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First-Generation African American Female Alumni Perspectives on Persistence to Degree Completion at a Private Urban College: A Phenomenological Study

Delores Patterson

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to use a qualitative research design to examine the key factors that influenced nine first-generation African American female alumni to persist past their first year at a private urban college. The goal of this study was to gain insight into the degree of academic involvement and social interaction that firstgeneration African American female alumni had while attending a private urban college and if these factors posed considerable benefits to support the students' longer term commitments. A phenomenological approach was utilized to explore the experiences of first-generation African American female alumni. The exploration of this study employed semi-structured interviews, which were the primary method used to collect, code, and analyze the data to develop categories and themes. Utilizing a phenomenology approach through the lens of Tinto's (1973) student attrition and persistence model, the results were consistent with academic involvement and social integration factors that supported academic success. The results of this research study identified seven areas that the participants linked to their academic commitment that ultimately led to their successful college completion. This study includes recommendations regarding how institutions can make improvements on academic programs that contribute to retention as well as strengthen students' commitment to reach degree attainment. The recommendations include enhancing academic programs that would strengthen the students' competitive edge to contribute in the future workforce, include senior-level students as guest speakers to improve peer participation in college success courses, and incorporate suggestions from students during academic program planning stages.

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Dedication

First, I give thanks to God for giving me an angel of grace, mercy, and perseverance to begin and complete this journey. The scripture that guided me during this academic experience was, "The Lord, in whose presence I have lived, will send His angel with you and make your way successful" (Genesis 24:40 NLT). This process has been a complete walk of faith, and I am a grateful to God for showing Himself strong and mighty, once again, on my behalf. I am a living testimony that with men this was impossible, but with God, all things are possible. I also dedicate this to my husband, affectionately called "handsome," who tirelessly stood by my side, constantly speaking words of encouragement that motivated me to press on. Thank you for believing in me, lending a listening ear, and cheering me on in the good days and challenging days. To my three amazing sons, mommy will always love you guys. I believe my mom is somewhere in that city called Heaven smiling down and saying, "I always knew you could do it!" I dedicate this to the memory of a mother who never stopped praying for me.

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leadership. I am blessed to have had you as my advisor from the beginning to the end of this journey.

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Biographical Sketch

Delores Patterson is currently an assistant professor in the School of Criminal Justice at an urban college in New York State. Mrs. Patterson attended Iona College, graduating in 2006 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Health Care Administration and a minor in Health Counseling. She completed her Master of Science degree in Marriage & Family Therapy in 2010 at Iona College. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2018 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Mrs. Patterson pursued her research in First-Generation African American Female Alumni Perspectives on Persistence to Degree Completion in an Urban College Setting under the direction of Dr. Anthony P. Chiarlitti and Dr. Arlene Hogan and received her Ed.D. degree in the summer of 2020.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to use a qualitative research design to examine the key factors that influenced nine first-generation African American female alumni to persist past their first year at a private urban college. The goal of this study was to gain insight into the degree of academic involvement and social interaction that first-generation African American female alumni had while attending a private urban college and if these factors posed considerable benefits to support the students' longer term commitments. A phenomenological approach was utilized to explore the experiences of first-generation African American female alumni. The exploration of this study employed semi-structured interviews, which were the primary method used to collect, code, and analyze the data to develop categories and themes. Utilizing a phenomenology approach through the lens of Tinto's (1973) student attrition and persistence model, the results were consistent with academic involvement and social integration factors that supported academic success. The results of this research study identified seven areas that the participants linked to their academic commitment that ultimately led to their successful college completion. This study includes recommendations regarding how institutions can make improvements on academic programs that contribute to retention as well as strengthen students' commitment to reach degree attainment. The recommendations include enhancing academic programs that would strengthen the students' competitive edge to contribute in the future workforce, include senior-level

students as guest speakers to improve peer participation in college success courses, and

incorporate suggestions from students during academic program planning stages.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent decades, America has made major strides in providing access to college and universities, and enrollment for women and racial/ethnic minorities categorized as first-generation, has increased dramatically (Strayhorn, 2017). First-generation college students in this context are considered students whose parents did not obtain a degree from a postsecondary institution (NCES, 2018a). However, despite the increase in undergraduate enrollment, a considerable amount of research indicates that institutions continue to be challenged with translating access into persistence and completion to graduation for low-income, first-generation students (Tinto, 2012). The research suggests that out of 4.5 million, or 24%, of enrolled first-generation students in postsecondary education, only 11% will earn a degree after 6 years compared to 55% of non-first-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The degree attainment gap is even wider for private 4-year institutions where first-generation students and their non-first-generation student peers earn a degree at a rate of 43% compared to 80% respectively (Engle & Tinto, 2008). A more recent study associated with educational statistics reported similar results revealing that 58% of first-generation college students who enrolled in a postsecondary college reached degree completion at a rate of 20% while continuing-generation students who enrolled at 79% completed a degree at a rate of 42%; therefore, first-generation college students were less likely to persist beyond 2 years of college (NCES, 2017).

Additionally, mounting pressure has been placed on postsecondary educators to improve racial disparities in persistence rates of low-income, first-generation students. While persistence rates at 2- and 4-year degree-granting institutions for full-time White students was 25%, Hispanic students persisted at a rate of 19%, and African American students had the lowest persistence at a rate of 14% 3 years after initial enrollment (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Katrevich & Aruguette, 2017; NCES, 2017). The research also indicates that while graduation rates within a 4-year postsecondary institution for White females was 51.2%, Hispanic females graduated at a rate of 36.1%, and African American females graduated at a rate of 25.2% compared to their peers (NCES, 2018a).

Consequently, the continuing challenge for higher educational lawmakers is the lack of retention and non-completion rate among first-generation students, which can create a significant impact on the occupational stability and mental well-being of students, decreasing students' ability to sustain career opportunities that support healthy lifestyles (Concordia, 2012). More importantly, evidence suggests that disparities in academic success pose serious consequences for low-achieving African American female students, yet few studies have been devoted to understanding the social barriers and low achievement that affects this population in the campus community (Booker, 2016).

To this end, the impact of low levels of degree attainment poses potentially negative consequences that can affect students, institutions, and it can weaken America's competitiveness in the global economy. Furthermore, students who do not have a college credential cannot compete in the job market, are less likely to participate in national civil affairs, and they are unable to advocate in social justice initiatives that would benefit a community (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017).

Current population classification projects an increasing demographic shift in the United States, and by the year 2050, the White population will increase by 52.5%, Hispanic population will increase by 22.5%, Asians will increase by 10.3%, and the African American population will increase by 14.6% (Levitt & Piro, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). This growing number in diversity will impact the American education, economy, and cultural systems; therefore, institutional leaders and educational policymakers must focus their efforts on increasing innovative strategies that will assist students to not only gain access to college but also earn a college degree (Levitt & Piro, 2012, Tinto, 2012). Retention and persistence, particularly among African American female students, in postsecondary education are vital for timely completion of a college degree (NCES, 2017; Walpole, Chambers, & Goss, 2014).

To better understand the experiences of African American female college students, the concepts of social integration and academic involvement that ground this study posit that a combination of these social integration and academic involvement play an integral role in their college success. African American female students face a different experience than their White counterparts in the campus environment. They have been historically marginalized, endured racial discrimination, and they report feelings of isolation while being misunderstood (Dominque, 2015; Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016; Miles, Jones, Clemons, & Golay, 2011; Robinson, Equibel, & Rich, 2013; Settles, 2006; Shahid, Nelson, & Cardemil, 2018). Yet, their resilience has produced impressive strides in higher educational attainment despite the stigma of race and gender (Shahid et al., 2018). In fact, enrollment rates for first-time African American female undergraduate students was 56% compared to their White counterparts who

enrolled at a rate of 50% in postsecondary institutions in the United States (Walpole et al., 2014) with the majority representing marginalized females. This population of marginalized females attained degree completion at a rate of 7%, which means they were more likely to leave college before completing their degree than their male counterparts who attained an educational credential at the rate of 16% (Bartman, 2015; Walpole et al., 2014). Yet, despite tremendous strides in access and graduation rates, African American female students continue to fall behind when compared to White, Hispanic, and Asian American females (Bartman, 2015).

First-Generation Students

A growing number of first-generation students continue to depart from 4-year colleges in urban college settings without completing their undergraduate degree and closing the success gap poses a serious challenge for postsecondary institutions (Parker, 2014; Woods-Warrior, 2014). First-generation students are typically defined as low-income minority students whose parents never went to college, they are challenged by multiple social forces working against their desire to re-enroll, and they are historically generalized as students of color (Concordia, 2012; Johnson & Reynolds, 2018). First-generation students experience less academic success than their peers, and they are 4 times more likely to leave college during their first year (Engle & Tinto, 2008). They face many academic and social disadvantages and do not have consistent access to social support systems. According to a recent Pell study conducted at Concordia University, 54% of first-generation female students are financially independent and many are single parents; this challenges their ability to focus on coursework (Concordia, 2012). Many also lack college readiness, which hinders their ability to re-enroll (Katrevich &

Aruguete, 2017). It is also important to note that the average age for first-generation students who begin college is 22 years, compared to the average age of traditional students who enroll at 20 years old (Concordia, 2012).

Another study from the University of California in 2011 reported that 42% of students whose parents attended college graduated within 4 years compared to only 27% of first-generation students who graduated within 4 years. The report also found that 60% of students whose parents attended college graduated within 5 years compared to 45% of first-generation dependent students who graduated during within 5 years (Concordia, 2012). Consequently, first-generation students face both external and internal barriers, including lack of time-management skills and low socioeconomic status, and they are less prepared to handle the rigor of a college course load (Conefrey, 2018). Designing effective retention programs to narrow the achievement gap, therefore, becomes an important focus of attention for higher education administrators (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; van der Meer, Jansen, & Torenbeck, 2010).

Problem Statement

Enrollment through to degree attainment continues to be a critical concern in American colleges, and if the country is going to remain a competitive nation in the global marketplace, the research suggests that institutions should implement intervention programs that address social and academic challenges of first-generation students (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; Tinto, 2012). Retention and graduation shape students' ability to compete in the global economy and obtaining a degree in higher education means that a graduate's earning potential is much greater than a non-graduate's earning potential. In fact, Tinto (2012) stated that the gap in lifetime earnings between those who

complete a bachelor's degree program and those who depart prior to degree completion is over $750,000, and students who complete an associate degree can earn approximately $354,000 over their working lifetime.

Demographic classifications in the U.S. population are steadily shifting, and projections hold that by the year 2050, 47.4% of individuals will identify as Black, Hispanic, or Asian, and nearly 24% of this population, at the time of this study, represent first-generation undergraduates, while 55% represent non-Hispanic White students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Levitt & Piro, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Although approximately 4.5 million low-income, first-generation students were enrolled in postsecondary education in 2008, Engle and Tinto maintained that disparities in degree attainment continue to be a complex concern. This poses an ongoing challenge for higher educational industries to address the lack of degree attainment among first-generation students. The research confirms that the first few weeks of a students' college experience predict whether the student will re-enroll (Tinto, 1993). Given extensive studies on the disadvantages faced by first-generation students, it is evident that persistence is predicated on both social and academic involvement at a college or university (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). This concern places a demand on higher educational leaders to reevaluate social integration and academic engagement activities in an effort to decrease student dropout rates among this the first-generation student population (Chen, 2014).

Theoretical Rationale

The primary theoretical framework that has contributed significant research on student premature departure was conducted by Tinto (1993), who emphasized that the

first year of college is critical to institutional policy makers aimed at reducing student attrition. Considerable attention was given to the importance of the first year of college, which is vital to the process of retention and persistence. Further explanation of the Tinto (1993) theory describes the students' *intention* and *commitment* that is especially important in the development of the students' experiences and subsequently shapes their motivation to re-enroll. The seminal work of Tinto (1993) can be defined as an explanation of the "longitudinal process of students leaving from institutions of higher education while exploring the complexity of behaviors that underlie the phenomenon" (p. 3), and an understanding of the underlying issues will help educators to answer the question of how to design holistic student retention programs (Tinto, 1993).

According to Woods-Warrior (2014), the theoretical models dominating research on college retention were initially developed between 1970 and 1980. At the forefront of the existing research was a postmodern worldview regarding retention that reviewed longitudinal studies on student attrition to distinguish the differences of student experiences in their first year of study. Tinto's (1993) theoretical approach combined with the work of Astin (1970), Durkheim (1951), and Van Gennep (1960) and attempted to explain the student experiences and events that led to their departure as well as the institutional actions that contributed to this complex process.

The theoretical model that attempted to explain the process of student retention was rooted in the groundbreaking research of Astin's (1970) theory on student involvement that proposes that student success is based on high levels of student involvement in campus activities (Woods-Warrior, 2014). Although Astin's (1975) research on college persistence provided a preliminary framework for future researchers,

Tinto (1993) expanded upon this comprehensive work with the advancement of the student departure theory.

In 1973, Tinto and Cullen began to investigate longitudinal studies on student attrition, which formed the foundational variables of academic and social integration for Tinto's (1973) model. The components of student attrition and persistence variables included (a) pre-entry attributes, (b) goals/commitment, (c) institutional experiences, (d) integration, (e) intentions and external commitments, and (f) outcome (Metz, 2005). Consequently, inclusion of these variables was adapted from Van Gennep's (1960) rite of passage theory, which attempts to show a period of transition from family separation and adjustment stages from students' past lives while adopting new norms (Milem & Berger, 1997). This transition was considered a necessary addition to a student's integration, which also identified reasons for student departure (Metz, 2005).

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to question their decision to attend college, and this often stems from past school invalidation experiences (Rendòn & Muńoz, 2011). For example, students who did poorly in high school may not have gotten a clear sense of academic direction from their teachers, and they probably did not receive affirmation and guidance of their own internal self-capabilities and potential, which meant they were more likely to need extra validation in the college environment. For this reason, institutional involvement and social integration could be the key to a student's college success (Rendòn & Muńoz, 2011).

Overall, Tinto's (1993) theory provides the major framework for investigating issues associated with student persistence through to degree attainment. The key factors related to these concerns were identified by student social and academic engagement,

which can have a significant impact on college retention. As revealed in the research, developing effective student integration activities continues to dominate the agenda of educational policymakers to incorporate programs that provide evidence of successful student outcomes (Metz, 2005).

Tinto's (1993) theory confirmed that the effects of academic and social engagement behaviors matter to postsecondary institutions, and they can be predictors of continued persistence to degree attainment (Flynn, 2014). Combined efforts of research conducted by Tinto (1993) and the aforementioned researchers reflect on the longitudinal character of student departure, and findings concluded that the retention process begins in the first year of college. The discussion on student departure in Tinto's (1993) theory draws on evidence that helps to explain the phenomenon of interest in this current study.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine how first-generation African American female alumni defined academic involvement and social integration and how these factors contributed to their college success. This study explored the predictors of academic involvement and social integration that supported the African American female alumni to persistence beyond the first year of college through to degree attainment. While there has been considerable research on the predictors related to retention and persistence for first-generation African American female students, data pertaining to the alumni success stories during the first year, which support academic and social engagement, is not sufficiently documented, especially regarding how the alumni defined (a) academic involvement, (b) academic programs that supported academic goals, (c) social integration that influenced re-enrollment, (c) barriers on and

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off the campus environment, and (d) academic programs that helped the alumni overcome barriers (Morales, 2014).

While there are other predictors that indicate successful outcomes for first-generation college students, the importance of this study was to evaluate social integration and academic engagement factors that support and promote student achievement, institutional retention goals, and a healthy society. More importantly, the goal of this study was to better inform college and university administrators regarding implementing academic services to promote the first-generation African American female student population toward degree completion.

Research Questions

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested that a qualitative research approach in a natural setting, where the researcher is engaged in telephone dialogue, is an appropriate way to develop an understanding of the problem under study. The use of qualitative research allows the researcher to make meaning of the lived experiences of individuals by talking directly to the participant, observing nonverbal behaviors, and by asking open-ended questions to gain rich in-depth context into the phenomenon. This study focused on the factors of social integration and academic involvement that led first-generation African American female alumni to successfully attain degree completion. Thus, this study was guided by four research questions:

1. What factors contributed to the academic success of first-generation African American female alumni?

2. How did first-generation African American female alumni in a private urban college describe their academic experiences during their first year?

3. What social integration activities influenced first-generation African American female alumni to persist during their first year and go on to graduate?

4. What strategies did first-generation African American female alumni describe as helpful to overcome barriers to persistence in college?

Potential Significance of the Study

College success is often measured by student retention and persistence. The first year of college serves as a pivotal time for students, as well as administrators, in higher education to facilitate a cohesive academic environment that ensures successful outcomes for all students (Parker, 2018). With that said, by the year 2050 colleges and universities will undergo a culture shift in the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity of students in the United States (Levitt & Piro, 2012). In light of this forecast, it is crucial for postsecondary educational leaders to prepare students for the degree completion that is required in order to compete for jobs in the future workforce (Bottiani, Larson, Debnam, Bischoff, & Bradshaw, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

This study will add to the body of knowledge by informing administrators in postsecondary institutions of the pressing need to develop policy that supports first-generation college students to persist. More importantly, from a societal perspective, the consequences of not meeting this challenge threatens current and future institutional enrollment objectives that can negatively impact America's place in the global economy (Morales, 2014).

Furthermore, this study will be significant in helping administrators and educators in higher education to better understand first-generation African American female

students through practices that enhance engaging learning environments. A clearer understanding of this concept will also raise the awareness of higher educational leaders to develop institutional processes dedicated to diverse populations with a goal to move all students to degree completion (Booker, 2016).

Definition of Terms

The following are the definition of the terms for this study:

Academic Involvement – activities that include faculty-student engagement over coursework, access to college resources, tutoring, mentoring, and advisement that support college success (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017).

Continuing-Generation Student – individuals in a higher education institution who have an educational profile and characteristic, with at least one parent who attained a bachelor's degree or higher level of degree completion, of attending college and persisting to degree attainment at a higher rate than first-generation students. This term can be used interchangeable with "non-first-generation student" (NCES, 2017).

First-Generation Student – individuals enrolled at a college or university whose parent or parents did not attain a 4-year college degree, and they are typically first-time freshmen from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfeld, 2017; NCES, 2018a).

Lived Experience – the result of conversations with individuals from their point of view that unfolds meaning and uncovers events in their lived world. In the case of this study, lived experience is the cultivation of conversations that encourage an individual to talk about the academic environment from their perspective (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Persistence – students' continual pursuit to complete their college degree program at any an institution of higher learning (Tinto, 2012).

Retention – the rate at which an educational institution retains freshmen students through to degree attainment. Retention can also be used to define persistence (Tinto, 2012).

Sense of Belonging – an individual's feeling of being accepted or connected. In the case of this study, students' full experiences in the college environment (Booker, 2016).

Social Integration – an educational institution's intention to allocate and employ nonacademic programs that connect students to college and university resources to foster persistence and retention (Henning, 2012; Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2017).

Validation – the intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in-class and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty, administrators, staff, family members, and peers) (Rendòn, 1994).

Chapter Summary

As the demographic shift in American society continues to project an undeniable increase of a multicultural population, educational policymakers are challenged to explore new ways to integrate diversity objectives and develop effective student-engagement initiatives to support first-generation African American female college students toward degree completion. This chapter introduced the increasing premature departure rates among first-generation African American female college students (Tinto, 1993). This study looked primarily through the lens of Tinto's (1993) intention and commitment model that predicts factors of retention and persistence. The purpose of this

study is to support institutional intervention protocols to retain and improve degree attainment goals for first-generation American African female college students. The importance of enhancing social integration and academic involvement is clearly a problem, which, if not reversed to produce positive outcomes, can have negative consequences on institutions' retention goals, the students, and America's global economy (Duke, 2017).

A discussion and review on related studies is presented in Chapter 2. This overview includes a brief review on (a) first-generation students, (b) first-generation African American female college students, (c) student engagement and the campus environment, (d) factors influencing social integration and academic involvement, and (e) factors influencing student persistence in higher education. Chapter 3 discusses the research design, methodology, and data analysis that was used to conduct this study. The results of the research are presented and discussed in Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings and recommendations based on the analysis of the data.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Demographic classifications in the United States, by the year 2050, are predicted to shift into a multicultural population (Levitt & Piro, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Along with this prediction, researchers have reported a steady increase of low-income, first-generation students enrolling in colleges and universities who comprise approximately 21% of the student population (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). The college enrollment rate for White students is expected to increase by 7%, for African American and Asian students an approximate 20% increase is expected, and the enrollment rate for Hispanic students is expected to increase by 18% (NCES, 2017). However, despite a steady increase in student enrollment, low numbers of college completion for first-generation students continues to exist, and approximately 11% of first-generation students are expected to earn a degree compared to 55% of their non-first-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). With this in mind, results from the Walpole et al. (2014) study further report that the percentage of Hispanic female students were awarded a degree at a rate of 23%, non-Hispanic White female students were awarded a degree at a rate of 28%; yet, first-generation African American female students reached degree completion at a significantly less rate of 7% (Walpole et al., 2014). While much research documents the reasons for lack of academic completion, the goal of this study attempts to understand if social integration and academic involvement

contributed to successful outcomes for first-generation African American female alumni who graduated from a private urban college (Morales, 2014).

The following literature review examines the results of research closely related to this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), and it describes areas of relevance. The review begins with a description of first-generation students and first-generation African American female students and their challenge to attain a college degree. Second, the importance of student engagement and its effect on the students' sense of belonging is evaluated. Third, research on social integration and academic involvement factors that influence student persistence and retention are discussed. This review concludes with a discussion on the consequences that challenge the American economy due to premature student departure from college.

Topic Analysis

The following sections provide an analysis of the literature related to factors influencing social and academic integration in higher education and the predictors of first-generation African American female college students who persisted beyond their first year. The review provides a context for a qualitative study on first-generation African American college females who were defined as first-generation college students and the factors that influenced them to enroll and persist to degree completion. The chapter also explores the educational trajectories of first-generation students, specifically relating to factors that influenced social and academic integration and student engagement as well as predictors that influenced their persistence and retention (Walpole et al., 2014).

First-Generation College Students

First-generation students often struggle with college adjustment, and some believe that university administrators are unaware of their challenge to understand the college process (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014; Gibbons, Rhinehart, & Hardin, 2019). Gibbons et al. (2019) employed various concepts of the social cognitive career theory to view specific barriers that affected first-generation students' college adjustment. Using a sample size of 11 women and four men from a public state university in the Southeastern United States, these researchers conducted a qualitative study by facilitating two focus groups to collect data. Using themes from the social cognitive career theory, findings from the study emphasized two preconceived themes, suggesting that students needed to be involved in early preparation prior to college entry to experience a positive transition. Although the results from this study included an overrepresentation of racial minority students in an academic support center, it confirmed the continued struggle of first-generation college student females to make positive adjustments in the college environment (Gibbons et al., 2019).

Conefrey (2018) performed a qualitative case study describing some of the issues faced by incoming first-year students at a private 4-year institution in a northern California college. The researcher used constructs from the social cognitive career theory to analyze the role of high-impact practices (HIP) on self-efficacy and engagement to improve student persistence in literacy and study skills. HIP, in this context, is defined as the institutional implementation of experiences and activities that broaden academic skills while promoting student involvement toward persistence. The overarching question posed in this study was do HIPs positively impact engagement and retention (Conefrey,

2018)? The focus for the Conefrey (2018) study centered on first-generation students'

course work using two college courses. The sample size included one instructor and 19

first-generation college students. Data was collected by creating an online ePortfolio for

students to upload multiple essays with feedback coming from peers and instructors

inclusive of screenshots, videos, audio, and other multimedia technology (Conefrey,

2018). First-generation students were recruited by email from the 2015-2016 and 2017-

2018 cohort. Results revealed that during the first semester, students were positively

engaged in using their HIPs ePortfolios towards academic learning while on campus.

This study concluded that by using writing samples from an English course as the

primary data source revealed that overall academic and social interaction for students

who participated in several HIPs processes, had a beneficial impact on student

persistence (Conefrey, 2018).

According to a study outlined by Hebert (2018), high-achieving, first-generation

students experience difficulty maintaining their status at the college level and many come

from low-income working-class families. In an effort to sustain intellectual engagement

to increase retention, this author urged the educational community to develop an

awareness that high-achieving students, who grew up in families from low

socioeconomic environments, can also attend college. In fact, Hebert (2018) conducted a

qualitative study aimed to understand the experiences of first-generation college students

using a phenomenological interview process. A selection of 10 high-achieving students

from a state university in the Southeast United States participated in 2-hour interviews,

which occurred over three consecutive semesters. Using a semi-structured interview

method, data collection involved asking open-ended questions to explore the

phenomenon regarding how low-income students successfully attained high academic goals amidst adverse conditions. Results of the study confirm that emotionally supportive K-12 educators and family involvement helped students to thrive during rigorous academic studies in high school and intellectual engagement at the university level. The Hebert (2018) study recommended that qualitative researchers conduct future research focused on the effects of feelings, attitudes, and subjectivities throughout the data collection process in order to gain a better understanding of first-generation high-achieving students' economically challenging experiences in higher education (Hebert, 2018).

Havlik, Pulliam, Malott, and Steen (2017) sought to explore the lived experiences of first-generation college students' persistence through to degree attainment. These researchers stressed the need for higher education administrators to become strongly aware of the significant future contributions that this population would provide to the nation's economy. The investigation began at a mid-sized private, predominant White institution and examined the lived experiences of how first-generation college students persisted through their academic studies. Use of an interpretive phenomenological analytic method incorporating multiple social categories, such as race, religion, and socioeconomic status, allowed researchers to better understand the experiences of being a first-generation college student. A focus group included 18 full-time first-generation college students, 10 females and eight males, ranging 18 to 22 years of age and 19 full-time retention professors from the university. Group interviews and recorded audio and two data sets were used to collect data, and the student focus groups were the principal data source. Results from this study revealed that first-generation college students

experienced "a sense of *Otherness*" (Havlik et al., 2017, p. 11), and participants defined this as feelings of isolation and misrepresentation in the academic setting. These factors led to the realization as to why these students struggled to navigate socially through interactions in the campus environment. One female student described how issues of feeling left out impacted her desire to academically survive, and they threatened her persistence during the first year of college (Havlik et al., 2017). The researchers pointed out the vital need for educators to continue to develop culture-specific practices that support continued student enrollment.

According to Galligan (2014), disparities exist between first-year generation students and their non-first-generation college peers as it relates to academic success, student attrition, and retention. A study on the federally funded TRiO program was performed to explore the challenges of social integration that tend to decrease the academic success rate for first-generation college students. The TRiO program, established in 1968, had a mission to increase postsecondary persistence, graduation, and transfer rates for low-income students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities (Galligan, 2014). The Galligan (2014) study aimed to obtain information on the perceived perceptions of academic success for first-generation college students who were enrolled in the TRiO/Student Support Services program at a Midwestern technical college (Galligan, 2014; Zhang & Chan, 2007).

The study performed by Galligan (2014) used a mixed-methods design to administer qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys to a sample size of 92 first-generation students from a liberal arts transfer program. Out of 91 eligible participants, 51 students responded to the survey. A finding revealed that student-teacher validation

was the key factor that helped students connected with their instructor; thus, validation is a significant element for academic success. As a result of this investigation, it was recommended that all new staff undergo a comprehensive cultural competency and awareness training during employee orientations (Galligan, 2014). To add, it was important for educational staff members to understand the needs and characteristics of the underrepresented student population beyond racial and ethnic differences. More importantly, it was all-encompassing for college educators to include effective cultural awareness practices in order to promote student success (Cousins, 2014).

According to D'Amico and Dika (2014), higher education for first-generation college students should be considered the pathway to sustaining a quality of life, and they contended that if more students can persist to degree completion, they are less likely to be unemployed. These researchers used a predictor known as the time of initial admission to investigate the first year grade point averages (GPAs) and second year retention of first-generation college students and non-first-generation college students in search of potential barriers that might affect success. In an effort to find potential barriers, the study included primary thematic variables such as cultural, academic, and integration to student success, and then matched these variables with the time of initial enrollment, which served as bridges for the primary themes (D'Amico & Dika, 2014).

D'Amico and Dika (2014) performed this study at an urban doctoral university in the Southeastern United States, and participants were selected from the first-generation student cohorts who had completed two fall semesters. The university's student records system was used to collect data on 1,433 first-generation college students, and the information included term of initial entry, whether the student persisted to the next

semester, GPAs, gender, and time of initial enrollment. The time of admission and initial enrollment variables were evaluate using a casual-comparative design. This design included measuring the students' retention and academic performance. The second step was to conduct a logistic regression in order to determine which variable impacted the second year retention and first-generation college students' cumulative GPA. Results from the logistic regression analyses proved to be the best indicator of student retention for first-generation college students and non-first-generation college students, and the indicator was associated with the likelihood for this population of students to re-enroll (D'Amico & Dika, 2014).

First-Generation, African American Females

Enrollment in the U.S. postsecondary institutions has dramatically increased in student diversity: it is estimated that 21% of first-generation college students (FGCS) account for the undergraduate population (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). Today's educational leaders continue to be challenged to develop initiatives that strengthen student attrition, (McConnell, 2000), and for many FGCS, higher education has been a journey that begins and ends prematurely (Engle, 2007; Galligan, 2014; Tinto, 2003). First-generation college students can generally be defined as either college students whose parent/s did not complete a 4-year college degree, students who are the first members in their family to attend college, or students whose parents had no college experience. They typically come from low-income backgrounds of underrepresented racial and ethnic cultures, and African American women are considered to be the majority of this student population in the United States (McConnell, 2000; Walpole et al., 2014). Consequently, first-generation students face both external and internal barriers

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including lack of time-management skills, low socioeconomic status, and being less prepared to handle the rigor of a college course load (Conefrey, 2018).

In a 2017 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the enrollment gap between African American female and African American male students who enrolled in bachelor's degree programs in American institutions was the widest during the 2014 academic year at a rate of 62% versus 38%, respectively (NCES, 2017). The 2017 report went on to reveal that African American females surpassed their same-race male counterparts to be awarded bachelor's degrees at a rate of 44% versus 34% (Kelly, Raines, Brown, French, & Stone, 2019; NCES, 2017).

The focus of this current study sought to gain a deeper understand of the experiences that assisted African American female alumni participants to reach degree completion. Knowing this level of achievement may provide an avenue for educational practitioners to gain a deeper meaning of the persistence of first-generation African American female alumni and the unique experiences that led to their academic success, which could inform higher education institutions on predictors for re-enrollment to graduation (Kelly et al., 2019; NCES, 2017).

Despite the persistence research portraying African American females as resilient, they are still a neglected population who receive little academic support and attention, and they are likely to be underrepresented at colleges and underprepared for college (Kelly et al., 2019; Walpole et al., 2014). The day-to-day life of African American females differs from African American males in terms of domestic experiences because many of these women often work to balance academic studies and home responsibilities. They endure multiple loyalties to their social life, their children, and their work, which

often create hindrances for the striving student. As a result, conflicting values arise between academics and working to support their families (Walpole et al., 2014).

In a study conducted by Walpole et al. (2014), an exploration of the educational trajectories of African American females was examined. These researchers sought to analyze persistence, degree completion, and graduate studies with a focus on African American college females, compared to African American males and other women who started at a community college. Using longitudinal data from the beginning postsecondary and baccalaureate and beyond data sets, from 1993 through to 2003, as well as parental education degree attainment variables, students were followed through their postsecondary education. The sample size of African American graduates who enrolled in a 2-year college prior to completing their bachelor's degrees was 16,003. The total sample size of African American females was 10,200. The analysis included two stages: the first stage explored through *t* tests was descriptive information to investigate differences in retention, associate and bachelor's degree completion, and graduate school attendance. The second stage focused on multivariate analysis, using logistic regression to determine variables associated with bachelor and graduate degree completion for African American females (Walpole et al., 2017). Findings in the Walpole et al. (2017) study concluded that African American female college students attending a community college were significantly less likely to attain an associate degree (4%) compared to their White female peers (15%). Within the context of student persistence, African American females' prematurely departed college at 68% while all other females prematurely departed college at 48%. The study implies that greater attention is warranted to support African American females who enroll at higher rates than African American males and

their other female counterparts, yet their persistence to pursue higher education credentials is significantly lower (Walpole et al., 2017).

Being involved and socially integrated in a campus community can present enormous challenges for African American female college students, and there is an achievement gap between African American female students and other ethnicities relating to involvement and integration in college and universities (Miller, 2017; Museus, 2008; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). According to Miller (2017), although higher education continues to enhance learning opportunities that lead to successful student matriculation, African American females have not been at the forefront of educational discussions regarding success, and they are generally researched through their racial and gender identity. In a quantitative study using Tinto's (1993) student departure theory and Astin's (1984) student involvement theory, Miller (2017) sought to explore the relationship of African American female students' social integration and student involvement. The researcher conceded that too often African American female students contend with hostile and unwelcoming environments, which can impact their psychological well-being when trying to adapt to the institution's social fabric. African American college female students, in particular, are challenged by perceptions of alienation and interpersonal relationship stresses that can cause difficulty in their social adjustment. Subsequently, students who have a greater social and academic integration into the campus community are more likely to re-enroll.

Miller (2017) employed the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ) instrument to collect data from 2005 to 2010 cohort to assess the influence of social integration and student involvement on the experience of African American females. The

sample size included 566 freshmen first-year African American college female students. The variables examined within the CSEQ were social integration, student involvement, and self-reporting gains. Student involvement was defined as campus activities outside of the classroom, and self-reporting gains were gauged by five gain factors, listed as personal development, general education, intellectual skills, technology, and vocational preparation. These factors were used to understand the overall experience of the Africa American college female student. The results of the Miller (2017) study indicate that all interaction between the self-reported gains and both social integration and social involvement positively correlated to retention and persistence. The Miller (2017) study further demonstrated that campus initiatives to promote success for African American college females was significant.

Factors Influencing Social and Academic Integration

Social integration and a sense of connectedness correlates with the ability of first-generation college students to thrive in the academic environment. In fact, recent research suggested that these relationship-specific areas have a direct impact on the students' psychological well-being and academic progress (Ma & Shea, 2019). In a continued effort to support retention, Ma and Shea (2019) contributed to the body of research by exploring contextual factors to explain the link between *perceived barriers* and career *outcome expectations* that may affect the sense of college connectedness for first-generation college students. These scholars also confirmed that a critical relationship between academic and social integration on campus is linked to the first-generation college students' continued enrollment, which strengthens persistence through to graduation (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Ma & Shea, 2019).

Ma and Shea (2019) conducted a quantitative study to explore the factors that contributed to the correlation between first-generation college students' *perceived barriers* and their *career outcome expectations*. The investigation began by recruiting a sample size consisting of 153 female college students from an undergraduate psychology class. Two public universities from the west and east coast of the United States were chosen to participate, and scoring was measured using The Perceptions of Barriers Scale-Revised and The Social Connectedness Scale-Campus Version (Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001; Ma & Shea, 2019). Results from this mediation analysis demonstrated that negative career expectations were associated with high levels of perceived barriers. It is important to note that this study could have yielded a stronger resolution using a longitudinal design representative of students pursuing careers from other college majors. The Ma and Shea (2019) study provided additional evidence that supports institutional goals to cultivate effective intervention programs in an effort to motivate first-generation female students' willingness to engage in a positive educational experience.

Means and Pyne (2017) conducted a similar study to Ma and Shea (2019) and argued that it is essential for students to feel a sense of belonging to the campus community, which can hinder or increase academic performance. These researchers observed that despite institutional improvements toward increased enrollment, achievement gaps between first-generation students and non-first-generation students continued to exist. The Means and Pyne (2017) study was guided by an investigation that questioned whether institutional support systems could increase connectedness both socially and academically for low-income and first-generation college students, and they questioned if the support systems sufficiently helped these students to successfully

navigate through campus resources. Using a qualitative case study, Means and Pyne (2017) followed 10 low-income, first-generation students during their first year of studies. Participants were purposely selected from a sample size of undergraduate students from Lakeside Academy, a predominantly White institution.

In order to better understand the students' lived experiences, data was collected from three semi-structured, one-on-one interviews over a 10-month period. Findings from the study conclude that precollege activities were a strong support mechanism and the study demonstrated that students' precollege activities supported a strong sense-of-belonging in the college experience of first-generation students. The significant contribution from the study noted that both authors were low-income, working-class, first-generation college students. More importantly, it was clear that positionality invariably shaped the opinions and experiences of the researchers' privileges and oppression in higher education. A students' sense-of-belonging has been associated with institutional connections and supportive interactions, which strengthen their social awareness on a campus environment (Means & Pyne, 2017).

There are considerable prerequisites that enable students to build a healthy psychological well-being that helps them to feel like valued members of the campus community (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). In fact, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) conducted a study on how White and minority college students defined a sense-of-belonging in an academic setting. The location for this study was a mid-sized public university in the Northeast United States. A purposeful recruitment of 51 racially mixed, first-generation students including White, Asian American/Pacific, Bi/multiracial, Black, and Latino were categorized accordingly. The researchers employed constructionist

grounded theory methods, in-depth interviews, and two series of semi-structured individual interviews during the fall and spring semester, and this was also considered the primary source for the data collection (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

Vaccaro and Newman (2016) conceded that the participants viewed sense of belonging differently and offered a variety of definitions emerging from words such as *comfortable* and *fitting in* with campus surroundings. Interestingly, these terms were used by both privileged and minority students. To add, minority participants emphasized the importance of an unobstructed learning environment describing connectedness, fairness, and equitable treatment for all students as factors leading to a sense of campus community (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). The study contributed new knowledge to the body of research and suggested that no prior literature had connected perceptions of campus environment, relationships, and involvement to a sense of belonging. Another significant contribution reinforced the need for college administrators to reevaluate policy and incorporate a new area called *social media learning objectives*, which could have a positive impact on academic outcomes (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

Factors Influencing Student Persistence and Retention

Morales (2014) posited that the difficulties that colleges and universities face in effectively retaining low-income, first-generation students to persist beyond the first year of college continues to be a pressing concern. Of particular interest to administrators and educational policymakers is to understand why some students succeed in college and other students leave prematurely (Toutkoushian, May-Trifiletti, & Clayton, 2019). Additionally, recent research on first-generation students uncovered that this population had a higher probably for attrition than traditional first-year students (Toutkoushian,

May-Trifiletti, & Clayton, 2019). Using a longitudinal study of 2002 data, based on parents' highest level of education, Toutkoushian et al. (2019) examined how first-generation college students defined preparation for degree attainment from 2 and 4-year colleges. Relying on the Educational Longitudinal Study - ELS.02, a national survey for data collection, a sample size of approximately 7,800 students who indicated that they were dependent on their parents were surveyed during their 10th grade year in 2002. The same cohort of students completed follow-up surveys in 2004, 2006, and 2012.

To examine graduation rates of first-generation students, Toutkoushian et al. (2019) employed a multinomial logistic regression using three dependent variables. The variable of interest was associated with whether students persisted to obtain their degree in 2012. Other related variables were used to interpret whether the students obtained a bachelor's degree, achieved an associate degree, or did not achieve a degree. Each column of data were categorized by the educational level of the students' parents, and the participants were limited to only students who were enrolled in college. The results of the Toutkoushian et al. (2019) study found that large educational gaps existed in college completion rates among first-generation college students whose parents did not attain a degree. Overall, conclusions for the study uncovered that students with one college-educated parent, reached degree attainment at an 18% lower rate than their peers who had two college-educated parents and who reached degree attainment at a rate of 23%. It was also noted that females from this population were reported more likely than male students to persist to get a college degree (Toutkoushian et al., 2019).

Identifying predictors that ensure student academic preparedness is an ongoing commitment of institutions, and they continue to produce uncertainty in their quest to

remove barriers that block persistence (Hepworth, Littlepage, & Hancock, 2018). It is paramount for institutions of higher learning to expand their knowledge on these predictors and have continuous administrative conversations to locate the necessary balance between challenges and support systems that promote student persistence (Strayhorn, 2017). A key theoretical perspective suggests that if students believe that the institution genuinely supports positive social integration, the likelihood of continued enrollment is evident (Tinto, 1975). Hepworth et al. (2018), therefore, sought to understand how student perceptions of "social integration, perceived institutional commitment, and academic preparedness" (p. 45) impacted academic performance.

In a quest to identify student perceptions, Hepworth et al. (2018) conducted a study at a public, regional, residential university in West Kentucky. Data collection was done by giving students, enrolled in an introduction to a criminal justice course, a voluntary online survey over a period of three semesters (spring 2015, fall 2015, spring 2016). An ordinal logistic regression was conducted on three variables to explore if social integration, institutional involvement, and academic readiness could impact persistence. Overall, the findings stressed the importance for colleges to be actively involved in providing intervention resources to school districts that promote college readiness programs. The Hepworth et al (2018) study also revealed that the institutional commitment to implement effective social integration activities had a positive influence on students scoring higher grades, which led to increased retention.

According to Garriott, Navarro, and Flores (2017), by 2030, career opportunities within the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) field will be in great demand. Thus, it is critical for postsecondary practitioners to examine factors that

promote first-generation college students' persistence as potential contributors to the future workforce—not only in this field-specific area but for the American economy at large. America's place in the global hierarchy is predicated on successful educational outcomes that increase the number of first-generation students' continued enrollment in colleges across the country (Morales, 2014). On a mission to understand how student attrition might impact the nation's global economy, Garriott et al. (2017) performed a study using social cognitive career theory to explore the relationship between parental support as a predictor of engineering-related learning outcomes and persistence intentions for first-generation college students. Participants for this investigation were chosen from a Hispanic-serving college in the Southwestern Region of the United States, and a sample size of 130 first-generation college students were selected who majored in engineering. A 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), using a parental support variable as a predictor, was administered to a sample size of 91 Latino/Latina students. In addition, to strengthening the reliability of the survey data collection, participants who did not complete the survey were contacted via postcards, email, and phones calls (Garriott et al., 2017).

      The study performed by Garriott et al. (2017) noted that parental guidance was a key predictor for first-generation students to build healthy relationships with college educators to gain positive feedback on their academic performance. The Garriott et al. (2017) study also provided valuable insight to the body of existing literature recommending the inclusion of additional performance-based experiences, such as physiological and emotional learning experiences, as precursors to persistence intentions.

Premature departure from a university usually occurs prior to the second year of college, the first year has shown to especially important (Tinto, 1993), and researchers have challenged administrators within institutions of higher learning to consider the reasons why students may or may not persist at the college level. Morrow and Ackermann (2012) found that college administrators are in search of factors that can be used to determine a students' persistence to strengthen a university's retention goals. The underlying question is, "Can a sense of community on the college campus motivate an intention to persist for first-generation students?" A study performed by Morrow and Ackermann (2012) aimed to assess the importance of a sense of belonging and motivation. These researchers sought to understand if *feeling valued* was a predictor of the students' long-term commitment to complete their academic studies beyond their sophomore year. Participants included 960 first-year undergraduate university students who completed an online survey containing questions regarding the students' campus experiences.

Morrow and Ackermann (2012) used the Sense-of-Belonging Scale in their study, which allowed respondents to rate perceived areas relative to perceived peer support, perceived classroom comfort, and perceived faculty involvement. The overall results revealed that perceived faculty support was a positive indicator that strengthened the students' intentions to continue their academic studies. Findings also confirmed that increased perceived peer support generated increased student resilience in returning the next semester. Relevant insights to the research stressed the need for institutional educators to look at specific nonacademic factors that would attempt to explain retention

in an effort to modify program policies to better prepare students for degree completion (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012).

Hu, McCormick, and Gonyea (2011) contended that measuring student learning presents many challenges for an institution's retention goals. These researchers aimed to examine if the relationship between different approaches, relative to college grades, students' self-reported gains, and the direct-assessment of learning gains, supported outcomes to persist (Hu et al., 2011). Data collection for this study came from a 2006 cohort of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education using a sample size of 2,297 students from a diverse group from 14, four-year colleges. The results were a combination of various survey instruments conducted at the end of the 2007 spring semester. Overall results from several logistic regressions and students' self-reported gain indicated that students' grade-point averages increased with faculty involvement and positively impacted persistence to degree completion (Hu et al., 2011).

First-generation college students face unique career development and occupational stability challenges, which can significantly impact their ability to pursue higher levels of education (Tate et al., 2015). Tate et al. (2015) claimed that higher levels of education contributed to sustained employability, which is critical to the American economy. They also argued that students whose parents had a low-socioeconomic status compounded the support necessary for these students to gain access to graduate school. Consequently, these scholars sought to investigate the influence of self-efficacy, coping efficacy, and family values as predictors that initiated increased levels of higher education for first-generation college students (Tate et al., 2015).

An online survey was used to recruit 170 students and 158 directors from the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, a federally funded program to prepare students for graduate studies (Tate et al., 2015). A mixed sample of ethnic backgrounds included 73% female, 25% males, and one individual identifying as a transgender student. Five assessment instruments, including the Graduate Education Self Efficacy, Perceptions of Barriers, and Coping with Barriers scales, were used to assess the students' intention to attend graduate school. Conclusions using only students pursuing a graduate degree suggested that self-efficacy partially influenced the students' pursuit to attend graduate school, and the career-related family influence only had a partial impact on the students' pursuit of a graduate degree (Tate et al., 2015).

Student-Engagement and the Campus Environment

Researchers have made claims for decades that non-academic factors, such as lack of student-engagement, are connected to reasons why colleges and universities struggle to retain students (Astin, 1999; Kimbark et al., 2017; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Moreover, ongoing reviews reveal that non-academic factors play a critical role in the learning environment, and the value of engagement is essential to measuring student outcomes (Kahu, 2013). Astin (1984) theorized that college students' involvement includes spending time on campus and being involved in social interactions and having good academic performance, which are key factors that influence continued enrollment.

Kimbark et al. (2017) attempted to investigate if participation in a Student Success Course (SSC) was linked to student engagement and persistence. Participants for this study included 432 students who responded to the Community College Survey of

Student Engagement questionnaire. Qualitative data was extracted from an archived database, including students who took the SSC the previous year, and the validity of data was determined using a triangulation of data sources. Overall, results from a chi-squared test of independence reported that 99% of SSC students enrolled the following semester and student engagement for these participants increased after taking the SSC (Kimbark et al., 2017).

Although an enormous amount of time has been spent on identifying the unique challenges for first-generation college students, universities continue to work on efforts to provide special programs, such as the first-year seminars, aimed to minimize early departure rates (Everett, 2017). The primary purpose of these seminars are to support the students' engagement and well-being while transitioning into the college environment. During the fall semester of 2012, an experiment was conducted to test first-generation college students' engagement and well-being through visual narratives. Participants from a medium-sized 4-year public liberal arts college included 53 first-year students who were enrolled in two sections of a mandatory first-year seminar. The central goal of the Everett study was to support students to had a positive transition into college using the visual narrative project by Week 9 of the 15-week semester. Data collection was extracted from the visual narratives and student reflection papers using a qualitative analysis to identify emergent themes (Everett, 2017).

Similar to Kimbark et al. (2017), the Everett (2017) study aimed to demonstrate if data from the visual narrative project fostered first-generation college students' social engagement and personal well-being toward re-enrollment. From the institutional level, the findings from the Everett study recommended that administrators hold continuous

discussions centered on reevaluating the existing retention protocols giving attention to increasing success rates and devoting time to understanding the personal well-being for first-generation students (Everett, 2017). It was also noted by Everett that an understanding of non-academic factors does play a significant role in a student's decision to leave college, and non-academic factors could play a key role in successful academic outcomes. From the classroom level, the Everett findings suggest that the visual view has a tremendous impact on employing early teaching and learning approaches that stimulate first-generation students' level of interest and engagement (Bovill, Bulley, & Morss, 2011; Everett, 2017). Although the study did not measure an in-depth account of the effectiveness of teaching strategies and the relationship between educators and students, its significance plays a crucial role in encouraging culturally responsive pedagogical practices to support institutional re-enrollment goals (Everett, 2017).

Tinto (1973) theorized that academic and social integration on college campuses is a predictor of retention and persistence. Flynn (2014) started a study searching for indicators that linked student engagement to increased student performance. Using the 2004/2009 Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study, participants included students who began their studies in a 4-year institution in 2003. The persistence analysis sample included 8,700 students from 1,350 different baccalaureate-granting institutions. The use of two logistic regressions yielded results indicating that both academic and social student engagement significantly impact persistence in postsecondary educational settings. A key finding in the Flynn (2014) study demonstrated that students who were actively engaged in academic and social activities led to their persistence.

According to Cole and Korkmaz (2013), environment matters for first-generation students, and institutional leaders are charged with an ongoing mission to focus on creating supportive, positive campus environments that foster engagement. In 2013, Cole and Korkmaz conducted a study to examine the personality characteristics of precollege, first-year college students' perceptions of classroom, college environments, and academic engagement. Astin's (1993) mediation model was used to provide the theoretical framework for linking precollege student personality and student perceptions of the campus environment (Cole & Korkmaz, 2013).

During the fall of 2006, data were collected from 18 institutions including a total of 2,607 groups of students who completed the Need for Cognition Scale and the Psychological Well-Being Scale. Using the chi-square for model fit, the overall results demonstrated that a positive campus environment was critical in constructing the personality and academic engagement for first-generation college students. Although this study examined the importance of establishing healthy relationships between personality constructs and the well-being of college students, it only relied on the students' self-reported behaviors, which generated uncertainty regarding the accuracy of the results (Cole & Korkmaz, 2013).

A more recent research reported that the role of communication with on-campus friends contributed to first-generation students' academic adjustment. Cheong, Gauvain, and Palbusa (2019) found that increased academic self-efficacy and students' sense of feeling valued at an institution are important factors for academic success. To test this hypothesis, Cheong et al. (2019) performed a study to investigate if relationships between the students' communication with on-campus friends correlated with academic self-

efficacy and strengthened the students' commitment to continue at the university. The Cheong et al. (2019) study was performed at a Hispanic-serving institution in the Southwestern United States, and an online survey was given to 246 first-year college students with 55% representing first-generation students. Accessing the survey from the college's website, participants expressed their views of the on-campus social connections and their college adjustment.

Cheong et al. (2019) conducted this study using an independent-sample t test and a multivariate analysis of variance to explore possible differences based on variables relating to the participants' gender and ethnicity. The overall results reveal that correlations between first-generation students' frequent communications with on-campus friends was positively related to academic self-efficacy, and frequent communication with on-campus friends contributed to the students' desire toward longer-term academic goals. The Cheong et al. (2019) study revealed, significantly, that first-generation students had higher rates of school engagement than non-first-generation students, which could result in the fact that more than half of the student body in the study reported as being first-generation students. It is also significant to note that the institution reported higher graduation rates of first-generation students compared to other public universities (Cheong et al., 2019).

Chapter Summary

The research confirms the insurmountable goal for leaders of institutions of higher education to identify factors that can lead to persistence intentions for first-generation college students (Hepworth et al., 2018). The goal of this review was to gain insight from preexisting research on predictors of retention and completion in an effort to

help colleges and universities develop a framework for action to increase persistence among the African American female student population (Tinto, 2012).

This literature review explored some of the factors that can be employed by colleges and universities to determine its effectiveness for longer-term enrollment outcomes among first-generation students, in particular, African American females. The research confirms that academic involvement, as well as social integration, are factors that ensure student success, and academic performance accomplishments are achieved through supportive campus environments that promotes persistence intentions (Hepworth et al., 2018).

Chapter 3 gives a detailed description of the research design and instruments used to conduct this study. The research questions are stated along with a description of the site location, participants, and a justification for using the research design are explained. Finally, a description of the data collection and analysis process are discussed.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

It has been widely documented that first-generation college students represent a large proportion of individuals in colleges and universities, yet there are increasing concerns about high noncompletion rates among this population who enroll in postsecondary institutions (Barnett, 2011; Garza & Fullerton, 2019). Although first-generation college students represent nearly 4.5 million, or 24%, of all students enrolled, 22% depart during their first year of college, and only 11% complete a degree-granting program after 6 years, compared to 55% of their non-first-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). More importantly, the research reveals that 68% of first-generation students who identify as African American female will depart prior to degree completion (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; Walpole et al., 2014). Moreover, this significant disproportionate degree-completion rate challenges higher education researchers and policy makers to focus on student characteristics and institutional factors that predict whether or not a student will attain college success (Tinto, 2012).

The research suggests that immediate attention to concerns of premature departure among first-generation students begins with institutional actions to improve campus conditions that enhance retention (Tinto, 2012). Tinto (2012) theorized that academic involvement and social integration are predictors of retention and persistence, yielding a significant impact on continuous re-enrollment in postsecondary educational settings. Cheong et al. (2019) suggested that communication with on-campus friends contributes

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to first-generation students' academic adjustment, and the value of positive engagement on campus can support continued enrollment. Similarly, the Cheong et al. study reports that increased academic self-efficacy and students' sense of feeling valued on the college campus are important factors for academic achievement. Addressing students' sense of belonging and academic engagement can have a lasting impact—not only on college retention goals—but they can also produce successful students, thereby leading to a thriving future economy (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to use a qualitative research design to examine key factors that influenced first-generation African American female alumni to persist past the first year at a private urban college. The goal of this study was to gain insight into the degree of social interaction and academic involvement that first-generation African American female alumni had while attending a private urban college and if these factors can pose considerable benefits to support students' longer-term commitments. This study was informed by a conceptually based theoretical framework that described student departure relating to intention and commitment, which are critical in the development of students' experiences and subsequently their persistence (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) theorized that intention and commitment enables students to work toward their goals; conversely, the "lack of willingness or commitment proves to be a critical part of the departure process" (Tinto, 1993, p. 42).

While there has been considerable research on predictors relating to retention and persistence for first-generation African American female college students, the data pertaining to their lived experiences that support academic success is not sufficiently documented (Morales, 2014). To address this gap in the literature, this study sought to

identify and describe these unique factors, and this study was guided by one overarching question and three related questions;

1. Overarching question: What factors contributed to the academic success of first-generation African American female college alumni?

2. How did first-generation African American female alumni at a private urban college describe their academic experiences during their first year?

3. What social integration activities influenced first-generation African American female alumni to persist and graduate?

4. What strategies did first-generation African American female alumni describe as helpful to overcome barriers that led to persistence in college?

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative design was used to examine the social integration and academic involvement factors that led to persistence for first-generation African American female college alumni and how this population achieved degree completion. This study examined the predictors of persistence beyond the first year in a private urban college setting. Havlik et al. (2017) stressed the need for higher education administrators to become aware of the lived experiences of first-generation African American female students and factors, such as lack of student-engagement and social integration, help to explain reasons why there is a high dropout rate among this student population (Astin, 1999; Kimbark et al., 2017; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Astin (1984) theorized that spending time on campus, social interaction, and academic performance are key factors that influence re-enrollment. Ma and Shea (2019) argued that social integration and a sense of connectedness correlates with the ability of first-generation students to thrive in an academic environment, and these relationship-

specific areas have a direct impact on the students' psychological well-being. Vaccaro and Newman (2016) also noted that students' sense of belonging is strengthened by institutional supportive interactions, and they are considered prerequisites that enable students to feel connected to the campus community.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested that a qualitative research approach in a natural setting, where the researcher is engaged in dialogue, is an appropriate way to develop an understanding of the problem under study. The use of qualitative research allows the researcher to make meaning of the lived experiences of individuals by talking directly to the participants, observing behaviors, and gathering information. A strategic inquiry associated with this phenomenology was used because the goal of this study was to better understand the factors of the students' social interaction and academic involvement and how they related to retention and academic success (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Utilization of this phenomenological inquiry gave the researcher an opportunity to explore the social and educational engagement factors, as described by the participants, through unstructured telephone interviews that allowed the participants to narrate stories of their lived experiences about the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

A qualitative study is an approach to understanding the lived experiences as described by individuals and what they define as important realities in their world. Employing the qualitative design of inquiry allowed for exploration, description, and discovery while seeking to develop a better understanding as described by the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The exploration was conducted through the use of semi-structured interviews with first-generation African American female alumni

who had graduated from a private urban college within the past 5 years of the start of this research study, therefore, using the years 2015 through 2020. This timeframe was chosen because the target population of graduates were enrolled in a college success course where social integration activities were designed to promote student persistence and academic success. Interviews were conducted and allowed the researcher to obtain rich and detailed data on the lived experiences of interviewees. The interviews involved asking open-ended questions on a specific topic, guided by questions with central themes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Research Context

This qualitative phenomenological study was conducted at a private urban college located in a metropolitan area of New York State. The college from which the first-generation African American female alumni had graduated provides professional, career-oriented, higher education to students from diverse backgrounds. The institution operates on a three-semester academic calendar that allows students to obtain a bachelor's degree within 3 years. The college enrolls a population of 6,601 undergraduate/graduate students with 63% female and 37% male students, as well as 43% African American, 40% Latino, 2% Asian, 3% White students, and 2% students with an unknown racial ethnicity. The administration at the school, at the time of this study, comprised 198 full-time faculty members, and 307 part-time faculty members. The college has three campuses, two extension sites, and online programs. Given the unprecedented conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the study used the Zoom platform, via telephone, and the individual interviews were conducted with selected participants. Upon St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix A), the researcher

submitted a letter to the urban college requesting permission to conduct the research

study. The program that was significant to this study was a college success course that

was part of the institution's core values and commitment to deliver strong academic

support for student success. The college success course was conducted as a required

course during the first semester of the students' first year, and this is where the first-

generation students began their transition into the campus environment. The college

success course served as a learning opportunity to access campus resources, build

relationships with peers, and its core mission was to help first-generation students

navigate through college procedures to achieve their academic goals.

Research Participants

Purposeful sampling strategies were employed to select participants who were

college graduates between January 2014 and December 2019 and who were first-

generation African American females during their freshmen year. The participants were

also recruited using the snowball method, which is a type of non-probability sampling

that uses the initial research participants to recruit other members to be part of the study

via word of mouth. This technique is also called chain-referral sampling, where referrals

are sought for potential study participants from the social networks of selected

participants. A sample size was determined by the number of graduates who agreed to

participate in the study, which included no less than 8 to 10 participants. The criteria

used to select the participants included: (a) African American female, (b) enrolled as a

first-generation college student, (c) received an associate or bachelor's degree from the

institution between January 2014 and December 2019, and (d) agreed to participate in the

study.

After the urban college's approval and the St. John Fisher College IRB approval, a list was generated with 100 to 250 potential participants, who were sent a letter of introduction via email (Appendix B), along with a secured link for each participant to complete a pre-interview demographic questionnaire (Appendix C). The email letter included a brief explanation of the overall purpose and significance of the study. Graduates who were first-generation African American females and who expressed a willingness to participate in the study were selected to participate. The purposeful sampling supported the researcher in selecting qualified respondents that informed this study. Interviews enabled the participants to reflect on personal experiences and narrate knowledge-producing context that helped the researcher identify recurring themes and realities that informed this study (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The literature review supplied many examples of questionnaires that were adapted to guide the interview sessions.

An informed consent form (Appendix D) was emailed to the selected participants prior to the initial meeting, telling about the purpose of the study as well as including information on the procedure of this research study. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they would not be intimidated into signing the consent forms (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). An important area of consideration when conducting a study is the privacy of the participants. Therefore, during this time, issues of confidentiality were addressed, and the participants were informed that the private nature of their information would not be disclosed. A discussion regarding who would have access to the interview transcripts and other materials was addressed, and the selected participant were informed that all statements would remain anonymous. The

participants were informed that all materials would be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked office to protect both the participants and the researcher (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The participants were informed that there would not be compensation for their participation.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

Once the sample size had been identified, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were scheduled, conducted, and guided by the predetermined interview questions (Appendix E) as the primary instrument used for data collection. The first data collection instrument was administered via email in the form of a pre-interview demographic questionnaire (Appendix C) that served to gather qualitative data on potential participant demographics, and it served as a selection tool. The pre-interview demographic questionnaire consisted of 10 questions and was sent via an email link with the introductory letter to first-generation African American female college alumni who had graduated between January 2014 and December 2019. The questionnaire was member-checked by a professional and any questions causing ambiguity were revised or replaced prior to submission to the potential participants.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection tool for this study. According to Brinkmann & Kvale (2015) a semi-structured interview is a qualitative data-gathering method that seeks to obtain the "lived world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the phenomena" (p. 150). This is where the interviewer asked a series of open-ended questions with the interviewee. This data gathering strategy allowed the researcher to capture the experiences of first-generation African American female college alumni, as well as capture factors that influenced their

college success. This data gathering technique also allowed the interviewer to capture themes and well-thought-out expressions on barriers that hindered the alumni's persistence. A pseudonym was assigned by the researcher to each participant at the initial interview to protect the participants' identity throughout the study.

The semi-structured interview strategy was informed by the researcher's theoretical framework and literature review to support questions relating to the alumni's perspectives on social integration and academic involvement. Questions regarding factors that supported persistence, as well as barriers that the participants encountered toward reaching their academic goal, were also be used to inform the study. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) contended that ethical issues should be taken into consideration "throughout the entire process of an interview investigation" (p. 85). The ethical research design, therefore, began with preapproval from the urban college, and it was followed by St. John Fisher College IRB approval, which required a confidentiality disclosure to be part of the letter of consent, and which was signed by both the researcher and the interviewees.

The advantages of conducting one-on-one, face-to-face zoom telephone interviews allowed the researcher to directly observe the non-verbal language from the selected members, facilitate the interaction with each individual, and control the questions that were unrelated to the topic. Telephone interviews were used to support the availability and flexibility of time for the participants. Another advantage to using this approach was that it fostered opportunities to obtain rich detailed data on the topic for discussion. The disadvantage to using interviews was the manner in which the questions were worded; the words could have inadvertently shaped the content of the answer. For

example, the interviewer had to pay close attention to biases, non-verbal language, and the verbal responses that could positively or negatively reinforce the interviewee's answer to proceeding questions. It was critical for the interviewer to ensure that leading questions were congruent to the purpose of the study to undergird the validity and reliability of the interviewees' responses (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Validity is an important aspect of the qualitative research process and trustworthiness demonstrates that the research findings are credible and measured what was intended as well as if the findings reached saturation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher ensured validity of the interview questions through member-checking to get feedback and critique from a professional in the field, and necessary revisions were made after the review of the questions. The professional was not be part of the study and only supported the critique of interview questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interviews were conducted over a period of 4 weeks during the spring semester of 2020.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

The exploration of this study employed a primary data collection method of semi-structured interviews to allow for meaningful and detailed feedback from first-generation African American female alumni. This data-gathering tool allowed the researcher to ask open-ended, predetermined questions to better understand the phenomenon as described by the individual alumni participants. After site approval was granted by the sponsoring institution, the researcher gained access to a database with over 1,000 first-generation female alumni names and contact information to begin the data collection process. This was the first data-gathering tool that provided basic demographic information about the potential participants, such as year of graduation from the private urban college, GPA,

parent/guardians' educational status, the alumni's involvement in extracurricular activities, and if the alumni wanted to participate in the study. Prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews, each potential participant underwent a screening process that gathered pre-interview demographic information to determine eligibility for participation in the study. The researcher conducted this data-gathering process by sending an email with survey information along with a link that allowed the potential participant to access a 10-item questionnaire. The research design suggested that a sample of 100 to 200 potential participants should be screened. Because the sample size granted by the sponsoring institution was larger than needed, a purposeful random sampling technique was used to select the potential participants. To capture a full range of potential participants, the researcher pooled a total of 236 alumni from the data base using this following sampling strategy.

The total number of questionnaires emailed was 236, of which 37 people responded, but only 35 completed a survey. All 35 respondents indicated that they maintained a GPA of 2.0 or above, and all respondents graduated from the college between January 2014 and December 2019 receiving an associate or bachelor's degree. Out of the 35 completed surveys, 31 respondents identified as African American female, and four identified as not being an African American female. An exclusion of the four responders who did not identify as African American female allowed the researcher to continue the screening process using 31 survey responders. Out of the 31 respondents, 11 responded that they did not take a college success course, and two out of 31 responded that they did not start as a freshmen. Of the 31 survey respondents, 11 indicated that they were not interested in being part of the study, resulting in a total of seven respondents

who agreed to participate in the study. Given that the research design required a sample size of eight to 10 selected participants, the researcher returned to the pool of 236 from the sample size and conducted an incremental outreach aim to fulfill the research design requirement. A total of 120 non-responders were sent a second email survey for which two individuals responded. However, those two indicated that they did not want to participate in the study.

In order to align with the research design that suggested a sample size of eight to 10 selected participants, the researcher utilized the non-probability sampling technique, which is considered a chain-referral, in an effort to recruit three additional potential participants for the study. The potential participants were recruited via the networking of the seven selected participants, and their names and contact information were given to the researcher. The researcher contacted the three recruited potential participants using the initial pre-interview demographic screen method to qualify them for selection. Upon review of their demographic information, two potential participants met the criteria and satisfied the research requirement. The third potential participant did not respond after two follow-up attempts were made by the researcher via telephone. A total of nine participants were selected to participate in the study. Each of the nine selected participants met the criteria, which was that they had to have graduated from the college with a 2.0 GPA or better, received an associate or bachelor's degree between January 2014 and December 2019, identified as African American female alumni who completed a college success course during their freshman year, and agreed to participate in the study. Completion of this pre-interview demographic screening method allowed the researcher to continue to the next step in the selection process.

The participants who volunteered were selected from the sampling strategies and consisted of 9 members. The interviews were conducted via telephone with the participants who graduated from an urban college in a metropolitan section of New York State, and the research was employed using a zoom platform, one-on-one semi-structured interviews that ran for approximately 60 minutes, each conducted on designated days that fit the participants' schedules. The interview process was the primary instrument used for data gathering, and the coding process was conducted through the in vivo and a priori designs. A list of predetermined questions was prepared for the participants, and one follow-up question was added or revised based on the interviewees' responses. This method allowed the researcher to explore factors in-depth and uncover central themes that led to the participants' academic achievement through interpretation as described by the participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The researcher used audiotaping devices and handwritten notes as a way to document responses and prevent loss of information in the event that the recording device failed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A transcription of the audio recordings was scheduled in advance of the interviews, and the data were organized and sent to a digital data service to transcribe the feedback from the audio recorder. The telephone conversations with the participants were conducted in a private, closed-door office where the interviewer could ask the open-ended questions to gain detailed information from the participants. Additionally, the researcher recorded ID numbers for the interviews, date of the interviews, location of the interviews, and the start and end times for each interview. All recording devices, handwritten notes, and transcriptions are be kept in a locked file cabinet located in the researcher's home. All paper records will be kept for a period of 3

years. After 3 years, all paper records will be cross-cut shredded and professionally

delivered to incineration. Electronic records will be cleared, purged, and destroyed from

the hard drive and all devices such that restoring data is not possible.

Data analysis helped the researcher to understand and make sense of the context

that was collected from the interviewees. The data were reviewed by the researcher using

the three-phase coding process that included open coding which came directly from the

voice of the participants, axial coding which involved grouping codes in categories, and

selective coding where the researcher focused on the main themes of the data (Saladaña,

2016). The researcher embraced the data by segmenting, which involved separating the

data into meaningful analytical units, finding important pieces and then arranging the

important pieces into descriptive columns that came from the experiences as narrated by

the interviewee (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is recommended that the researcher

analyze the data developed through the themes, descriptions, and essences from the data

gathered to inform this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The initial process of

organizing the data and creating a coded log book, and then an using an Excel

spreadsheet was used for the data-gathering activity, including definitions and examples

from the interviewees (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Immersion of the data was required

for the researcher to gain a general sense of the information collected. After the

researcher read through the transcripts, the coding cycle was incorporated using in vivo

and a priori techniques.

According to Saldaña (2016), using two or three coding methods helps to capture

the phenomena in the data. The a priori coding enabled the researcher to generate a list

of codes on previous research. These codes were extracted from the literature review and

were related to the topic. In vivo coding, often referred to as literal coding, allowed the researcher to use the exact words of the interviewees during the sessions and symbols and metaphors were used for rich context (Saldaña, 2016). These coding methods supported the researcher in developing categories and themes to begin analyzing the data. The purpose of analyzing the was to develop meaning and significance to the data, create themes, and generate a report that provided a narrative description of the participants' experiences. Tables were created to summarize the results from the narrative report and data analysis.

This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach. Using this type of coding procedure was appropriate to fully capture what of significance was contributed by the participant. Utilization of this coding method enabled the researcher to keep track of codes, to analyze the themes drawn from the participants' voices, and to look for patterns to develop new processes in responding to the research questions (Saldaña, 2016). It was important for the researcher to understand how the participants were defining their identities, but using the a priori technique could have been problematic, because the participants may not have displayed their true selves, and their perception of their identity could be categorized under many interpretations. Because of the uniqueness of the in vivo method, the researcher was allowed to select exact words for the themes and categories that were generated by the participants but that may have been limited the researcher's ability to expound on the theoretical approaches that could contribute to other perspectives in the study (Saldaña, 2016).

Identification of themes. The researcher thoroughly conducted an analysis of the data which involved a thorough line-by-line reading, analysis, and coding the content

from the transcriptions as described by each participant. The researcher developed a coding spreadsheet utilizing a Microsoft Excel program to keep track of the in vivo coding process and to create categories and themes. The theoretical framework established by Tinto (1973) was aligned with the coding process to group key phrases. This process included the six variables of student attrition and persistence (pre-entry attributes, goals/commitment, institutional experience, integration, intention/commitment, and outcome), and the process was also used in correlation with the four research questions. In vivo codes were also used to identify frequencies from individual participant responses.

The researcher developed field notes after each interview. The field notes were informal analytic notes taken by the researcher about the participants' thoughts, the researcher's follow-up notes, and non-verbal observations of the researcher such as sighs, hesitation, and agitated/excited voice tone. These notes have been included in the data analysis process.

Summary

Increasing attention and research continues to challenge policy makers, institutional leaders, and scholars regarding the factors that predict the retention and persistence of first-generation African American female college alumni (Hansen, Trujillo, Boland, & MacKinnon, 2014). The purpose of this study was to understand what factors influenced student persistence to degree attainment. A qualitative, phenomenological design was used to explore how social integration and academic involvement supported academic achievement for first-generation African American female graduates. Interviews provided a forum for the selected participants to describe their academic

experiences, which ultimately helped them to persist to degree completion. The results of this study offers significant insights into how to further strengthen support for first-generation African American female students throughout the first year of college and beyond.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This study sought to understand academic involvement and social integration from the perspective of first-generation African American female alumni who graduated from a private urban college. The study focused on narratives from first-generation African American female alumni and explored the factors of academic involvement and social integration that contributed to their degree completion. Tinto's (1973) student attrition and persistence theory was the guiding theoretical model used to conduct this study.

Tinto's (1973) model explained the seriousness of the student departure problem and provided a framework for investigating primary variables associated with student persistence through to degree attainment. These primary variables included (a) pre-entry attributes, (b) goals/commitment, (c) institutional experiences, (d) integration, (e) intention/external commitments, and (f) outcome, which are critical to students intention to re-enroll during their first year of college. The reoccurring factors associated with these variables were identified as student academic involvement, academic program/goals, social integration, contributions to college success, college activities, barriers/obstacles, and overcoming barriers/obstacles, which can have a significant impact on the students' college success. Overall, Tinto's (1973) framework of student attrition and persistence was the dominant model used in this study.

A review of the literature indicates that first-generation African American female students are at a higher risk for premature departure, and they are less likely to attain degree completion than their White female peers (Walpole et al., 2014). Further study revealed that early departure can lead to economic struggles for individuals who do not complete their degree. The annual earning potential of the individual who does not attain a college degree is 27% lower than that of the college-graduate workers earning at a rate of 57%, and individual who do not attain a degree are less likely to be consider for career advancement (NCES, 2018a).

A report from the NCES (2018b) stated that the economic outcome for individuals who attained their bachelor's degree was a higher earning potential. For example, overall, the median earning for full-time, year-round workers with a bachelor's degree was $54,700 compared to those workers without a bachelor's degree who earned an annual salary of $34,900, and those workers who did not complete high school earned a salary of $27,900 annually (NCES, 2018b). Further investigation of this study reveals that female full-time, year-round workers who held a bachelor's degree had a higher annual earning at $50,000 compared to those females who only completed high school and earned $29,000 annually. It is important to note that this earning pattern associated with degree attainment held true for both male and females from ethnic backgrounds including White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian (NCES, 2018b).

This study examined first-generation African American female alumni's perspectives regarding academic involvement and social integration while attending a private urban college and the influence they had on the female alumni's commitment to persist to degree completion. The purpose of this study was to gain insight regarding

how first-generation African American female alumni, who graduated from a private urban college, defined their academic involvement in the campus environment. Additionally, the goal of this study was to gain insight into how this alumni population from a private urban college perceived their academic and social involvement supported their college completion. More importantly, evidence suggests that disproportionate degree completion gaps pose serious consequences for African American female students, yet insufficient studies have been devoted to understanding how they defined (a) academic involvement, (b) academic program/goals, (c) social interactions, (d) intention/external commitment, (e) barriers, and (f) overcame barriers as well as how these factors contributed to their degree completion (Booker, 2016).

The participants for this study were first-generation African American female alumni who graduated from a private urban college located in a metropolitan section of New York State. The study drew its participant pool from a 4-year private urban institution that enrolled over 6,500 students per year. At the time of this study, the college enrolled approximately 43% African American students, and as of 2017, African American females represented 25.5% of the total student body. The participants in this study graduated from the private college between January 2014 and December 2019.

A qualitative phenomenological research approach was employed to conduct this study to understand the lived experiences as described by the participants and what they defined as important realities during their academic journey. Employing a phenomenological approach allowed for exploration, description, and discovery while the researcher sought to better understand specific experiences that the participants had in common (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasized the

importance of the researcher to "collect data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develop a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals" (p. 75). The strategy for using this research approach supported the goal of this study, which was to better understand the participants' experience on academic involvement and social interaction factors and how these aspects supported retention through to their degree completion. This study utilized phenomenology to look through the lens of Tinto's (1973) student attrition and persistence model. Inquiries were performed to understand how these theoretical concepts supported first-generation African American female student commitment, re-enrollment, and ultimately successful graduation from a private urban college. Tinto's (1973) model for student attrition and persistence was the overarching theoretical framework used to align with the study. The findings from this study should bolster the body of knowledge on student retention for educators and institutional policy makers in U.S. society.

This chapter begins with an overview of the research questions. It follows with the data analysis and major themes that were uncovered by the researcher. The first-generation African American female alumni's reflections and feelings gave meaning to their experiences while attending the private urban college. As graduates from both the associate and bachelor's degree programs, the perspectives, as described in their own words, provided the researcher with emerging themes that the alumni indicated were influences in their persistence to degree completion.

Research Questions

The researcher employed one overarching question and three qualitative research questions that guided this study. The research questions supported a better understanding

of the academic involvement and social integration factors described by first-generation

African American females who graduated from a private urban college. The four

research questions were:

1. What factors contributed to the academic success of first-generation African

   American female alumni?

2. How did first-generation African American female alumni in a private urban

   college describe their academic experiences during their first year?

3. What social integration activities influenced first-generation African

   American female alumni to persist during their first year and go on to

   graduate?

4. What strategies did first-generation African American female alumni describe

   as helpful to overcome barriers to persistence in college?

Data gathered from the interviews was used to capture the lived experiences of

the participants and unfold major themes that supported a further investigation conducted

by the researcher.

Data Analysis and Findings

This section describes the process used for analyzing the data. Major findings are

discussed in detail later in the chapter.

Questionnaire data. It was important to capture the participants' demographic

backgrounds that was described by the respondents chosen to complete the demographic

questionnaire. Data from a screener that gathered information was used as a selection

tool which served to gain insight on basic demographic information. This data collection

method gave the researcher an understanding of various demographic entities such as

whether the responder identified as an African American female, an indication of the year

of graduation, if they identified as first-generation, whether or not they participated in an

extracurricular activity, and if they agreed to participate. These components were

necessary in the participant-selection process. While the results from the questionnaires

highlighted respondent background information, which helped to provide information to

determined potential participant eligibility, this study followed a qualitative

phenomenological approach aimed to present rich detailed reflections as narrated by the

selected participants. No quantitative data analysis was performed for this study. The

questionnaire gathered descriptive statistics and presented a textual overview of first-

generation African American females who graduated from a private urban college, and

results from the questionnaire provided the researcher with insight that helped in the

selection process.

The respondents' gender status was significant to the study as the research

centered on individuals who identified as first-generation African American females.

While the respondents whose parents did not have a 4-year college degree were included

in the study, it is important to note that out of 31 survey respondents, eight (26%) had at

least one parent who attained an associate degree, which qualified them to be a

participant in the study. This data is consistent with the literature review that most

African American females who attended college are first-generation students

(McConnell, 2000; Walpole et al., 2014). Of the nine selected participants, $n = 3$ (33%)

reported a least one parent who completed an associate degree program, $n = 5$ (56%)

reported a least one parent with some college credits but no degree, $n = 5$ (56%) reported

a least one parent had completed high school or an equivalent GED program. Neither

respondents nor participants reported parental completion of a bachelor's degree program.

Table 4.1

Highest Level of Parents' Educational Attainment

Parent	All Respondents (P)	Participants (p)
Highest Level Earned by Mother		
No Schooling	–	–
Elementary School (K-5)	–	–
Middle School (6-8)	4	1
High School (9-120) or GED/Equivalent	17	2
Some College Credits, No Degree	6	3
2-Year College Degree	7	3
4-Year College Degree	–	–
Unknown	1	–
Highest Level Earned by Father		
No Schooling	2	1
Elementary School (K-5)	2	1
Middle School (6-8)	5	1
High School (9-120) or GED/Equivalent	16	3
Some College Credits, No Degree	4	2
2-Year College Degree	3	2
4-Year College Degree	–	–
Unknown	5	2

It was important to inquire if the respondents were involved in extracurricular activities while attending college. These activities must have been organized by the college or related to coursework that was taken at the college and was used by the researcher as an indicator to measure the level of academic interaction. Table 4.2 shows the type of college involvement, and the respondents were asked to select all that applied.

Table 4.2

Level of Academic Involvement in College

Academic Involvement	All Respondents (*P*)	Participants (*p*)
Recognized Student Club/Organization	3	1
Peer Mentoring Program	–	–
Athletic Team	2	1
Volunteer Program	1	–
Internship Program	18	7
Member of Academic Support Services	2	–
Study Groups	–	–
Not involved in any of the above activities	9	–

Of the respondents, $n = 26$ (74%) indicated that they were involved in at least one of the extracurricular activities listed on the questionnaire, and these participants were involved in at least one of the extracurricular activities listed. The majority of the respondents, or 94%, indicated that they started the college as a freshman, and two respondents, or 57%, reported not having started during their freshman year.

Of all the selected participants, 89% indicated starting at the college during their freshman year. It is important to note that two of the selected participants, or 11%, reported having a *bad academic experience* from another college; but they indicated that they transferred to complete their freshman year at the sponsoring institution.

As part of the criteria for selection, it was important for the researcher to investigate if taking a college success course during the first year of college supported the academic goals for the first-generation African American female alumni, and $n = 7$ (78%) of the selected participants, indicated that they took a college success course during their first year. Further investigating during the telephone interview stage of data collection

revealed that $n = 2$ (22%) of the selected participants stated that they were unsure if they completed a college success course. Of the selected participants, $n = 5$, (67%), were between the ages of 23-25, $n = 3$ (33%) were between the ages of 25-30, and $n = 1$ participant was between the age of 30-45. Seven of the selected participants worked a part-time job while in college, one worked full-time job, and one participant was not employed.

The nine participants chosen for this study met the selection criteria if they (a) identified as African American female, (b) took a college success course during their freshman year, (c) received an associate or bachelor's degree from the sponsoring institution between January 2014 and December 2019, (d) obtained a 2.0 GPA or better, and (e) agreed to participate in the study. Table 4.3 provides an overview of the demographic information on the study participants' involvement in extracurricular college activities and enrollment in a college success course during the first year. The researcher created pseudonyms to protect the participants' identity.

Table 4.3

Demographic Information for All Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Age	College Activities	College Success Course	Employment While in School
1	22-25	Internship Program	First-Year Experience	Part Time on Campus
2	26-30	Student Club	First-Year Experience	Part Time on Campus
3	22-25	Internship Program	First-Year Experience	Part Time on Campus
4	22-25	Internship Program	First-Year Experience	No Employment
5	22-25	Internship Program	First-Year Experience	Part Time on Campus
6	22-26	Internship Program	"Unsure"	Part Time on Campus
7	20-45	Internship Program	First-Year Experience	Full Time on Campus
8	26-30	Internship Program	"Unsure"	Part Time on Campus
9	26-30	Athletic Program	First-Year Experience	Part Time on Campus

Coding process. The coding process was conducted in three phases that included reading, analyzing, and coding the content from the transcription of each participant. The initial cycle used open coding which allowed the researcher to examine impressions of the participant responses. The initial cycle used in vivo codes which are derived directly from the voice of the participants during the interview and a priori codes generated from a review of the literature related to the participants experience (Saldaña, 2016). Examples of in vivo codes that emerged were phrases such as *I felt like going to class*, *I reminded myself*, *I had to self-reflect*, *I was determined*, *the campus has a community atmosphere*, and *I made great friends*. These codes were expressions of the participants' lived experience and perspectives in the college environment. A priori codes were developed prior to the coding cycle and were used to identify themes and categories as well as analyze the qualitative data (Saldaña, 2016). These codes were relevant to the participants' experiences and supported the research questions. An example of the a priori codes drawn from the research included words such as *academic involvement*, *social integration*, *contributed to college success*, *barriers/obstacles*, and *college activities*.

The second phase used axial coding where the researcher grouped coded data 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). Using this coding phase supported the researcher in determining which codes in the research were significant and which were less important (Saldaña, 2016). A sample of axial codes included words such as *goals/commitments*, *institutional experience*, *intention/commitments*, and *outcome*.

The third coding phase was conducted using selective coding. In this phase, the researcher explains the story by analyzing and focusing on central themes of the data (Saldaña, 2016). This phase allowed the researcher to integrate all categories and themes and align these concepts around the theoretical orientation that explains the phenomenon. Some of the categories and themes derived from selective coding were *academic involvement*, *academic program/goals*, *social interaction*, *barriers/obstacles*, and *overcoming barriers/obstacles*.

The researcher then categorized the themes into the six variables (pre-entry attribute, goals/commitment, institutional experience, integration, intention/commitment, and outcome) based on the persistence measurement to college success (Tinto, 1973). Table 4.4 highlights the themes and categories as they are related to Tinto's (1973) student attrition and persistence theory.

Table 4.4

Categories and Themes Related to Persistence

Tinto (1973) Six Variable	Category and Themes	Description of Category and Themes
Pre-entry Attribute	Academic Involvement	The characteristics of the participants and their degree of knowledge on integrating into the academic and social system that reflected their level of commitment.
Goals/Commitment	Academic Programs	Academic programs as described by the participants that helped them reach academic goals during their first year of college.
Institutional Experience	Academic Activities	The college programs and functions designed by administrators to support the freshmen's transactions during the first years. The participants described whether their involvement or lack of involvement supported their college success.
Integration	Social Interaction	The importance of the participants being socially connected on (off) campus and how this influenced re-enrollment that supported persistence to degree completion.
Intentions and External Commitments	Barriers/Obstacles	Events or personal issues on (off) campus that the participants encountered while attending college.
Outcomes	Overcoming Barriers	Academic resources and programs the participants found helpful to support their persistence.

Frequency of themes. The findings reveal the list of themes, categories, and occurrence of frequencies that emerged from the data as displayed in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

Categories and Themes (Frequency)

Category	Theme (Frequency)	
Academic Involvement (67)	Access to college resources (6) Administrative support (18) Community involvement related to major (5) Integrating life experience in lecture (5) Peer support (4)	Professor engagement (11) Taking an internship (1) Taking classes (12) Understanding that transition can be challenging (4)
Academic Programs (38)	Academic center (6) Advisement office (5) Core course curriculum (6) Internship program (3)	Mentorship program (3) Office of Disabilities (1) Scheduled meetings with professor (8) Student services (4)
College activities (130) How did alumni become involved?	Build relationship with Mentor (4) Build relationship with Professor (10) Got involved through volunteering (3) Difficult to become involved (8) Easy to become involved (4) Felt it contributed to college success (40)	Moved closed to the campus (2) Reach out to meet new people (13) Felt lack of contribution to college success (4)
Contributed to college success (42)	Academic Advisor (1) College involvement fairs (4) Community-oriented campus (6) Economic demands (2) First-year experience course (2) Making new friends (6)	Mentor motivation (3) Self-driven (6) Support from faculty (7) Understanding coursework (3) Use of library resources (2)
Social Interaction (48)	Felt this was important (45) Felt this was not important (3)	
Functions influenced re-enrollment (35)	Basketball games (1) Campus Club fairs (4) Guest speaker events (1) Hiking trip (7) Homecoming (3) Marching Band (3)	Off-campus field trips with mentor (8) Sipping Chats (1) Student panel discussions (1) Tie-dye shirt contest (3) Unity mural painting (2) Yoga (1)
Barriers/Obstacles (74)	Commute issues (1) Easily distracted (2) Insensitive professors (18) Lack of administrative support (12) Lack of communication with professor (4)	Loss of a parent (5) Roommate problems (20) Taking online classes (3) Unstable home (7)
Overcoming Barriers (68)	Academic Advisement (4) Coach involvement (5) Interacting with peers (6) Mentorship program (3) Office of Disabilities (5) Research out to peers (4)	Residential Life Support (4) Self-driven (17) Spoke to a trusted professor (5) Student Affairs (8) Student Evaluation (3) Student Services (4)

A continuous and thorough analysis and coding of 412 participant statements uncovered the development of 59 themes. A further review and investigation of the themes allowed the researcher to assemble similarities into various categories. Eight themes linked to the category of academic involvement, eight themes linked to academic program/goals, nine themes linked to college activities, 12 themes paralleled to contributions to college success, five themes correlated to social interaction (social functions were combined in two themes called off/on campus field trips), eight themes were mapped to barriers/obstacles, and 11 themes correlated to the category of overcoming barriers.

Major Findings

The results of this research identified seven factors that the alumni participants associated with their intention to persist through to degree completion. These factors were academic involvement, academic program/goals, college activities, contributions to college success, social interaction, barriers/obstacles, and overcoming barriers/obstacles. Using Tinto's (1973) student attrition and persistence model, the researcher paralleled each of the seven factors to the six commitment components. Pre-entry attributes linked to academic involvement, academic programs relating to goals/commitment, institutional experience paralleled with college activities and contributions to college success, integration correlated to social interaction, barriers/obstacles relating to intention/external commitments, and overcoming barriers/obstacles paralleled with outcome.

Pre-entry attribute. One of the essential findings identified in this study was to consider the alumni participants' individual characteristics and attitudes toward academic involvement. For the purpose of this study, the participants' perspectives and definition of academic involvement was connected to their pre-entry attributes. It was important for

the researcher to uncover if the pre-university knowledge of entering higher education involved any emotional situations that strengthened or weakened the alumni participants' level of continuance. As such, the occurrence of this initial finding would have a relevant impact on the motivational level that influenced the alumni participant to persist. The alumni participants spoke about positive interactions between professors and other members of the institution, their connection with curriculum programs, and understanding the challenges of college transition that strengthened their degree of knowledge regarding academic involvement. Several participants mentioned that administrators who held weekly meetings helped them navigate through the academic process. Participant 3 stated that coming from a high school that was predominantly White, caused high levels of anxiety around whether to attend college. She mentioned how, in her first semester, she met a staff person who was culturally diverse. She reflected on how going on field trips related to her major, using college resources, and encouragement from her mentor supported re-enrollment. Another participant recalled how she felt during her first year. She stated that a staff member was *simply amazing* and alleviated her anxiety by scheduling weekly meetings that encouraged her to keep returning. Participant 1 commented on how her pre-entry knowledge of college created anxiety and uncertainty. She stated that, at first, she did not think college was for her, and she did not think she could commit to the college pace, because it was very different from high school. She strongly believed that going to college events, meeting new people, and having understanding professors supported her persistence.

Several participants described that being academically connected meant aligning themselves with the course curriculum. Collectively, they felt that listening to the

professors integrate real-life experiences into the lectures impacted their re-enrollment.

One participant stated that academic involvement made her want to finish her degree

program, and she shared that "if you're not involved, it's harder to be successful"

(Participant 8). Another participant shared an experience on her first day of class. She

did not know where to go on the campus. She reflected on her anxiety not being able to

find her class. She stated that one of the staff members approached her and was very

instrumental in directing, not only her, but other students, to the right building and

classroom. Several alumni shared that the college created a community atmosphere that

allowed students to experience acceptance and belonging.

Another participant shared a pre-college experience that caused her to be

emotionally challenged, very shy, and introverted. She explained how staff members

from the academic center staff showed understanding and provided a strong support

system due her struggle to transition in the college environment. She stated that because

professors and administrators understood her academic struggles and supported her

achievement, she planned to re-enroll into a masters-level degree program at the college.

Goals/commitment. Themes that emerged from this category indicated that the

commitment level of the participants was consistent to achieving their academic goals.

These programs unfolded as the participants described how student services, core course

curriculum, advisement, academic center, and other programs helped them to both

commit and reach academic goals. All the participants commented that involvement in

these programs helped them create a relationship with faculty and staff that improved

their academic performance and success. They felt that the effect of faculty and staff

interactions supported a better understanding of educational commitments and formulating a continuous desire to complete their academic requirements.

Utilizing academic programs to support academic goal-oriented commitments, the participants shared that they developed a level of maturity that was important in order for them to reach their academic goals. Many of the participants shared that getting involved in academic programs, such as the tutoring center, faculty invitations to guest speaker presentations, and exam study sessions, made them feel welcomed in the campus community and strengthened their desire to continue to reach out for academic support.

Institutional experience. Building relationships with professors and staff was a common theme in this area of the study. Institutional experience played an important role in how easy or difficult it was for the participants to get involved in college activities and connect with institutional leaders at the private urban college. This is particularly true because students' involvement in college activities during their first year increases the likelihood of college success (Tinto, 2012). Conversely, the participants' lack of involvement due to external commitments, such as a part-time job and caring for a loved one, was expected to lower their level of involvement in college activities, but in the end, they still succeeded. For example, two out of the nine participants had to care for parents who were ill. They share experiences of having to leave class and immediately travel to the hospital or return home to handle domestic responsibilities for their loved one. Six out of the nine participants expressed an interest in attending college activities but were often committed to work-related responsibilities that hindered their ability to attend functions. One participant shared that coupled with working a part-time job, she also had to care for her newborn baby. As a result, being involved in college activities enhanced

persistence for some participants; however, those individuals who were unable to participate in college activities reported increased levels of self-driven motivation. This emerging theme reflects the notion that something else made up for their involvement in college activities that supported degree completion, and it is discussed later in the chapter.

Most participants felt that attending college activities was very important and that attending college activities contributed to their college success, but two participants' lack of interest in attending college functions was due to competing external commitments. Participant 1 described how attending college activities helped her to establish friendships, and she stated that, for her, this was the first start to networking. She shared how volunteering helped her to learn about college resources. This participant believed that building relationships with professors and going on field trips helped to better connect with the campus community. During her first year, she explained how she went on a hiking field trip with students and staff, and because of that trip, her questions around whether college was the right choice were answered. She also shared how she made great connections with new people who eventually would register into one of her classes. She felt making new friends increased her desire to re-enroll after the first semester. Participant 4 commented on how an academic advisor invited her to be part of a campus club that was related to her major during her freshmen year. She made several statements about how this helped her make great connections, and she stated that attending club meetings helped her acclimate into the college environment that supported meeting academic goals.

Participants 3 and 7 shared their difficulty getting involved in college activities because of having to care for a loved one and/or because of inflexible work schedules. These participants noted that even though they did not attend college functions, they felt that the college did a good job offering opportunities for students to get involved. They expressed that a lot of their motivation to finish their associate degree program came through individual self-reflection, self-motivation, and self-determination. Participant 3 shared that during her first year, her mother passed away, and she was forced to develop self-driven characteristics to complete her associate degree program. She shared that when her mother died, she developed a character trait of self-motivation that contributed to college success. As she stated, "this is what my mother would have wanted . . . is for me to finish college." Similarly, Participant 7 shared that she also was self-driven by the deaths of her mother and father. Her mother passed away when she was receiving her associate degree and her father passed away as she was pursuing her bachelor's degree. She stated that her loss was one of the motivating factors that helped her to complete a degree program, because this is what her parents would have wanted. She also made several references to being self-driven because of economic demands, and she stated that she lived alone without a family support system.

Integration. The degree to which an individual is socially connected to the college campus can also shape persistence, and seven out of the nine participants recognized how important it was for them to be involved in social functions on campus, whereas two out of the nine alumni felt that being socially connected was not important to persistence. Three of the seven participants who recognized the importance of being socially connected shared that social functions, such as college club fairs, basketball

games, and off-campus field trips, had an impact on their commitment to re-enroll. Participant 1 stated that "without social integration, college can be boring." She believed that college is more than just textbooks and completing required assignments. She felt that she established valuable connections that strengthened her desire to re-enroll beyond the first semester. Participant 9 made many statements regarding how social engagement helped her to overcome anxiety around attending college. She explained that a bad experience in another school caused her to suffer from introversion, shyness, and anxiety. She shared that the college created a community environment for the students that helped her to move beyond shyness on campus and to make several friends. This participant also commented that attending on-campus activities and utilizing college resources helped her obtain both her associate and bachelor's degree.

Intention/external commitments. Five out of the nine participants felt that lack of communication with professors/administrators was the prevailing obstacle to their intention to commit, and two out of the nine participants felt that roommate problems, were the prevailing obstacles to their intention to commit. An interesting discovery was uncovered that slightly shifted the study toward individuality in conjunction with intention/external commitments. In many statements, the participant interconnected language such as "self-motivation," "self-reflection," "self-determination," and the researcher was led to place these frequencies under a central theme called "self-driven." This became a common occurrence throughout the interviews and uncovered the participants' strong intention to persist in the face of both on-campus and external barriers.

Interview Question 4 of the semi-structured interview asked, "How did you overcome problem encounters on campus?" Participants 1, 2, and 9 made responses about speaking to a trusted professor and reaching out to academic services; whereas, Participants 3 and 4 felt that interacting with peers and mentors helped them to overcome problems. Most of the participants included strong responses that being self-driven was a key factor to reducing negative influences and positively increased their level of persistence. For example, Participant 7, who was a commuter student at the college, made several references as to being self-driven that led her to degree completion. She explained her struggle with depression for 10 months during her academic journey, and she was put on anti-depressants following the death of her parents. She went on to say that she had no other family to support perseverance, and she lived alone. The driving force that supported her intention to academic commitment was to develop an attitude of self-motivation and self-determination that helped her to attain both degrees. Another participant stated that she developed a character of self-survival after numerous roommate problems. She projected anger and frustration during this part of the interview because of the lack of administrative support. Interview Question 4 of the semi-structured interview asked, "How did you overcome these barriers?," and she stated "motivating myself and staying focused on my academic goals is what helped me to finish my degree program" (Participant 6).

Participant 8 shared her experience with a faculty member who she stated, "stressed me out." She would eventually drop the class because she felt that the professor did not provided an adequate academic learning environment. She stated, "all she would do is put on Netflix . . . and I felt like . . . I really did have to go to school." She stated, "I

ended up dropping the class I had after her, because I didn't want to be there all day. . . . I wasn't motivated enough to be in school. I just didn't want to be there." She went on to share how she would not let that experience stop her from reaching her academic goals and that her perseverance led to registering for the class in her senior year. She stated, that "it didn't really push me back. . . . I took it in my last semester, and I ended up doing well." Her individual self-determination helped her to overcome and achieve academic success.

Findings by the Research Questions

The following analysis and discussion include the themes connected to the four research questions. Significant quotes were used that pertained to statements from the participants as evidence of the findings. The extensive number of quotes have been abbreviated by the researcher and highlighted by significant discoveries.

Research Question 1. *What factors contributed to the academic success of first-generation African American female college alumni?* For many of the participants, academic involvement meant connecting to the course work in the classroom: they felt that when professors integrated real-life experiences into the lecture, the class came alive. Seven of the nine participants reported that professor-student engagement and utilizing the academic center were key areas that helped them reach their academic goals. The primary theme that emerged from this question was that academic involvement meant going to classes, building relationships with professors/administrative staff, and having access to college resources.

Academic involvement. Of the nine participants, all of them, in various ways, defined academic involvement as utilizing college resources, professor-student

engagement, and a supportive administrative staff. Two of the nine participants shared

that academic involvement meant developing an understanding that freshmen transition

can be a challenge, and they believed that without being academically involved, they

could not have completed their degree program. For example, Participant 1 indicated that

at first, she was emotionally challenged by the thought of going to college. She did not

think college was for her. She reported that academic involvement meant "building a

relationship with teachers, connecting to the area of your study, and taking classes related

to your major." She went on to comment, "without me being academically involved, I

wouldn't have finished college." She described her sense of exploration in terms such as

reading flyers and bulletin board announcements on upcoming events as a way to get

involved. She went on to share that volunteering at college events and having

understanding professors decreased her anxiety about returning the next semester.

Participant 8 shared a similar statement by saying, "if you're not involved, I feel like it's

harder for you to be successful."

Participant 4 stated that, "academic involvement was connecting to the right

people." She strongly believed that reaching out to staff and building relationships with

peers is key to involvement. She commented:

> My first day, I didn't really know where to go. And so, one of the staff workers,
>
> they talked to me, and they told me where to go and how to find what I was
>
> looking for. . . . They explained it was really easy for me to find my class, and at
>
> the same time, I was going to my class, this student was also going to that same
>
> class, and because of that, we became friends, because we asked for help.

Academic program/goals. Based on their knowledge of academic involvement, the participants described academic programs and services that helped them achieve their academic goals. Of the nine participants, seven used specific used terms, such as *connecting to the major*, *using the academic center*, and *professors providing amazing support* to support academic achievement. Other participants felt that reaching academic milestones meant that they had to connect with the college resources and their major course curriculum. For example, Participant 1 believed that connecting to her curriculum strongly supported her achievement. She gave a meaningful explanation on her comment, and stated:

> My major. . . because my major reminded me of what I was doing, like . . . what I was here for and what was important. . . . So, I found a job on my own at a residential facility, and that was like . . . it was great, because it was what my major was, and it helped me see a side of my academics and just assured me that this was something that I wanted to be part of.

Similarly, Participant 9 reported that being engaged in her course of study, having supportive professors, and going to the academic center helped her to reach academic goals. She added:

> All of the professors are very hands-on with the students. I noticed that it was a lot of people wanting to see me succeed . . . they were also showing me if I wasn't understanding the course work. I thought that was amazing because I didn't think I was gonna finish college.

She felt comfortable asking as many questions as necessary to get answers on her assignments, and she felt that using the academic center provided a strong support in

helping to finalize papers and study for exams. In a similar tone, Participant 2, who was registered with the office of disabilities, spoke about building relationships with faculty while also using the college services to navigate through college. She stated that, "my experiences with services from the office of disability has been amazing." She went on to add:

> From the very first day I got there, the program director and his staff took complete interest in my college experience. They helped me with extended time and the staff there have been really great in helping me to contact my professors ahead of time with my accommodations that I needed.

She met with the staff in the office of disability once a week, and she also stated it is "very important to have those interactions with professors and college programs" in order to reach academic goals (Participant 2).

One participant stated that enrolling in required internship programs connected to their major helped them to reach academic goals. In fact, Participant 1 believed that the internship program helped her to develop a commitment to a career path while connecting to the course work. She stated:

> I had an internship at my place of employment, and it was like . . a different type of position for caseworkers, which is like . . . another part of my major. Then I was able to intern at the Metropolitan Hospital at patient infection control, which is not related to my major, but it was good to be able to build certain skills. (Participant 1)

Lastly, many participants indicated that reaching academic goals involved utilizing college resources, such as the academic center, when necessary. For example,

Participant 8 shared how she used college resources to complete here assignments. She stated: "Professors would give me the resources, whether it's writing a paper or seeking help with my math assignments, they would send me to like . . . an academic center or the math center. They really helped me the most" (Participant 8).

The responses from Research Question 1 revealed that the majority of the participants agreed that academic involvement made significant contributions to their academic success. Their responses strongly included instructor-student engagement, peer support, having access to college resources as well as consistent support from administrative staff at the private urban college. Interestingly, several participants expressed the need to be self-driven, and two of the nine participants commented on the importance of understanding that college transition can be challenging for first-year students.

Research Question 2. *How did first-generation African American female alumni in a private urban college describe their academic experience during their first year?* This question sought to understand how the participants became involved in college activities during their first year. Academic experience in this context spoke to the participants' commitment and ability to become involved in college activities that provide important contributions to college success during the first year. In addition, the participants described how easy or difficult it was for them to become involved, and they shared ways that involvement or the lack of involvement contributed to successful outcomes.

Participant 1 recalled that her first year began with uncertainty as to whether to continue. She reported that

It was like in the beginning, it was challenging, because it was like, at first, I

didn't want to go to college, but I should take it seriously, also it's like a new

environment. . . . it's not really like high school.

Participant 1 shared that she was dealing with a "very uneasy" situation at home that

created a battle within her as to whether to stay in college. She added, "I even dropped

out of classes during the first semester." She went on to report that, "your environment at

home does have an effect on how well you do in school as well as the professors you

have teaching you." It was difficult for Participant 1 to participate in college activities

until she moved into an apartment closer to campus. She began getting involved, once

she moved away from home, by reaching out to meet new people on campus,

volunteering at college functions, and forming relationships with faculty. She stated, "I

would not have finished without being academically connected." The responses from the

other participants also reported that reaching out to meet new friends, building

relationships with professors, and attending campus functions contributed to their

success. Seven of the nine participants reported that it was not until they became

acclimated into the college campus and became involved in college activities that life

became easier; whereas, two of the nine participants responded that getting involved was

difficult. Participant 7, who was a commuter student, and remembered that it was very

hard. She stated:

I didn't belong to any campus clubs or anything like that. Only because I was

limited, because , um, I had two sick parents. My mom passed away while I was

getting my associate's, and then my dad passed away when I was getting my

bachelor's. . . . It was really, really hard, because I was going through the

depression stage. . . . I didn't have a support system.

It was important for the researcher to uncover the persistence level of this participant and to ask if her inability to be involved made any contribution to her successful completion. The participant continued to share factors, including supportive faculty, economic demands, and self-motivation, as the key areas that supported her degree completion.

Six of the nine participants described opportunities to become involved by using specific terms, such as community-oriented campus, understanding coursework, advisor assistance, and support from faculty, as factors that helped contribute to successful outcomes. However, it is important to note that it was not until after they became comfortable on the campus and learned about activities through flyers and bulletin/email announcements, that it became easier to sign up for campus functions.

The participants indicated various forms of college activities, which depended— in some cases—on their academic studies or work-related responsibilities that allowed them to attend. Some areas that contributed to their college success included making new friends, college fairs, and support from faculty and academic advisement. It was evident from the responses that signing up to attend college functions made significant contributions to moving the students toward achieving their goals.

Research Question 3. *What social integration activities influenced first-generation African American female alumni to persist during their first year and go on to graduate?* The researcher wanted to understand how the participants perceived their experience during social functions, and it was important for the researcher to learn if this college service influenced the participant to a longer commitment. There was an

overwhelmingly positive response to this question, and the participants agreed that the college provided a variety of social functions that gave them the foundational tools to re-enroll after their first year. Of the nine participants, eight stated that the college did a good job at promoting social activities, and they felt that this was an important resource that influenced re-enrollment—even if they personally did not get involved. Several participants spoke openly about their involvement in social gatherings and used language such as "the college has a community atmosphere," "I made great connections," and "I wish I could have attended more functions." One participant stated, "I really do wish I was more social. I hate that, you know. I regret that I wasn't always at the pep rallies and the games and stuff like that." This participant believed that the college offered many opportunities for students to attend social functions, and she regretted not taking advantage of the services.

Social functions. Eight participants commented on various social activities offered by the college during their first year that encouraged them to remain enrolled. They spoke candidly about events, such as college fairs, on- and off-campus field trips, and guest speaker sessions, that connected them with staff members and helped them to bond with peers. Participant 1 shared many thoughts in this area and explained:

> Being a part of social functions on campus was important for me, because I felt like sometimes, I needed to be able to network and make new friends. . . . You're able to build relationships, and you only learned these skills through networking while you're in college.

She went on to describe how she signed up to attend a hiking field trip, and this trip was the defining moment that solidified her desire to continue. She said that she saw a

different perspective on college life and discovered that college is not only reading and writing papers, but it can also shape one's life "through fun interactions with new people." She stated, "I would say the social function that encouraged me to re-enroll will probably be, um, [when] I went hiking with them one time. . . . So, I was like, 'okay, I'm down.'"

Participant 4 shared, "It was important to me because, I'm shy most of the time, so I don't really have a lot of friends." She explained how she used opportunities to attend social events to meet new people and said, "I was able to meet some great people . . . I've been able to join a college club and actually stayed long enough to talk to people and get to know them . . . and we had classes together."

In a similar tone, Participant 2 stated, "I'm more of an introvert. . . . Ironically, I actually love to be involved with people, as long as it's tied to something, I have a passion for." She shared that she had a dance group outside of school and how joining the marching band on campus helped her to continue pursuing her college education. She said, "I was a part of the initial group that started the band, and for me, that was a really great experience . . . and encouraged me to re-enroll." Participant 5 explained:

> I'm in a way . . . like I do like things that like . . . it was fun and some activities that I attended was fun. . . . I liked the sipping chats that the school had. Sometimes they had panel discussions and discuss, like . . . somethings we want to do as college students.

Participant 5 felt that these types of social events were interesting and strengthened her desired to remain enrolled.

Two of the nine participants reported that attending social functions was not as important and did not support re-enrollment to persist to graduate. These participants used specific terms such as "I was self-motivated," "focused on my studies," and "I really couldn't attend." They generally felt that being self-driven influenced them to commit to degree completion. For example, Participant 7 mentioned during her interview that she was an older student who completed her associate and bachelor's degree at the private urban college. She shared how outside demands, such as work, caring for two sick parents, and travel, kept her from attending social events. Participant 7 stated, "Well, I wasn't actually on campus. . . . So, I was just, um, coming to school, you know . . . completing my coursework and then going home. So, like I said, I concentrated on my education." Throughout the interview, Participant 7 placed an emphasis on terms, such as self-determination, family issues, and economic demands, which were important factors that led her to persist and get her degree. In a similar tone, Participant 6 shared, "I don't think it was important, like, at all to me, because I had a strict goal and it was to like make honors . . . go to class and go back to my dorm room and do my work." This participant went on to say that her primary focus was getting her assignments done on time and maintaining her 3.0 GPA. She believed her self-motivation led to persistence.

The responses to Research Question 3 revealed that most of the participants felt that the college offered great opportunities to attend social functions, and they agreed that attending these social gatherings on campus was an important factor in strengthening their desire to persist and continue to pursue their degree program. Other participants felt that although social interaction was important, other factors, such as self-motivation, social life, and economic demands, increased their desire to re-enroll.

Research Question 4. *What strategies did first-generation African American female alumni describe as helpful to overcome barriers to persistence in college?* This question sought to explore any problems on and/or off campus that the participants encountered during college, the emotional impact on the participants, and what academic services they employed to promote their intention to persist. Four of the nine participants reported a lack of communication with professors and a lack of administrative support. Two of the nine participants reported roommate issues hindering their ability to maintain focus on academic studies. Two of the nine participants spoke about the loss of a loved one, and one participant shared that an unstable home environment led to an inconsistent desire to stay in college. Seven out of the nine participants indicated that using strategies such as "interaction with peers," "speaking to a trusted professor," "student services," and "being self-driven," supported persistence. For example, Participant 3 shared that during her first year, her mother became ill. She lived in a dorm on campus but made consistent trips back home and to the hospital to tend to the needs of her mother. When her mother passed away, she felt as though her entire support system crumbled. She stated, "I usually have my mother to speak with, and she's my go-to person to get me through everything . . . but, yeah . . . I don't have her at this moment." She went on to share how she lost focus on her academic studies and had to withdraw from a few classes during her first semester. The researcher heard hesitation and sensed sadness as the participant struggled slightly to continue speaking during the interview. Upon giving the participant a moment to reflect, the researcher redirected the focus of the interview by asking the participant if there were any academic programs that helped her to get through this obstacle. The participant reflected on her close connection to an administrative staff

member, as well as her own self-motivation, which helped her to continue. She stated, "I really didn't get involved in academic programs . . . like I said . . . Miss [Name] really encouraged me to continue . . . she took me on field trips related to my major and helped me to re-enroll for the next semester."

Participant 7 shared a similar story, reporting that when she completed her associate degree her mother passed away, and while completing her bachelor's degree, her father passed away. She added that she went into a state of depression for 10 months and was placed on antidepressants during her academic journey. She also shared that she had an insensitive professor during the same time frame. She stated, "I came into an obstacle with a female professor. . . . everything was going wrong, wrong, wrong for me. . . . She gave me an "F'. . . I had to take the course over again." The researcher sensed feelings of frustration as this participant continued to narrate the problems she encountered both on and off campus. As she proceeded to share how she recovered from these encounters, the researcher perceived a change in the conversation tone to being more positive as the participant reflected on using college resources that promoted successful outcomes. When asked how the she overcame such barriers, she strongly believed that her own self-determination led to degree completion. She stated:

> Well, like I said, I filled out the student evaluation. . . . I just moved on, you
>
> know, I still graduated. . . . And, like, I said, I was the first of my siblings to
>
> graduate from college. . . . A professor inspired me to persist. Like I said, I got
>
> into my studies, I studied . . . I was determined to finish! Yeah, I was just so
>
> determined. . . . I was determined to pass . . . this is what my parents would have
>
> wanted . . . I needed that degree to get a better job.

Participant 6 reported a different viewpoint on overcoming barriers. She shared her experience with living in a dorm at the college and the difficulty she experienced dealing with roommates. As she described her issue, the researcher noted feelings of anger and frustration that emerged from the participants' reflection. She commented that, "the problem escalated to the point that I almost got kicked off campus." She stated:

> So, I got like these two roommates from freshman year. And then, we had this one girl, she's on a track team. She's cool and all, but like her friend . . . we really can't see eye to eye. I'm like, okay . . . I'm trying to negotiate, like I already established I wanted this bed . . . I was, um . . . "kindly would you move your things over there" . . . it was just . . . it was a boiling moment.

Participant 6 described several incidents that transpired during her stay in the dormitory that caused her much bitterness toward roommates. She described how "she blacked out one time and told everybody off." She said things like, "You need to stay away from my side, because I not playing with you. . . . I will gladly move you out that window . . . on the fourth floor." During the interview, the researcher continued to sense non-verbal communication revealing anger as the participant narrated her story about the issue. The researcher then shifted the conversation and proceeded to ask the participant how she managed to overcome these barriers. She shared that she addressed her concerns with the team coach to get resolution. She went on to share that she had to self-reflect on the reason she was attending college, and how this is what motivated her desire to persist and graduate. The researcher revisited this question in order to bring clarification as what strategies Participant 6 used to overcome her barriers, she commented, "going to classes, literally, going to classes."

Participant 4 reported how she overcame her encounter with a professor who neglected to provide effective communication regarding a math assignment. She stated:

I had a couple of professors that . . . their teaching style . . . they really don't work for me. I have a professor, right now . . . we're learning about using Excel and using math at the same time . . . it's like the way he teaches . . . is that he starts asking questions before . . . he starts explaining stuff.

When the researcher inquired how this participant overcame her barrier she stated, "I had a friend taking the class with me, and she explains stuff that I don't understand." This participant consistently reported that peer support helped her to overcome barriers and obstacles.

The overarching theme that emerged in response to this question was that overcoming barriers meant the participants chose to utilize the college resources to support persistence. The researcher discovered that many of the participants used specific terms such as "self-reflection," "self-motivation," and "self-determined" that helped them to overcome barriers and obstacles toward a continual pursuit of their degree completion. Overall, the responses from this Research Question 4 indicated that he participants valued their interactions with peers, student services, and being self-driven to overcome barriers and reach their academic objectives.

Summary of Results

Chapter 4 provided an overview of the analysis and findings based on the four research questions that guided this phenomenological study. This study presented findings gathered by the researcher that were collected via semi-structured interviews with nine first-generation African American females who graduated from a private urban

college. The alumni participants provided detailed and meaningful descriptions of their lived experiences that uncovered common themes that supported their academic success. The common themes were correlated to seven major categories indicated by academic involvement, academic program/goals, college activities, contributions to college success, social integration, barriers/obstacles, and overcoming barriers/obstacles that influenced persistence to degree completion. All of the participants narrated their personal understanding of academic involvement and social integration and highlighted unique experiences that they felt supported them to longer commitments that led to graduation.

The researcher mapped the seven categories utilizing Tinto's (1973) components to student attrition and persistence theory, and the researcher was able to connect the six variables of student attrition and persistence to the categories and themes that emerged. Chapter 5 discusses the implications of the findings that are connected to the literature and it suggests recommendations for future studies.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

        This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of nine first-generation African American female alumni and to gather their perspectives on the academic involvement and social integration that led to their degree completion from a private urban college. The results of this study applied Tinto's (1973) theoretical framework of student attrition and persistence, which postulates that understanding students' premature departure or continuance from college could be examined by the efficacy of their interactions in academic and social settings at the institution. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight into how first-generation African American female alumni explained academic and social predictors and how these influenced the alumni'' persistence to degree completion. The study referred to categories, such as academic involvement, academic program/goals, social integration, contributions to college success, barriers/obstacles, and overcoming barriers/obstacles, which were explored as described from the voices of the alumni. In addition, these findings can be used to inform and expand institutional knowledge on components that promote retention, enhance student academic performance, and strengthen college programs from an alumni's viewpoint.

        This chapter reviews the implications of the findings, limitations of the research, and recommendations, which are significant for future studies and theory application. Lastly, this chapter summarizes the research and provides a conclusion.

Research supports a steady increase of first-generation students who account for approximately 21% of the undergraduate population in the United States (Katrevich & Aruguette, 2017; Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Blake, & Tran, 2010). For many first-generation students, higher education has become a revolving door that begins and ends prematurely, and only 11% from this student population graduates after 6 years compared to 55% of their non-first-generation peers (Engle, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Galligan, 2014; Katrevich & Aruguette, 2017; Tinto, 2003). Furthermore, the NCES indicates that a higher percentage of African American females are enrolled in college than any other ethnic group (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Johnson & Reynolds, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2017); yet, despite the representation of first-generation African American female students enrolled in higher education, their graduation rates are considerably lower than their White female counterparts. Black females graduated at a rate of 25.5% versus White females who graduated at a rate of 51.2%, from bachelor's degree-awarding institutions (NCES, 2018a; Tinto, 2012). Despite adequate access to college enrollment, factors that influence African American females' persistence to degree attainment have not been sufficiently studied for potential unique areas relating to their academic involvement, academic program/goals, college activities, contributions to college success, social engagement, barriers/obstacles and overcoming barriers/obstacles. To address these factors, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors contributed to the academic success of first-generation African American female alumni?

2. How did first-generation African American female alumni in a private urban college describe their academic experiences during their first year?

3. What social integration activities influenced first-generation African American female alumni to persist during their first year and go on to graduate?

4. What strategies did first-generation African American female alumni describe as helpful to overcome barriers to persistence in college?

Implications of Findings

This study is a contribution to the existing literature employing a qualitative approach that supports a better understanding of the processes that leads to persistence for first-generation African American females. Contributions to the literature from this study are connected to the student retention/persistence model that consists of six variables including (a) pre-entry attributes, (b) goals/commitment, (c) institutional experiences, (d) integration, (e) intentions/external commitments; and (f) outcome (Metz, 2004; Tinto 1973). The themes included academic involvement, academic program/goals, college activities, contributions to college success, social integration, barriers/obstacles, and overcoming barriers/obstacles. This study examined the lived experiences of first-generation African American female alumni as they described how these themes influenced persistence to degree completion in a private urban college.

Academic involvement. Studies show that the degree of academic involvement, particularly for women, can either undermine or enhance a student's ability to perform, and these are significant factors that influence a student's willingness to persist and graduate from college (Booker, 2016). Further studies suggest that specific characteristics and goals become a dominant influence affecting a student's behavior, thereby, explaining the level of continuation in the academic setting (Metz, 2004). Thus,

the researcher sought to evaluate if Tinto's (1973) theory on student attrition and persistence determined the retention levels of first-generation African American female alumni through their perceptions of academic success.

Based on the findings, reoccurring themes relating to professor engagement and administrative support strongly encouraged re-enrollment. All the participants defined academic involvement as building relationships with professors and staff members, which were important predictors of success. These findings concur with the literature that suggests enhanced student-faculty and staff interactions were directly associated with student continuance (Tinto, 1975).

Academic program/goals. The findings suggest that the private college provided substantial academic programs to help students reach their academic goals. Many of the participants felt that services, such as the academic center, advisement office, and core course curriculum programs, supported them in reaching their academic goals. Ma & Shea (2019) provided additional evidence that when institutions cultivate effective intervention programs, first-generation female students are motivated to engage in positive educational experiences.

College activities. This study uncovered that most of the participants felt it was important to become acclimated to the campus environment prior to getting involvement in college activities during their first year. Gaining insight into the campus environment allowed the students to develop a sense of familiarity, which later transitioned into learning more about college events. Involvement in institutional experiences presented an avenue for the students to reach out to meet new people, build relationship with professors, and connect with campus resources. Participant 1 shared how getting

involved in college events helped her to achieve good grades. She stated: "I seen a big difference in my grades. . . . I seen a big difference in my attendance. . . . I seen a big difference in my relationship with my professors." Findings from this current study support Vaccaro and Newman's (2016) research regarding the importance for institutional creation and promotion of student engagement in unstructured learning environments that helped them feel like valued members of the campus community.

Contributions to college success. While some participants revealed that their own self-motivation made contributions to their successful completion, most participants indicated that support from faculty and staff, making new friends, and use of library resources made significant contribution to their success. Participant 1 shared how getting involved in college activities impacted her decision to commit. She stated, "academic involvement contributed to my college success greatly, because it was like . . . I wouldn't have finished college." The research confirms that faculty commitment to engage in the students' academic goals, the ability of the student to successful navigate through college resources, and forming peer relationships, are paramount to continued enrollment (Means & Pyne, 2017).

Social interaction. The findings in this research concluded that it is essential for students to feel a sense of belonging to the campus community, which can hinder or increase academic involvement (Means & Pyne, 2017). Many statements, as shared by the participants, strongly supported perspectives on this factor, and they used language that defined sense of belonging as "the school has a community atmosphere," "there is a community aspect here," "college community atmosphere," and "I felt very welcomed." For example, Participant 2 stated, "you know, like, you were able to identify with each

other . . . the community aspect definitely pushed me to re-enroll." In a similar tone, Participant 9 added, "when I got there and, you know, I felt very welcomed, an, um, I finished with good grades." Social engagement connects to the ability of first-generation college students' willingness to engage in a positive educational experience, and social engagement has been found to directly impact students' sense of belonging along with institutional connectedness, which strengthens their social awareness in a campus environment (Means & Pyne, 2017). The social functions of the college included not only peer interaction and increased faculty and staff connectedness, but the participants spoke of going on off-campus field trips and attending campus events that influenced re-enrollment. Finally, in corroboration with Tinto's (1973) research, the alumni responses indicated that associations with the social systems of the campus strongly related to persistence, consequently, helping the student to meet academic goals.

Barriers/obstacles. Recent studies on first-generation students uncovered the notion that this population had a higher probability for attrition than their non-first-generation peers, and the perceived barriers, such as being a single mother, work demands, and caring for an elderly family member, triggered discontinuance for this student population (Toutkoushian et al., 2019). Therefore, it was important for the researcher to investigate what barriers the participants encountered on or off campus as well as gather a description of the academic programs that helped them persist beyond their struggles and graduate.

The findings in this study reveal that interactions with peers and faculty/staff support yielded strong resolution to the persistence gap for many of the participants. The uncovering of a new theme called self-driven, allowed the researcher to conduct further

investigation that informed the study. As many of the participants reflected on their own experiences with overcoming barriers, the researcher noted consistent descriptions of terms such as self-motivation, self-reflection, and self-determination, in the participant interviews. A thorough analysis by the researcher on this phenomenon concluded that these terms, collectively, could be placed under one central theme called self-driven. The development of the self-driven theme was a new discovery in the study, which is a means of negotiating and understanding the issues, struggles, and forms of oppression faced by African American women on a daily basis. The research suggests that little is known about how this population managed to overcome their problems, and this new discovery could be a potential avenue for future research (Mattis, 2002; Patton & McClure 2009).

Reflecting on past experiences regarding how to resolve problems resulted in answers containing situations that the participants attributed to being the catalyst that pushed them to degree completion. Among the participants who shared their experience in this area, was the voice of Participant 7, who reflected on the problems she encountered during her academic journey. She commented:

> I had two sick parents. . . . You know . . . Yeah, my mom passed away while I was getting my associate's, and then my dad passed away when I'm getting my bachelor's. . . . I had to really, really push myself. I was so determined. I was just so determined to pass.

In a similar tone, Participant 3 shared her story that transpired during her first year and she said, "I was dealing with my mother's passing that really took a toll on my academics . . . it was my mentor who encouraged me to re-enroll . . . she was remarkable . . . that's really, really how I did it!" She went on to say that she also overcame barriers

through self-motivation, and she reflected, "I try to figure out things on my own . . . I really kinda, handled things in my way to get out of college."

The consistency of the participants' comments also concurs with the current research that suggests dealing with stressful or traumatic ordeals meant that the student chose to connect with a trusted professor or staff member. It was also found in the research by Patton and McClure (2009) that establishing good relations with college peers and having a strong internal commitment were indicated as instrumental to the goal of bachelor's degree completion.

Limitations

The findings in this study identified several limitations. One limitation was that the selected participants included nine African American females who had already graduated from the urban college. While the qualitative approach was applicable for this understudied population, this was a retrospective study which asked alumni participants to describe events and perceptions of events that occurred during their college years. In other words, the cognitive-emotional perceptions of what the alumni said during the semi-structured interview can be different from what they experienced while in the process of completing their degree program (Booker, 2016). Though retrospective accounts are frequently utilized in research, some inherent drawbacks are noteworthy including flaws in recollection, as well as potential distortion based on intervening factors of the academic program.

Another potential limitation was reliance on the snowball sampling technique. Semi-structured interview data gathering was the original study design. Snowball sampling was later utilized in the study as the original selection process only yielded

seven alumni participants who met the criteria, completed the required demographic survey, and agreed to participate in the study. Although two of nine participants were recruited as a result of this method, it remains noteworthy to mention those who referred them for participation, thereby potentially limiting the scope of generalizability of the findings.

Lastly, the data collection from alumni only, may be a study limitation. The sample size for this study followed the lived experiences of first-generation African American females who graduated from an urban college. These were individuals who, by definition, were successful in meeting the requirements for graduation. While the study was examining the potentially beneficial effects of college life relative to academic involvement and social integration, including individuals who did not persist to degree completion, as well as students who were currently enrolled in a degree program, could have allowed for potential issues to be uncovered as well as real-time analysis of college support systems. This may have had yielded more accuracy than retrospective accounts.

Recommendations

Academic programs. Garriott et al. (2017) emphasized the importance for postsecondary practitioners to reinforce first-generation college students' academic skills by developing 21st academic support programs to increase college students' ability to be potential contributors to the future workforce. During the ice-breaking part of the interviews, some of the participants expressed that the college could have offered internship programs that would have more closely related to their major. Although most of the participants felt that the internship experience was important, some shared that the program could be designed to better help them compete for careers due to their minimal

work-related experience. Successful educational leaders could possibly strengthen academic support programs that strongly contribute to the graduates' competitive edge, which could lead to viable and sustainable career opportunities in the global economy.

Partner with students when planning social activities. The research confirms that first-generation African American female students are underrepresented and underprepared when entering the campus environment. They enroll with multiple loyalties, in terms of domestic responsibilities, including but not limited to balancing academic and work schedules to support their families, childcare, and home responsibilities (Kelly et al., 2019; Walpole et al., 2014). Therefore, these competing schedules and off-campus commitments present a critical need for first-generation African American female college students to have the flexibility to experience social connectivity in the campus community. Current extracurricular activities may not be capturing the attention of all first-generation African American female students.   All participants, both those who were socially engaged and those who had difficulty attending social functions, agreed that the college could plan events that considers the on- and off-campus demands of the student. They felt that the ability for the students to be socially connected could be strengthened by gaining input from the students and including their suggestions in the planning stages and implementation process, when restructuring social functions both on and off campus. It is important to note that administrators may not perceive the struggles of students if they neglect to respond to their desire be more actively involved, and this can result in early departure (Tinto, 2012).

College success course. A final recommendation for the college is to re-examine college success courses that are offered to students during their first semester. The research identified strong evidence that suggests peer interactions lead to positive academic outcomes. By involving senior-level students who are familiar with navigating through the college process, administrators can effectively create various ways to keep the first-year students engaged, and this can potentially encourage them to return by listening to positive experiences from the senior-level students. One participant stressed the importance or reevaluate the required course. She shared that although she attended this required course during her first year, it did not hold her interest and she finally stopped attending the class. She explained that it was her mentor who helped her to reach her academic goals and strengthened her persistence.

Future research. Due to minimal research on the lived experiences related to the factors that support first-generation African American female students to persistence to degree completion, a continued study on student persistence to degree completion is warranted. The findings in this study allowed the researcher to reveal areas for further research based on the factors relating to academic engagement and social connectedness for first-generation African American female college students that supports persistence to degree completion. Topics for future study are discussed in the next section.

African American male college students experience similar success and failures in college completion. A recent study reported that they are also more likely to drop out prior to completing a college degree. It was also reported that meaningful and supportive relationships with faculty and staff positively influenced their satisfaction with the college experience (Strayhorn, 2017). A potential benefit to future research would

include a representation of first-generation African American male alumni using a qualitative phenomenological approach that would allow for data collection that would better inform the study on persistence to degree completion in a private urban college.

Although Tinto's (1973) model for student attrition and persistence was the primary theoretical framework used to draw conclusions on student persistence, a combination of Rendón's (1994) validation theory, which is applicable to low-income first-generation female students, can offer new insight to theorize how students describe college success while being enrolled in postsecondary education. This approach could speak to current issues, by studying this audience and adding new phenomena to the study regarding how to support completion at a private urban college.

Finally, new discoveries allowed the researcher to further examine language as voiced by the participants who described the terms self-motivated, self-reflected, and self-determination. This study suggests that further research warrants a deeper exploration into these components and investigate the *how* and *why* the participants described these terms as strong indicators that led to degree completions. According a study conducted by Patton and McClure (2009), spirituality plays a role in the lives of woman and the why and how can be best answered by examining their life experiences. Spirituality also serves as the source of individual strength that motives the Black female to succeed and is used as a means to deal with challenges (Patton & McClure, 2009). Future research could seek to gain additional insight on the intersection of spirituality on the Black female college student and the influence on self-driven elements that could possibly influence retention and reduced premature departure.

Conclusion

Despite the increase in undergraduate enrollment, a considerable amount of research indicates that institutions of higher learning continue to be challenged to translate access into persistence and completion for low-income first generation African American female students who graduate at a rate of 25.5% compared to their White female peers who graduate at a rate of 51.2% (NCES, 2018a; Tinto, 2012). Improving persistence rates for first-generation college students continues to create unending pressure on postsecondary educational policymakers as racial disparities continue to rise. While persistence rates at degree-granting institutions for full-time White student was 25%, African American students had the lowest persistence rate at 14% (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Katrevich & Aruguette, 2017; NCES, 2017). As previously stated, while vast research can be found on how male students persisted and graduated, limited research has been found documenting how first-generation African American female students persisted and reached degree attainment. This demographic group continues to be an underreported, underrepresented, and underserved student population (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014).

Consequently, exploration on the educational trajectory of first-generation African American females at a private urban college warrants continued study. This could provide vital information about the ways in which the student experience for this group can be improved thereby leading to increased retention and persistence to completion rates. Research indicates that this student population is faced with multiple challenges from balancing work schedules with academic course work, childcare, and

caring for a loved one, that can change the course of their academic trajectory and pose a significant impact on continued enrollment (Kelly et al., 2019; Walpole et al., 2014).

An increasing number of first-generation students continue to depart from higher educational institutions without completing their undergraduate degree (Park, 2014; Woods-Warrior, 2014). With this in mind, the impact of low levels of degree attainment pose potentially negative results that could affect not only the student, but the institutions' retention goals, as well as weaken America's competitive position in the global economy. It is better to support students to not only to persist, but more importantly, complete their college education. If educational lawmakers do not give immediate attention to strengthening these concerns, they can suffer a huge waste of money in terms in PELL grants, TAP grants, and other lending entities. To add, a 2018 Higher Education Service Corporation study reported that the maximum PELL grant recipient was awarded $6,095 to help cover tuition fees, room, and board at public colleges and universities. The estimated TAP awards ranges from $500 to $5,165 per year depending on the financial status of the student (The Official Website of New York State, n.d.).

Current population classifications project an increasing demographic shift in the United States, and by the year 2050, the African American population is expected to grow from 35.8 to 61.4 million or at a rate of 14.6% (Levitt & Piro, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). This growing change will undoubtedly impact the American education system, the economy, and culture; therefore, educational policymakers must focus their attention on increasing academic initiatives that support first-generation African American students—not only to gain access to colleges but also to earn a college degree.

The first year of college serves as a pivotal time for institutions to strengthen retention and persistence, particularly among first-generation African American female students, which is a vital condition for timely completion of a degree program (NCES, 2017; Walpole et al., 2014). Additionally, insufficient levels of academic and social integration will lead to a low commitment and a probability that students will decide to leave college early (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto's (1973) model emphasizes and discusses the importance of six variables in relation to the process that undergraduate students experience throughout their academic years. The framework proposes an approach that suggests the student ponders a decision between dropout or perseverance during the first year. The initial inception of this model had a theoretical development proposed by Tinto and Cullen (1973), and it is commonly referred to as Tinto's student attrition and persistence model. This framework, which suggests a longitudinal approach to the dropout/persist process, has been at the forefront of numerous educational studies and has been revisited by higher educational leaders for over 50 years (since the 1970s) analyzing factors that most directly impact continuance in the university environment (Nicoletti, 2019). For the purpose of this study, Tinto (1973) described six operational and observable variables used to measure the students' level of integration into the academic and social systems included were (a) pre-entry attributes, (b) goals/commitment, (c) institutional experience, (d) integration, (e) external/ commitments, and (f) outcome. These variables correlated to seven categories that were related to (a) academic involvement, (b) academic program/goals, (c) college activities, (d) contributions to college success, (e) social integration (f) barriers/obstacles, and (g) overcoming barriers/obstacles (Metz, 2004; Tinto, 1973).

Tinto (1973) formulated a process of "re-evaluating the degrees of commitment to the course as well as to the institution, which are fundamental and critical issues related to the process of dropout" (Nicoletti, 2019, p. 58). Subsequently, the structure of this model can be approached as a process that begins by received input data on the variable values associated with academic and social integration. Accordingly, a combination of the first-year commitment of the student and his/her integration in both factors, strengthens their commitment to complete (Nicoletti, 2019; Tinto, 1973). Consequently, Tinto's (1973) theoretical model suggests that, "the greater the integration of the student in both academic and social spheres, the greater will be his/her commitment to the institution, as well as the greater will be the students' commitment to the goals of persistence and completion" (Nicoletti, 2019, p. 58).

This study examined the lived experiences from the voice of nine first-generation African American female alumni who graduated from a private urban college. The findings of this retrospective study demonstrate that this student population achieved successful academic outcomes when educational administrators employed academic and social involvement programs that benefited the entire student population. To further address this point, the alumni in this study strongly reported consistent levels of persistence when attending classes, supportive faculty, and having access to college resources, which helped them to reach academic goals. Unanimously, they also believed that building relationships with peers, as well as establishing their own desire to commit, supported completion. These alumni participants consistently referred to socialization terms such as *community atmosphere* and *friendly campus community*, which helped them to overcome barriers during their first year and that influenced their persistence.

Additionally, when encountering barriers, some of the alumni participants referred to their own abilities and reflected on terms such as self-determination, self-motivation, and self-awareness. Their comments, relating to inflexible professors and staff support during challenging times, caused them to develop their own resistance to continue. Employing these self-driven attributes led to commitment, resilience, and completion. The degree to which the participants expounded on these attributes allowed the researcher to further explore if this new phenomenon led to persistence. It is important to note that not only factors of academic involvement and social integration were strongly predictors of academic success, but this study unveiled new discoveries relating to self-driven characteristics as narrated by the alumni participants in this study. This might be a potentially beneficial topic for college administrators to incorporate during the first-year freshmen seminar—employing academic techniques that challenge the students' individual ability to persevere.

This study adds invaluable insight to the existing body of research on first-generation African American female college students, as discussed in Chapter 2, and it broadens the scope of knowledge that supports educational leaders on factors to help close the disproportionate degree-completion gap for this student population in college and universities. The results of this study will support college administrators and educational policymakers in higher education to better understand first-generation African American female students through 21st century practices when enhancing engaging learning environments. This study sought to find ways to explain the academic involvement and social integration protocols in higher education which have shown to

positively impact first-generation African American female students ultimately leading to continuous enrollment and degree completion.

Without question, obtaining a college degree leads to better career opportunities and employment advancement. It is evidence by the research that the earning gap between those females who completed a college degree versus those who do not is approximately $21,000 per year (NCES, 2018b). More importantly, the lifetime earnings by educational attainment for females who graduate with a bachelor's degree was $650,000 versus females who were high school completers who earn an annual salary of $27,900 as full-time workers, year-round (NCES, 2020). Another important study indicated that "lifetime earnings have important implications for retirement outcomes including the level of Social Security benefits" (Tamborini, ChangHwan, & Sakamoto, 2015, p. 1383). Without completing a bachelor's degree, the low-level earning for those who do not complete college can directly affect their potential for career advancement, they are more likely to have health challenges, and they may experience incidence of poverty during economic downturns (Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, n.d.). Therefore, it is crucial for postsecondary leaders to prepare all students for degree completion, because is a necessary requirement to compete for jobs in the future workforce (Bottiani et al., 2018; USDOE, 2014).

Increasing attention on closing disproportionate retention and graduation gaps continues to challenge educational practitioners, institutional policy makers, and scholars to revisit factors that predict persistence and degree completion for first-generation African American female college students (Hansen et al., 2014). Institutional administrators have the responsibility to ensure that these students are included in the

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education process, especially during their first year. Administrators from the student academic affairs office can possibly implement specialized programs to support the students' commitment level as well as give space for the student to voice their perspective on commitment. The purpose of this study was to reveal that academic involvement and social integration influenced the students' desire to re-enroll and ultimately graduate and this study gave voice to alumni who confirmed it in the factors presented. These factors add to the body of literature and may help other educational practitioners, institutional policymakers, and administrators better understand African American female college students and how academic involvement and social integration factors support persistence to degree completion which, in turn, provides increased career opportunities, healthier lifestyles, and a sustainable future for the U.S. economy.

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Appendix A

St. John Fisher College IRB Approval

ST. JOHN
FISHER
COLLEGE

February 14, 2020

File No: 4072-02202020-01

Delores Patterson
St. John Fisher College

Dear Ms. Patterson:
Thank you for submitting your research proposal to the Institutional Review Board.
I am pleased to inform you that the Board has approved your Exempt Review project,
"Firstgeneration African American Female Student Perspectives on Persistence to
Degree Completion at a Private Urban College: A Phenomenological Study".

Following federal guidelines, research related records should be maintained in a secure
area for three years following the completion of the project at which time they may be
destroyed.
Should you have any questions about this process or your responsibilities, please contact
me at irb@sifc.edu.

Sincerely,

Lynd-Balta

Eileen Lynd-Balta, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board
ELB: jdr

Appendix B

Email Letter of Introduction

Date

Dear Prospective Participant:

My name is Delores Patterson, and I am a doctoral candidate at St. John Fisher College. I want to thank you for completing the online survey for my research study. Based on your response, you have been selected to participate in an in-depth telephone interview. The purpose of my study is to understand your experience as a first-generation African American female who successfully graduated from _____ College. In this study, you will be asked 10 semi-structured questions, and the interview will last approximately 1 hour. I will be happy to contact you via telephone at your convenience to conduct the interview.

If you are still interested in participating in the study, please review the attached Informed Consent form and submit with your online signature.

Please contact me at (___) ___-____ -mobile and let me know your availability in the two next weeks for the telephone interview.

Thank you, again, and I look forward to speaking with you.

Best regards,

Delores Patterson

Delores Patterson

Appendix C

Pre-Interview Demographic Questionnaire

1) Do you identify as an African American?

□ Yes or □ No

2) Do you identify as female?

□ Yes or □ No

3) Please indicate the year you graduated with your associate or bachelor's degree:

□ 2014 or □ 2015 or □ 2016 or □ 2017 or □ 2018 or □ 2019

4) What was your grade point average upon graduation?

Between □ 2.0 and □ 2.7 or between □ 3.0 and □ 4.0

5) Did you take a college success course? (i.e., First year experience or College 100 course)

6) Did you start as a freshman at _____ College?

□ Yes or □ No

7) What is the highest degree or level of education that your mother has completed?

(If mother's educational level is unknown, please use the choices below to indicate the status of your primary caretaker.)

□ No schooling completed

□ Elementary School (Kindergarten–5)

□ Middle School (6–8)

□ High School (9–12) or the equivalent (i.e., obtained a GED)

□ Some college credit, no degree

□ Associate degree or higher

□ Unknown

8) What is the highest degree or level of education that your father has completed?

(If father's educational level is unknown, please use the choices below to indicate the status of your primary caretaker.)

□ No schooling completed

□ Elementary School (Kindergarten–5)

□ Middle School (6–8)

□ High School (9–12) or the equivalent (i.e., obtained a GED)

□ Some college credit, no degree

□ Associate degree or higher

□ Unknown

9) Please select the extra or co-curricular activities in which you participated while attending _____ College. *(Note: These activities must have been organized by the college or related to coursework you took at the college.* You may check all that apply:

□ Recognized student club/organization (i.e., student government)

□ Peer mentoring program

□ Athletic team

□ Volunteer program

□ Internship program

□ Member of academic support services

□ Study groups

□ I was not involved in any of the above activities

10) Would you be interested in participating in an in-depth telephone interview?

□ Yes or □ No

Informed Consent Form

St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board

Statement of Informed Consent for Adult Participants

First-Generation African American Female Alumni Perspectives on Persistence to Degree Completion at a Private Urban College: A Phenomenological Study

SUMMARY OF KEY INFORMATION:

- You are being asked to be in a research study of first-generation African American female student perspectives on persistence to degree completion at a private urban college. As with all research studies, participation is voluntary.

- The purpose of this study is to examine how first-generation African American female college graduates defined social integration and academic involvement as contributing factors to their degree completion.

- Approximately 8 to10 people will take part in this study. The results will be used to better inform college and university administrators on implementation of academic services to promote student retention and understand factors related to social integration and academic involvement that predict successful completion.

- If you agree to take part in this study, it will convene on a day that is flexible with your schedule for one-on-one telephone semi-structured interview. The estimated duration for this interview will be one hour. The session will begin in the spring 2020 and include a one-time participation on a day and time that you are available. I do not anticipate collecting follow-up information after the session.

- Your participation will involve completing a semi-structured interview via telephone which will take place in the spring of 2020. The interview process will include 10 questions and should take no more than an hour to complete. The one-time interview will take place via telephone on a day and time that you are available. Additional details are provided in the body of the consent form.

- We believe this study has no more than minimal risk and will take no more than one hour to complete. You may terminate the interview at any time without penalty.

- The benefit to participating in this study will be knowing that you have helped educators and students to learn what academic resources were used to help you navigate through college to degree completion.
- *There are no alternative procedures or course of treatment for this study.*

DETAILED STUDY INFORMATION (some information may be repeated from the summary above):

You are being asked to be in a research study of first-generation African American female student perspectives on persistence to degree completion. This study is being conducted in the office of the primary researcher at a private urban college. This study is being conducted by: Delores Patterson. The name of the faculty research mentor is Dr. Anthony P. Chiarlitti in the Executive Leadership program at St. John Fisher College.

You were selected as a possible participant because you meet the criteria as a first-generation African American female who graduated from a private urban college.

Please read this consent form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

PROCEDURES:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:
On a day that is convenient with your schedule, prepare for a semi-structured interview via telephone. All participants will be given a pseudonym to protect confidentiality. Once we agree to a suitable time, I will call you, and the estimated duration for this telephone interview will be one hour. The telephone interview session will begin in the spring 2020 and include one-time participation on a day and time that you are available. You will be asked to answer a total of 10 questions, and I do not anticipate collecting follow-up information; but, I will inform you of additional participation within a week of after the session.

To aid the researcher with the accurate documentation of the participants' responses, interviews may be recorded using an audio recording device that will be transcribed by a third-party. You have the right to disallow such recording without penalty. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording: ☐Yes ☐No

COMPENSATION/INCENTIVES:

You will not receive compensation for your time and participation in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

The records of this study will be kept private and your confidentiality will be protected. In any sort of report the researcher might publish, no identifying information will be included. To ensure confidentiality, each participant will be assigned alphanumeric codes for identification purposes. Consent forms will be protected in a locked file cabinet, behind the researcher's locked office at the college. Audio recordings and transcribed data will be kept in a password protected cloud storage application for three years following the interview.

Identifiable research records will be stored securely and only the researcher(s) will have access to the records. Upon completion of the study, all data will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's private home. Only the investigator will have access to the data. All study records with identifiable information including tapes, transcripts, and consent forms, will be destroyed by shredding and/or deleting after three years. Audio recordings and transcribed data will be kept in a password protected cloud storage application and will be destroyed by shredding and/or deleting three years following the interview.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Participation in this study is voluntary and requires your informed consent. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. John Fisher College or Monroe College. If you decide to participate, you are free to skip any question that is asked. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You have the right to be informed of the results of the study.

CONTACTS, REFERRALS AND QUESTIONS:

The researcher conducting this study is Delores Patterson. If you have questions, **you are encouraged** to contact me at _____@monroecollege.edu or by telephone at ___-___-____. You may also contact my Dissertation Committee Chair, Dr. Anthony P. Chiarlitti at (___) ___-____ (office) or by e-mail at _____@sjfc.edu.

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 the SJFC IRB administrator by phone during normal business hours at (___) ___-____ or irb@sjfc.edu.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT:

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understood the above information. I consent to voluntarily participate in the study.

Signature:_____ Date:
_____

Signature of Investigator:_____ Date: _____

Retain this section only if applicable:
I agree to be audio-recorded/transcribed _____ Yes _____No If no, I understand that the
researcher will explain alternative to audio-recording, if any. If no alternative, state this clearly.

Signature:_____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator:_____ Date: _____

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher 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 (1-888-NYC-WELL, ext. 2).

Audio recordings addendum:

All digital audio recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be maintained using a private located, 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 locked inside a file cabinet in the principal researcher's private home. 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 three years following publication of the dissertation. 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.

Please keep a copy of this informed consent for your records.

Appendix E

Predetermined Interview Questions for the Participants

Research Questions	Interview Questions
1. What factors contributed to the academic success of first-generation African American female college alumni?	1. Please tell me how you would define "academic involvement"? 2. Based on your definition, what were some academic programs that helped you achieve your academic goals?
2. How did first-generation African American female alumni in a private urban college describe their academic experience during the first year?	3. How did you become involved in college activities during your first year? 4. How easy or difficult was it for you to become involved in academic activities? 5. In what ways do you feel academic involvement (or lack of involvement) contributed to your college success?
3. What social integration activities influenced first-generation African American female alumni to persist in their first year and graduate?	6. How important was it for you to be involved in social functions on campus? 7. What social functions (if any) influenced you to re-enroll?
2. What strategies did first-generation African American female alumni describe as helpful to overcome barriers to persistence in college?	8. What problems did you encounter during your academic experience on (or off) campus? 9. How did you overcome problems you encountered in college? Out of college? 10. What academic programs did you find helpful to overcome these problems? 11. (Follow-up) Is there anything that I did not mention that you would like to share?