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Examining the Lived Experiences of Successful Graduates of Color from Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) in Rural Environments

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Abstract

The demographics of students who enter colleges and universities across the United States have changed. These changes are seen in the increased numbers of students of color (SoC) that enter colleges and universities in the United States. The enrollment of SoC at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) has increased. Still, SoC disproportionately graduate at lower rates than their White counterparts. Administrators at PWIs continue to grapple with providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for students of color. Lack of academic preparation in their K-12 careers, and transition from larger urban cities to rural communities are challenges that students of color face. However, despite these well documented deficits, there are students of color at PWIs who are academically resilient and successful. Limited research had been conducted on what made a successful experience and what attributed to the success of SoC. To examine this phenomenon, interviews were conducted with graduates who were SoC from PWIs in rural environments. Nine participants shared that they experienced challenges with moving from an urban to a rural environment. Several themes emerged from the analysis. Three key findings emerged from the study. The first finding was that there is an inadequate transition or onboarding process for SoC at PWIs in a rural environment. The second finding revealed the importance of opportunity programs such as the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP). Finding three emphasized the importance of relationships and their integral role in the success of SoC.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my nieces, Imayah Hawkins and Raina Izabella Thompson, and my nephews, Jermani Hawkins, Branden Hawkins, Tresur Husani Griffin, Andre Bigham Walker, Brien Alexander Walker, and Joel Tresur Thompson. I love you and wish that as you continue your journey to self-discovery, personal and academic milestones, I wish for you the resilience and perseverance to successfully achieve all that you are capable of accomplishing. Know that you are enough.

I also dedicate this dissertation to the students (my students), you know who you are, in Jamaica, the USA, Canada, Gabon, Australia, at Trinity Preparatory, SUNY Canton, The College at Brockport, Keuka College who graciously provided me with the opportunity to serve them. In the moments when I felt like giving up, and there were many, I thought of you and I was motivated to stay and fight another day. You made this a reality. Earning this doctorate was a test and a testament to my resilience and persistence. It was about something bigger than myself and you made this happen for me. Please know that this is *our* degree.

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Biographical Sketch

Lisa M. Thompson was born on the island of Jamaica in the West Indies. She is a naturalized citizen of the United States of America (USA) and resides in Rochester, NY. She is an educator, coach, mentor, and higher education administrator who works with college students to assist them in realizing their untapped potentials. Prior to emigrating to the United States, Ms. Thompson earned a degree in primary education from Shortwood Teachers' College in Jamaica and taught Grade 4 for 3 years at Trinity Preparatory. In the US, she earned her associates and bachelor's degree in Business Administration respectively from Monroe Community College and The College at Brockport. Ms. Thompson went on to earn a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) from Clarkson University in Potsdam, NY.

Ms. Thompson is currently employed at a private college in the upstate region of NY where she serves as the Director of an opportunity program. She is also a member of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee and is co-advisor for the class of 2023. She was recently selected to participate in the Emerging Leaders Program which is a professional development opportunity available to leaders at her institution.

In May of 2020, Ms. Thompson earned her doctorate in executive leadership from St. John Fisher College. She plans to present her dissertation at workshops and conferences across the US and will also continue to write and expand on the lived experiences of students of color at predominately White institutions.

Abstract

The demographics of students who enter colleges and universities across the United States have changed. These changes are seen in the increased numbers of students of color (SoC) that enter colleges and universities in the United States. The enrollment of SoC at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) has increased. Still, SoC disproportionately graduate at lower rates than their White counterparts. Administrators at PWIs continue to grapple with providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for students of color. Lack of academic preparation in their K-12 careers, and transition from larger urban cities to rural communities are challenges that students of color face. However, despite these well documented deficits, there are students of color at PWIs who are academically resilient and successful. Limited research had been conducted on what made a successful experience and what attributed to the success of SoC. To examine this phenomenon, interviews were conducted with graduates who were SoC from PWIs in rural environments.

Nine participants shared that they experienced challenges with moving from an urban to a rural environment. Several themes emerged from the analysis. Three key findings emerged from the study. The first finding was that there is an inadequate transition or onboarding process for SoC at PWIs in a rural environment. The second finding revealed the importance of opportunity programs such as the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP). Finding three emphasized the importance of relationships and their integral role in the success of SoC.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The nation has experienced a significant demographic shift that continues to change the landscape of students enrolled in colleges across the United States (Kniess, Havice, & Cawthon, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). College and university admissions for students of color (SoC) have increased through recent years (Bond, Cason, & Baxley, 2015; Campbell & Davis, 1996; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Quaye & Harper, 2015; Schreiner, 2014). Despite this increase, disproportionately high attrition of students of color compared to their White peers impacts the persistence and graduation rates of this population (Leverett, Parker, & McDonald, 2007; Luedke, 2017). Students of color continue to graduate at lower rates than their White counterparts. Sixty-seven percent of White students who pursue a 4-year college degree are successful in obtaining one; while less than 50% of SoC are successful in doing so (Museus & Quaye, 2009). The persistence and graduation for students of color is further impacted by several factors as they navigate their way toward success at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Gusa, 2010; Quaye & Harper, 2015).

Students of color at PWIs are faced with the adjustment of college life, and the challenges of the many transitions in a college environment (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). In addition, students of color at PWIs find themselves experiencing marginalization and racially divisive environments (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Sinanan, 2016). These students cite feelings of alienation, loneliness, and a hostile atmosphere as

reasons they do not persist at PWIs (Harper, 2015; Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2000; Museus & Neville, 2012; Reddick, 2011). Additionally, White students' inclination is to misjudge the existence and pervasiveness of campus racism and racial tension (Cabrera, 2014). These factors present an added layer of challenges to the college experience for students of color. Morales and Trottman (2004) identified two areas that are particularly challenging for students of color. One area is the effort to minimize the effects of poor academic preparation received in their K-12 academic careers. The other area of challenge is for students who move from environments where they are a part of a racial majority to environments where they are a racial minority (Morales & Trottman, 2004).

The Higher Education Act of 1965 provided the opportunity for more students to attend college (Brock, 2010). It was presumed that when students enter college, they should be able to perform at a certain level. Disproportionately, this is not the reality for students of color (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Despite having the potential, students of color are at an academic and socioeconomic disadvantage in comparison to their White counterparts (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Schreiner, 2014). They start at a different level and lack the incidental learnings that their White counterparts gain through their daily associations and interactions (Lee, Catellanos, & Cole, 2002). Moreover, students of color experience PWIs differently than their White peers and look to cross-cultural offices to provide institutional support for academic and social opportunities as well as places of safety that improve the campus climate (Lee et al., 2002, Schreiner, 2014).

Grillo and Leist (2013) posited that increased engagement of academic support programs and services concurrently increase the academic performance of all students.

As such, these supports are crucial to the academic success of SoC who arrive on campus and are disproportionately less academically prepared for the rigors of college work (Kitano & Lewis, 2005). These academic support programs and services take many forms, such as summer bridge programs, instructional support services (tutoring, writing centers, mentoring), student to faculty relationships, and developmental courses. Furthermore, Schreiner's (2014) research identifies four areas that are the pathways that lead to success for students of color. The areas are campus involvement, student-faculty interaction, spirituality, and sense of community on campus (Schreiner, 2014).

Bridge programs exist to support the efforts of students who need additional academic support to be successful in college (Kallison & Stader, 2012). Furthermore, Kallison and Stader (2012) states that the purpose of these programs is to provide the needed intrusions to attain college enrollment. Bridge and opportunity programs have long been known to provide support to students who are underprepared and/or are from underrepresented backgrounds, such as low income, first generation, and students of color (Morales & Trottman, 2004; Kallison & Stader, 2012). These programs provide a plethora of support services designed to supplement and promote access, retention, and student achievement (McCurrie, 2009). These programs operate under the premise that students who participate are better prepared to transition into college (Strayhorn, 2011). Yet very minimal empirical data are available to substantiate the effectiveness of such programs in relation to preparation rates or approaches (Strayhorn, 2011). Cabrera, Miner, and Milem (2013) posited that the impact of summer bridge programs is likely indirect. Hence, that created methodological challenges in assessment and evaluation for administrators. Additionally, one consistent feature of a successful bridge program that is

not always highlighted is the devotion of the staff members who ensure the students in these programs succeed (Contreras, 2011).

Instructional support services such as tutoring, writing centers, and mentors provide students with the support that fosters their academic success, growth, and development (Wilmer, 2008; Winograd & Rust, 2014). Tutoring offers academic benefits as it supports classroom instruction and improves the learning process for students. It is a supplement to classroom teaching and it provides an alternate way for the student to learn the material (Wilmer, 2008). Furthermore, Wilmer (2008) postulated that tutoring has nonacademic benefits as tutors are positive influences and role models to the individuals they tutor.

Likewise, student to faculty interaction has been shown to significantly support higher academic achievement (Beattie & Thiele, 2016; Hunn, 2014; Tinto, 2012). Student to faculty interaction is a critical component to student success in college, and this relationship affects students' satisfaction with college. McKay and Estrellas (2008) pointed out that the relationship between students and faculty in or outside the classroom helps to shape their new environment.

Developmental courses also help to shape the academic trajectory of college students (Wilmer, 2008). Placement tests such as the ACCUPLACER and COMPASS are administered to students and determine their placement in the appropriate math and English courses. Bettinger, Boatman, and Long (2013) state that placement exams are ineffective measurements that were used to determine a student's ability. Bettinger et al. (2013) further suggests that college administrators revise these placement exams to more accurately measure and assign students to the appropriate courses (Bettinger et al., 2013).

A sense of belonging and connectedness is important to students of color (Sinanan, 2016). A loss of connectedness can be a traumatic experience (Smith, Geleta, Dixon, & Curtin, 2015). The Center for Integrated Health Solutions (2018) defines trauma as situations or events that leave an indelible experience that adversely affect mental, emotional, social, and spiritual welfare. Furthermore, Smith et al. (2015) purports that a sense of belonging is crucial to the academic success of students of color. The creation of a safe space is essential for assisting Black students in managing their well-being and experiences at PWIs (Grier-Reed, 2010). As such, faculty members' efforts at connection impact the lives of students (Trolian, Jach, Hanson, & Pascarella, 2016; Tinto, 2006). This type of interaction enhances student learning, academic achievement and retention (Guiffrida, 2005a; Trolian et al., 2016). In other words, SoC need holistic and meaningful interactions with campus agents, like faculty and staff members (Sinanan, 2016). However, Luedke (2017) reveals that academic focus is the approach of White faculty during their interactions with SoC. Because of this concentrated approach, SoC felt the interactions lack an authentic desire to get to know them as a person (Luedke, 2017). For SoC to be connected and successful at PWIs, college administrators need to ensure that campus agents give priority to opportunities for a personal connection (Luedke, 2017; Sinanan, 2016).

It could also be argued that, like international students who studied at the Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University, SoC who attend PWIs in rural communities are faced with acculturative stress (Nailevna, 2017). Acculturative stress is defined as a multidimensional phenomenon which includes, but is not limited to, physical, social, spiritual, academic and financial barriers (Nailevna, 2017). The focus of the Nailevna's

study was students' ability to adapt to a new culture (Nailevna, 2017). In addition, SoC face the added stressor of racial microaggressions (Grier-Reed, 2010). It is therefore crucial to have safe spaces on college campuses that SoC use as a respite from the stressors of managing the racial microaggressions they encounter on campus (Grier-Reed, 2010; Harper, 2013; Smith et al., 2015).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019) revealed that in the fall of 2017, 23% of the 1.5 million full-time college faculty were faculty of color. A further breakdown identified that, of all full-time faculty, 6% were Asian/Pacific Islander males and 5% were Asian/Pacific Islander females. Additionally, 3% each were Black male and female faculty, and Hispanic male and female faculty. Having faculty of color at PWIs requires a collaborative approach. Turner, Gonzalez, and Wood (2008) state "to achieve success in the recruitment and retention of faculty of color, communities of color and institutions of higher education must create relationships with one another" (p. 151). Furthermore, Guiffrida (2005a) reveals that at PWIs the vast majority of faculty who interact with SoC are White. However, students of color often do not recognize White faculty as genuine role models as they are frequently considered culturally indifferent. Students of color perceive White faculty to be unfriendly based on their stereotypical remarks and insensitivity to the cultural needs of SoC.

Retention, then, has become everyone's business. Many colleges and universities have been unable to convert their knowledge of retention into actionable ways that promote student persistence and graduation (Tinto, 2006). Tinto (2006) states that this occurs as a result of the poor implementation of good ideas. The inability to provide the

needed support for students of color could result in upsetting consequences for retention and graduation rates (Smith et al., 2015).

Problem Statement

Research exists on students of color and their academic performance at PWIs. However, there is a gap in the literature on specific information about academically successful students of color who attend PWIs in rural locations and who have transitioned from a non-rural environment. Specifically, there is limited research on the academically successful students of color at PWIs in rural environments (McCoy, 2014; Woldolf, Wiggins, & Washington, 2011). The assumption is made that college students know how to adjust to a new environment. On the contrary, students of color report experiencing culture shock (McCoy, 2014). This shock results through transition from a diverse community to one that lacks racial and ethnic diversity, both on campus and in the local community (McCoy, 2014). Assisting SoC through this transition is particularly important as a welcoming and inclusive environment can ease the transition and promotes a positive racial atmosphere. In addition, there is little to no research on students of color who are successful and must adapt to very different environments such as those at rural PWIs. The available research suggests that several factors are in play that lead to academic success or challenges (Guiffrida, 2005b; Reddick, 2011; Strayhorn, 2011; Turner et al., 2008).

Across the United States, students of color are enrolling in college at an increasing rate (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The increase punctuates the challenge that exists for students of color being recruited and retained at PWIs. It is estimated, that by the year 2043, non-Hispanic Whites will be the underrepresented group (Colby & Ortman,

2014). Approximately one-third of all Americans are minorities (Colby & Ortman, 2014). Disproportionately, students of color are first-generation (FG) and low-income (LI) and are generally academically underprepared for the rigors of college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Approximately 4.5 million FG and LI students are enrolled in college and are four times more likely to leave (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Engle and Tinto (2008) further revealed that, after six years, 43% of FG and LI students leave college without earning a 4-year degree. Luedke (2017) posits that SoC who receive mentoring have a smoother transition into college than those who do not.

Students of color at PWIs still lag behind their White counterparts (Reddick, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed a graduation rate for the 2011 cohort, (receiving a bachelor's degree), of 55 % for Hispanic/Latino, and 39.8% for Black/African American compared to their White counterparts at 64.3%. This represented a 9.3% difference for Hispanic/Latino and an even larger gap for Black/African American of 24.5 % (NCES, 2019). Students of color additionally experience feelings of isolation, prejudice, and racism (Quaye & Harper, 2015). Research continues to highlight a deficit-based approach to supporting the academic performance and success of students of color at PWIs (D'Lima, Winsler, & Kitsantas, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Fries-Britt, & Turner, 2002). Despite student deficits, SoC at PWIs persist (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002, Harper, 2015, Schreiner, 2014). Success for students of color occurs even though their experience at PWIs is different than that of their White counterparts (Schreiner, 2014).

Students of color are faced with numerous academic and social challenges, which in turn hinder their success in college (McCoy, 2014). The importance of academic

support programming is essential and attended to the socio emotional wellness and development of college students (Quinn et al., 2019). A plethora of academic support programs exist and are implemented across college campuses in the United States. These support programs serve as the framework supplementing student persistence and retention (Tinto, 2006).

Academic support undergirds the successful retention of college students. Student enrollment in college forms a connection that morally obligates the institution to provide the support needed for student persistence to the degree completion and graduation (Tinto, 2012). Academic support, as reviewed in the research literature, entails many services including additional or supplemental instruction, basic skills, developmental, or remedial courses, tutoring, study groups, student/faculty relationships and bridge programs (Tinto, 2012). Furthermore, bridge programs, first year experience, learning communities, peer mentoring, career and personal counseling fall under the auspices of academic support and are referred to in the literature as academic support programs (Ryan & Glenn, 2002; Tinto, 2012).

Theoretical Rationale

Academic resilience as defined by Morales and Trottman (2004) describes an individual who has overcome significant traumatic experiences, and unlike others, is academically and socially successful. Academic resilience is, therefore, a theory that aligns with understanding of the problems and gaps for SoC in rural PWIs. Throughout the literature, SoC are typically identified as low academic performers (Morales, 2008). The educational disparity between students of color and their White counterparts is a longstanding issue, and for more than three decades, this disparity has plagued campus

administrators (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Morales, 2010; Seidman, 2005). However, despite this educational achievement gap, SoC who graduate from college have demonstrated academic resilience. Resilience infers that individuals flourish despite challenges they face (Kitano and Lewis, 2005). Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) state that:

> Resilience is concerned behavioral adaptation usually defined as internal states of wellbeing or effective functioning or both. Protective factors moderate the effects of individual vulnerability or environmental hazards so that adaptational trajectory is more positive than would be the case if the protective factor were not operational (p. 426).

There are four basic assumptions that guide academic resilience theory (Morales, 2008). These assumptions are: a) *risk factors* that are described as the environmental concerns that place students in danger. For example, lack of parental support or a culture of violence; b) *protective factors* are described as strengths students have that reduce their risk factors, such as caring teachers and supportive friends; c) *vulnerability areas* are identified as an area(s) of the student's life that could pose a potential weakness to the student. These potential areas of weakness are identified as gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status; and d) *compensatory strategies* are tactics that the student develops to protect the self from being exposed, which in turn supports their positive academic achievements (Morales, 2008).

Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado and Cortes (2009) offer that students with a positive academic trajectory seem to have a strong support system. Several at-risk students are connected with the Federal TRIO programs (TRIO) such as Upward Bound, Talent Search Student Support Services, Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Program

(McNair Program), and The Arthur O. Eve Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), which is New York State (NYS) operated. These critical external programs are intended to enhance the protective factors which advanced the academic achievement of students who are from a low socioeconomic status (SES).

An exploration of the dissertation topic through this theoretical framework serves to uncover the reasons why many SoC are academically successful despite research that shows the disparity in their academic performance, retention, and graduation rates compared to their White counterparts. In addition, the resilience framework serves to provide broader recommendations for administrators at PWIs who are searching for more effective ways to support SoC on their campuses.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify and gain a better understanding of what contributes to the academic success of students of color at PWIs. Students of color have been identified as being high risk as their persistence to graduation lags behind their White counterparts (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Additionally, students of color who are enrolled at PWIs are also high risk for marginalization and discrimination (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Through interviews with individuals who successfully graduated from a PWI, the study identified factors that contribute to academic resilience and student success. The study focused on students of color who graduated from a PWI within the past 6 years. In particular, the study focused on interviewing graduates from small, rural, private liberal arts colleges to address a gap in the literature about the understanding of individual narratives from successful SoC who moved to rural campus environments.

Their lived experiences, and success in a changed environment identified skills and tools helpful in supporting a broader community of SoC at PWIs across the United States.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions seeking pertinent information through the lived experiences of students of color at PWIs in rural communities.

1. What determines academic success for students of color who attended PWIs in rural communities?

2. Which, if any, of the four assumptions that guide academic resilience theory played a role in a successful experience of students of color at PWIs in rural communities?

3. What, if any, support systems do students of color at PWIs in rural communities' attribute to a successful experience at college?

Potential Significance of the Study

The study highlighted academically successful students of color at PWIs. The body of scholarly literature employs a deficit-based approach when considering the academic success of students of color. There continues to be an abundance of literature that highlights the lower academic success rate for students of color compared to their White counterparts (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Herbert, 2002; Museus & Neville, 2012; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Sinanan, 2016). Engle & Tinto (2008), Fries-Britt (2002), and Baker (2013) concurred that the graduation rates of SoC lag behind that of their White counterparts. Additionally, Quaye and Harper (2015) purported that despite the increased enrollment of students of color at PWIs, these students still frequently experience an antagonistic and unpleasant campus atmosphere.

In the body of research, much information supports students of color being academically and socioeconomically disadvantaged compared to their White counterparts. However, less emphasis was placed on how students of color, despite their challenges, have been able to succeed academically. Research in this area contributes to the body of knowledge as administrators at colleges and universities, specifically PWIs, continue to grapple with this topic. The transition to college extends beyond the borders of the campus (Woldoff, Wiggins, & Washington, 2011). The environment in which the campus is located may influence the feelings of acceptance from SoC. The small rural environment may be a foreign experience for SoC. Additionally, the way of life and activities in the community may also be a culture shock to SoC. The lack of easy access to public transportation and other amenities may be additional adjustments for SoC. This research is significant for administrators and faculty at colleges and universities as it provides valuable information as to how the institution may foster and promote a successful environment for students of color (Sinanan, 2016). Furthermore, this research might help to change the policies and operational structures that exist at PWIs. Finally, information unearthed can be the catalyst for educating and creating deeper connections with campus agents, faculty and staff, who have been identified as being the strongest predictor of success for college students (Fries-Britt & Snider, 2015; Herbert, 2018).

Definitions of Terms

Academic resilience theory: the study of high educational accomplishment notwithstanding the existence of risk factors that typically signify low academic performance (Morales, 2008).

Academic Success: academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015).

Academic Support: summer bridge programs, developmental courses, tutoring, study groups mentoring, first year experience, student-faculty (Tinto, 2012).

At-risk: students whose educational performance is impeded by academic, social, and/or financial factors that affect their persistence in college (Vivian, 2005).

Black: identified as "Black or African American" and having ancestries in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

First-generation: for purposes of this study first-generation is defined as a student being the first in her or his family to go to college and whose parent(s) has had little to no college time (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2014).

Incidental Learning Gaps: informal, unplanned or unintended learning of material and topics that would support students' adjustment and understanding of how to effectively navigate college. This learning occurs through engagement in conversations and tasks and is a byproduct of planned learning (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

Low-income: earning less than twice the federal poverty guidelines (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Predominantly White Institution: Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) refers to an institution of higher learning where most enrolled students are White and account for more than 50% of the student enrollment (Bourke, 2016).

Retention: persistence from one period to the next, typically retention is calculated from fall to fall (IPEDS, 2019).

Students of color (SoC): For purposes of this study, students of color are identified as Black and Latino college students.

Summer Bridge Program: short, intense introduction to college designed to assist underprepared first-year students (McCurrie, 2009).

White: refers to an individual with ancestors in any of the original persons of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the significant and increased enrollment of students of color into PWIs. However, despite that demographic shift, colleges and universities across the United States still face retention challenges with students of color. In comparison to their White counterparts, students of color continue to graduate at much lower rates (Schreiner, 2014). Additionally, PWIs have not done a great job of creating a welcoming environment for students of color, particularly in rural areas where the shift of environment was more pronounced. The experiences of students of color have been described as hostile and antagonistic; permeated with microaggressions and cultural insensitivity from students, faculty and staff members. While steps have been taken to add programs that are inclusive, the implementation of these programs has not been effective (Fischer, 2007). The array of issues continues to challenge college and university administrators.

The purpose of this study was to identify and gain a better understanding of what contributes to SoC being academically successful at PWIs. In addition, academic

resilience theory helped to frame a study which sought a deeper understanding of how students of color succeeded, despite the factors that indicated that they should not. Academic resilience theory aligned well with this topic as it highlighted the ways individuals could overcome and be successful despite the obstacles that they faced. Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the factors that create or hinder the academic success for SoC at PWIs. Chapter 3 discusses the research participants, instruments used in data collection, ethical guidelines, and thorough measures used in the study. Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of results and findings, and Chapter 5 summarizes the key findings of the study as well as discusses the limitations and recommendations for future studies.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This chapter provided synthesis and critical analysis of the literature and research regarding the lived experiences of academically resilient students of color at PWIs. First, the chapter examined studies that utilized the academic resiliency theory to frame an understanding of the retention and academic success of students of color at PWIs. Second, the chapter explored previous research that demonstrated how students of color were impacted by campus climate, sense of belonging, and microaggressions. Lastly, the chapter highlighted the various approaches of student engagement for students of color and the relationship to their academic and social trajectory towards retention and graduation success.

The academic success and retention of students of color at PWIs is an ongoing and complex matter. Hence, the efforts to assist this populace must be deliberate and purposefully designed (Sparks & Nunez, 2014). Retention of students of color at PWIs is highly pertinent as colleges continue to increase the enrollment of students of color (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This study was guided by the following questions that sought information on the lived experiences of students of color at PWIs in rural communities.

1. What determined academic success for SoC who attend PWIs in rural communities?

2. Which, if any, of the four assumptions that guided academic resilience theory play a role in a successful experience of SoC at PWIs in rural communities?

3. What, if any, support systems do SoC at PWIs in rural communities attribute to a successful experience at college?

Academic Resilience

Academic resilience was critical in the discussion of SoC who were enrolled at PWIs. The academic resilience process purported a framework which recognized the four basic dynamics as risk factors, protective factors, vulnerability areas, and compensatory strategies (Morales, 2014). Several studies on academic resilience have been conducted with high school students (Borman & Overman, 2004; Martin & Marsh, 2006; Martin & Marsh, 2008; Yavuz & Kutlu, 2016; Rajan, Harifa, & Pienyu, 2017). There are some studies on academic resilience that included participants at the college level (Morales, 2008, 2010; Perez et al., 2009).

A study of high school students conducted by Borman and Overman (2004) aimed to increase the understanding of high achieving academically progressive students from financially disadvantaged (low socioeconomic status) and underrepresented racial backgrounds (at-risk students) to their non-resilient counterparts. There were three racial groups that participated in the study for resilient students: African American, Hispanic, and White. Additionally, the study created and tested risk factors and resilience supporting characteristics of the school. Those four models were: (a) effective schools, (b) peer-group composition, (c) school resources, and (d) the supportive community school model (Borman & Overman, 2004).

Conducted over a 4-year period, Borman and Overman (2004) considered students from families with an average household income ranging from $7,500 to $14,999. Student resiliency was measured based on their performance in mathematics.

Students' performance in mathematics was measured due to a lack of students of color in the science, technical, engineering and math disciplines (STEM). Students' performance in math was also measured to focus the study on a fairly homogeneous group who were poor and who were identified as SoC (Borman & Overman, 2004).

The Borman and Overman (2004) study revealed that academic resilience was most apparent in students who were academically involved, maintained an optimistic perspective toward high school, and had high belief in their ability to be successful in mathematics. The study also revealed that there were barriers to resilience that SoC were more likely to encounter. In general, SoC, faced a decreased level of self-efficacy. Additionally, these students were more likely to be navigating in a school surroundings that were unable to provide a supportive school environment. In this study, a supportive school environment is defined as a school with a safe and orderly environment with little or no gang activity nor physical conflicts among students. In general, the study found that if SoC were provided resources and a school environment comparable to their White peers, they were likely to demonstrate academic resilience and subject-matter success (Borman & Overman, 2004).

Rajan, Harifa, and Pienyu (2017) conducted a study aimed at identifying any significant relationships between academic resilience and locus of control, academic engagement and self-efficacy. Additionally, the study sought to identify differences in males versus females in relation to academic resilience, locus of control, academic engagement and self-efficacy. The quantitative study (Rajan et al., 2017) included 155 high school students in three different schools in Malabar, India. The students ranged from 14 to 16 years of age. The instruments used in the study were the Academic

Resilience Scale, Locus of Control Scale, General Self-Efficacy Scale, and the Academic Engagement Scale.

The results revealed that academic resilience had a significantly low positive correlation to self-efficacy. Neither did academic engagement of locus of control show a strong positive correlation to academic resilience. However, there was a high positive correlation between academic engagement and self-efficacy. Additionally, females exhibited higher academic resilience compared to their male counterparts that participated in the study (Rajan et al., 2017).

Similarly, Yavuz and Kutlu (2016) conducted a study of high school students to investigate if gender, school attachment, perceived social support, and cognitive flexibility were predictors of academic resilience. The study also sought to determine the difference between academically resilient students who displayed different levels of resilience based on the previously mentioned variables of gender, school attachment, perceived social support, and cognitive flexibility. The quantitative study was conducted in 18 Anatolian high schools with 304 participants during the 2014-2015 academic year. The participants were divided into two groups based on their level of academic resilience. Three research questions guided the study: (a) Are school attachment, perceived social support, and cognitive flexibility predictors of the resilience of academically resilient students?, (b) Is there a significant difference between academically resilient students in terms of school attachment, perceived support and cognitive flexibility according to different levels of academic resilience?, (c) Is there a significant relationship between the level of academic resilience and gender?

Yavuz and Kutlu (2016) revealed cognitive flexibility as a significant predictor of academic resilience. Cognitive flexibility was also linked to the age of the participants. It was stated that as students age there is a positive relationship to their cognitive flexibility. This means that students with a high level of cognitive flexibility have the increased capacity to solve problems and be persistent in their efforts to being successful. Students develop increased cognitive skills that lead to improved cognitive flexibility (Yavuz & Kutlu, 2016). Perceived social support was revealed as a high predictor to resilience in students with high academic resilience. However, school attachment, as a variable, was not a significant predictor of the level of resilience in academically resilient students. Yavuz and Kutlu (2016) concluded that there was no significant difference between students with high and low academic resilience in relation to cognitive flexibility, school attachment, and perceived social support. Based on gender, the study concluded that there is a significant difference between the academic level and gender. Yavuz and Kutlu (2016) showed that female students are generally more successful in education and have higher academic resilience than male students.

Morales (2008) conducted a study that consisted of 50 male and female students attending PWIs. Of the 50 students, 30 students identified as African American and 20 students identified as Hispanic. The participants attended highly selective private universities, selective private universities, community colleges and select public universities. The largest percentage of students attended selective private universities and selective public universities, respectively. The research question that guided the study was "What significant differences, if any, exist in the academic resilience processes of high achieving low socioeconomic male and female college students of color; and as a

result, what can be concluded about perspectives and processes that are unique to females?" (Morales, 2008, p. 200). The study revealed that parents of the participants in the study had minimal educational background and identified as a person of color (Morales, 2008). Additionally, the participants had completed a minimum of 30 credits with a minimum grade point average (GPA) of 3.0.

The Morales (2008) study revealed three distinctly female approaches to academic resilience. The first approach was that females experienced more resistance than males in the pursuit of their college and career aspirations. The second approach revealed that females were more strongly motivated by their post-college professional goals than males. The third approach found that with regard to identifying an influential mentor, female students were less concerned about the gender of their mentors than males. The study further concluded that while academic resilience has not been delineated in terms of gender, there does appear to be a notable difference in how females manage resilience compared to their male counterparts.

Morales (2014) conducted a qualitative study that consisted of 50 academically resilient SoC from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The original study was completed over the course of eight years where 80% of the participants spent their entire childhood in an urban environment. The purpose of the study was to identify how the original research of academic resilience informed what college faculty can do to increase the retention of SoC. The findings from the study suggested broad categories that colleges can explore to increase retention of SoC. The categories were: (a) constantly build students' self-efficacy, (b) help students realistically appraise their own strengths and

weaknesses, (c) encourage help-seeking tendencies, and (d) provide clear linkages between academic success and future economic security.

Meanwhile, a quantitative study conducted by Perez et al. (2009) sought to identify the academic resilience of 104 undocumented immigrant Latino students. Some of the participants attended were high school aged students from various high schools while the remaining participants attended community colleges and universities within the United States. The average age of participants in the study was 19.97 years with more than 50% being female participants. The study consisted of an online survey with three parts and took approximately 45 minutes to complete. It was theorized that because of their significantly marginalized position, legal and social, the students who experienced high risk along with high levels of personal and environmental factors would have higher levels of academic performance than students with decreased levels of these protective factors. Perez et al. (2009) used three main indicators of success: (a) high GPA, (b) high number of academic awards, and (c) high number of honors and advanced placement (AP) courses. The research question that guided the study was, (a) "What is the relationship between risk factors, protective factors (personal and environmental), and academic achievement among undocumented immigrant Latino students?, (b) How do undocumented students with different configurations of risk and protective factor differ in their academic performance?" (Perez et al., 2009 p. 156). The researchers used four key theoretical concepts which were: (a) risk, (b) environmental protective factors, (c) personal protective factors, and (d) academic outcomes.

For the purposes of the study, Perez et al. (2009) identified, risk factors as: (a) high school employment, (b) parental education, (c) size of family, and (d) rejection

experienced due to undocumented status. High-school employment was considered a risk if participants worked more than 20 hours per week. Parent education was considered a risk if the level of education of parents of the participants was less than a high school education. Family size was considered a risk if participants had three or more siblings. Rejection experienced due to undocumented status was considered a risk if the scores on the Likert scale, ranged from 7 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree), were higher (Perez et al., 2009).

Perez et al. (2009) described environmental protective factors as positive resources that aid an individual to overcome risk. The five environmental factors used in the study were: (a) parent valuing of school, (b) friends valuing of school, (c) participation in extracurricular activities, (d) participation in volunteerism, and (e) growing up with both parents. Perez et al. (2009) identified personal protective factors as: (a) gifted, (b) distress scale, (c) bilingualism, and (d) valuing of school. Gifted was considered as personal protective factor if the participant was identified as such during elementary or middle school. Participants had 12 statements that assessed their levels of distress. Risk and personal factors highlighted above were independent variables that were used to understand the academic performance of the undocumented immigrant Latino students in the study (Perez et al., 2009). The academic outcomes used were: (a) GPA, (b) school awards, and (c) honors and AP courses. (Perez et al., 2009).

The results of the study were presented in two sections and the first section described the relationship with all the variables that were used in the regression analysis. The incremental analysis examined whether risk and protective factors were associated with academic outcomes. It was shown that there was a positive association with

personal and protective factors and GPA. Specifically valuing of school had a positive association with GPA.

Additionally, Perez et al. (2009) revealed the risk factors: (a) undocumented Latino students had parents with low levels of education and (b) on average, students worked 12 hours per week, which is seen as an academic risk factor. Forty percent worked 20 hours or more while 11% worked 30 hours or more. The social rejection that students experienced based on their status in the United States was modestly high. With regard to personal protective factors, 36% of the students were recognized as exceptional during their early years of schooling. These undocumented students also reported high levels of bilingualism and the levels of distress reported were modestly low (Perez et al., 2009).

Results from the study (Perez et al., 2009) showed that several resources protected students from the detrimental situations that increased their risk of academic failure. Three main conclusions were drawn from the study: (a) academic success (resilience) was associated with personal and environmental resources, (b) an increase in the number of resources also typically results in a positive academic performance, and (c) the high risk and resilient groups experienced significantly higher level of adversity compared to the protected group. The study revealed that when faced with a variety of risk factors, undocumented Latino youth utilized their personal and environmental resources for support. Perez et al. (2009) also revealed that not all undocumented Latinos face high level of risk factors. The importance of protective factors cannot be ignored as they are significant mediators of success.

Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging is necessary for students to feel connected to an institution. Students of color at PWIs experience a greater sense of alienation and marginalization compared to their White counterparts (Campbell & Davis, 1996; Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011; Strayhorn, 2008). McCoy (2014) conducted a study to understand the transitional experience of first-generation students of color to an "extreme" predominantly White institution (McCoy, 2014, p.155). The research question that guided the study "What are the transitional experiences of first-generation college students of color from urban areas to an extreme predominantly White institution?" (McCoy, 2014 p.157). This qualitative study took place at a small public research institution located in the north of New England which enrolled approximately 13,500 students. The population of students included undergraduates, graduates and professional students. Students of color made up 10% of the total student enrollment. Hispanics/Latinos comprised 3.5%, Asian/Pacific Islander made up 2.5%, African Americans 1.5%, and biracial/multicultural 2.2%. Ninety-three percent of the city's population, where the institution was located, was White (McCoy, 2014).

Participants of the study (McCoy, 2014) shared their experiences of recruitment and admissions process, college choice and decision making, their transition to higher education, as well as their undergraduate experience. The themes that emerged were: (a) the participants experienced high family influence and expectations, (b) the admissions process was difficult and confusing, (c) the difficult transition from urban to an extreme predominantly White institution was aided by involvement in student organizations, mentor support, and use of the multicultural center as a place to foster community, and (d) participants experienced "culture shock in a sea of whiteness" (McCoy, 2014, p.160).

Participants shared that going to college was not a choice for them, it was what was expected. This expectation put additional burden on the participants. One participant stated that she came to accept the expectation of going to college. She wanted to do it not only for her family but she also wanted to do it for herself. The admissions process was difficult and burdensome and the participants were unprepared for the complexities that they faced (McCoy, 2014). McCoy (2014) suggested that colleges and universities should not only be authentic in their marketing of the institution but should also be cognizant that many first-generation students lack the academic and cultural capital to effectively navigate the process. As such, colleges and universities must continue to provide orientation sessions and workshops to educate and assist parents. Although all the participants of the study did not participate in a summer bridge program, its importance is critical to the retention of students of color (McCoy, 2014).

In McCoy (2014), participants experienced culture shock when they entered a community that lacked racial diversity. Participants often turned to faculty and staff of color for support who assisted them in overcoming the shock of being in a predominantly homogeneous environment. Furthermore, these findings highlighted the necessity for having multicultural student centers on predominantly White campuses. The participants recognized the multicultural centers as a counterspace. A counterspace was defined as a supportive and positive safe space for students of color (McCoy, 2014).

In contrast, a qualitative study by Woldoff et al. (2011) examined the adjustment differences between in-state and out-of-state Black students at a predominantly White institution. The study defined in-state as Black students who are acquainted with rural and predominantly White environments. Out-of-state Black students were defined as

Black students who came from largely Black neighborhoods and larger cities. The study was conducted at West Virginia University, a rural college campus in Morgantown, West Virginia. Morgantown is the largest north-central city in West Virginia. The racial composition of Morgantown is 95% White. The undergraduate population of West Virginia University is 21,720 with African American students accounting for 3% of the student population. Woldoff et al. (2011) conducted three focus groups with a total of 19 participants. Each focus group met for approximately 1 to 2 hours. A large number of the participants were from the East Coast, particularly New York City, Washington D.C., and Baltimore. Out-of-state students came from neighborhoods that were predominantly Black (83.3 % Black, on average), in contrast, in-state students were from less diverse communities, where Blacks accounted for 19.4% of the total community.

The themes that emerged from Woldoff et al. (2011) were: (a) difference in level of comfort in predominantly White settings, (b) rural Black students "acting White", and (c) perceptions of differences between the two groups in provincialism versus sophistication. Woldoff et al. (2011) highlighted that out-of-state Black students grew up in Black environments and therefore finding Black friends on campus was critically important to them. Additionally, the census data revealed that, with the exception of one participant, all the out-of-state Black students grew up in segregated communities. In contrast, in-state Black students grew up in predominantly White communities. Rural Black students acting White was also another theme that emerged. In-state Black participants were frustrated by this assumption that questioned their authenticity as a Black individual. Resident Black students were perceived as provincial or "country" and less sophisticated compared to their Black out-of-state counterparts.

Woldoff et al. (2011) also revealed that in-state students were more likely to know someone from their past at college. However, the out-of-state students in the study revealed they arrived on campus and knew no one. Out-of-state students also shared the view that in-state students' friendships were cliquey and unwelcoming to them. It was also the perception that out-of-state students were less academically focused and more materialistic (Woldoff et al., 2011).

In contrast, Strayhorn (2008) conducted a quantitative study of 289 Latino and 300 White students enrolled at a 4-year college. The purpose of the study was to assess the college experiences of Latino students and their sense of belonging on campus. Students participated in the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). The CSEQ was developed to assess the effort expended by students in utilizing the resources and opportunities that led to their success. Females were the majority in both ethnic groups. The analysis was based on the dependent variable which was identified as "sense of belonging." Significant predictors of sense of belonging are identified as: grades, time spent studying, and interactions with diverse peers. The findings suggested that Latino students who excel academically have a greater connectedness to campus than those who are lower performing students. Strayhorn (2008) stated that attention should be given to lower performing Latino student to ensure engagement and reduce the possibility of attrition.

Strayhorn (2008) also compared these findings with Latino students' White counterparts who were also influenced by their academic and social interactions. Specifically, hours spent studying and course grades are positive influences on Latino students and their sense of belonging. Controlling for background variances, a

hierarchical linear regression test was completed to identify the outcome of academic and social experiences on Latino students' sense of belonging. The regression analysis indicated a significant relationship with sense of belonging. The study highlighted the variables that were substantial predictors of sense of belonging which was comprised of grades, duration of study time, and interactions with diverse peers. In contrast, the similar hierarchical linear regression was completed on White students and it showed no significant influence on sense of belonging. Additionally, referring to the cognitive and affective elements of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2008) at a PWI signals a sense of value in being a part of that institution.

A study by Esposito (2011) was part of a larger qualitative ethnographic research study. The larger study included over 50 diverse undergraduate women, four professors, and three graduate research assistants. It was conducted using grounded theory that explored how undergraduate female students of color encountered and navigated the hidden curriculum at a PWI. Esposito's (2011) sub-sample study included students in their third year at a private PWI in a northeastern city in the United States, with a population of 13,000. The representation of students of color accounted for 15% of the student body. The participants learned the hidden curriculum of diversity through their interactions with White students and faculty on campus. Through their lived experiences, the participants in the study learned resiliency and how to effectively and successfully navigate life at a PWI. Participants shared their awareness of the heightened visibility of their female bodies on campus, either because of their race or gender. They reported sensitivity to being "looked at" or "stared at" (Esposito, 2011, p. 153). In addition, the participants realized that there was a hidden curriculum on diversity that they had to

navigate. Through interactions across campus, this curriculum is evident in lessons about race, gender and equity. Their presence at a PWI informed White students and faculty of the differences that existed between students of color and Whites. Through this experience, the women learned how to build resilience around the hidden curriculum in order to become successfully competent in navigating life at a PWI.

Like Esposito (2011), Baber (2012) highlighted racial identity and educational inequity as critical components that students of color face at PWIs. These experiences are additional challenges that students of color face and must navigate. In addition, both studies focused on the lived experiences of the participants and how their lived experiences impacted and shaped their college experiences at a PWI. Baber (2012) conducted a qualitative study, employing a phenomenological strategy of inquiry that examined the influence of racial identity development on educational experiences. Through purposeful sampling, 15 African American students, six male and nine female, who self-identified as first-year students at a midsize PWI located in the mid-Atlantic region with varying grade point average (GPA) ranges.   All the participants were in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors. Six of the participants received scholarships that were specifically aimed at increasing the enrollment of students of color in STEM related fields.

Over the 9-month period, students were interviewed, and their experiences analyzed through a Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) framework (Baber 2012). The four elements in the MMRI framework were: a) racial salience, b) racial centrality, c) racial regard, and d) racial ideology. The findings revealed that having a critical mass of students of color at a PWI is important as students develop their

sense of identity; having a critical mass of students of color allowed students to be the "insider" as students of color may find themselves as an "outsider" at a PWI. The study further revealed the development that students of color began to unearth. A deeper understanding of the complexities of identity occurred as they shifted between the various dimensions of racial identity. Resilience was evident as a mechanism that propelled students through the development of their racial identity with the larger campus and their "insider" group (Baber, 2012, p. 77). Enrollment of students of color at PWIs continued to increase (Baber, 2012), yet these institutions are challenged to retain and graduate the students of color who enrolled.

The perceptions and lived experiences of students of color at PWIs are different than those of White students (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008). Institutional support for the experiences of SoC is critical to providing a less chilly and hostile campus climate for students of color (Locks et al., 2008). Ten public universities with a strong commitment to diversity participated in this study. Participants in the study were predominantly White. The other races represented, which were combined in one group for purposes of this study, were Asian American/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, African American and American Indian. More than 60% of the participants were female. All ten campuses had recent success in diversifying their student body. The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences and attitudes of students on several issues related to diversity and civic engagement.

Locks et al. (2008) found that women of color were somewhat more likely than men to have an increased sense of belonging in college. In addition, students of color were more likely than their White peers to have precollege exposure to people of color,

diversity-related activities, positive interactions with diverse groups and perceive more racial tension on the college campus. Interestingly, they found no significant difference between SoC and White students in the number of anxious interactions they experienced across race/ethnicity and their sense of belonging to their institution in their second year of college. In the second year of college, all students who had more frequent interactions with diverse peers had an increased sense of belonging. In contrast, students who spent less time socializing were more likely to have a lower sense of belonging. Additionally, the findings of the study indicated that White students typically had lower perceptions of racial tension than students of color.

Sinanan (2012) completed a qualitative study that focused on the academic, social and institutional factors that shaped achievement for African American male students. These students attended a small 4-year liberal arts PWI in southern New Jersey. The study participants included thirteen African American males ranging in ages from 18-25 with eight of the participants being from an urban city, three from suburban areas, and two from rural areas. The participants engaged in a group interview which lasted for an hour and a half and focused on their experiences at a PWI. The major themes that emerged from the group interview were: (a) level of preparation for college at a PWI, (b) lack of belonging in a new social environment, (c) feelings of social and personal isolation, and (d) feelings of negativity toward faculty.

A major theme that emerged from the study was participants' lack of preparation for attending a PWI. The study revealed that several participants experienced culture shock. This occurred as a result of the incongruence between the social and cultural values of the students and those of the PWI. Having a support network of students, staff

and faculty from similar groups proved to be beneficial to the participants' adjustment. Another theme that emerged was lack of belonging. Participants shared that they felt out of place and that they would look to connect with another Black person whenever they walked into a room. The participants also shared that they were happy to see another Black student on campus. This was their support network. Another theme that ties in with the previous theme was that African American males experienced a sense of personal and social isolation. Several of the participants in this study expressed this feeling of isolation as a result of the lack of racial diversity of their campus. The other major theme was the negative feelings towards faculty on the part of participants. Although participants wanted to have a positive relationship with their faculty, they did not want to surrender their academic confidence, racial identity, or cultural comfort to do so. The study revealed that the experiences of African American males at a PWI can significantly impact, mediate, and limit the ability of their learning experience.

Campus Climate at Predominantly White Institutions

PWIs are increasingly enrolling students of color. The challenge is to support and retain this population. Research was conducted by Palmer, Maramba, and Holmes (2011) on promoting the academic success of students of color at a predominantly white research institution. The institution was a midsized, public institution with a population of 12,000 located within a small-town in the northeast. The groups represented were White, Asian, Black, and Hispanic. There were 20 participants in the study, with a GPA of 2.5 or higher. The participants were identified as Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Pakistani. The purpose of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that promote

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retention, persistence, and success among college students of color who were pursuing degrees in STEM fields.

The results of this study revealed three main themes from the interviews: a) peer group support, b) involvement in STEM related activities, and c) strong high school preparation. The first theme provided information from participants who described the value of peer group support and the positive impact those peers had on their academic success. The second theme recognized the importance of being involved in STEM related activities on and off campus. Involvement in these activities improved their understanding of the STEM related opportunities and professions. The third theme highlighted the participants' preparedness and strong academic foundation in STEM throughout their high school career. The participants also discussed the high degree of expectations that their high school teachers placed on them. The participants in the study asked that institutions focus beyond enrollment and provide proactive student support services such as tutoring and peer networks. In addition, institutions should implement creative measures for students of color to be retained and succeed in STEM majors (Palmer et al., 2011). Additionally, the participants, (Palmer et al., 2011) shared that creating a sense of community with faculty, students, STEM alumni and professionals in the STEM professions would increase their sense of engagement in the STEM programs at the college.

Another study, conducted by Jones and Williams (2006), provided evidence of the need for the African American Student Center (AASC). The Center fostered peer-interaction, student-faculty relations and student mentoring techniques as they are supportive in fostering the development of Black students. Students involved in the study

expressed satisfactory sentiments of the support provided by the AASC. The AASC was found to assist students navigating racially charged incidents on campus. Based on information collected, it was revealed that the AASC played a significant role in the retention of Black students. However, despite the academic and social resources that the Center provided, the AASC Counselor was identified as the most significant resource.

Similarly, the purpose of Eimers' (2001) study was to clarify any differences in undergraduate experience and progress between minority and nonminority students. The study purported that the impact of student experiences on the progress in college is dissimilar for minority and nonminority students. A College Outcomes (CO) Survey was conducted at the University of Missouri, which has four campus sites. The university enrolls approximately 41,000 student population undergraduates. The four campuses are Columbia, Kansas City, Rolla, and St. Louis. Approximately 1,000 full-time students on each campus received the CO Survey. Students who reported academic progress of less than 24 credits were removed from the sample which was then adjusted to 923. Of the 923 respondents, the largest group identified as African American. In addition, other ethnicities identified were Asian or Pacific Islander, Multiracial, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Hispanic/nonwhite.

Students completed a survey in response to their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with certain features of the college. The study measured four areas of student satisfaction: (a) faculty-student relations, (b) assessment of the academic atmosphere, (c) campus climate, and (d) overall assessment of experience in college. The four areas were established as the four independent variables for the study. Furthermore, the measures were compared to four college outcomes: math and science development, intellectual and

skill development, career, and problem-solving development. Data were collected using the College Outcomes Survey (CO Survey) that was developed by American College Testing (ACT) (Eimers, 2001).

The results of the study (Eimers, 2001) revealed no significant difference between minority and nonminority students' responses regarding faculty-student relations and academic atmosphere. There was however a statistically significant difference between minority and nonminority students in relation to campus climate and overall assessment. In addition, with the college outcomes variables there were no significant differences between minority and nonminority students in math, science, or career development. However, the results highlighted a significant difference between minority and non-minority students in relation to intellectual development. Minority students reported a greater increase in intellectual development than nonminority students.

A study conducted by Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) examined the lived social and academic experiences of 36 Black male students who were enrolled at elite historically White institutions (HWIs). The participants were enrolled at Harvard University, Michigan State University, the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Illinois, and the University of Michigan. The primary focus of the study was to examine the psychological effects of racial battle fatigue. Racial battle fatigue is defined as physiological and psychological strain exacted on racially marginalized groups and the amount of energy lost dedicated to coping with racial microaggressions and racism. Some of the psychological symptoms of racial battle fatigue are: (a) elevated heart rate, (b) extreme exhaustion, (c) loss of appetite, (d) increased blood pressure, (e)

intrusive thoughts and images, (f) increased profanity and complaining, (g) frustration, (h) hypervigilance, (i) denial, and (j) loss of self-confidence.

First, Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) examined the various forms of racial microaggressions that were experience by the participants. Second, the study looked for examples of how the participants interpreted and reported the acts of microaggressions. Third, the study (Smith et al., 2007) explored three primary domains where the participants experienced microaggressions. The areas where the participants experienced microaggressions were: (a) campus-academic, (b) campus-social, and (c) campus public spaces. Fourth, the study identified the agents or perpetuators who committed the acts of microaggressions against the participants. Lastly, the study investigated the participants' responses to the microaggressions they experienced. The focus was on identifying psychological responses through the voices and narratives of the participants (Smith et al., 2007).

Two major themes were discovered from the study (Smith et al., 2007): (a) anti-Black male stereotyping and marginality and (b) hyper surveillance and control. The study found that participants experienced increased surveillance and control by way of community policing tactics. The study also found that participants experienced numerous forms of racial microaggressions in the primary spaces on campus: (a) campus-academic defined as spaces where students are in proximity or in an academic or administrative building, (b) campus-social defined as areas where students live, entertain or engage in group activities, and (c) campus-public spaces defined as areas that are adjacent to the campus. There are two factors that were evident in each of the mentioned spaces: (a) all participants viewed their encounters from a race based and gendered perspective and (b)

law enforcement officials were present in every encounter. With the continued racial indignities, participants reported feelings of anger, disbelief, frustration, helplessness and being trapped. The participants in the study confirmed that racial encounters are difficult and cause painful psychological responses.

Academic Support

Academic support has been identified as a factor that positively contributed to the retention of college students. Grillo and Leist (2013) found that college students increased their chances of persisting to graduation when they spend equitable amounts of time engaged in active and meaningful academic support. Tinto (2012) argued that academic support was the cornerstone of student retention, specifically in the first year of a college student's career. It, therefore, behooved colleges to identify ways to effectively retain each student (McKay & Estrella, 2008).

Bridge programs. Bridge programs are frequently referenced and analyzed as a form of academic support for the academically underprepared college student (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013). Despite having some amount of program variances, the academic and social preparation underpinned their framework (Cabrera et al., 2013). Cabrera et al. (2013) found positive impacts on first year academic average and the likelihood of retention in the first year of college. However, the study highlighted a gap area and the necessity to conduct longitudinal evaluation of the results of the program. The study compared non-bridge participants to bridge participants and the results highlighted that participants were retained at considerably higher levels than nonparticipants. Additionally, participants had higher grade point averages than non-

participants. The research called for the comparison of a statistically equivalent set of students who are non-summer bridge participants.

Phillips (2005) conducted a study of 159 participants enrolled at two public 4-year state institutions located in the northeastern region of the United States. The study focused on the comparison of African American and White students who participated in an equal opportunity program referred to as ACT 101. Fifty-two of the participants were White students and 49% were African American students. The instrument used by the researcher sought to explore six areas of the participants' undergraduate experience. The six areas were: (a) classroom climate, (b) peer interaction, (c) faculty interaction, (d) academic advising relationship, (e) administrative climate, and (f) student services.

In five of the six areas, the results of the study revealed a significant difference in the responses between the African American and White participants. White students had a false understanding of how the African American students viewed the campus climate. Additionally, the White participants perceived that the campus environment mirrored their values as well as those of SoC. Conversely, SoC did not believe the campus environment was receptive to them or their culture. As such, the African American students questioned the college's intentions to create an inclusive environment. The area which revealed no significant difference between African American and White participants was academic advising. African American students in the ACT 101 program revealed feeling marginalized and White students were not perceived to be part of the program. White students in ACT 101 were camouflaged into the regularly enrolled student population. Furthermore, it was revealed in the study that most of the African

American students enrolled at both colleges were also primarily students in the ACT 101 program.

Student-faculty interactions. Baker (2013) conducted a mixed method study of 27 selective colleges and universities who agreed to participate in the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF). The focus of the study was the experiences of students of color. Therefore, only African American and Latino students participated in the study, which narrowed the remaining sample to 1,907. Of the 1,907 remaining participants, 991 were African American, and 916 were Latino students.

The study examined how personal support, on campus personal support, peers, and faculty influences the academic performance of African American and Latino students. Results from the study corroborate previous research that African American students perceived African American faculty to be more capable of incorporating their Black culture, history, and ideas into their courses. Additionally, African American faculty were more apt to be considered genuine role models. Baker (2013) further supported this finding with a study linking professors who are the same race to the high academic performance of Black and Latino students. The findings stated that professors who are similar in race to the students they teach positively impact those students' academic performance. Baker (2013) highlighted the importance of the on-campus personal support. The most significant on-campus personal support for African American and Latino students is the support they receive from faculty. It is important to note that there is a positive impact on African American and Latino students who take classes with professors who are the same race as the students. Surprisingly, on-campus

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peer support did not show a positive effect on the grades of students of color (Baker, 2013).

Furthermore, Greer-Reid, Madyun and Buckley (2008) conducted a qualitative study using a phenomenological strategy of inquiry. The strategy was fitting because the study exclusively focused on the lived experiences of SoC. Specifically, a pilot study was conducted with five members of the African American Student Network (AFAM), two of whom were male and three were female. Their membership in AFAM ranged from one to four semesters and their ages ranged from 19-23. Three of the participants identified as African American, one identified as biracial and one identified as bicultural, identifying as an African immigrant as well as with the African American culture.

The African American Student Network (AFAM) was created by two Black faculty to share Black students' experience and an effort to advance retention and graduation rates. Additionally, the AFAM philosophy that undergirded the AFAM was to create a safe space and allow students to close the gap between the ideal and real self. Faculty played an important role in facilitating the closure of this gap. The group focused on the psychological well-being of its members and all Black students, and other members of the college community were welcomed to share, network and build relationships. Another goal of the AFAM was to gain the perspective of students of color and their interaction with the university. This avenue provided faculty with an opportunity to connect with and create meaningful student-faculty relationships. The AFAM stressed communication as a vital component and the network support of all undergraduate and graduate students, staff, and other individuals. Like Greer-Reid et al.

(2008) and Baker (2013), the findings in their studies revealed that student-faculty relationships provided a positive impact on students of color.

Anaya and Cole (2001) conducted a quantitative study that utilized the national databank for the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ). In 1997, the CSEQ was completed by 28,556 colleges and universities. They recruited a sample of 836 undergraduate Latina/o students. A 191-item quality survey on student effort and educational progress in college. The CSEQ questionnaire contains items on student-faculty interactions, cocurricular activities, interpersonal relationships and self-reported student grades. The dependent variable in the study was academic achievement which was measured using college grades. The study's dependent variable was academic achievement and two types independent variables. The first group was comprised of student background and class standing. The second group was comprised of college environment variables which were students' academic major and place of residence. The college experience variable consisted of student motivation and behavioral variables and numbers of student-faculty interaction.

The results from the study (Anaya & Cole, 2001) showed that most Latina/o students were doing well, with more than 60% earning grades of B or higher. Furthermore, the study reported that most of the Latina/o students had communicated with a professor, however, this was to obtain general course information. The study further revealed that participants had only occasional in-depth interactions with faculty. These occasions occurred when participants engaged faculty in discussions on ideas to assist them in the completion of a term paper, or seeking the faculty's clarification on comments made on an assignment. Less than a quarter of the students in the study had

much interpersonal contact with their professors. Anaya and Cole (2001) found limited

interaction between White faculty and students of color.

A qualitative study conducted by Johnson (2007) at a large PWI in the western

region of the United States included 16 women of color identifying as Black, Latina, and

American Indian who were science students. The study focused on how women of color

dealt with the experiences in their undergraduate science classes. The participants of the

study found three areas of their courses dissatisfying: (a) size of the classes, (b) class

participation, and (c) engaging in undergraduate research. The participants in the study

were negatively affected by two cultural principles: (a) the narrow focus on

decontextualized science and (b) the construction of science as a gender, ethnicity, and

race-neutral meritocracy (Johnson, 2007).

The large lecture classes had a negative impact on the participants in the study.

Many of them expressed a desire to get to know their professors. Some of the

participants felt alienated from the experience of learning. The participants were also

significantly and negatively impacted by class participation. The study highlighted that

when professors asked if students had any questions, the participants in the study shared

that they did not answer. As SoC, they already felt conspicuous and did not want to

further draw attention to themselves by asking or answering questions. Additionally,

participants in the study were negatively impacted by doing research. Some of the

participants shared that they had unsupportive and intimidating professors (Johnson,

2007).

Johnson (2007) also found that the participants were negatively impacted by two

cultural principles. The first cultural principle of a narrow focus on decontextualized

science had a discouraging effect on the participants. The participants expressed feeling belittled by the attitudes of their professors. This type of interaction was unsettling and impersonal for the participants. One participant stated that she wanted to be seen first as a person rather than through the lens of science. The second cultural principle, science as a meritocracy, neutral to gender, race, and ethnicity, was experienced differently by participants. The participants experienced isolation in these settings. Students of color ended up being laboratory partners with each other because the White students did not want to interact with students of color (Johnson, 2007).

Mentoring for Students of Color at PWIs

Mentoring has shown to be more impactful with minority students. The concept of ethnic matching in mentoring relationships results in more positive outcomes in cumulative GPA and graduation rates compared to unmatched mentor relationships (Campbell & Campbell, 2007). Student-faculty relationships are a critical component to student success in college and this relationship affects a student's satisfaction with college. Frequent interaction of students with faculty has been shown to significantly support higher academic achievement (Beattie & Thiele, 2016; Hunn, 2014; Tinto, 2012).

A qualitative study conducted by Luedke (2017) explored the mentoring roles of staff and administrators of SoC. Social reproduction theory was utilized to assess how mentors cultivated social capital in the students of color with whom they interacted. Social reproduction theory evaluated how inequality was preserved or disrupted (Luedke, 2017). The study consisted of 24 first-generation, undergraduate, African American, Latinx, and biracial students at two PWIs in the Midwest. One of the PWIs was a large research-based university and the other was a midsize comprehensive university. On

average, the student body of both institutions was approximately 89% White. Participants completed interviews that lasted on average for an hour and a half with questions focused around their influential relationships before, during, and throughout college. Particular focus was placed on the types of support and interactions these influential relationships provided for each student.

The results from the study stated that SoC did not receive holistic support from White staff and administrators. The emerging themes were that staff and administrators of color: a) nurtured the prior capital that SoC brought with them to college, b) maintained complete honesty, and c) made themselves available. White staff and administrators focused on the academic experience and performance while ignoring other areas that impacted the students' well-being (Luedke, 2017). This interaction led SoC to believe that White staff and administrators were not interested in building authentic relationships with them. Consequently, this led SoC to seek out relationships with staff and administrators of color. The study discovered that staff and administrators of color played a critical role in nurturing the varying forms of capital that SoC brought to college. Additionally, SoC found that staff and administrators of color were more readily available to them.

A qualitative study conducted by Guiffrida (2005a) employed a grounded theory strategy of inquiry that was phenomenological in nature. The purpose of the study was to gain an increased understanding of interactions among African American students and faculty at a PWI. Furthermore, this approach was used instead of attempting to make generalizations of all African American students and their interactions with faculty. The study was conducted on the campus of a mid-sized northeastern college with

undergraduate population of 11,000 with a small percentage identifying as African American.

Using purposeful sampling and snowball sampling, 19 students participated. Guiffrida (2005a) highlighted that African American students perceived African American faculty as more student-centered than White faculty. In addition, the study focused on "othermothering" as a framework to understanding how African American students perceived student-centered faculty. The clear majority of faculty that African American students identified as being student centered were African American faculty and states the need and importance for faculty of color at PWIs. Students of color at PWIs appreciate the support from White faculty, however, they did not perceive them as going above and beyond.

It should be noted that Guiffrida (2005a) chose high achieving African American students for this qualitative study with GPAs ranging from 2.8 to 3.9. Participants in this study identified more holistic and richer interactions with African American faculty. Based on the perceptions of the participants, African American faculty were perceived as more student-centered in their interactions with students of color. Emerging from the study was the concept of othermothering and its critical role in the lives of students of color at a PWI. Students of color identified student centered faculty as those who went above and beyond their role as faculty. The results also revealed that students of color wanted to talk with faculty about their future goals and that faculty who knew them well would be able to assist with employment opportunities. Guiffrida (2005a) posited that another way for White faculty to be more student-centered in the eyes of African American students is to have a more diverse curriculum.

Reddick (2012) conducted a phenomenological study that employed theories of cross-racial and cross-gender mentoring. The study included eight participants who completed two in-depth interviews. The purpose of the study was to explore the experience of mentoring in higher education between cross-racial male faculty (Black and White) and Black students at a highly selective PWI (Reddick 2012). Black male faculty who participated in the study were able to utilize their formative experiences to inform their conversations on race with Black male mentees. On the other hand, White male faculty in their interactions with their Black male mentees, utilized closely related, yet dissimilar experiences to guide their support of Black students. Additionally, the study revealed that both Black and White male faculty assisted their Black mentees with racially charged situations. Again, Black male faculty were able to associate past experiences to assist in problem-solving current issues. However, White male faculty relied on other individuals to assist in the problem-solving. This study recognized that cross-race mentoring is significant and can alleviate the added stressors placed upon faculty of color. Reddick (2012) showed that cross-mentoring with Black males was beneficial and male faculty can play a pivotal role in overall development (Reddick, 2012).

Booker and Brevard (2017) conducted a 1-year long mixed methods study of 90 incoming freshmen African American participants at a PWI. The purpose of the study was to focus on the experiences of the participants. The study paired first year students with upperclassman students of color, faculty or staff members. The faculty and staff members were from a plethora of racial backgrounds. Student self-selected to participate in the study and no incentives were provided to the mentors.

Three themes emerged from the analysis: (a) accessibility and communication, (b) academic and social support, and (c) valuable support with the transition. For *accessibility and communication*, the study revealed that less than a quarter of the mentors met with their mentee approximately 2-3 times per month. An area of great concern was a small percentage of mentees revealed that they never met their mentor. More than half of the mentees reported that their mentors were "always" available. In contrast, it was reported that some of the mentors were "never" available, while more than half of the faculty and staff were reported as "always" being available. For *academic support*, the study showed that academic issues were identified as the concern that was most frequently discussed with mentors. This was followed by personal advising with mentors. Similarly, over half of the students discussed social concerns with their mentor. Students who had staff or faculty mentors reported having a more effective relationship. In contrast, mentees who had upperclassmen students as mentors reported their relationship, very ineffective, ineffective or somewhat ineffective. Overall, students felt that the mentoring experience was valuable and helpful to their transition to college.

Like Reddick (2012) and Guiffrida (2005a), Booker and Brevard (2017) provided evidence that mentoring is beneficial to students of color. In addition, Booker and Brevard (2017) revealed that faculty and staff mentors are viewed as more effective. Whereas Reddick's (2012) study provided the mentoring from the faculty perspective, Booker and Brevard (2017) provided a student perspective on mentoring. Booker and Brevard (2017) brought up an additional component of staff relationships that supported students of color at PWIs. Both perspectives posited that mentoring provides growth and

maturation for the students (Booker & Brevard, 2017) and increased understanding of working with a diverse student population (Reddick, 2012).

Substantive Gaps in the Literature

While several studies have highlighted the academic performance of Black and Latino students, there was limited mention of students of color who were academically successful. The literature revealed that institutions must be mindful of the support that students of color needed in order to augment their academic retention and persistence. Although the literature identified that PWIs must pay close attention to students of color and create an atmosphere of inclusivity, there remained a significant gap in the academic performance of students of color at PWIs. In addition, while there is limited information on the academic resilience of students of color, there was an absence of literature on the academic persistence and resilience of students of color at PWIs that were in a rural setting.

Chapter Summary

The challenge that PWIs faced is in their institutional approach to weaving changes into the fabric of the institution (Tinto, 2012). Tinto (2006) purported that in order to retain students, programs and activities, instead of taking the add-on effect, should be intentionally infused into the daily academic life of the institution. Instead, these programs are added and most are not maintained (Tinto, 2006). Retention of students need to be taken more seriously (Tinto, 1999). Students of color at PWIs need a strong sense of belonging in order to feel connected with the institution (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). Theories of resiliency, social capital, and the critical race theory were common across the bodies of literature.

Students of color who entered college were less prepared than their White counterparts (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Banks & Dohy, 2019). Their college readiness must be considered and must set a precedent for institutions as they ensure that faculty are culturally prepared to interact with first generation students. The research indicated that first generation college students were disproportionately SoC (Tinto & Engle, 2008). Furthermore, college administrators must prioritize cultivating an environment where retention of SoC is critical to the strategic plan and shapes some of the initiatives so that they reflect the commitment of the institution (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Institutional cultures that fostered student success were important components to student retention.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology, research design, and analysis process. The chapter also highlights the rationale for employing qualitative methodology and provided a synopsis of the research context. Additionally, Chapter 3 discusses the research participants, instruments used in data collection, ethical guidelines, and thorough measures used in the study.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Disproportionately, SoC are identified as high-risk and underprepared for the rigors of college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Schreiner et al. (2011) purported that although significant programming efforts have been implemented to enhance the success of at-risk college students their persistence continued to lag behind those of their White counterparts. The purpose of this study was to identify and gain a better understanding of what contributed to the academic resilience of students of color being academically successful at PWIs.

The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What determined academic success for SoC who attend PWIs in rural communities?

2. Which, if any, of the four assumptions that guide academic resilience theory played a role in a successful experience of SoC at PWIs in rural communities?

3. What, if any, support systems do SoC at PWIs in rural communities' attribute to a successful experience at college?

The researcher used a phenomenological research design for this proposed study. This research design, which was qualitative in nature, allowed the participants' voices to be heard and allowed the participants to feel a sense of ownership in the process (Creswell, 2014).

Research Context

  The research setting for the study took place at three small, 4-year liberal arts private colleges located in rural communities in the central and western New York regions. The pseudonyms for the three colleges were Woods University (WU), Upshot College (UC), and Aquatic College (AC). The colleges each had an approximate total full-time enrollment of over 1,100. On average, the student-faculty ratio is 10:1 with an average class size of 16. The population of SoC at each of the colleges was less than 20% and, on average, each institution had a higher percentage of males, compared to female students. More than 50% of students enrolled at the colleges received some form of financial assistance. These colleges fostered an environment that valued global citizenship, teamwork, ethics, inclusive excellence and cultural competence through partnership with the local community, global communities, study abroad programs, and programs in athletics, career development, service and leadership. They also supported and participated in study abroad programs and opportunities throughout the world. In addition, students brought a diversity of languages, thought, and experiences as a variety of languages were spoken on the college campus and students hailed from different states within the United States as well as various countries across the world.

  The general organizational structure of the colleges consisted of the college president with nine senior-level administrators who reported directly to the president. Senior-level administrators had oversight and leadership for the following areas: faculty supervision, strategic initiatives, campus life, enrollment management, athletics, registrars, financial aid, marketing, finance, institutional research and advancement, alumni relations as well as maintaining and monitoring the growth and enhancement of

academic programs and the development of institutional policies and procedures. Collectively, and in concert with senior administrators, directors, associate directors and assistant directors assisted with the long term and daily oversight of the college.

There were several similarities across the three colleges. Similarities included their geographic location, small size, support programs, and their support in enrolling international students and students of color. However, there were differences among the three colleges that are important to mention. Woods University had more stringent admissions criteria for acceptance and boasted an acceptance rate of less than 25%. Upshot College offered the largest number of majors, more than 50, and offered an extensive international program. More than 50 languages were spoken on campus. Aquatic College is the least selective of the three colleges. However, it boasted trademark internship opportunities that provided students with the real-world exposure needed to supplement their learning in the classroom.

Research Participants

The research participants were SoC who graduated from WU, UC, and AC colleges during the 6-year timeframe from 2013 through 2018. The research participants were selected based on a home address in a diverse living environment prior to attending college in a rural and predominantly White setting. Additionally, the research participants lived on their college campus for a minimum of one year.

Ethical considerations. To conduct the research, approval was sought from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John Fisher College. Review of research plans by the researcher's college or university is a critical component of the process (Creswell, 2014). In addition, signed informed consent forms were obtained from the participants

(Appendix A). This signed form provided participants with an agreement to the provisions of the study prior to providing information (Creswell, 2014). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, with the option to participate and withdraw from participation at any point throughout the research process. Participants were also briefed on the data collection and confidentiality process and its preservation throughout the research procedure.

Sampling. For this proposed research study, participants were chosen using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a nonrandom, nonprobability-based sample intentionally selected by the researcher by identifying characteristics of the participants that matched the study (Holosko & Thyer, 2011). The target population was alumni from Woods University, Upshot College, and Aquatic College. These were individuals who graduated from the previously mentioned institutions between 2013 and 2018 and lived on campus for a minimum of 1 year. The colleges in this study were located in central and western regions of New York. Purposive sampling was the best methodological choice as participants were purposefully chosen and possessed the attributes and characteristics that were aligned to the research topic and questions that were essential to proposed study (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). The sampling method provided the platform for the participants who attended similar PWIs to share their lived experiences as SoC. The participants, prior to their enrollment at their institution, lived in an urban setting ensuring their prior experience within a racially diverse environment.

Researcher. The researcher has had many years of experience in higher education and implemented measures that ensured the integrity of the research was maintained. In order to ensure that this occurred, the researcher did not interview any

participants with whom the researcher had established a professional or social connection. This meant that any participant that the researcher knew was not a part of the study.

Access. The recruitment of participants occurred with representatives from the institutions from which the participants graduated. These individuals were the initial point persons that drove the dissemination of information to the identified graduates. The graduates were solicited to participate by: a) targeted email sent from faculty and staff who regularly communicated with the participants while they were students at the college (Appendix B) and b) snowball effect, where current participants asked others who met the criteria of the study to also participate (Holosko & Thyer, 2011). Both methods of solicitation guided interested participants to campus liaisons, who provided the researcher's contact information, phone number and email address.

Once interested individuals contacted the researcher, they were emailed an interest letter (Appendix C), an informed consent form, and a participant contact form. If individuals were interested they reviewed, signed and retuned the completed informed consent form and participation form to the researcher via email or phone. Each interested individual was provided with information regarding the purpose of the study and were screened based on the selection criteria. The participant contact form captured additional information pertinent to the study, such as gender and race.

Confidentiality. This research was confidential, and all participants were assigned a pseudonym that protected their identity. Written transcripts are stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's private and locked office for a period of 5 years. After that period, all documents associated with each participant will be shredded.

Additional participant information was stored in a password-protected external hard drive. The researcher did not request any participant information that was not critical to the focus and purpose of this study. Audio recordings and electronic documents were taken and when not in use, the recordings and files, including transcriptions, were secured on a password protected hard drive and stored in a locked cabinet in the private office of the researcher. This information will be kept for a period of 5 years after the successful defense of the researcher's dissertation and then destroyed.

Instruments to be Used in Data Collection

The initial email that was sent to the targeted population of graduates from Woods University, Upshot College and Aquatic College explained the type of volunteers that the researcher needed for the study. In addition, at the end of the interview, the researcher verified the demographic information of the participant. However, the primary tool for data collection for this study was a semi-structured one-on-one interview with the research participants. Interviews provide the opportunity to collect rich content and more deeply understand the lived daily experiences of the participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The participants had one interview session, which was scheduled for approximately 45-60 minutes. Each participant chose a pseudonym that was used to assure confidentiality and anonymity of data collected. Each participant received a $25 gift card, as a small thank you for their time and effort (Creswell, 2014).

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

The goal of the study was to understand the lived experiences of SoC who graduated from a PWI in a rural community and the factors that supported their academic success. Academic success was defined as retention, and persistence to graduation. The

research participants were selected in part because they originally lived in an urban environment before attending college in a rural community. A phenomenological study was the best approach as it allowed the researcher to gain rich content from the lived experiences of participants. Furthermore, the use of a semi-structured interview provided structure and allowed for flexibility to ask follow-up questions of the participants that lead to information-rich answers relevant to the research topic and to answering the questions (Appendix E) that were posed in this study (Creswell, 2014).

Each interview was recorded, using two recording devices, a tape recorder, and voice memo recording on the researcher's iPhone. This provided a backup for recording the interview and ensured that the responses were captured. The intention behind using voice memo on the researcher's iPhone was the ease of uploading the recording to the Rev.com application which was downloaded on the researcher's iPhone. The interviewer also took comprehensive field notes during the interview sessions and observations were also documented when face-to-face interviews were conducted. Field notes and observations, when interviews were completed in-person, were captured to assist with the triangulation of data collected from participants. After each interview, the recording was titled with research participant's pseudonym and dated for easy retrieval. In addition, after transcription, the recorded sessions will be confidentially stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's private office for a period of 5 years.

Coding. To become familiar with the data for analysis, the researcher was immersed in the data to identify emerging themes. Data analysis occurred at various stages and coding was one of the ways the researcher analyzed the data. Coding was an option (Saldana, 2016) and required a variety of filters, lenses, angles, and approaches to

be employed. The researcher developed a codebook which was electronically stored, and password protected. Interviews were transcribed using Rev.com.

Coding the data obtained was critical to obtaining rich content shared during the interview (Creswell, 2014). The process of coding allowed the researcher to organize data in segments and chunks to identify emerging themes (Creswell, 2014). For the first cycle of coding, a priori and axial coding were employed for this study. A priori coding aligned with the theoretical framework and directly related to the research questions of the study (Saldana, 2016). In the second cycle, open coding was employed. Open coding allowed the researcher to capture additional themes that emerged from the research that were not originally captured using a priori coding. For the third cycle, axial coding was employed as it is favored for studies that draw from a variety of data sources, such as interviews, transcripts, journals, videos, and documents (Saldana, 2016). Axial coding aimed to connect categories with sub categories and decipher the alignment (Saldana, 2016). The purpose of axial coding was to extend the analysis that occurred from the first cycle coding (Saldana, 2016).

Field notes. The researcher employed the use of field notes to supplement the collection of data during the interview sessions. Field notes for the interviews and observations were ideally aligned to be utilized for this proposed study. Valuable observations, thick description, and rich content may be contained in the researcher's field notes (Saldana, 2016). Noting observations was an important component for this study. The descriptive field notes documented by the interviewer held information about perspectives, thoughts, interpretations or what were witnessed by the interviewer that might be critical to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher triangulated the data across the three colleges and once the process was completed, any questions about the information were presented to participants for member checking. This procedure ensured accuracy, credibility and validity of information. As an additional tool, the researcher employed a critical friend to provide sound, honest and critical feedback. This person was identified from within the researcher's circle of individuals who provided mentorship and critical feedback. Reliability is an internal instrument that validates consistency across paradigms over time (Creswell, 2014).

Procedures. The following procedures were employed and applied to the research study.

1. Obtained permission for the study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John Fisher College.

2. Reached out to identify the researcher's target population via the college contacts using purposive sampling at Woods University, Upshot College, and Aquatic College. The college contact for each college was identified. The researcher communicated via phone and email with each contact individual and obtained information on the target population. If it was possible, the researcher met each contact in person to provide an overview of the research and share expectations.

3. Pilot tested the interview questions with two students not participating in the study.

4. Sent e-mail communication to potential participants, after the completion of pilot testing.

5. Communicated with potential participants, via e-mail or phone, scheduled and confirmed date, time and location of interviews, within one to two weeks after e-mail communication was sent.

6. Received informed consent form from interested participants or confirmed that form would be provided at the scheduled interview session.

7. Emailed or sent phone reminders to participants of interview date, time and location.

8. Reviewed interview protocol (Appendix D), before every interview to ensure that a consistent process was followed for recording data (Creswell, 2014).

9. Conducted in-person interviews with research participants two weeks after e-mail communication was sent.

10. Ensured that interview was uploaded to Rev.com within 24-48 hours or completion of interview.

11. Provided interview data to participants to allow feedback to verify accuracy of information.

12. Completed data analysis.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the methodology, research design, and analysis process. The chapter also highlighted the rationale for employing qualitative methodology and provided a synopsis of the research context. Additionally, Chapter 3 discussed the research participants, instruments used in data collection, ethical guidelines, and thorough measures used in the study.

In Chapter 3, the research context of the study took place at Woods University, Upshot College, and Aquatic College. These were small private liberal arts institutions in the upstate region of New York and were located in rural settings. Research participants were academically successful SoC who graduated from the colleges mentioned, within the past 6 years, between 2013 to 2018. The study used purposive sampling and followed strict ethical considerations to ensure the identities of the participants remained anonymous. The primary data collection tool was a 45-60-minute semi-structured interview. The researcher's positionality as a person of color working in higher education was taken in to consideration throughout the duration of this study. The interviews were recorded and uploaded to Rev.com for transcription. All documents and recordings were securely and confidentially protected. A priori and axial coding were used to analyze the data and pull out emerging themes.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of results and findings of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative research study examined the lived experiences of students of color (SoC) at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and how they transitioned from an urban to rural environment. Academic resilience theory was used as the lens for this research. The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What determines academic success for SoC who attend PWIs in rural communities?

2. Which, if any, of the four assumptions that guide academic resilience theory play a role in a successful experience of SoC at PWIs in rural communities?

3. What, if any, support systems do SoC at PWIs in rural communities' attribute to a successful experience at college?

Data Analysis and Findings

Included in this section is the demographic summary of research participants as well findings from the data collection process. This section also includes the themes and subthemes that emerged through the process of data analysis. Findings are arranged by research question along with the corresponding themes and subthemes.

Demographic Summary

Data for this research were collected using semi-structured interviews that lasted for approximately one hour. The interviews were conducted over the phone, via FaceTime or in-person. Nine participants who successfully graduated with their undergraduate degrees from three rural colleges were interviewed. Three participants

from each of the three rural colleges were solicited for this research. Having graduated, the participants were no longer residing in the areas where their colleges are located. The three institutions in this study are located in rural environments in central and western New York. The relevant demographic information is included in Table 4.1.

A priori and open coding were the combined methods used in the data analysis for this research. A priori codes were developed and aligned with academic resilience theory and applied to all three research questions. The transcripts were read and analyzed several times. Recordings were reviewed as well to capture information for data analysis. With the achievement of data saturation, the codes were analyzed to develop themes for each research question.

Field Notes

The notes taken on participants supported input and were useful. Notes regarding one participant showed that, although he was aware of his racial identity, he was less concerned about being in the minority. As such, his transition was more seamless than that of the other participants.

Table 4.1

Research Participants

Name of College	Pseudonym	Year of Graduation
Aquatic College	Daisah	2018
	Ruby	2015
	Sylvester	2015
Upshot College	Aaron	2013
	Sasha	2014

	Yaritza	2018
Woods University	Brown	2018
	Carolyn	2015
	David	2018

Note. Table 1.1 contains the pseudonyms of the research participants and the college from which they graduated along with the year they graduated from their institution.

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative research was to answer three questions and to analyze the responses to those questions through the identification of themes. The first research question sought to understand what determined academic success for SoC who attended PWIs in rural communities. One theme, *getting through culture shock*, emerged from the analysis, along with two subthemes: *persistence amidst difficulty*, and *mimicking the majority*. The second research question asked which, if any, of the four assumptions that guided academic resilience had any role in the success that SoC experienced at PWIs in rural communities. Two themes emerged: relationships – *feeling connected to faculty,* and *vulnerabilities fueled success (risk and vulnerability factors).* Three themes emerged from Research Question 3: *HEOP is key*, student involvement - *all involved,* and *maintaining initial relationships and connections*.

Research Question 1 asked what determines academic success for SoC who attend PWIs in rural communities. Research Question 1 focused on identifying the reasons that SoC were successful. One theme emerged with two subthemes and is displayed in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Research Question 1: Theme and Subthemes

Theme 1	Getting through culture shock
Subtheme A	Persistence amidst difficulty
Subtheme B	Mimicking the majority

Theme 1: Getting through culture shock. The term culture shock was not explicitly stated during the interviews with the participants. However, it was evident, based on the information that participants shared, that they experienced culture shock. Culture shock is defined as "the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Oberg, 1951, p. 1). Participants in McCoy's (2014) study experienced culture shock moving from a racially diverse community to one where diverse ethnic and racial representation was minimal. For some of the participants in McCoy's (2014) study, this was their first experience of racial isolation. Additionally, the extent of the homogeneity was not realized until they were on campus (McCoy, 2014).

David recalls an experience he had during orientation, "I was on this orientation trip where I was the only Black, also person of color of this orientation trip. Me and six or seven other white students camping" (G 88-90). David further shared his thoughts during the orientation trip.

> I remember feeling so, I don't know, so distant. It was definitely a cultural difference. Like some of the words they're using I had never heard of. Like, just like slang that I would never hear at camp when . . . like someone used the word "Dank" to describe macaroni and cheese, and I was like, "What are you talking about. (I 91-96)

Brown who also attended Woods University shared his experience regarding his transition to Woods University. Brown said, "[The transition] really was difficult" (H 111). He went on and further shared:

> Given where I was coming from - what made it so difficult was the social aspect of Woods. Just on the one hand trying to grapple with being not only this Black kid amongst a bunch of White people—but being from the hood amongst a bunch of White, wealthy people. It just felt like the culture. You know the language, the references in conversation, the ways of dress, everything was foreign to me. And that was difficult for me to deal with at first. (H 117-124)

Like David and Brown, all the other participants experienced transitional difficulties with their new environment. The participants were all moving from an environment where they were in the majority to one where they were in the minority. Daisah recalled:

> I went from being in the majority of a population to a minority population and it was difficult. I felt targeted in ways that people wouldn't consider to be targeted. Like in class, it kind of felt like people were waiting for me …because my degree's in sociology, so we studied vulnerable populations and I am like the trifecta of vulnerable populations, a female, in a wheelchair, and I'm Black. (A 101-109)

Yaritza's experience was also similar to the others. She remembers her first semester:

> But it was kind of difficult my first semester just because I wasn't used to kind of being the only person of color. I was used to kind of being one of the many persons of color in my classroom because I did go to a high school in the South

Bronx. So I think that was difficult. And I think I actually became very shy and very quiet, very reserved in my classes because I started noticing like I…because English isn't my first language, it's my second. And I didn't notice it until I got to campus because these are kids that went to very preppy, dormy school, private schools. So it was like their English was out of this world. I was like, whoa, I do not sound like that. So I wasn't comfortable. (D 142-153)

The introduction to a new environment was also an adjustment for Carolyn. Being from a diverse city, Carolyn was exposed to individuals who spoke various languages. She realized that at Woods, "I got used to the fact that not everybody speaks Spanish. I had to get used to that" (G 378-380). She further shared that at Woods:

It was a little different because if I would speak a different language, I would get a face. So it's like that took a while of getting used to, originally, because I didn't really…At first, I was just like, "Oh, you don't get it? Okay. Let me say it in English," but then eventually it was like, "Oh, you're making a face because that's not the first thing to come out of my mouth. It's not English immediately." I had to go through a path to get to the English. It took a while to get used to it, and I think that's kind of like why I picked the friends that I picked because they get it. Even if not all of them spoke Spanish, but they didn't make a face. (G 392-407)

Limited access to cultural and diverse foods was also an adjustment that some of the participants experienced. Sasha recalled the difference in accessibility of diverse types of foods in her home town compared to her new college environment. Sasha reminisced, "I was so used to different cultures, so used to different languages, used to

seeing different types of people and different types of food. [I] didn't get that [here in my college town]" (E 778-782).

Sylvester recognized that the access to transportation was different from his experiences in New York City. The distance to the store was much further for him than it was at home. He noted, "I don't want to feel like I'm burdening anyone, so you know, I had to rely on people to go to town to get some stuff" (B 135-137). Sylvester, however, had an interesting perspective on being in his new environment. He said:

> So, I mean, the tradeoff is there, but at the end of the day, I was just like, it's a
> nice way to bond. Nice way to travel and see different things because I had to
> readjust. I had to readjust instead of seeing buildings, and darkness, and a train
> station, and buildings on a bus station, instead I got to experience the wilderness
> and farms. Which isn't entirely new to me either, you know, my family is
> Mexican. So I would travel frequently to Mexico. (B 149-157)

For Sylvester, this new environment was not entirely new as he had an introduction to it by visiting with his family in Mexico. He added about his experience being in Mexico, "Basically living there. And basically relying on cars, or walking distances to go places. So, in a way, I was kind of already mentally prepared" (B 164-166). Unlike the other participants, Sylvester's exposure to a rural environment made him less concerned about the transition to a new way of life.

Of all the participants, Sylvester was the only one who knew that he wanted to go to a small school far from home and stated "My family wasn't going anywhere. I just wanted to experience that traditional going away experience" (B 73-74). The other participants echoed Sylvester's statements about the access to transportation, but found it

less an advantage and more of a challenge to their successful transition. Yaritza represented the majority of those interviewed when she commented:

> I just kind of felt trapped. You need a car to get anywhere, even on campus is a long walk. Like I just felt trapped on campus and, feeling trapped in a place that you just don't feel welcome is terrible. (D 475-479)

Subtheme A: Persistence amidst difficulty. One of the subthemes that emerged from Research Question 1 was the participants' ability to persist despite the difficulties they experienced. Ruby recalls a traumatic experience in her first semester at Aquatic College:

> But my freshman year, I found out that I was pregnant and I knew nothing about what to do, who to go to. And I only reach[ed] out for help once I knew there was some issues, and so I went down to…Thank you, I went down to the nurse's office, and she was able to give a pregnancy test and confirm. And due to complications I was having, she was able to refer me, and it was a really emotional time for me, especially at her office that day. And she was very compassionate, and she cared, and she was able to debrief with me and tell me what my options were, what I could do, who I could go to for extra help. (C 356-370)

Ruby ended up having a miscarriage and shared that being at Aquatic was difficult. However, she did not give up her quest for pursuing her degree. As she shares,

> It was tough because I was two and a half hours away from home, I knew no one here. My family wasn't able to visit as often as I would like, so it took a big toll on me to feel like I found a place here for myself. (C65-70)

Sasha, much like Ruby, had her share of difficulties, yet she persevered. Sasha was much further away from home at Upshot College. Sasha commented on the difference she experienced compared to her diverse community at home. She revealed, "I cried so much because I missed home so much. I was at the point in the freshman year towards the end of, I was starting to fill out transfer applications. And I didn't because my friends at the time were like, 'No blah, blah. Like, it'll get better, like, you have us'" (E 480-485). She remembered struggling to find her place at Upshot. She reminisced, "I couldn't find my group, my niche" (E 526-527). When the researcher asked Sasha if she found her group, her response, "No, absolutely not. Did not. I found some good friends" (E 529-530). These friendships were what sustained Sasha and kept her grounded at Upshot College. Throughout the interviews the participants shared that relationships they had forged supported their persistence and resilience through to graduation.

Aaron was an athlete and was able to find his niche. Aaron remembers losing his grandmother in his sophomore year of college: "She had been battling cancer and my teammates knew that, my coaches knew that. But the day that she passed away, the coach and his wife had me and two of my classmates over for dinner at his house" (F 346-350). During that difficult time, Aaron was appreciative of the support he received.

Subtheme B: *Mimicking the majority.* All the participants acknowledged the cultural differences in their new environment. Daisah shared, "Assimilation, I had to assimilate" (A126). This was her response to the move from being in the majority population at home to now being in the minority at her college. She further explained:

Like, my diction and the way I converse with people was something, it was very difficult and now that I have done it for those four years at Aquatic I can't undo it.

But simple conversations with people require different answers than I used to

[than what I am used to], like Gucci. (A 130-135)

Gucci is an urban slang that means everything is good or okay. Instead of using words like Gucci, Daisah had to make adjustments to her diction and vocabulary to assimilate to her new environment.

Similarly, David found himself, in some ways, conforming to the culture of the majority. He shared:

I think once coming to Woods I acted more, how do you say it, my vocabulary, enunciate more that was something that I noticed with people, and now with people that stuck with me, I feel like I have to speak slow, and enunciate. (I 147-151)

Brown, who attended Woods University, shared that the culture was foreign to him and he struggled with the transition. Brown revealed:

I felt pressured to conform, to dress that way, to speak that way. It's not like anyone had a knife to my throat saying yo, this is what you gotta do. But you feel all this pressure 'cause not only is this the predominant culture. It's very evident in spaces that represent something that isn't a predom [predominantly]. (H 191-198)

There appeared to be unwritten cultural guidelines that students were expected to uphold and follow.

Aaron remembered how his attire changed:

I came in here wearing baggy jeans and army fatigue belts and next thing you know, my sophomore year I'm wearing Sperry's and boat shoes and things of that

nature. So I think the physical appearance is one thing to just feel like you can fit

in with a group of people if you're at a dinner table. (F 184-189)

Aaron commented on the one thing he would have changed about his college experience,

"Just being comfortable of where you are from, what you wear, what you listen to, what

you like" (F 443-444). Aaron's decision to change his style of dress was to help him fit

in with those around him.

Research Question 2 asked which, if any, of the four assumptions that guide

academic resilience theory play a role in a successful experience of SoC at PWIs in

rural communities? Describe the role. Research Question 2 had two themes that

emerged and is shown in Table 4.3. Theme 1 was *relationships – feeling connected to*

faculty, and Theme 2 was *vulnerabilities fueled success (risk and vulnerability factors).*

Table 4.3

Research Question 2: Themes

Theme 1	Relationships – feeling connected with faculty
Theme 2	Vulnerabilities fueled success (risk and vulnerability factor)

Theme 1: relationships – feeling connected to faculty. The relationships that

participants encountered were woven throughout all the interview responses. These

relationships created and provided security, support, and a safety net for the participants.

The relationships that participants fostered kept them going. These relationships with

faculty were critical and impactful. All participants shared positive experiences, support,

and interactions that they had with faculty. These connections and encounters with

faculty supported and significantly enhanced the experience of all nine participants.

Ruby was on academic probation her first year at Aquatic College. An encounter with a professor who also lived in her hometown made all the difference. Ruby shared:

And then when I returned to school that following semester, she made sure…she was on me a lot more, and I think it was because we had that bond just because we were from the same town. I could tell she wanted to see me succeed, and she definitely proved that to me by her devotion and her assistance. She made a big difference in my academic success here, because my freshman year, I did not do the best. (C 200-210)

Similarly, Aaron from Upshot College had a positive experience with one of his professors. He was struggling in one of his classes and shared this information with his professor:

So then we just casually started talking about my paper. The next thing you know, idea one, idea two, idea three, all this inspiration is coming. But the fact that he opened his doors, allowed me to sit with him and his family that really, really showed me that it was more about just educating me and more about offering me an experience. (F 332-338)

Daisah described how the support she received from a faculty member allowed her to stay in college:

And literally I was like I don't know what to do, I'm not going to get a degree, like I can't fix this and I can't come back here. I don't have money to come back here, not even just to pay for the class. Like I don't physically have the money taking me to the school for one class. What can we do? And, she definitely went to bat and she fixed it. And now I'm graduated and now I have a degree. (A 510-518).

Sylvester from Aquatic College valued the time his professor took to share with him the progress he had made in his class:

I got support from, it was my capstone senior project, the last big assignment. I did one of the last of the last classes. The hardest of the hardest, and I destroyed that class. I made it mine. I did great. Personally, I felt great, and I wasn't expecting a nice review from that professor. It felt personal, it felt great. I felt that everything accumulated to this, and I knew personally I did good and a grade would have been enough. But this instructor took the time to write something very meaningful, not just to review what I presented, but to acknowledge the growth that they had seen. (B 495-509)

This recognition from Sylvester's professor is evidence of an individual who was aware of not only what took place in class but also the holistic improvements that his student had made.

Recognition from his professor provided Brown with the support that he needed to make it through the difficult time he experienced when his cousin was arrested. Brown found it difficult to focus on his academics:

My little cousin got arrested, charged with attempted murder and yeah, it was weighing heavy on me. When the judge had to hand it down, when he was convicted and the judge handed down the sentence, this is my spring semester senior year. Yeah, he got 25 years, he was only 21 at the time. So that was a lot for me. I was the only one in the court room. You know family member slash friend. Yeah. Just I was just stressing about it and one of my professors, the one who, my Black philosophy professor. I was taking his seminar, he noticed that I

just wasn't as lively as I was the first several weeks of the class. So he came up to me, he's like, "Yo, what's going on?" And I told him what happened, I was crying a little bit. Yeah, he was just there for me, he just gave me a hug sat me down. We just talked through it. And yeah, it didn't like make me feel entirely better, but it helped a lot. (H 423-438)

Participants acknowledged that the connections they made with faculty were a key ingredient to their success. Faculty who took the time to connect with the participants created supportive, long-lasting, and genuine bonds.

Theme 2: vulnerabilities fueled success (risk and vulnerability factor).
Participants encountered situations that could have negatively impacted the trajectory of their college career. These situations could have derailed their persistence to graduation. Instead, the situations fueled them to successful completion of their studies. In her junior year, Ruby had an encounter in the town where her college was located. She recalled:

I remember driving into town. And I was going to the gas station, it was a Byrne Dairy, and I remember pulling into a gas pump, and there was a White man in the truck, who was getting ready to pull into that same pump. However, he had to go to the next one over and was like... And then when he got out of his truck, he said, "That pump was for me, nigger." And I didn't say anything, I was honestly just shocked, I had never been called out that way. But after that I just carried on, and got my gas, and came back to campus. But it just showed me that people can be cruel, and if that one person can say so freely like that, there's many more in this town. So I had to just be a little bit more resilient, and adjust to my surroundings. (C 513-530)

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Ruby used that encounter as encouragement to keep moving forward with her studies at Aquatic College.

It took Daisah an entire year to make friends. She struggled to make it at Aquatic College. She felt alone, isolated, and even when she did meet friends, she was not able to connect with them as often as she would have liked. Daisah shared how she made it through her first year:

> To be honest, I was drunk. I felt like Aquatic [College] was the worst place in the world and all I knew was I had to go to class, but like in the moments where I wasn't in class, underage or not, I was drinking. And, I have self-control because my grades didn't suffer. But my self-esteem definitely did because I didn't [My self-esteem definitely suffered, even though I was able to perform well academically]. It kind of felt like I couldn't let people know what I like because there was no one like me. (A 284-298)

Further in the interview, Daisah shared that if she had visited Aquatic, she would not have attended. Despite this difficult situation, she persisted to complete her degree and graduated.

Sasha was diagnosed with depression at the end of her freshman year, and prior to the start of her sophomore year. She revealed that the depression was due to a number of things: her mom being diagnosed with cancer, stomach issues, and her mom's struggle with alcohol addiction. Sasha shared that emotions do not exist in the Latin culture and "there's no mental health, nothing" (E 585-586). Her mother did not understand what was happening to her when she was diagnosed with depression. Sasha's tumultuous

relationship with both her parents, who were not together, made the situation more challenging for her to handle.

Research Question 3 asked what, if any, support systems do SoC at PWIs in rural communities attribute to a successful experience at college? Table 4.4 highlights the themes that emerged from Research Question 3.

Table 4.4

Research Question 3: Themes

Theme 1	HEOP is key
Theme 2	Student involvement - all involved
Theme 3	Maintaining initial relationships and connections

Theme 1: HEOP is key. Six out of the nine participants were accepted to their college through the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP). A common sentiment that was shared with the participants was the close bond they shared with their HEOP friend group and the HEOP staff. HEOP was a family for them, a support, a safe space. Yaritza shared, "my HEOP family was my best friend group. I had other friends but without like the wisdom I think made the experience worth it. So we kind of just bonded over like our struggles and kind of figuring things out" (D 138-142). Aaron commented on the support and preparation he received participating in the pre-first year summer program. Aaron revealed:

> First of all, the familiarity with the campus. Being here for 5 weeks and walking
> around, knowing the dining hall and knowing the dorm that just took a huge
> weight off my shoulders. When I returned in the fall semester I wasn't having to

ask questions of like, how do I get here? I already knew it. I think with the

Summer Institute you're challenged. They kind of throw a lot at you, almost I'd

say, half of a semester's worth of work in five weeks. (F 99-107) So, I think the

big thing, if I could summarize the Summer Institute, which is a level of

comfortability that allowed me to get established going into the fall. (F 121-124)

Sasha, in contrast to Aaron, struggled with being accepted to attend Upshot

through HEOP.   During her college career at Upshot, Sasha reminisced, "Well, we just

got lucky. Like the standards were dumbed down for us so we can get in" (E 386-388).

In retrospect, Sasha realized the importance of HEOP, "It was a rigorous program, that

now that I think about it, I am proud of HEOP" (E 384-385). This recognition is a

testament to the importance of HEOP for Sasha.

David recalled the support he received through HEOP, specifically from his

HEOP Director. He shared:

> She really motivated me to . . . I remember one time she brought me into her
>
> office, we used to have these monthly meetings in freshman college, and she
>
> would say, I know you can do better, right now you're just doing the work but
>
> you're just doing mediocre work. You've got to apply yourself. (I 160-164)

David was thankful for the motivation that he received from his HEOP director. Her

belief in him was one of the reasons he became more involved on campus.

Similarly, Brown received support from HEOP during a difficult time. During his

junior year of college, Brown's father was deported and "my family reasoned that it was

the best decision to send my little brother with him [be]cause he was having a bunch of

behavioral issues" (H 406-408). Brown's family did not have the financial resources to

send his 8-year old brother to be with their father. This realization weighed heavily on Brown. He remembered the difficulty to remain academically focused:

> I really can't focus in the way I need to academically if I don't have this squared away. So I went to HEOP and I asked if they could assist and they were like, yes, of course. Like I told them how major this is for my family. Told them you know, how much I need to deal with it, in order to get on task. They're like "yeah, we'll buy the ticket you know, just get us the information. We'll take care of it." And they did that for me. That was huge. (H 416-423)

A number of the participants attributed HEOP as a reason for their success in college. When asked what contributed to her success in college, Yaritza responded:

> I definitely would say my HEOP family. I think without them, I think a lot of us talked about kind of transferring out and that conversation did come up a lot. But I think of the end of the day when we did end up talking about it, they were like, the only reason I'm staying is because of you, like over a friend group. And just because like, and we had a problem or like we were kind of just have like a little meeting and just kind of events and just have fun. But I think if it wasn't for them, I think a lot of us would have left. (D 271-279)

Yaritza's success at Upshot College was tethered to the support that she received through HEOP. This support as she shared was the reason that her and individuals from her friend group made the decision to stay.

Theme 2: Student involvement - all involved. One thing was consistent throughout the analysis of the interview from each participant, to some degree, while some were more involved than others, they were all involved on campus. For some of

the participants their involvement was despite having stated that the culture of the college detracted from their success. Five out of the nine participants stated that the college culture detracted from their success. Four participants felt that the culture supported their success.

Sylvester shared that, "in my sophomore year, I got my first work-study job, so I was definitely working. I was working in the campus safety office, and I had a great boss. I would call him my mentor as well" (B 782-785). In his final year, Sylvester worked as a resident assistant and said, "and that was very rewarding for me. Very, very rewarding" (B 802-803).

Ruby recollected that being involved was integral to her meeting new people. Her involvement on the performance team progressed, "So my freshman year, I was just on the team, and then my sophomore year, I became the business manager, and then my junior and senior year, I was the coach of the performance team" (C 121-125). Ruby credits some of her success in college to being involved on the step team. Ruby also recalled attending and enjoying a comedy show on campus, the comedian, she shared had Tourette's syndrome. Her attendance at that event led her to have a great experience and she still follows this performer.

Yaritza was not only involved on campus but also in the larger community where she worked with migrant workers and the Lions. The Lions Club is an organization that focuses on empowering volunteers to provide service and humanitarian support to their communities. Working with the Lions "opened my eyes, like I want to go into education. I want to work in a school" (D 934-935). On campus, Yaritza was involved in working with the Office of Intercultural Affairs and the Latin American organization. Yaritza felt

it was important to give back not only to the college community but also the larger community that surrounded her college.

Aaron focused his involvement with being a student athlete, which he took very seriously. He shared he knew he "wanted to be a coach and I wanted to be really good at my craft" (F 564-565). Aaron realized that he may have missed out in other areas on campus but that he was focused on making connections that would support his end goal of being a coach. His focus paid off as he is currently a coach and is very proud of this accomplishment.

Brown shared his perspective on being involved on campus. He saw being involved as a gateway to set things in order with himself. Brown recalled:

Later on when I would be this writing tutor, public speaking tutor, all this stuff. You know I think yeah, it sort of made me be more focused academically. 'Cause you can't be helping someone with a paper, you know, if you ain't got your stuff in order. Which low key was still the case. But nah, definitely, it helped, and like that would also bring me into closer proximity with, you know, the quote unquote smartest kids (H 878-887) . . . So we would always like debate and that would definitely sharpen me up. (H 889-890)

Student involvement is considered a high impact educational practice that supports student retention (Kuh, 2008). However, for Daisah, her involvement with work study was out of necessity and limited her involvement with other opportunities on campus:

If I could have just not worked like a slave. If I could've just been like, okay guys, let's just go. Because it kind of was like, I can go to this but I'm not going to be involved or would literally pass things. Like I would pass things and just be

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like, oh that would've been fun but I need some sleep or I need to do homework.

(A 817-823)

Daisah had to work to pay for college. She believed that she "would've been a better student if I could've been involved though. I feel like I would've had like school spirit or what have you, yeah, I had none" (A 825-828). Different than with Sylvester, Daisah did not view her work study as student involvement, but rather as solely a way to pay her way for college.

Theme 3: Maintaining initial relationships and connections. The relationships that the participants brought with them and the ones that they forged and fostered during their college years were integral to their academic success. The relationships that the participants brought with them, such as the ones they had with community elders, parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, counselors, and mentors from community-based organizations supplemented the new support networks that the participants created, forged and maintained.

Sylvester's academic success resulted from the relational support that he received. He remembered, "I would just say the support from family back home" (B 356). Sylvester also revealed that his academic advisor and professors at his institution were instrumental to his success. His academic advisor listened and encouraged him. He shared, "It was always encouraging. It was always great, fine. Nothing to discourage me. Nothing to…even like a 'That's great but…' Never even a 'but'" (B 298-300). This was an experience that was new to Sylvester and although he found it unnerving he rather enjoyed not hearing no from his academic advisor. He debated that his advisor's response might have been because he did everything right.

Chapter Summary

Overall, the participants interviewed for the study were challenged with the transition of moving from an urban to a rural environment. The new culture presented culture shock for the participants. Participants particularly mentioned the accessibility to transportation and culturally diverse foods. At the time of enrollment, none of the participants owned a vehicle and neither did most of the individuals in their friend groups. Some participants also commented on the pressure they felt to change their way of dress and diction in order to assimilate to their new environment. During their interviews, four out of the nine participants mentioned that they considered transferring. They stayed because of the support they received from their friend groups, faculty and staff.

The relationships the participants forged during their college careers are the support mechanisms that kept them grounded and were the inspiration for them to persist to graduation. These relationships have extended past graduation as a number of the participants shared that they continue to be in close contact with their friend groups, faculty and staff. One common connecting theme throughout the interviews with the participants was relationships. The significance of the relationships that the participants fostered and maintained was central to their success.

Chapter 5 summarizes the key findings of the study as well as discusses the limitations and recommendations for future studies.

Chapter 5: Discussion

There is an abundance of literature on students of color (SoC) at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). However, there is an underrepresentation in the literature of the experiences of SoC who have attended PWIs in rural settings. The purpose of the study was to examine the lived experiences of SoC who graduated from rural PWIs. These graduates, prior to attending their institutions, lived in urban environments. This chapter provides an overview of the key findings of the study, its implications, and its limitations. Additionally, this chapter will provide recommendations for high school professionals, other administrators who support SoC in their transition to college, college administrators, faculty and staff. The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What determines academic success for SoC who attend PWIs in rural communities?

2. Which, if any, of the four assumptions that guide academic resilience theory play a role in a successful experience of SoC at PWIs in rural communities?

3. What, if any, support systems do SoC at PWIs in rural communities' attribute to a successful experience at college?

The discussion and implications of the study were developed from the themes that emerged from the study. These themes provided key findings discussed in the chapter and aligned with the research questions.

Implications of the Findings

Three key findings emerged from the study. The first finding was that there are inadequate transition or onboarding processes for SoC who attend PWIs in a rural environment. Participants in the study were not at all prepared for the differences in moving from a diverse community to a very homogeneous setting. Finding two revealed the importance of opportunity programs such as the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP). These programs and the staff are critical to ensuring that SoC have successfully transitioned and are well adjusted to their new environment. Finding three emphasized the importance of relationships and their integral role in the success of SoC. It was critical for students to be authentically connected with faculty and staff members of their new community.

Finding 1: Inadequate transition or onboarding process for SoC who attend PWIs in a rural environment. Despite the fact that colleges conduct new student orientations for their incoming students, there is a greater need for the adjustment of SoC that has not been fulfilled. Part of the onboarding needs to occur with high school counselors and community based organization personnel as well as the college administrators and support staff. All the participants that were interviewed shared challenges that they experienced in a rural environment.

It was evident that there was an absence of an intentional transition and orientation focused on SoC from urban settings to their rural campuses. None of the participants mentioned any specific initial or ongoing support that focused on the unique encounters they would experience on campus. Only one of the nine participants knew that he wanted to go away to college and had some understanding of where he was going

and the anticipated experience. However, participants collectively experienced culture shock, code switching, imposter syndrome, racial inequities, and transportation challenges. These experiences added layers of complexities for the participants as they tried to navigate their new environment.

Similarly, SoC had similar experiences in Esposito's (2011) study. The study included approximately 50 diverse undergraduate females who shared how they encountered and navigated the hidden curriculum at a PWI. The female participants in Esposito's (2011) study mentioned the heightened awareness of their bodies based on their race or gender. The participants also reported the sensitivity to being "looked at" or "stared at" (Esposito, 2011, p. 153). Much like the participants in this study participants in Esposito's (2011) study experienced racial inequities which was a challenge they had to navigate at their PWIs. Both participants from this study and Esposito's (2011) built resilience that led to them more successfully navigating their PWIs.

One of the major themes from Sinanan's (2012) study was the lack of preparedness the participants had in attending a PWI. Several of Sinanan's (2012) participants experienced culture shock, much like the experiences of the majority of the participants in this study. Similar to Sinanan's (2012) participants, the participants in this study were ill prepared to attend a PWI. The participants in Sinanan's (2012) study focused on the academic, social, and institutional factors that shaped achievement for African American male students who were enrolled at a small 4-year liberal arts private college in southern New Jersey.

The findings also uncovered that college administrators were not prepared to effectively support the SoC who arrived on campus. There appeared to be a lack of

awareness of the needs of SoC, and no oversight on how to measure whether the needs of SoC were being addressed. For the participants in this study, the transition to rural PWIs was daunting and overwhelming. Similarly, in McCoy's (2014) study, the participants also echoed similar sentiments regarding the experiences they encountered as they navigated the admissions process at their institution. In McCoy's (2014) study, one participant shared that he felt isolated and spent most of his time confined to campus because he did not have access to transportation. Another participant shared that if she had to do it again, she would not attend her college. It took her an entire year to make friends; she too felt extremely isolated. The majority of the participants shared that they did not visit their campuses before enrolling. One participant shared that a former graduate of her college came to speak with them at her high school and he had her at "they will help pay for your school [college]" (D 110). She did not hear anything else he said after that statement. The ability to find a way to pay for college outweighed some of the other issues that would make her college experience more challenging. All the participants mentioned finances as one of the main reasons they made their college choice.

The complexities that the participants faced were aligned with two assumptions of academic resilience theory (Morales, 2008). The one area is the risk factors, which are described as the environmental concerns that place students in danger. The other is vulnerability, described as areas of the student's life that could pose a potential weakness to the student (Morales, 2008). Yet, despite those risk factors and vulnerability areas, the participants overcame their adversities and experienced successes. These successes did not occur in a vacuum. The other two assumptions of academic resilience theory,

protective factors and compensatory factors, were at play. Protective factors are described as student strengths that reduced their risk factors. Compensatory factors are described as the tactics students develop to protect themselves from being exposed, which in turn supports their academic success (Morales, 2008). A theme that emerged from the study highlighted that risk and vulnerability factors fueled the success of the participants. Being exposed to a hostile and challenging situations provided the catalyst for the participants to display academic resilience.

Participants in McCoy's (2014) study shared similar sentiments. McCoy's (2014) study took place at a small public college in the north of New England population of 13,500 including 10% SoC. The research question that guided the study, "What are the transitional experiences of first-generation college SoC from urban areas to an extreme predominantly White institution?" (McCoy, 2014, p. 157). One of the themes that emerged was that the participants experienced culture shock in a sea of whiteness and they were unprepared for the complexities they faced. The participants in the McCoy (2014) study sought solace and support from the faculty of color on campus.

Similar, to McCoy's (2014) study, some of the participants in this researcher's study were able to connect with faculty of color on their campuses. However, other participants in this study did not have the opportunity for that connection. Instead, they connected with White faculty who provided them with the support they needed to navigate their new rural environment. Students of color enrolled at a PWI typically find that there are a limited number of faculty and staff of color on their campuses. Reddick (2012) conducted a study on Black and White male faculty who provided mentorship to Black males. The Black faculty utilized their formative experiences to inform the

interactions they had with their mentees. On the other hand, White faculty had utilized and relied on other individuals to assist in the problem solving. Reddick (2012) recognized the importance of cross-mentoring and the benefit of alleviating stressors placed on faculty of color.

The inadequacy of onboarding SoC at rural PWIs is further compounded with racial encounters. In Chapter 4, Ruby shared the encounter she had at the local gas station when she drove to town. Academic resilience theory (Morales, 2008) highlights the four basic assumptions that students used to support their progress. Ruby encountered risk factors that placed her in danger, yet despite the negative and traumatic experience, she persevered and was ultimately successful. In contrast, Woldoff et al. (2011) showed that in-state Black students had an easier time transitioning to PWIs than their out-of-state Black peers. The in-state students were acquainted with rural and predominantly White settings. Hence, their transition was less of an issue than for Black students from out-of-state who also had predominantly been from urban locations. Participants in this study, like the out-of-state students in the Woldoff et al. (2011) study, had difficulty acclimating to the college environment.

Finding 2: The importance of opportunity programs such as HEOP. Six out of the nine participants in the study shared that they were a part of HEOP. HEOP is an academic support program in New York State (NYS) that provides access to students who show potential but fall below the regular requirements for acceptance to a particular institution. For incoming first-year students, there is a mandatory summer residential program on their campuses. The summer program is intense with much academic rigor and usually lasts 4 to 6 weeks, depending on the participating institution. In this study, it

was evident that the participants who were a part of HEOP had an additional layer of support that provided them with some of the onboarding and preparation.

All the students that participated in HEOP commented on the academic support they received during the summer program. For some of the participants, they laud the summer program for preparing them for a more seamless and easier academic transition into the fall semester of college. The summer program was also where the participants started their initial relationship and connection with their college community. For five out of the six participants who were HEOP, they shared that their core friend groups were formed in HEOP. These friend groups have lasted well beyond college for most of the participants. Although there were social advantages from the program, the overarching support for participants was focused more on academic well-being. An important as well as critical element to the success of SoC is their ability to transition well, academically and socially, to their new environment (Smith et al., 2007). Additionally, HEOP serves as a mechanism for a relational support system for SoC. This support system is integral to their social and academic success.

Being part of HEOP, as well as the summer program, was beneficial to the SoC. They revealed that the program provided the support they needed to transition more seamlessly into the fall semester. For the three participants who were not a part of HEOP, their transition to college was different and two of the three participants initially struggled to find social connections. Programs like HEOP provide a built-in mechanism where relationships are forged, connections are created, and a sense of belonging and community exists. Guiffrida (2005a) stated that "othermothering" is an integral component needed for SoC at PWIs. Othermothering is a concept that is predominant in

African American communities where individuals, typically women, provide support and guidance to children in the community. This term can be applied to SoC at PWIs who receive mentoring, coaching and *mothering* from staff and faculty of color. This support allows SoC to more efficiently navigate and manage their encounters at PWIs (Guiffrida, 2005a). The concept of othermothering provides a deeper connection than just academic support for SoC. While HEOP is an academic program, there was an added support that the participants received when they shared the benefits of talking with HEOP personnel at their colleges. Some of them mentioned that HEOP was like family.

The HEOP community provided a sense of validation and resilience for the participants. Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley (2008) reported seven themes, including validation and resilience, emerged from their study. The participants in their study experienced validation being a part of the African American Student Network (AFAM). They were able to connect with other Black students, share their experiences, and feel valued. Additionally, the participants in Grier-Reed et al. (2008) felt fortified to be able to manage their upcoming week. They were able to connect and share coping mechanism strategizes, gain advice, and process the many encounters such as culture shock and alienation.

Through HEOP, similarly, students in Morales' (2008) study were able to, not only be academically supported, but also to create a community where they felt safe. This community is considered a compensatory factor, which is one of the assumptions of the academic resilience theory. This compensatory factor is a strategy that a student uses to protect them from being exposed and in turn supports their academic achievement (Morales, 2008). The multiple aspects of academic and social support provided within

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HEOP are considered protective factors which are strengths in a student's life, such as academic tutoring and structured meetings, as well as caring friends and staff members. These serve to reduce a student's risk factors. Protective and risk factors are also assumptions of the academic resilience theory (Morales, 2008). The HEOP serves as a holistic support system for SoC at PWIs. As SoC progress through their academic and social encounters, their academic, personal, and social resilience is strengthened by HEOP expectations, and the relationships they have forged through HEOP which also contribute to the development of relationships across campus.

Finding 3: The importance of relationships and their integral role to the success of SoC at PWIs. Research Question 3 explored, what, if any, support systems do SoC at PWIs attribute to a successful experience at college. The data unequivocally uncovered that the relationships that the participants fostered and maintained supported their academic success. The relationships were with staff, faculty, and friend groups of the participants. All the participants of this study shared how the relational connections that they fostered supported them through their college career. One of the participants who struggled with making initial connections talked about the positive impact she experienced in connecting with a faculty member. This faculty member would become a constant throughout her college life. She was appreciative of the genuine concern and interest that her professor displayed. The participant highlighted this support as instrumental in her academic improvement. Another participant lauded the support that she received from her HEOP counselor as a source of solace and refuge when she was overwhelmed. She knew that she could go to her HEOP counselor and receive the

guidance to get back on track or work through her current struggles. She was also able to convince other HEOP students to seek support from this counselor.

While it is important that SoC are academically on track to graduate, it is also important that their social needs are also being met. As SoC navigate their rural PWI environments, the relationships they foster with those around them fulfill their requirements for feeling connected and encourages degree completion. The studies of Greer-Reid et al. (2008) and Baker (2013) revealed that student-faculty relationships provided a positive impact on SoC. Similarly, in this study the connections that the participants made with faculty, staff, and their friend groups supported their progress throughout their college years. While student engagement and participation in campus activities, such as sports, tutoring, membership in clubs and organizations, was significant to the participants' success, it was the resulting new-found relationships which sustained their success.

Another study conducted by Palmer et al. (2011) also emphasized that meaningful relationships with faculty are critical to the success of SoC. The study further recognized that although numerous studies suggest the need for SoC to connect with faculty of color, there are a number of these students who have connected with White faculty. Students of color with connections to White faculty have also had meaningful and valuable interactions (Palmer et al., 2011). Such is also the case for the participants in this study. While some of them were able to connect with faculty of color, they all connected with White faculty who mentored and supported their successes.

Additionally, the participants spoke of the relationships they fostered with staff members and their friend groups. The study by Baker (2013) supports this finding, yet it

highlights that the participants viewed their peer support as both positive and negative. While they looked to their peers for emotional support, the academic support that they received was not the best. At times they would stay up talking into the wee hours of the morning, not having made any academic progress. In this study, the participants primarily looked to their friend groups for emotional and social support. Similar to Baker (2013), the participants in this study looked to faculty for academic guidance and expertise. These interactions and relationships were key to building the academic resilience that the participants displayed throughout their college career.

The academic resilience of the participants in Morales' (2014) study was evident in their ability to manage the traumatic, challenging, and life changing experiences they faced. The protective and compensatory factors were the assumptions of the academic resilience theory that guided the decisions of these participants. The participants used their protective and compensatory factors to offset their circumstances. Morales (2014) asserted that college faculty can support the increase of SoC retention by building student self-efficacy, encouraging help seeking tendencies, encouraging students to appraise their strengths and weaknesses, and providing a link between their academic success and future economic security.

Limitations

There were three limitations to the study. The first limitation was that the study only included *graduates* from the various colleges. Additional perspectives may have emerged from SoC who were currently enrolled in rural PWIs. Being able to compare current student responses to those of the SoC who graduated would have added dimension to the triangulation and analysis of the study.

The second limitation was that, even though three colleges were represented, the study only included participants who had been students. Being able to get the responses from faculty and staff on how their support aided in the success of SoC would have provided another perspective to gather additional rich content for the study.

The third limitation was that the geographical location of the study was confined to central and western New York. The culture and local White interactions may have been different in another geographic location. In another location, the perspectives and lived experiences of students of color who attended and graduated from PWIs in a rural environment could have been different from the responses of the participants in central and western New York.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations for college administrators, faculty and support personnel, high school personnel, and future research proposed as the result of this research. The following section highlights four recommendations for college administrators, faculty, and support personnel, two recommendations for high school personnel, and two recommendations for future research.

College administrators, faculty, and support personnel. The three key findings of the study spark recommendations for higher education institutions, specifically those that are in small rural environments. Additionally, the study prompted recommendations for faculty, staff, and college administrators assisting with supporting students in their transition to college.

First, it is recommended that college administrators work on creating and implementing a process that provides intentional support to effectively onboard SoC at

PWIs in rural environments. There needs to be an increased understanding when SoC communicate the realities of their lived experiences to college administrators. It should also be recognized that the lived experiences of SoC are likely to be different from those of their White counterparts (Luedke, 2017). Hence, the differences between these experiences should not be dismissed and/or minimized as invalid or untrue.

During new student orientation, SoC should be able to attend workshops geared specifically for them. These workshops should be intentional in exposing students to key terminologies and experiences that they might encounter during their time at the institution. Furthermore, there should be continued development once students begin the fall semester. None of the nine participants mentioned any intentional programs that were designed specifically to support their transition to their campuses during orientation or into their first semester. As part of this programming, SoC should be engaged in small group conversations with upper-class students who can share their lived experiences and the ways they navigate their new environments.

Second, it is recommended that faculty, staff, and other college personnel attend training on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion and also engage in conversations with SoC (Phillips, 2005). Increased education in the form of professional development workshops for college administrators could help to close the gaps by promoting a better understanding of the ways varying lived experiences can exist on one college campus. Professional development in the form of training should provide specific information needed for faculty, staff, and other college personnel to more effectively support SoC at PWIs. The training should be on-going and provided in various forms to ensure continued learning, support, and understanding occurs. Training should foster systemic

changes that impact the culture of the institution and should be designed to encourage and establish permanent institutional reforms. One of the findings in Woldoff et al. (2011) suggested that college administration be mindful that the successful retention of African American students reaches further than academic programming. The retention of African American students involves their ability to "fit into the fabric of the institution" (Woldoff et al., 2011, p. 1073). The same was true for participants in this study, and the diversity, equity, and inclusion training could be the catalyst to effect systemic changes.

Relational connections support the retention of SoC (Greer-Reed et al., 2008). The training that faculty are provided could assist them in being more culturally aware and relevant. This could enhance the delivery of their instruction in the classroom setting. This training should foster a deeper understanding of the lived experiences that SoC and promote more inclusive classroom experiences. Relational connections are supported by academic resilience theory, aligned with its assumption regarding and aligned to the protective factors. Faculty have the capacity in their classrooms to promote academic resilience of SoC with whom they interact (Morales, 2014).

Third, it is recommended that there is an increased attention and priority to recruiting faculty and staff of color at rural PWIs. Students of color in this study were able to make authentic connections and receive support from White faculty and staff. It arguably, could be a less stressful transition if SoC, upon arrival to campus, were able to see themselves better reflected in the employees, particularly faculty and leadership, of the college.

Fourth, it is recommended that small, rural colleges hire a chief diversity officer (CDO) who would serve to support the advancement of a culture of diversity, equity, and

inclusion and who reports directly to the president of the institution. The CDO's primary role would be to create, support, and advocate for systemic changes. In order for these systemic changes to occur, the CDO's role in engaging the leadership is critical as diversity and inclusion topics should be at the forefront of decision making. The presence of the CDO on committees could challenge the status quo and promote the diversity agenda of the institution (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013). The CDO's presence would serve to promote a more equitable and inclusive campus environment. Additionally, the CDO would serve as the point person regarding training, curriculum design, and program review such as new student orientation (NSO), and the recruitment and hiring practices to ensure the diversification of the staff and faculty. In order for these CDO responsibilities to be carried out effectively, it is critical that the CDO reports directly to the president of the institution to advise the kinds of impact and disruptions necessary for systemic changes.

With the CDO reviewing programs such as NSO, intentional and systemic changes could support a more inclusive environment at rural PWIs. Concerns such as racial encounters, imposter syndrome, code switching, transportation concerns that SoC experienced are indicative of a clear and deficient gap in the onboarding experience of SoC. These would be addressed by having a CDO in place to disrupt and require systemic changes to occur. These changes would benefit colleges in creating more inclusive campus climates and experiences (Woldoff et al., 2011).

Additionally, the CDO could be the voice for all campus constituents, specifically those who are from marginalized populations. The benefit would be evident in a more effective and culturally informed onboarding process for SoC. A more effective

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onboarding process would support the continued persistence and retention of SoC through to graduation. All except one of the participants in this study shared racially charged encounters that they experienced during their time at their particular institution. A systemic change might alter the campus climate and create an atmosphere where SoC feel a greater sense of belonging (Locks et al., 2008).

Fifth, because of the demonstrated success and the importance these participants placed on HEOP, it is recommended that college administrators model other college programs on the practices and principles of HEOP. Various bridge programs would support the broader college community as well as SoC who attend PWIs and who are not members of the HEOP community. It is crucial that college administrators use the principles and frameworks of opportunity programs to better develop and understand the work that is essential to supporting SoC. This can be effective whether the support is through the HEOP or through a campus-wide adoption of HEOP best practices to formally and intentionally support the success of SoC.

Programs such as HEOP serve as safe and rejuvenating spaces for SoC at PWIs. If a college campus is perceived as having a racially hostile climate, it impacts students from a variety of racial/ethnic groups in their transition to college (Locks et al., 2008). Adopting campus wide practices inspired by opportunity programs and grounded in the academic resilience theory could be beneficial to the entire campus community.

High school personnel. High school personnel are key to providing critical information to assist SoC with their onboarding to small rural PWIs. High school personnel are some of the individuals that the participants have cited as influencing mentioned were influential in their college choices and decisions. As high school

personnel have the undivided attention of their college bound students, they are in a prime position to impart needed and crucial information. Through a series of specific workshops college bound SoC can be oriented to expectations and the culture of their new environment. This type of orientation might be achieved through collaboration with a team of college personnel from PWIs located in rural locations. These workshops could precede and pave the way for the workshops that could later continue through the college's onboarding programs.

High school counselors should provide the opportunity for their students to visit campus prior to enrollment. This would provide a layered effect that ties in with the collaborative workshops that would educate high school SoC about rural PWIs. The majority of the participants in this study shared that they did not visit campus prior to being enrolled. High school personnel should strongly recommend that their college bound SoC visit their intended college of choice to see where it is located. McCoy (2011) suggested that there should be a strengthening of the working relationship between high schools and colleges. The assumption should not be made that students and their families possess the cultural capital to effortlessly navigate the process. Additionally, intentional education on the difference in the college culture and community should be emphasized. One such emphasis would be providing funds to increase the ability for students and their families to visit campus as it might be costly to visit PWIs in rural communities. One participant in this study shared that her ability to visit campus was possible through the support of her school counselor. Students of color and their families may encounter financial barriers that prevents them from visiting colleges in rural communities.

Future research. First, future researchers should examine how high school counselors and CBO personnel are supporting and educating their students for the next academic phase of their lives. While colleges have a responsibility to be more effective in how SoC are transitioned to their campuses, it is also necessary that high school personnel are supporting this transition by providing the necessary information to guide SoC to the institutions that are best suited for them. It is important that students are making well informed decisions before enrolling at rural PWIs. These well informed decisions on the part of students should help to lower the rate of attrition. The majority of the participants had not visited their college prior to attending. Additionally, several of the participants went on the recommendation of their high school counselor without gathering much more information on the profile of the college.

While the information that emerged from this study revealed that a SoC who visits a PWI in a rural environment might not attend, it is critical that high school counselors and college admissions personnel encourage visits for SoC. Future research should explore avenues to draw students to enrolling at PWIs in rural communities as there are a number of social gaps and challenges that SoC could experience in attending a PWI in a rural community. One suggestion would be to focus heavily on intentional onboarding support that is provided to SoC at PWIs in rural communities.

Second, future studies should include the perspective of current students as well as faculty and staff at these institutions. This broadened perspective would help to shed more light on this topic and provide more information to improve the practices, processes, and policies which would better support SoC at PWIs in rural environments.

Conclusion

This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of successful SoC who graduated from PWIs located in rural environments. The participants in this study moved from an urban to a rural setting. Academic resilience theory was the lens through which the data was explored and interpreted. The study revealed three key findings: a) the inadequate plans for transitioning or onboarding SoC at PWIs located in rural environments, b) the importance of opportunity programs like HEOP to the success of SoC, and c) the of importance of relationships and their integral role in the success of SoC at PWIs in rural environments.

A qualitative methodology was used to examine the research questions associated with this study. The semi-structured, face-to-face and phone interviews were conducted with nine graduates; three from each institution. A gap in the literature showed few studies that focused on the lived experiences of SoC at PWIs who transitioned from urban to rural environments, and on their strategies for successful persistence and graduation. There were two studies the researcher found which focused on PWIs in a rural environment. The participants shared the ways they experienced and navigated the college environment, what they found challenging and how they were supported throughout their years at their respective institutions.

The study findings revealed that SoC at PWIs are inadequately transitioned/onboarded to their institutions. This finding implied that college administrators as well as high school personnel seemed unaware of the necessity to effectively provide added layers of assistance to SoC. This lack of awareness resulted in additional challenges for SoC as they navigated the environments at rural PWIs. Study

findings also highlighted the importance of programs such as HEOP. HEOP is an academic bridge program that is designed to assist students toward a more seamless academic transition as they enter their first semester of college. Key aspects of HEOP programs could be duplicated in support of broader student success across campuses. In addition, study findings recognized the importance of relationships and their integral role to the success of SoC at PWIs. The value of these relationships was central in fostering and highlighting the development of both, protective and compensatory factors, assumptions of academic resilience theory.

The recommendations put forth in this study focused on college administrators, faculty, and support staff personnel as well as recommendations were made for high school personnel. The four recommendations that were directed to college administrators, faculty, and support staff personnel were: a) to create and implement a process that provides intentional support for effective onboarding, b) to establish and expect college personnel to attend and complete training focused on understanding issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion; c) to hire a chief diversity officer (CDO) for effecting systemic change within the institution and supporting the advancement of a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion; and d) to establish college-based programs founded on the practices and principles of HEOP and other formal bridge programs. Campuses who adopt these recommendations stand to provide immediate improvements in their support of SoC. Implementing these recommendations will help PWIs in rural communities continue to gain valuable information that can provide for direction to longer term systemic changes and reforms within their campus communities.

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of successful graduates of color from PWIs in rural environments. These graduates transitioned from diverse communities to homogeneous communities where they enrolled in college. The experiences that SoC encountered highlights the need for continuous improvement at PWIs. The significance of this study is to ensure that systemic changes are made to significantly improve the lived experiences of SoC enrolled at college in rural environments. It is important that college administrators implement these campus wide changes that will shift the narrative of SoC at PWIs in rural communities. The researcher, as a person of color at a PWI, recognizes that there must be intentional changes that are implemented in order for the overall culture of PWIs to improve the policies, procedures and operational structures to ensure a more inclusive and welcoming for SoC.

The study was ignited by the everyday experiences of working with SoC at PWIs. Students are impacted on a daily basis, both positively as well as negatively as they navigate their journey at their PWIs. The underlying purpose of the study was to unearth additional information that could be instrumental to the success of SoC as they face challenges at PWIs in rural environments. In the process of completing this study, it is clear that faculty and staff professionals who work with SoC must intentionally focus on specific strategies to support SoC. As executive leaders, higher education professionals must more effectively use their positions and platforms to educate, inform, and promote more systemic alignment to support SoC on their campuses. It could be argued that when changes are made systemically, these changes provide more permanency to the daily operations of the institution.

Executive leaders at PWIs in rural communities are in a position to recognize the importance of intentional policies and how policy can significantly impact the experiences of the SoC that are enrolled at their institutions. Executive leaders should engage with SoC and listen to the adjustments that SoC face as they find their way at PWIs (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). In this study as well in the research, SoC experienced feelings of isolation, culture shock, imposter syndrome and racial inequities. There is still more intentional assistance that SoC can and should receive. One of these intentional mechanisms would be to engage college administration with the results of this research and formally identify ways to provide necessary changes to positively impact the overall campus climate of PWIs in rural communities.

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INFORMED CONSENT FORM

St. John Fisher College
Doctor of Education in Executive Leadership
3690 East Avenue, Rochester, NY 14618

Title of Study: The Lived Experiences of Academically Resilient Students of
                             Color at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs): Their
                             Transition to a Rural Environment

Name of Interviewer: Lisa M. Thompson
Email Address: lmt04749@sjfc.edu
Personal Mobile: (585) 732-2973

Name of Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Marie Cianca

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to identify and gain a better
understanding of what contributes to the academic resilience of students of color (SoC)
being academically successful at PWIs.
Place of Study: The study will be expected to include SoC who have graduated from
local rural colleges within the past five years, 2012 to 2018. The interviews will take
place at a location that is comfortable and private for the interviewee and the interviewer.
Length of Participation: One interview per participants lasting between 45-60 minutes.

Risk and Benefits: The potential risks and benefits of this study are outlined below.

Potential Risk. Participants in this study are expected to encounter minimal risk, harm
or discomfort as they provide their shared experiences for this study. It is possible that
participants might initially experience awkwardness or vulnerability sharing personal
information with someone with whom they have not met. However, at any point during
the interview the may choose to withdraw from the study and all recordings will be
erased. The interview will be scheduled at a convenient time for participants to minimize
interruption to their schedules.
Potential Benefits. Participation in this study should add to the body of research about
this topic and provide the opportunity to share feelings, perceptions, and concerns related
to their lived experiences as a SoC who was academically successful and graduated from
a PWI.

Method for Protecting Confidentiality and Privacy:
All digital audio recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be maintained using a
private, locked, and password-protected file and password-protected computer stored
securely in the private home of the principal researcher. Electronic files will include
assigned identity codes and pseudonyms; they will not include actual names or any

Other materials, including notes or paper files related to data collection and analysis, will be stored securely in unmarked boxes, locked inside a cabinet in the private home of the principal researcher. Only the researcher will have access to electronic or paper records. The digitally recorded audio data will be kept by this researcher for a period of five years following publication of the dissertation. Signed informed consent documents will be kept for five years after publication. All paper records will be cross-cut shredded and professionally delivered for incineration. Electronic records will be cleared, purged, and destroyed from the hard drive and all devices such that restoring data is not possible.

Your information may be shared with appropriate governmental authorities ONLY if you or someone else is in danger, or it we are required to do so by law.

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

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

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

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

_____   _____   _____
Print Name of Participant   Signature   Date

_____   _____   _____
Print Name of Participant   Signature   Date

Appendix B

Initial E-Mail to Solicit Interested Graduates

Date

Dear Alumna/Alumnus of Woods University/Upshot College/Aquatic College:

My name is Lisa M. Thompson and I am a doctoral candidate in the Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College. This letter serves to invite you to participate in my study by allowing me to interview you.

The topic of my study is the lived experience of students of color (SoC) at a predominantly White institution, their academic success and the experience they encountered in the transition to a predominantly White environment. I plan to interview students of color who have graduated from your college between 2012 and 2018 and resided for at least one year in a residence hall on campus. Prior to attending your college, you must have lived in a large city. I am interested in learning about your experience and transition as a student of color that attended a PWI.

The interview will take place in a location where you are comfortable or may be via telephone and may take approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded and there is no preparation required. Participation in this study should add to the body of research about this topic and provide the opportunity to share feelings, perceptions, and concerns related to your lived experiences as a SoC who was academically successful and graduated from a PWI.

If you participate and become uncomfortable answering questions, you may choose not to answer. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time. Also, for your willingness and your time, you will receive a small gift of $25.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me via my mobile phone at (585) 732-2973 or (lmt04749@sjfc.edu). Thanks for your consideration to participate in this study.

Respectfully

Lisa M. Thompson
Education Doctoral Candidate in Executive Leadership
St. John Fisher College
Rochester N.Y.

Appendix C

E-Mail to Interested Graduates

Dear Graduate:

My name is Lisa M. Thompson and I am a doctoral student in the Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College located in Rochester, New York. Thank you for your interest and willingness to participate in a research study that will focus on the lived experiences of academically resilient students of color at a predominantly White institution. The study specifically looks at students of color (Black or Hispanic) who have graduated from small private liberal arts colleges in a rural environment. The purpose of the study is to gain critical insight on the factors that made it possible for students of color to have gained and maintained academic resilience in a rural environment.

The interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. If you decide to participate, you will receive a small gift of $25 in appreciation of your time and effort. We will work collaboratively to identify a date, time and place that is most convenient for you.

Please find attached a copy of the "Informed Consent" document which should take approximately 5 minutes to complete. In order to participate in this one-on-one interview, you will need to read and sign the attached document. You can attach and send via email a scanned copy of the completed consent document or bring a signed copy with you on our scheduled interview date.

If you are still interested in participating in this study and/or have questions, please contact me via my mobile phone at (585) 732-2973) or e-mail (lmt04749@sjfc.edu). Thank you again for your consideration and I look forward to the opportunity of meeting with you in the near future.

Respectfully,

Lisa M. Thompson
Education Doctoral Candidate in Executive Leadership
St. John Fisher College
Rochester, New York

Appendix D

Alignment of Research Questions to Interview Questions

The research questions that will guide the study are:
1. What determines academic success for SoC who attend PWIs in rural communities?
2. Which, if any, of the four assumptions that guide academic resilience theory play a role in a successful experience of SoC at PWIs in rural communities. Describe the role.
3. What, if any, support systems do SoC at PWIs attribute to a successful experience at college?

Research Question (RQ)	Interview Question (IQ)

RQ1	1. Can you share with me why you made the decision to attend a college in a rural environment?
	    a. Were there other SoC in your classes?
	    b. Did you feel that you were prepared for the rigor of college work?
	    c. If not, do you believe the college provided the resources to assist you in becoming more prepared?

RQ1	2. How would you describe your transition to the new environment? **a. Do you recall any adjustments that you had to make?**
RQ1	3. Looking back what you do you think led to your success in college? a. Are there any additional factors that you believe were responsible for your academic success and supported your persistence to graduation?

RQ2 (risk factors)	4. Were there any challenges that you faced while in college in a rural environment?
	    a. Were there any challenges that you brought with you?
	    b. Were there any that you faced once you were on campus?

RQ2
 	
(protective and compensatory)
	5. How did you go about forging the relationships on campus?
	   a. Who were your mentors, formal and informal that supported your academic success?
	   b. Please share one or two examples of moments where you were supported and that stands out distinctively in your mind.

RQ2 (vulnerability)	6. In what ways, if any, did your gender/race impacted your success and the experiences that you encountered?
	   a. If so, how?
	   b. How did you navigate those experiences to persist to graduation?

RQ3	7. Let's talk about how you maintained your support systems.
	   a. Who made up your support system?
	   b. How did your support system change over the years? If so how?
	   c. If there were changes to your support system, what prompted you to make these changes?

RQ3	8. If you were able to change one thing about your experience at your college, what would it be and why?
RQ3	9. What role did faculty play in the experience that you had in college?

RQ3	10. How do you think the culture of your college supported or detracted from your success as a SoC?
	   a. Were you engaged in activities outside of your classes?
	   b. If yes, what activities?

RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	11. Is there anything that I did not mention or ask that you would like to share?

Appendix E

Interview Preparation and Protocol

The following interview protocol will be utilized to ensure consistency of procedures and processes for each interview.

1. The interviewer will have an assigned notebook to take detailed notes that will add to the richness of the research. Additionally, prior to interview, the researcher will ensure that recorders are charged, cued and ready to record.

2. A thank you note with gift card will be ready for each participant once interview session is completed (Creswell, 2014).

3. All participants will be greeted and thanked by the interviewer for taking the time to share.

4. If the informed consent form had not been previously sent, it will be collected and placed in a marked folder.

5. The interviewer will ask the participant if they need anything, a bottle of water, or to use the restroom.

6. Once the researcher and participant are settled, the researcher will break the ice by getting to know the participant by reviewing the purpose of the research and find out how the participant is doing.

7. A reminder to the participant of the length of the interview will be shared and that both the participant and researcher are encouraged to seek clarification if necessary. Participants will know that they may be asked to elaborate or explain ideas more in-depth (Creswell, 2014).

8. Space between questions will be given in order to record notes, comments on any observations or thoughts that arise (Creswell, 2014).

9. There will be time left after the interview ends for researcher to debrief, add additional notes, and document reminders for follow-up tasks.

10. If possible before leaving interview location, recorded session will be uploaded to Rev.com. If this is not possible, recorded sessions will be uploaded within 24 hours after the interview.

11. Start the process of coding the data.

Interview Questions

1. Can you share with me why you made the decision to attend a college in a rural environment?
   a. Were there other SoC in your classes?
   b. Did you feel that you were prepared for the rigor of college work?
   c. If not, do you believe the college provided the resources to assist you in becoming more prepared?

2. How would you describe your transition to the new environment?
   a. Do you recall any adjustments that you had to make?

3. Looking back what you do you think led to your success in college?
   a. Are there any additional factors that you believe were responsible for your academic success and supported your persistence to graduation?

4. Were there any challenges that you faced while in college in a rural environment?
   a. Were there any challenges that you brought with you?
   b. Were there any that you faced once you were on campus?

5. How did you go about forging the relationships on campus?
   a. Who were your mentors, formal and informal that supported your academic success?
   b. Please share one or two examples of moments where you were supported and that stands out distinctively in your mind.

6. In what ways, if any, did your race/gender impact your success and the experiences that you encountered?
   a. If so, how?
   b. How did you navigate those experiences to persist to graduation?

7. Let's talk about how you maintained your support systems.
   a. Who made up your support system?
   b. Did your support system change over the years? If so, how?
   c. If there were changes to your support system, what prompted you to make these changes?

8. If you were able to change one thing about your experience at your college, what would it be and why?

9. What role did faculty play in the experience you had in college?

10. How do you think the culture of your college supported or detracted from your success as a SoC?
    a. Were you engaged in activities outside of your classes?
    b. If yes, what activities?

c. What kind of impact did your involvement have your experience and success in college?

11. Is there anything that I did not mention or ask that you would like to share?