the academic success of first-generation African American graduates. Minority leadership is also a limitation to this study. The participants spoke mostly about their interaction with White faculty/staff whether they were good or bad experiences. The lack of minority faculty/staff made the participants' experiences seem one-sided, as it is unknown if having minority faculty/staff would create a different experience for the graduates. Finally, this study examined students' experiences as college graduates and required that students reflect upon their pre-college experience and overall college experience at a PWI.

Recommendations

This study demonstrates that first-generation African American graduates are adjusting well to college despite being the minority on campus and the influence of their family background. Positive adjustment to postsecondary education helps in both the transition to college and persistence to graduation. When a student is well adjusted to an environment, it is expected that he/she would be more likely to thrive, create a sense of belonging, and ultimately succeed. Despite the academic success of the graduates in this study, further areas should be considered.

Faculty/staff minority mentoring program. The graduates in this study expressed not having a mentor who looked like them. Although some had mentors who were White, they yearned for someone of their ethnicity. By establishing a faculty/staff minority mentoring program, colleges can connect students to someone who they deem is more relatable. This connection can help create other programs in the future which can aid in the sense of belonging that the graduates in this study mentioned. This program will support students in that their mentor will help promote a proactive, collaborative approach to student success. The mentor will serve as the central facilitator for student issues and communication with school officials. Often times students feel disconnected from school administration. By providing them with a mentor, this helps build a bridge and creates a more welcoming environment where students would feel supported. Overall, the mentors would provide direct support as well as connect students to existing resources within the college to encourage optimal academic and personal achievement.

Freshman transition program. Attending college can be daunting, especially for those without support. Currently, the City University of New York (CUNY) system has a

College Now program that is a free college transition and dual enrollment program for entering students. CUNY developed a partnership with New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) where they have recruited 18 CUNY colleges and over 420 public high schools within NYCDOE in a quest to help students successfully transition to college. College Now provides college credit courses aligned with the first-year study at CUNY, along with pre-college courses which increase students' academic readiness for college without a need for remediation (City University of NY, 2018). Furthermore, College Now provides students with college awareness courses and activities, full day summer programs, and access to CUNY campus facilities and events.

The graduates in this study spoke about attending a college prep high school and not taking college-level courses. Similar to College Now, PWIs should work to create a connection with college preparation high schools that works year-round with the students from freshman year through college enrollment. Each student should have a college mentor who works with them to prepare them for college. This should include everything a student would need to know to be successful in their first year of college, such as using a student handbook, classroom and email etiquette, student engagement and involvement, commuter life, and what to expect as a resident student, to name a few. This can help the student see the value and importance of their high school education and help them understand what the graduates in this study called *the unfamiliar world* of college. This program could help students and their families become familiar with college and the expectations. This program can be delivered as a summer bridge program which occurs during the summer months. This program should be virtual and something the freshmen can experience with their parent/guardian at home. Students are more inclined to

participate in things that require the use of technology. The program can have set dates and times when the students/families can log on and see or ask various departmental questions and even attend summer classes. They will be able to learn college jargon and have their questions answered prior to arriving at the college. Virtual tours of the campus to include their classroom and residence hall should be a part of this as well. This helps ease the transition and nervousness that the graduates in this study stated they felt when they first arrived on campus. Having freshmen experience a typical introductory college-level lecture class will help them to improve their organizational skills and provide them with helpful habits and useful behaviors they will need to succeed at college.

The purpose of this program would be to help students learn to articulate individual learning issues that need attention and provide them with information on campus resources. Students will then be able to identify the specific support mechanisms the college offers, which is currently a problematic area for freshmen. This would help freshmen to learn and practice the self-advocacy skills they will need to navigate through their freshman year. This builds the foundation for a successful college career. Furthermore, it will identify problem habits and behaviors that might surface during their first year, for which the administrators can provide support and guidance to help the students early on. Overall, this program will allow the freshmen to be immersed in a learning experience that offers a real taste of college life, college-level work, and the challenges they will encounter in the fall. Lastly, it will help freshmen to develop a clear understanding of their personal learning strengths and needs, and discover how resources and self-advocacy can support their success in college.

Staff/student meet and greet. During the first 6 weeks of school, which many colleges identify as the *weeks of welcome*, the school should hold *meet and greet* events for the students, faculty, and administrators. This would allow students to meet and interact with others in a more informal environment. The first 6 weeks of school are important as that is when students typically decide if they will remain at their chosen school or leave the institution. This timeframe gives the students time to work on adjusting, while creating the comfortability that the graduates said PWIs lacked.

It is important for PWIs to recognize the value and meaning of connecting students and staff early on. A staff/student meet and greet allows students to come together with their peers, faculty, and staff to explore their identities, challenges, and to build networks of support and solidarity. Having students and staff come together with shared goals and interests helps break down stereotypes of inequities among various ethnicities and lessens the perception of power and privilege, which can ultimately have a differential impact on students of marginalized identities. This program can create spaces for deeper connections and understanding between those in attendance. It is important that predominantly White institutions realize the intersectional and multiple identities of each student and intentionally foster a safe, welcoming space that acknowledges both similarities and differences.

Faculty and staff development program. The graduates in this study spoke about not receiving empathy and understanding from faculty and staff as a first-generation African American student. The development of a Faculty and Staff Development Program can offer a variety of workshops to enhance the professional and personal development of staff and faculty at PWIs. Programs could be geared toward

cultural understanding and awareness and assessing the educational and emotional needs of first-generation African American students. This would give the faculty/staff the ability to enhance their skills and learn some important characteristics of first-generation African American students who would be useful in helping the students to navigate both inside and outside of the classroom. This can create a connection to the students and can help shift the classroom and campus culture at PWIs as described as *unfamiliar and uninviting* by the graduates in this study.

Diversity and inclusion office. The graduates in this study spoke about not feeling included at their institution. Many felt that there was a lack of awareness and knowledge surrounding not only first-generation students but African Americans as well. PWIs who are operating without an office of diversity and inclusion should work to create one. This office will commit to providing leadership, guidance, and resources to students, faculty, and staff in support of creating a more diverse and inclusive institution. By PWIs recognizing that this commitment requires being more inclusive, knowledgeable and accepting of various diversities, they can establish and sustain a dramatically rich campus climate and culture that deepens their intellectual environment. College institutions such as PWIs are responsible for addressing inclusivity and diversity matters that impact the academic experience of the faculty, staff, and students.

Partnership with professional minority organizations and HBCUs. The graduates spoke about the lack of minority presence within the staff and faculty. There needs to be a balance between White/minority staff and faculty at PWIs. One way that PWIs can achieve this balance is by increasing their involvement with diverse professional organizations and diversity-oriented career fairs. Job postings and placement

of the advertisements is crucial to the recruitment of African American faculty and staff. PWIs should utilize targeted advertising to reach diverse groups and expand their recruitment outreach through purposeful networking with minority professional organizations. In addition to creating a lasting partnership with minority professional organizations, PWIs should reach out to graduate students at HBCUs to increase their pool of potential applicants with the goal of increasing diversity of faculty and staff. This could increase their pool of applicants for jobs. Lastly, PWIs can hire search firms that have a proven track record in identifying and pursuing diverse candidates

Future studies. The study's findings had implications for future research surrounding factors that lead to academic success for first-generation African American college graduates. Below are topics for future studies.

1. Although there was one male graduate who participated in this study, future studies should focus on the academic success of first-generation African American male graduates. Although more females tend to go to college, it would be beneficial to colleges to also hear the perspective of first-generation African American males through qualitative research.
2. The graduates in this study mostly spoke about their involvement in various clubs, organizations, and various areas on campus. Future studies can explore the perspective of first-generation African American students who were successful but did not participate in any activities on campus. This would give a different outlook on how one can successfully graduate college without a direct connection to the institution. This may reveal other reasons why students persisted to graduation.

3. Many graduates spoke about attending a college preparatory high school but not taking any college-level courses and the effect it had on them at their PWI. Conducting a comparative study on students who attended college prep high schools as compared to those who did not, with a focus on how that affected them in college would give a wider perspective on the types of students who are enrolling in college. Many times, we assume a college prep school is preparing students for academic success, however, this study contradicts that theory in that many of the graduates did not experience college-level work prior to college, and yet were successful.
4. This research did not reveal a great deal of diversity in the administration. Future studies could seek to gain an understanding of minority administrators' experience working at PWIs. This could help explain the success of first-generation African American students at PWIs. It may also help to create informative programs for the faculty and staff on how they can form connections with the students. Furthermore, it could provide PWIs with valuable information in order to develop curriculum and programs geared toward all populations.

Conclusion

Approximately two-thirds of African American students who enroll in college departed without obtaining a degree (Engle & Theokas, 2010). Although factors such as a student's family background and academic performance predict student retention, it is still uncertain if students understand these factors in relation to their desire to graduate (Oldfield, 2007). A student's family socioeconomic status is said to contribute to

variations in educational outcomes among African American men and women (Tekleselassie et al., 2013). In the United States, an estimated 24% of the total undergraduate population is identified as first-generation students, totaling over five million students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; NCES, 2014). Postsecondary completion is more critical than ever. Postsecondary training is required by most jobs of the 21st century (USDOE, 2014). Predictions by Carnevale et al. (2010) indicated that by 2018 the United States would require a postsecondary degree for approximately 101 million jobs. In 2014, United States college graduates with a bachelor's degree earned 62% more (\$48,000 vs. \$30,000), in comparison to individuals with only a high school diploma (Kena et al., 2016).

This study explored first-generation African American graduates who successfully graduated from a predominantly White institution and the factors that led to their academic success. This phenomenological study is crucial for PWIs, so they can do more to help first-generation African American students succeed in society and help establish them as competitors in an ever-increasing global economy. The institution may benefit by helping to create a more socially just society, by serving more college students across ethnicities, genders, and levels of socioeconomic status to increase their graduation rates.

Furthermore, PWIs could increase their pursuit of minority faculty/staff. Having minority faculty creates cross-cultural learning and exchange of multiple perspectives and dialogues in the classroom (Mohamed, 2010). Having a diverse faculty/staff at PWIs offers the opportunity for students and school administrators to learn and grow intellectually, professionally, and personally (Michaels, 2011). PWIs should strive to

create a well-balanced and diverse student body and administration. This helps to showcase PWIs as multicultural and adaptive and aligned with the diverse global economy (Michaels, 2011). As the ethnic and racial demographics of the United States continues to increase, the ethnic and racial makeup of faculty, staff, and students in postsecondary institutions should reflect that change as well.

Tinto's (1973) student retention model has been the dominant framework for research on why students leave an institution. However, the initial formulation of the model did not speak to the experience of diverse student populations such as gender, race, ethnicity, income, and orientation (Tinto, 2006). Tinto's student retention model addressed the complex relationship between students and the institutional environment (Tinto, 1975). Tinto postulates that academic and social integration work together to influence ongoing goal and institutional commitments. Goal and institutional commitment lead to the decision to remain in or to leave college (Tinto, 1975). To assess why students were able to be successful and complete college, Padilla et al. (1997) offered a way to examine the experiences of minorities (African American, Hispanics and Native Americans) in college. This model, based mainly upon Padilla's (1994) model of successful minorities in college and Tinto's (1993) model of student departure argues that student success requires a combination of both theoretical (formal/book) knowledge and heuristic (campus specific) knowledge which is specifically important during the crucial first year of college (Padilla et al., 1997). Padilla et al. (1997) developed student success as a new line of inquiry. Padilla et al. (1997) felt that many researchers were only using retention models like Tinto's because no alternative frameworks existed for researching student success at the time (Padilla, 2009). Padilla argues that knowing why students

leave college is not the same as knowing what factors can be attributed to their success.

Padilla (1994) stated,

Student success involves more than preventing students from abandoning their studies. To promote student success one also must understand why many students, some of them under the most challenging circumstances, are able to complete all program requirements and actually graduate with a diploma or degree. (p. 9)

In this study, it has been demonstrated that first generation African American graduates can successfully complete college with the right support from faculty and staff. Although there is a large body of research that suggests that first-generation students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, this study revealed more graduates came from middle-class backgrounds, as compared to previous research which states most first-generation students come from low socioeconomic homes. Furthermore, the graduates in this study reported adjusting well academically and socially by getting involved in clubs, sports, taking leadership roles, and forming connections with faculty whether White or Black. This ultimately helped them to foster a connection to their institution. In addition, they reported experiencing obstacles and overcame them by seeking support to achieve academic success.

This study substantiated many of the findings of the research on first-generation and African American students as reviewed in Chapter 2. The findings also challenged some ideas posed by researchers about first-generation African American students. Instead of exploring reasons students remain at a PWI, this study examined the factors that led to the graduate's academic success. The graduates in this study revealed that being a member of a particular ethnicity and socioeconomic status does not determine

success in college. However, hard work, commitment, and having a mentor aids in being successful at a PWI.

Most of the results in this study were supported by the literature in Chapter 2 and revealed that to be successful, first-generation African American college students need support, guidance, and a welcoming environment that is accepting of all ethnicities. Understanding and meeting the needs of first-generation students is important in their academic success. Themes that emerged related to barriers, college preparation, support, decisions, home experience, administration, campus culture, and financial aid.

Additionally, the graduates were personally aware of their own abilities, which allowed them to be successful in persisting to graduation. As first-generation African Americans continue to be underrepresented in postsecondary education and degree completion, it is important to understand not only their academic and social experiences in college, but the factors that led to their successful educational attainment. The increasing numbers of first-generation African Americans entering and succeeding at predominantly White institutions provide a perfect opportunity to explore the educational experiences of this population through qualitative research methods.

This study adds value and depth to the existing body of research on first-generation African American students. First, the emphasis on first-generation African American graduates at PWIs differentiates this study from those on minority students as a whole, and thus, allows for a greater understanding of this specific population and their experiences. Second, by focusing on graduates, it allows for an exploration of the academic and social experiences of those who are now professional or removed from the institution, which might provide an unbiased review of the institution and their

experience. Lastly, this study helped provide a reflective moment for the graduates in which they were able to share their experience and how it has affected them overall.

College adjustment, by most explanations, seems to fall into two primary facets: academic integration and social integration. Academic integration involves the student's classroom experience, coursework, grade point average, enrollment status, and adhering to the academic standards of an institution. The participants in this study shared stories of needing extra support academically as they were not as prepared as their peers. Despite their lack of preparedness, the participants in this study showed resiliency and were able to overcome many academic obstacles in order to be successful. Their drive and determination for academic success showed that they were able to overcome not being able to perform as well as their White counterparts. The participants spoke about the self-motivation and lack of support and how they used that to push themselves throughout their time at their institution.

Social integration has a broader scope and includes overall attachment and sense of belonging to the institution in general, social adaptation, extracurricular involvements, overall well-being, faculty, staff, and peer interaction. Ultimately, this study looked to find ways to explain the graduate's success and provide informative stories and suggestions for PWIs, in hope that they would implement new programs to help first-generation African American students successfully transition, adapt, and graduate from a PWI.

References

- Alfonso, M., Bailey, T. R., & Scott, M. (2005). The educational outcomes of occupational sub-baccalaureate students: Evidence from the 1990s. *Education of Economics Review*, 24(2), 197-212.
- Allen, W. R., & Jewell, J. O. (2002). A backward glance forward: Past, present and future perspectives on historically Black colleges and universities. *The Review of Higher Education*, 25(3), 241-261.
- Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Aud, S., Hussar, W., Bianco, K., Frolich, L., Kemp, J., & Tahan, K. (2011, April 30). *The condition of education. 2011*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Barr, J. & Rasor, R. (1999, April). *Freshman persistence as measured by reaching academic achievement benchmarks*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges, Lake Arrowhead, CA. Retrieved from https://archive.org/details/ERIC_ED428798/page/n1
- Bautsch, B. (2010). *Gathering information: Tips for legislators*. Washington, DC: National Conference of State Legislatures.
- Bers, T. H. & Smith, K. E. (1991). Persistence of community college students: The influence of student intent and academic and social integration. *Research in Higher Education*, 32(5), 538-556.
- Bergerson, A. (2007). Exploring the impact of social class on adjustments to college: Anna's story. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 20(1), 99-119.
- Borrero, N. (2011). Shared success:Voices of first-generation college-bound Latino/as. *Multicultural Education*, 18(4), 24-30.
- Brown, M. C., & Dancy, T. E., II (n.d). Predominantly White institutions. *Encyclopedia of African American Education*.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412971966.n193>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016). A profile of the working poor, 2014. United States

Department of Labor. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/working-poor/2014/home.htm>

- Cabrera, A. F. & Nora, A. (1994). College students' perceptions of prejudice and discrimination and their feelings of alienation: A construct validation approach. *The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, 16(3-4), 387-409.
- Caffey, R. A. (2007). *The impact of institutional characteristics on six-year graduation rates of African American students* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI 304825879)
- Carnevale, P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). *Help wanted: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2018*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workplace.
- Casazza, M. E. & Casazza, M. E. (2004). Oral history of postsecondary access: Martha Maxwell, a pioneer. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 28(1), 20-22.
- Charles, C., Fischer, M., Mooney, M. A., & Massey, D. (2009). Affirmative-action programs for minority students: Right in theory, wrong in practice. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 55(29).
- Charles, C. Z., Roscigno, V. J., & Torres, K. C. (2006). Racial inequality and college attendance. The mediating role of parental investments. *Social Science Research*, 36(1), 329- 352.
- Chen, P. D., Ingram, T., & Davis, L. (2014). Bridging student engagement and satisfaction: A comparison between historically black colleges and universities and predominantly white institutions. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 83(4), 565-579.
- City University of New York. (2018). *College now*. Retrieved from <http://www2.cuny.edu/academics/school-college-partnerships/college-now/>
- Cohen, A. & Brawer, F. (1996) *Policies and programs that affect transfer*. Washington, DC: Council on Education
- Cohen, H. & Ibrahim, N. (2008). A new accountability metric for a new time: a proposed graduation efficiency measure, change. *The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 40(3), 47-52.
- Concordia University. (2012). *First generation college students' graduation rates*. Retrieved from <https://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/reference-material/first-generation-college-students-graduation-rates/>

- Conley, P. & Hamlin, M. (2009). Justice-learning: exploring the efficacy with low-income, first-generation college students. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 16*(1), 47-58.
- Creswell, J. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative and quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J., & Poth, C. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cueto, S., Escobal, J., Penny, M., & Ames, P. (2011). *Tracking disparities: Who gets left behind? Initial findings from Peru*. Oxford, UK: University of Oxford.
- DuBois Baber, L. (2012). A qualitative inquiry on the multidimensional racial development among first-year African American college students attending a predominately white institution. *The Journal of Negro Education, 81*(1), 67-81.
- Engle, J., Bermeo, A., & O'Brien, C. (2006). *Straight from the source: What works for first-generation college students*. Washington, DC: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Education.
- Engle, J., & Theokas, C. (2010). Top gainers: Some public four-year colleges and universities make big improvements in minority graduation rates. *The Education Trust*. Retrieved from https://archive.org/stream/ERIC_ED511868#page/n0
- Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). *Moving beyond access: College for low-income, first-generation students*. Retrieved from www.pellinstitute.org/files/COEMovingBeyondReportFinal.pdf
- Feagin, J. R. & Sikes, M. P. (1995). How Black students cope with racism on White campuses. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 8*, 91-97.
- Fischer, M. J. (2007). Settling into campus life: Differences by race/ethnicity in college involvement and outcomes. *Journal of Higher Education, 78*(2), 125-161.
- Fleming, J. (1984). *Blacks in college: A comparative study of students' success in Black and White institutions*. San-Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gasman, M. (2008). *Minority-serving institutions: An historical backdrop*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Gibbons, M. & Borders, L. (2010). Prospective first-generation college students: A social-cognitive perspective. *The Career Development Quarterly, 58*(3), 194-208.

- Given, L. (2008). *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Green, A. C. (2014). *Experiences of African American college graduates*. (Doctoral dissertation). University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE.
- Guiffrida, D., & Douthit, K. (2010). The Black student experience at predominantly White colleges: Implications for school and college counselors. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 88*(3), 311-318.
- Handcock, M. S., & Gile, K. J. (2011). Comment: On the concept of snowball sampling. *Sociological Methodology, 41*(1), 367-371.
- Harackiewicz, J. M., Canning, E. A., Tibbetts, Y., Giffen, C. J., Blair, S. S., Rouse, D. I., & Hyde, J. S. (2014). Closing the social class achievement gap for first-generation students in undergraduate biology. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 106*(2), 375-389.
- Harper, S. (2010). An anti-deficit achievement framework for research on students of color in STEM. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 148*, 63-74.
- Harper, S. R. (2013). Am I my brother's teacher? Black undergraduates, racial socialization, and peer pedagogies in predominantly White postsecondary contexts. *Review of Research in Education, 37*, 183-211.
- Hausman, L. R., Schofield, J. W., & Woods, R. L. (2007). Sense of belonging as a predictor of intentions to persist among African American and White first-year college students. *Research in Higher Education, 48*(7), 803-840.
- Igwebuike, J. G. (2006). Legal and policy implications for faculty diversification in higher education. *Negro Educational Review, 57*(3/4), 189.
- Institute for Higher Education Policy. (2010). *A snapshot of African Americans in higher education*. Washington, DC: Author
- IPEDS. (2008). *Online glossary*. Retrieved from <https://surveys.nces.ed.gov/ipeds/VisGlossaryAll.aspx?>
- Ishitani, T. (2016). First-generation students' persistence at four-year institutions. *College and University, 91*(3), 22-34.
- Jehangir, R. (2010). *Higher education and first-generation students: Cultivating community, voice, and place from the new majority*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Johnson, J. M. (2013). *A different world: African American, first generation college*

at a selective university (Doctoral dissertation).

Karp, M., O'Gara, L., & Hughes, K. (2008). *Do support services at community colleges encourage success or reproduce disadvantage? An exploratory study of students in two community colleges. CCRC Working Paper No. 10.* New York, NY: Community College Research Center, Columbia University.

Kena, G., Hussar, W., McFarland, J., de Brey, C., & Musu-Velez, E. (2016). *The Condition of Education 2016.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016144.pdf>

Kiser, A. I. T. & Price, L. (2008). The persistence of college students from their freshman to sophomore year. *Journal of College Student Retention, 9*(4), 421-436.

Knapp, L. G., Kelly-Reid, J. E., & Grinder, S. A. (2011). *Employees in postsecondary institutions, fall 2010, and salaries of full-time instructional staff (NCES 2012-276).* Washington, DC: US Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences.

Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J. L., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (2006). *What matters to student success: A review of the literature (Vol. 8).* Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative.

London, H. B. (1992). Transformations: Cultural challenges faced by first-generation students. *New directions for Community Colleges, 1992*(80), 5-11.

Mattern, K. & Wyatt, J. (2012). The validity of the academic rigor index (ARI) for predicting FYGPA. Research Report 2012. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED563119.pdf>

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Michaels, W. B. (2011). The trouble with diversifying the faculty. *Liberal Education, 97*(1), 14-19.

Mohamed, T. (2010). Surviving the Academy: The continuing struggle of minority faculty on mainstream campuses. *International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities & Nations, 10*(4), 41.

Montalvo, J. M. (2010). The pattern of growth and poverty reduction in China. *Journal of Comparative Economics, 38*(1), 2-16.

Morrow, J., & Ackerman, M. (2012). Intention to persist and retention of first-year

- students: The importance of motivation and sense of belonging. *College Student Journal*, 46(3), 483-491.
- Murphy, C. G., & Hicks, T. (2006). Academic characteristics among first-generation and non-first-generation college students. *College Quarterly*, 9(2).
- Museus, S. D. & Quaye, S. J. (2009). Toward an intercultural perspective of racial and ethnic minority college student persistence. *The Review of Higher Education*, 33(1), 677-694.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2013). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_ree.asp
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2014). *Bachelor's degree conferred by postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity and sex of students. Selected years, 1976-77 through 2012-13*. Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). *Graduation rates*. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Fast facts. Back to school statistics*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>
- National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2017). *Persistence & retention-2017*. Retrieved from nsresearchcenter.org website: <https://nscresearchcenter.org/snapshotreport28-first-year-persistence-and-retention/>
- Nora, A. (2004). The role of habitus and cultural capital in choosing a college, transitioning from high school to higher education and persisting in college among minority and nonminority students. *Journal of Higher Education*, 67(2), 119-148.
- Oldfield, K. (2007). Welcoming first-generation poor and working-class students to college. *About Campus*, 11(6), 2-12.
- Olson, S., & Riordan, D. (2012). *Engage to excel: Producing one million additional college graduates with degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Report to the President*. Retrieved from https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/fact_sheet_final.pdf
- Opidee, I. (2015). Supporting first-generation college students: 24 ideas for guiding

students through the social, academic, financial and administrative challenges of college. *University Business*, 18(3).

- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2011). Education at a glance 2011: OECD indicators. OECD Publishing. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2011-en>
- Padilla, R. V. (1994). The unfolding matrix: A technique for qualitative data acquisition and analysis. *Studies in Qualitative Methodology*, 4, 273-285.
- Padilla, R. V. (2009). Student success modeling: Elementary school to college. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Padilla, R. V., Trevino, J., Trevino, J. & Gonzalez, K. (1997). Developing local models of minority student success in college. *Journal of College Student Development*, 38(2), 125-135.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Perna, L. W. (2000). Differences in the decision to attend college among African American, Hispanics, and Whites. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71(2), 117-141.
- Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (2017). *How many students earned their first undergraduate degree in 2015-2016*. Retrieved from <http://pnpi.org/how-many-students-earned-their-first-undergraduate-degree-in-2015-16/>
- Rodgers, T. (2013). Should high non-completion rates amongst ethnic minority students be seen as an ethnicity issue? Evidence from a case study of a student cohort from a British University. *Higher Education*, 66(5), 535-550.
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *An introduction to codes and coding. The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Sanacore, J., & Palumbo, A. (2016). Graduating from college: The impossible dream for most first-generation students. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 12(2), 23-33.
- Schneider, M., & Yin, L. (2011). The hidden costs of community colleges. *American Institutes for Research*. Retrieved from https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/AIR_Hidden_Costs_of_Community_Colleges_Oct2011_0.pdf
- Schofield, C., & Dismore, H. (2010). Predictors of retention and achievement of higher

- education students within a further education context. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 34(2), 207-221.
- Selingo, J. (2012, March). The rise and fall of the graduation rate. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-RiseFall-of-the/131036>
- Shelper, D., & Woosley, S. (2011). Understanding the early integration experience of First-generation college students. *College Student Journal*, 65(4), 700-714.
- Smedley, B. D., Myers, H. F., & Harrell, S. P. (1993). Minority -status stresses and the college adjustment of ethnic minority freshman. *Journal of Higher Education*, 64(4), 434-452.
- Solórzano, D., Ceja, M. & Yosso, T. (2001). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and the campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 60-73.
- Stebbleton, M., & Soria, K. (2012). Breaking down barriers: Academic obstacles of first-generation students at research universities. *National College Learning Center Association*, 17(2), 7-20.
- Strange, C. C., & Banning, J. H. (2001). *Educating by design: Creating campus learning environments that work*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Tekleselassie, A., Mallery, C., & Choi, T. (2013). Unpacking the gender gap in postsecondary participation among African Americans and Caucasians using hierarchical generalized linear modeling. *Journal of Negro Education*, 82(2), 139-156.
- Tinto, V. (1973). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89-125.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What's next? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice*, 8(1), 1-19.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). *Race*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2013). *Student Enrollment and Work Status*. Retrieved from

<https://www.census.gov/content/census/en/library/publications/2012/acs/acsbr11-14.html>

U.S. Census Bureau. (2016). *Quick facts. United States*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045217>

United States Department of Education. (2014). *Strategic plan for fiscal years 2014-2018*. Retrieved from [ed.gov: www2.ed.gov/about/reports/strat/plan2014-18/strategic-plan.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/about/reports/strat/plan2014-18/strategic-plan.pdf)

Vereen, L., Hill, N., & McNeal, D. (2008). Perceptions of multicultural counseling competency: Integration of the curricular and the practical. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 30(3), 226-236. ogt, W. P. & Johnson, R. B. (2011). *Dictionary of statistics & methodology: A nontechnical guide for the social sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Winkle-Wagner, R. (2009). *The unchosen me*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Woods-Warrior, E. (2014). *The student experience: The effects of three college retention strategies on first-generation student success outcomes*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.bing.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1876&context=doctoral>

Appendix A

Name of Greek Organizations
Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated
Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated
Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Incorporated
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated
Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated
Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated
Mu Sigma Upsilon Sorority, Incorporated

Appendix B

Sample Letter of Introduction

Date:

Dear Participant:

Hello and thank you for agreeing to participate in the research study. We are planning to meet on *date, time and place*

I am an Educational Doctorate (Ed. D) candidate at St. John Fisher College. I believe your input will be valuable to this research study. As part of the study, you will assist with providing your experience as a first-generation African American college graduate from a predominantly White institution. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has approved the research study for the completion of the dissertation.

In this study, you will be asked semi-structured questions in the interview. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will be recorded so that I can collect the results of each interview and combine them for analysis. There are no foreseen risks to you from participating in the interview. If you decide to end the interview early, there will be no repercussions to you. To encourage a quality conversation, I have the option to ask follow-up or clarifying questions related to the research questions. This will elicit valuable data to use in the study.

All interviews will be confidential. I will provide you with a pseudonym so that your name is not revealed. No individual, Greek organization or school names will be used in the research findings or presentation. All notes and recordings of the interviews

will be password protected and stored on my computer. Hard copies of the interview will be locked and stored in a secure location.

If you have questions or concerns, please feel free to email me ltb02431@sjfc.edu

Best regards,

LaToya Blount

Ed. D. Candidate and Researcher

St. John Fisher College

Appendix C

Pre-Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age?

18-21

22-25

26-30

31-40

41-50

2. What was your marital status when attending school? Circle all that apply

Married

Divorce

Separated

Single

3. What is your gender?

Male

Female

4. Were you a parent while in school?

Yes

No

5. What best describes your childhood household?

Single Parent-Mother

Single Parent-Other

Two Parent-Mother and Father

Other

6. What is the highest degree you have earned?

Bachelor's Degree

Master's Degree or higher

7. What is the highest degree or level of school that your mother completed?

No schooling completed

Elementary School (K-5)

Middle School (6-8)

High School (9-12) or the equivalent

Some college credit, no degree

Associate degree or higher

Unknown

8. What is the highest degree or level of school that your father completed?

No schooling completed

Elementary School (K-5)

Middle School (6-8)

High School (9-12) or the equivalent

Some college credit, no degree

Associate degree or higher

Unknown

9. What was your employment status while in school?

Employed full-time off campus

Employed full-time on campus

Employed part-time off campus

Employed part-time on campus

Did not work while in school

10. What was your family income while in school?

Under \$25,000

\$25, 000-\$44,999

\$45,000-\$64,999

65,000-\$84,999

\$85,000-\$99,999

11. Where did you live during school?

On campus

Off campus with friends

Off campus with my family

Off-campus alone

12. Would you like to participate in a semi-structured interview?

Yes

No

13. What College did you graduate from?

Write the name of the College here

14. If you would like to participate in an interview, please provide the following:

Name:

Phone Number:

Email Address:

Best time to reach you:

Appendix D

St. John Fisher College

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of study: The Key to Academic Success: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study on First-Generation African American Students Who Successfully Graduated from a Predominantly White Institution

Name(s) of researcher(s): LaToya Blount

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Josephine Moffett **Phone for further**

information:

Purpose of study: The purpose of this study is to examine the graduates lived experiences and factors that influenced their successful graduation from a predominantly White institution.

Place of study: phone or in person **Length of participation: 30-60 min**

Method(s) of data collection: The researcher will use a pre-demographic questionnaire and a visual/audio recorded interview that will be transcribed by a third party. The researcher may take notes during the meeting to support the recording.

Risks and benefits: There are no expected risks to participation in this study.

Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy of subjects: All participants and schools will be given a pseudonym.

Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy of data collected: All electronic notes and recordings will be in password protected files; hard copies will be stored at a secure location for five years.

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 the results of the study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

Print name (Participant)

Signature

Date

Print name (Investigator)

Signature

Date

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher(s) listed above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact your personal health care provider or an

appropriate crisis service provider (*Provide the number of a local crisis service referral center here).

The Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study/or if you feel that your rights as a participant (or the rights of another participant) have been violated or caused you undue distress (physical or emotional distress), please contact Jill Rathbun by phone during normal business hours at (585) 385-8012 or irb@sjfc.edu. She will contact a supervisory IRB official to assist you.

Audio recordings addendum:

All digital audio recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be maintained using a private, locked, and password-protected file and password-protected computer stored securely in the private home of the principal researcher. Electronic files will include assigned identity codes and pseudonyms; they will not include actual names or any information that could personally identify or connect participants to this study. Other materials, including notes or paper files related to data collection and analysis will be stored securely in unmarked boxes, locked inside a cabinet in the private home of the principal researcher. Only the researcher will have access to electronic or paper records. The digitally recorded audio data will be kept by this researcher for a period of five years following publication of the dissertation. Signed informed consent documents will be kept for five years after publication. All paper records will be cross-cut shredded and professionally delivered for incineration. Electronic records will be cleared, purged, and destroyed from the hard drive and all devices such that restoring data is not possible.

Appendix E

Interview Questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
<p>1) What led first-generation African American graduates to attend a predominantly White institution?</p>	<p>1) Tell me about your experiences that led to your desire to attend college?</p> <p>2) Can you tell me why you chose the College you graduated from?</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">a) Tell me about the campus culture? Defined as your perception of the school's traditions, relationships among students and administration, rituals, beliefs, etc.?</p>
<p>2) To what extent, did factors such as social integration, academic integration, barriers, college preparation, and family support influence first-generation African American student's decision to remain and graduate from a predominantly White institution?</p>	<p>3) What was your experience like at events, parties, in the residence halls, lounges, study areas, library, bookstore, or just walking around campus?</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">a) Did you participate in any non-academic activities?</p> <p>3) What was your social experience like as a minority on campus?</p> <p>4) Can you tell me what you did to prepare for college?</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">a) Did you take any college or advance classes in high school? If so what classes did you take?</p>

	<p>b) Did you participate in any pre- college initiatives or programs? If so, can you list them?</p> <p>5) Did you feel like you were academically prepared for class? In what ways?</p> <p>6) Can you describe your interactions with faculty both inside/outside of the classroom?</p> <p>a) Were there other students in your class that looked like you?</p> <p>b) Were there any faculty or administration on campus that looked like you?</p> <p>7) Did you feel like when you were home with your family they could relate to your experience?</p> <p>8) Was there anyone that positively motivated you while in college?</p>
<p>3) What barriers and obstacles did first-generation African American graduates encounter at a predominantly White institution?</p>	<p>9)Were there any obstacles that you had to overcome to achieve your goals? If so, please describe them.</p> <p>10) Describe some of the experiences that contributed to your academic success?</p> <p>11) Is there anything that I did not mention that you would like to share?</p>